



Mary Meigs Atwater— The Beginning

Mary Meigs Atwater, the woman after whom our Weaver's Guild is named, has been called the Dean of American Handweaving. She was described by her biographer, Mary Jo Reiter, as a woman ahead of her time, a great intellect, possessed of energy and talent. Fortunately for us, she chose to devote those talents to researching, recording, and sharing information about weaving. This is the first of a series of articles on her life and her writings to illustrate who she was and how she became so important to our present-day weaving world. Most of this information comes from her biography *Weaving a Life: The Story of Mary Meigs Atwater*, compiled

by Mary Jo Reiter, edited by Veronica Patterson, and published by Interweave Press in 1992.

Mary Meigs was born February 28, 1878, in Rock Island, Illinois, to Montgomery Meigs and Grace Lynde Meigs. She was named for her paternal grandmother, Mary Adams Lynde, whom Mary described as given to the strongest possible opinions about everything. She was the eldest of six daughters, who came, in her words, at intervals of a year and a half: Mary, Louisa, Grace, Alice, Cornelia, and Frances.

Mary Meigs grew up in Keokuk, Iowa, along the Mississippi River, in a house filled with people, music, and books. Her parents were both educated in Germany. Her father was a civil engineer who worked for the North Pacific Railroad and was gone for long periods of time, then later worked on the

She was described by a male classmate as one of those “brainy girls,” which pleased her. She was taken out of public school at age 14 and sent east to a finishing school—Miss Wheeler's, in Providence, Rhode Island. Miss Wheeler had studied art in Paris, and Mary was in one of the first groups that she took

to Europe to tour art galleries and study painting, going to Paris in 1894 at age 16. Mary loved it there, especially the Musee de Cluny, with its Roman ruins, tapestries, and ceramics. She described it as a “magic summer,” but sadly, her mother died while she was on the journey. She returned to



Mary, Louisa, Grace, Alice, Cornelia, and Frances

Photo from *Weaving a Life: The Story of Mary Meigs Atwater*

Mississippi River in Keokuk. When he was home, he read to his daughters from Scott and Dickens. Mary's mother read poetry to them.

The introduction to her biography contains Mary's remembrance that when she was asked what she wanted to be when she grew up, she replied “a painter.” Later she said that she was an artist, of sorts.

Mary and her sisters had governesses until she was 13, and then she went into the public school system, where she loved geometry, calling it the foundation and meaning of life.

Paris the following year, then went on to the Chicago Art Institute School of Design for drawing. Afterward, she was determined to become a muralist and returned a third time to Paris for further study. It was during this time that she met Max Atwater, a mining engineer. He proposed to her, and they were married in the spring of 1903, in Iowa. She would never return to Paris again. The next installment will cover her travels to mining towns in the West and the start of her family. ✨



Mary Meigs Atwater— Marriage, Mining and Moving

Mary Adams Meigs married Maxwell Wanton Atwater in Lee County, Iowa, on May 14, 1903. They boarded a train and spent their honeymoon camping in Platte Canyon in Colorado, at a summer cabin owned by friends. Mary spent the week in her traveling clothes, as her trunk never made the trip.

Over the next 11 years, Mary and Max moved 5 or 6 times with Max's mining career. They started in Telluride, Colorado, at a mining camp. Of the trip there, Mary wrote of the beauty of the mountains and that she considered herself a westerner from this point on.

She set up and maintained a household for the first time in her life. Mining strikes and long hours for her husband became a way of life and Mary learned quickly how to keep the dinner warm at all hours.

They then moved to Baker, Oregon, where their first child, a son (Montgomery named for Mary's father), was born in October 1904. Then they moved to Helena, Montana; there, one day, Max came home and announced that they were leaving for Bolivia the next week. Such was the life they led, pulling up stakes at a moment's notice. In La Paz, Bolivia, their second child Abby (named for Max's mother) was born in 1907, but she only lived to two weeks of age. That loss was described by Mary in her letters as a cruel pain.

In 1908, the Atwater family moved to Black Mountain Mexico, where Mary learned to live with scorpions, rattlesnakes, lizards and stinging ants and in a state of armed preparedness, as they were in bandit territory. Max took a job in Arizona, but it was a short stint, so Mary took the time to visit one of her sisters in West Virginia. Max took a mining job in Butte Montana in 1909. Mary stated in her biography that nobody lived in Butte by choice, calling it a camp, not a town. Here, as the wife of a

mine superintendent, she had household help, so she joined the Homer club and went to afternoon teas, which she said bored her. They stayed in Butte 4 years and Mary referred to it as the least satisfactory period of her life.

Mary, Max and Monty settled in Basin, Montana in 1914. It is an old settlement, located between Butte and Helena and the place Mary would come to consider home. It was here that their daughter, Elizabeth Joan (known as Betty) was born in 1916.

