

Thunder and Lightning: Addendum to Florence Montgomery's *Textiles in America*
By Neal Hurst

Florence Montgomery's 1984 book, *Textiles in America 1650-1870*, remains a standard on the bookshelves for those interested in textiles, interiors, and historic dress. Since 1984, more research has come to light to better define some of the textiles included within her dictionary. A fabric with the very unusual name of "thunder and lightning" has confused and stumped historians for decades until now and Montgomery's entry merits an update.

Montgomery provided a short entry for "thunder and lightning" and described it as "a heavy woolen cloth, probably rain repellent." She also included a runaway description cited in Alice Morse Earle's 1894 book entitled *Costume of Colonial Times*, it read "A Thunder and Lightning Coat; otherwise German Serge."¹ Both publications cite the May 2, 1757 issue of *The Virginia Gazette*, but it actually appeared in the May 2, 1751 issue of the newspaper. The advertisement read, "Ran away from the subscriber, living in Westmoreland County....Sarah Wilmore, alias Willmott...had on when she went away...a white dimity under coat workd around the bottom and a thunder and lightning alias German Serge coat, trimmed with black glass buttons."² In this instance, the coat refers to a petticoat.

Since the publication of Montgomery and Earle's books, searchable historic newspaper databases allow historians to gain a better understanding of textiles. The 1751 *Virginia Gazette* advertisement provided one hint into thunder and lightning calling it German serge. The eighteenth-century man or women understood that a serge was a twill woven textile. To confused the situation even more Daniel Campbell advertised in the *Maryland Gazette* looking for John Denniston and wrote, "Ran away from the Falls of Rappahannock River, Virginia, about the later End of last February...he carried Variety of cloaths with him; viz. a Thunder and Lightning Coat, a blue German Serge one, a dark colored Frize New Market one, a white and a pale wig."³ Campbell listed both a thunder and lightning coat and a blue German serge coat separately, assuming that they are distinctive and that the reader would know the difference.

¹ Florence M. Montgomery, *Textile in America 1650-1850* (W. W. Norton and Company: New York, 2007), 363. Alice Morse Earle, *Costume in Colonial Times* (Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1894), 89.

² *The Virginia Gazette*, May 2, 1751, page 3. www.colonialwilliamsburg.org

³ *The Maryland Gazette*, Thursday June 7, 1753, page 4. <https://www.newspapers.com>.



Figure 1: English and American speakers used to the term clouded to describe various objects like this clouded or tortoiseshell creamware plate (The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Gift of Mr. Harry H. Coon, 2005-134.)

Another advertisement placed nearly twenty years later provided further clues into this textile. In 1772, John Frierson advertised in the *South Carolina Gazette* for a runaway enslaved carpenter named Scipio. Frierson wrote, “Run away from the subscriber in St. John’s parish, about two months ago...he had on when he went away, a brown clouded, or (as is termed) a thunder and lightning cloth surtout coat, blue jacket, and white negro cloth boots...”⁴ English speakers often used the term clouded to describe a variegated or blurred appearance.

In an 1843 publication from the Society of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce, author G. T. Kemp reflected on fabrics termed “Clouded,” or “Chiné.” He wrote, “The art of clouding silk has been practiced upwards of a century, but until lately was conducted in very rude manner, and at a very considerable cost. The technical term to “cloud,” or, as in French “chiner,” denotes the partial coloring of the threads of silk, or other material, previously to their being woven, producing an irregular speckled appearance, or assuming a more definite design at the will of the operator, but always characterized by a softened, shaded, or irregular outline.”⁵ Clouded is also seen in reference to other items during the 18th century such as ceramics, stockings, and even livestock.⁶

⁴ *South Carolina Gazette*, Tuesday March 3, 1772, page 6. <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁵ G. T. Kemp, Esq., “On the process of printing warps to produce fabrics termed ‘clouded,’ or ‘chiné.’” In *Transactions of the Society of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce*, vol. 56 (Society of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce: London, 1843), 182.

