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Abstract
Eighteenth-century legal documents from the Chesapeake region occasionally refer to silk bed coverings—blankets, rugs, quilts, and counterpanes—but very few of these bed coverings have survived in museum and private collections. It is important, therefore, to closely analyze documentary evidence, particularly probate inventories, for clues as to the appearance, construction, commonality, and possible origin of these objects that Silk Bedcoverings in the Early Chesapeake Region: Interpreting Documentary Evidence.
were used in Chesapeake homes and were readily identifiable by men charged with assigning values to the chattels of a decedent.

Probate inventories, taken shortly after death as part of the process of settling an estate, are rich and tantalizing documents that provide a window into material goods. However, inventories frequently are ambiguous and omit information that historians seek. While appraisers recorded things as small and seemingly insignificant as a paper of pins, they often grouped assemblages of objects as "parcels" or "furniture." At times, inventories are the only evidence we longer survive and, therefore, where object-based research is to be the case for the silk bedcoverings known as rugs or "ruggs," which were used in Chesapeake homes during the colonial period and were listed by appraisers more frequently than any other type of silk bedcovering.

Research using two sets of probate inventories from Maryland and Virginia indicates that silk bed rugs were owned primarily by the upper classes during the eighteenth century. The documents include the Gunston Hall database, a small sample of Chesapeake probate inventories that is heavily weighted towards the elite social and economic peers of George Mason (1725-1792) on the Northern Neck of Virginia. Information from this database that from a group of more than 3,000 inventories recorded in Eastern Shore of Maryland, and inclusive of people across a broad economic spectrum. The Kent County inventory study took into account all inventories recorded in the county, whether the decedent was a boarder and had only his wearing apparel or whether he lived in a mansion house filled with an extensive list of imported and domestic furnishings. The Kent data, therefore, presents a less biased, more democratic view of the ownership of silk rugs, but discloses a far lower concentration of silk bedcoverings. In the Gunston Hall study, 45 percent, or almost one half, of the people in the sample who died between 1740 and 1750, owned one or more silk rugs as coverings for their beds. In Kent County, silk rugs, though not widely owned, also peaked in popularity between 1740 and 1750 when 5 percent of the deceased owned them.
strongly promoted by press clipping.