It was also the place and the same time (1916, that is) that she began her study of weaving. She said that she did it as an outlet for her artistic impulses and to provide a social service. Little did she know how important it would become. She had wanted to start some enterprise for the women in the mining community, and had heard of handweaving industries in the south.

After experimenting on a small loom, and convinced that weaving would be interesting and practical, she bought some looms, set up a workshop in her house, and hired an instructor from California. This was the beginning of the Shuttle-Craft Guild. Mary's part in the enterprise was in weaving design.

She went to Boston, New York and Philadelphia to search out patterns in museums, libraries, and private collections and started writing articles about the Shuttle-Craft workshop.

She revived patterns and published directions for summer and winter and doubleweave and made them accessible to weavers.



Mary Meigs Atwater and Monty, 1905

By August 1917, the Shuttle-Craft Guild and Weaving Shop had a successful exhibit in Butte, was becoming known for high-quality work, and was receiving orders.

Mary also started as an occupational therapist in response to a call from the Army for those experienced in crafts. She trained in Camp Lewis, Washington and Letterman General Hospital, San Francisco. She wrote that her “Army boys” were starved for color, given the depressing olive drab of their uniforms and the sanitary white walls of the wards, so she gave them all the color she could. She started them out with card weaving. Mary believed that touch is how we sense reality and that a mental disorder consists mainly of a detachment. Handicraft can be a powerful cure as we don’t doubt what we can feel.

In 1918, Max became seriously ill with what was first diagnosed as the flu. Mary took leave from her therapy work

to care for him. Max went to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota in April of 1919. He improved, then had a relapse and died in June. Mary was a widow at age 41. She returned to her army post, leaving the children with the Atwater family. She believed that the therapy work was the best place for her then, and that she could not improve her children’s condition in her grief.

The next installment will be on the Shuttle-Craft Guild and Mary Meigs Atwater’s writings.

Note: Photos are from *Weaving a Life: the Story of Mary Meigs Atwater*.



Mary Meigs and Monty Atwater 1915



Mary Meigs Atwater, Part 3— Weaving and Writing

Now on her own and with a need to support herself and her two children, Mary looked to weaving as a source of income. Before her husband passed away, Mary started the Shuttle-Craft Guild in Basin, Montana, as a way to occupy the women of the mining town and provide a little income. She had been inspired by the weaving work done in Berea, Kentucky, and thought that a weaving cottage industry would work in Basin as well. She hired an instructor from the West Coast who taught 4-harness overshot, and the Guild was begun. She started writing articles on weaving and getting questions from new weavers. In 1920, she became a teacher of weaving through a correspondence course. She also began to publish the *Shuttle-Craft Bulletin* as a monthly newsletter for her students.

In 1923, when her son, Monty, went to Harvard, the whole family moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts. This move afforded Mary access to museums in the east to study textiles and earlier weaving texts. She published the *John Landes Book of Patterns* and the *Shuttle-Craft Book of American Hand Weaving* as a text for her correspondence course and started compiling the *Recipe Book of Patterns for Hand Weavers*.

From an ad in the *Handicrafter*: “This book by Mary Meigs Atwater is designed to give as complete a picture as possible of this American national popular art. Based on her research, she revived double weave, Summer and Winter and a weave structure she called the “Bronson Weave.”



Mary Meigs Atwater with Harriet Douglas Tidball, 1947. Source: *Weaving a Life*, by Mary Jo Reiter

Mary also wrote weaving articles for national craft magazines. On the *Handweaving* website (<http://www.handweaving.net/DAHome.aspx>), the the *Handicrafter* magazine may be found, with articles by Mary M. Atwater, and ads for her *Shuttle Craft Book of American Hand Weaving*.

In 1928, Monty finished his degree and the family returned to Basin, Montana, where Mary contin-

ued with the Shuttle-Craft Guild, made up of people from isolated ranches in the Rockies to New York apartments, and with her writing. She wrote a question-and-answer column and other articles for the *Weaver Magazine*. She continued to publish on the Bronson weave and on Crackle, another structure

that she brought back into popularity as an alternative to Summer and Winter.

She wrote on topics other than weaving. She wrote short stories and a mystery titled *Crime in Corn Weather*. Originally published in 1935, this mystery, set in a small Iowa farming community, addresses modern issues such as abortion and drug addiction. She also wrote articles for *True Crime* magazine.

She continued until she “retired” in 1947 and turned the Shuttle-Craft Guild, the Course in Hand Weaving and the *Bulletin* over to Harriet Douglas, though she wrote articles for the *Bulletin* through 1949. She traveled to Guatemala, taught workshops in Toronto, a short course at the University of British Columbia, and she continued to publish. Some works she published herself, such as *Guatemala Visited*, a 43-page, spiral-bound book on the country, the life there, and the weaving tradition. This book includes many beautiful charts drawn by Mary. She also taught at the first Shuttle-Craft Guild workshop, the “Basin Institute” in 1948, organized by Harriet Douglas.