⁶ “Crates of clouded eathern ware.” *The South Carolina Gazette*, Monday December 22, 1766, page 2. <https://www.newspapers.com>, “a small clouded grey horse.” *The Virginia Gazette*, Monday June 12, 1750, page 3. <https://www.newspapers.com>, “a pair of blue and white clouded stockings.” *The Virginia Gazette*, Saturday February 14, 1750, page 4. <https://www.newspapers.com>.



Figure 2: These knit stockings were probably dyed using a similar tie dye technique as described by John Brearley in his notebook. Lengths of yarn would be tied tightly to keep the indigo dye from completely penetrating the yarns. Once untied and knit, it creates a variegated or clouded appearance (The Daughters of the American Revolution Museum, Washington DC. Gift of Colonel Samuel Ashley Chapter, 1858.A-B.)

While runaway ads provide some information to allow historians to speculate on the appearance of thunder and lightning, a Yorkshire frizzer provided a much more exacting answer. From 1758-1762, John Brearley worked in Wakefield as a cloth frizzer and kept a memorandum book filled with a variety of notes about his trade. A frizzer applied a napped finish to the surface of a woollen cloth, often improving the overall appearance of coarser woven goods. In his Yorkshire accent and phonetic spellings, Brearley recorded two descriptions in his book specifically noting thunder and lightning. He wrote, "Cloath called thunder and lightning is woven as thus with tyed yarn. First itt is made into long hancks so tyed in white and then dyed yellow. Then when dyed yellow it is tyed again then dyed a snuff coalar. This is for weft. The warp is dyed same way only not tyed att all."⁷ Farther into the memorandum book, he again mentions this unusually named textile and provides a little more information. Brearley wrote "Sopose you take woollen yarn and scour itt and tye itt is in hanks ech 4 inches tye itt. So dye itt what coalar you please then weave itt for weft itt will look weell and itt is called thunder and lightning. The name of it is."⁸ While each description is slightly different, it does show that the weft yarns of this textile are tied and dyed. In the first example given by Brearley and the slightly more specific tying instructions from the second description, the finished yarns would have white undyed areas every four inches, yellow dyed areas

⁷ John Smail, ed. *Woolen Manufacturing in Yorkshire, The Memorandum Books of John Brearley, Cloth Frizzer at Wakefield, 1758-1762* (Suffolk, England: The Boydell Press, 2001), 20.

⁸ John Smail, ed. *Woolen Manufacturing in Yorkshire, The Memorandum Books of John Brearley, Cloth Frizzer at Wakefield, 1758-1762* (Suffolk, England: The Boydell Press, 2001), 43.

between the white, and the untied areas dyed a snuff color. These weft yarns would fill the dyed warp, probably in a twill weave, creating a clouded multicolor appearance.



Figure 3: While thunder and lightning is a woolen, this variegated or clouded multicolored block print on cotton maybe trying to imitate the tie dyed effect created on the woolen yarns (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Otto Schroeter, C.I.51.51.)

To date, no identified swatches of thunder and lightning survive to pinpoint exactly how this textile appeared. Runaway advertisements from historic newspapers provide some clues but can be confusing as the advertiser may not know the exact names of fabrics compared to someone working within the textile trade. John Brearley, a frizzer working in the Yorkshire woolen trade had first-hand knowledge of this textile. The runaway ads combined with Brearley's memorandum entries help to create an improved definition for Florence Montgomery's *Textiles in America*.

Thunder and Lightning: A woolen fabric that is probably twill woven. Described as clouded, it is defined by its uniquely dyed weft yarns. The weft is produced by tying white wool hanks of yarn every four inches then dyeing it one color (ex. yellow). Once dyed, the hanks are tied again and dyed another color (ex. snuff color). When finished these yarns have a variegated appearance with three colors (ex. white, yellow, and snuff). The warp is dyed a solid color. After weaving it is probably frizzed, creating a fuzzy surface.