She was indefatigable. She did not spend all of her time with



Shuttlecraft Bulletin Logo

weaving or writing about weaving. According to her daughter, Betty, Mary attended family functions, school plays and graduations. She organized dinners for college students and helped with homework and Christmas tree trimming.

She moved to Salt Lake City, Utah, with Monty’s career in avalanche research. In the December 1947 issue of the *Bulletin*, Harriet Douglas wrote: “Winter has come

to Basin, and Mrs. Atwater is taking the responsibility for the weather. A month ago, she said, ‘as soon as I get ready to move, there will be a blizzard.’ Well, Mrs. Atwater is moving November 17 and the blizzard is getting ready for her. Mrs.

Atwater’s new address is 6120 South 23rd East, Holliday, Salt Lake City Utah. She has a new log cabin, studio home, next door to her son. . . . Mrs. Atwater will continue to be active in the Guild. All of her correspondence course students should send their work directly to her.”

Mary Meigs Atwater would spend the rest of her life in Utah. ❀

The next and last installment will cover her last years and the beginning of the Mary Meigs Atwater Weaver’s Guild.

—Maureen Wilson



Mary Meigs Atwater Comes to Utah And the Mary Meigs Atwater Weaver's Guild is Formed

It was Monty Atwater, Mary's son, who brought Mary Meigs Atwater to Utah. He served as a forest ranger for the Forest Service in Alta, Utah, starting in the autumn of 1945. There, he developed avalanche survey and control techniques.

Mary moved to Utah in November 1947 to live near Monty, who with the Engen brothers, built 2 log cabins in Holladay. Monty and his 2nd wife Alice lived in one and Mary Atwater in the other. These were located at 2275 East, 6200 South. The cabin has been removed and a private home built on the site.

To mark the pioneer centennial in 1947, Auerbach's depart-

ment store downtown Salt Lake City built a replica cabin and had people come and demonstrate the "old crafts." Mary Meigs Atwater and Glen Beeley taught weaving there. The two weavers had different teaching styles, according to early guild members. Mary would have weavers take out their work and redo it, while Glen Beeley's directions were to "do whatever you like." Mary, a gun-toting

chain smoker, according to Linda Ligon in her introduction to the Reiter biography, would leave burns in the looms when she put her cigarette down while instructing a weaver. Glen Beeley spearheaded a project for a permanent craft school, the Pioneer Craft House. The Pioneer Craft House is now relocating to another address. Mary did not join the project due to the differences in their approaches to the craft.

In 1948, Mary applied to the University of Utah to lecture in the Industrial Arts of the Evening College. In her application, Mary lists her qualifications, including recognition as a "Master Weaver" with the Boston Society of Arts and

Crafts, and honorary member of the Chicago Coverlet Guild. Additionally, she lists positions as Chairman of the County Republican Club in Basin, American Legion member, and honorary State member of Delta Kappa Gamma.

During the late 1940s and the early 1950s, Mary continued to travel, write, and teach. She traveled to Guatemala, with a resulting book: *Guatemala Visited*. She led a group of weavers to Mexico in 1956. She finished the manuscript for the revised Shuttle-Craft Book of American Hand-Weaving, and

wrote *Byways in Handweaving*. She taught at the University of Utah, Utah State University, and back in Basin, Montana, while visiting her daughter Betty and grandchildren.



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In 1956, the Mary Meigs Atwater Weaver's Guild was formed. Membership included students of Mary and students of her students, and this weaving pedigree continues to today. Mary didn't want a Guild named after her unless it was a service Guild. Jane Jennings, one of the members

Mary died on September 5, 1956; the Salt Lake Tribune obituary lists her survivors as: son Montgomery Meigs Atwater, two daughters, Miss Alice Atwater, Salt Lake City and Mrs. Elizabeth Atwater Biehl, Montana, three sisters and five grandchildren. Her ashes were scattered on

Basin Creek ranch in Montana, one of her favorite places. Her daughter, Betty Beihl, wrote a tribute to her in the Reiter biography, stating, "She owned a trenchant wit, sharp but never vicious; she was impatient with stupidity, and completely intolerant of dishonesty . . . She was rich in intellect and achievement; the world is less colorful and interesting without her." Indeed.

These articles have only touched on who Mary Meigs Atwater was and the life she led. I've enjoyed getting to know her and I recommend reading the Mary Jo Reiter Biography: Weaving a Life, 1992, Interweave Press, and the Tribute to Mary M. Atwater by her daughter Betty Atwater Biehl, presented at the opening of the Guild Exhibit in 1973. ❀



and a weaving teacher, said that Mary wanted members to help and improve the weaving in the state and not to have any fancy refreshments. One of those services is the revised *Recipe Book*.