

Does Quilting Matter?

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My family, like most in rural 19th and 20th Century Kentucky, made a living off the land. The men labored in the heat amidst never-ending rows of tobacco in order to feed their families. In addition to raising the children, the women helped in the field and grew a huge garden. They did every bit of the housework, cooked for the masses, and in their free time, they quilted and sewed.

When my grandparents passed away, I was fortunate to inherit a number of their quilts. As I learned more about these treasured works of art, I came to understand the legacy they left for me. Quilts have been part of our Kentucky culture since the earliest settlers found their way through the mountains at Cumberland Gap. I've discovered that quilts have a way of telling our collective story.

My foremothers, like theirs before them, have been making and using quilts for hundreds of years. They are still useful and they are still being made.¹ Whether people quilt for cathartic effect or for the friendships and community building it creates, it's clear – quilting matters, for a variety of reasons.

Quilt history is full of examples of quilters using cloth as a means to communicate their views of the world. There are quilts which support social causes as well as expressions of political or religious views. For people who inherited quilts, historians say the quilts play a symbolic role for those left behind.²

The process of quilting shows up in clothing attributed to both the Egyptians and feudal peasants. The oldest remaining quilt in modern times is The Tristan Quilt, a 14th Century novelty believed to have been made in Sicily.³ It is currently on display in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, England.

People in nearly every part of the world used padded fabrics for clothing, bedding, and even armor. With the arrival of the English and Dutch settlers in North America, quilting took on a new life and flourished.

The term “quilt” comes from the Latin word, *culcita*, meaning a stuffed sack.⁴ The word has come to have two meanings. It is used as a noun, meaning the 3-layer stitched bedcovering. It is also used as a verb, meaning the act of stitching through the three layers to hold them together.

Basically, a quilt is a type of bed covering crafted from two layers of fabric with padding in between called batting. The bottom layer, or backing, is typically a single piece of fabric. The top layer can be constructed from one fabric piece or, in the case of a patchwork quilt, from many pieces of fabric in different colors and patterns.

¹ Jonathan Holstein and John Finley, *Kentucky Quilts 1800-1900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 7.

² Beverly Gordon, *Textiles: The Whole Story* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 218.

³ Victoria and Albert Online Journal, Issue No. 2 Autumn 2009, accessed March 24, 2017, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/journals/research-journal/issue-02/tales-from-the-coilte>.

⁴ Julie Johnson, “History of Quilting,” Center for Great Plain Studies (Emporia State University), accessed January 15, 2014, <https://www.emporia.edu/cgps/tales/quilte~1.html>.



Tennessee Star

A pieced quilt is made of many pieces of fabric which are sewn together. Common designs for pieced quilts include patchwork, crazy quilts, and combinations of geometric forms. Whole cloth quilts use a single piece of cloth for the top, or if it is large, strips of the same cloth. These strips are sewn together to look like a single cloth surface, rather than multiple colors and fabrics as in the pieced quilt.

In the early days, women didn't have specific patterns. They relied upon their own ingenuity, creating as they went along. The first known quilt pattern was published by the *Godey's Lady's Book*, in 1835. Though unnamed at the time, it came to be known as the honeycomb or hexagon pattern.⁵ Women generally created their own patterns or borrowed them from friends. A woman in the city might carefully copy a new pattern on paper and mail it to her sister who lived out on a remote homestead.⁶

India provided most of the early fabrics such as calicos and painted designs. The ancient people of this civilization made homespun cotton garments. Remnants of their artifacts reveal needles crafted from bone and spindles made of wood.⁷

Sewing and quilting changed significantly when the power loom was invented in England in 1785, mechanizing fabric production. The loom used water instead of human power creating a

⁵ Laurette Carroll, "Quilt Patterns Names", Bharat Textile website 2000-2012, accessed March 26, 2009, <http://www.bharattextile.com/quilt/index.php>.

⁶ Shelly Zegart, personal interview, October 20, 2012.

⁷ TextilesAsArt.com, accessed March 26, 2017, <http://www.textileasart.com/weaving.htm>.

need for as much thread as spinners could create.⁸ The power loom came to the United States in 1814 and by 1820 mass manufacturing of fabric was underway.⁹

As fabric selections improved, quilt kits came on the market and women were encouraged to embellish their work. This was particularly true towards the end of the 19th century during the Victorian Era.¹⁰

Both boys and girls were taught to sew as soon as they could hold a needle. Sewing was seen as a way to teach children patience, to accept responsibility and to foster an attitude of service to others. At one time sewing was taught in school curriculum.¹¹ Children also learned how to take wool from their animals; card, spin, and weave it to make thread; operate a loom and create fabric; and even how to dye it.¹²

In ancient days, thread was made by hand using a spinning wheel. The device was first used in India in the Early Middle Ages (between 500 and 1000 C.E.) for spinning thread or yarn from natural or synthetic fibers.¹³ Roderick Kiracofe in *The American Quilt* stated that English and European quilters used a back stitch to do their sewing, which used three times more thread. American women innovated, conserving thread by using a running stitch which they had to grow and spin their own thread, or import it at a high price.

Women's work changed dramatically when sewing machines came on the market. They were in general use by the end of the Civil War, and women could machine sew, making more quilts in less time. The 1860 *Godey's Lady's Book* reported that a man's shirt could be made by machine in one hour versus fourteen hours of hand sewing.¹⁴ Many vintage tools for sewing and quilting are still available today and show the value quilters put in their craftsmanship.

Quiltings, or quilting parties as they were initially called, began in New England in the early 19th century. This was an important means of socializing for colonial and pioneer women and families. Through the winter months, women pieced their quilt tops. With no central heating and usually only one main heated room in their homes, the room became too crowded

⁸ Richard Marsden, *Cotton Weaving: Its Development, Principles, and Practice* (Oakland: George Bell & Sons. 1895), 584.

⁹ "Paul Moody." *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, vol. 29 (Farmington Hills, Michigan: Gale, 2009); *Biography in Context*, accessed March 24, 2017, http://libraries.state.ma.us/login?gwurl=http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/K1631009282/BIC1?u=mlin_n_umas&xid=0559f202.

¹⁰ Anne Copeland and Beverly Dunivent, "Kit Quilts in Perspective," *Uncoverings* 15 (1994), American Quilt Study Group, accessed March 23, 2015, <https://americanquiltstudygroup.org/uncoverings-1994-kit-quilts-in-perspective/>.

¹¹ Theodore J. Zeman and Randall M. Miller, *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Daily Life in America, Volume 4* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2009), 54.

¹² Laurette Carroll, "Quilt Patterns Names", Bharat Textile website 2000-2012, accessed March 26, 2009, www.bharattextile.com/quilt/index.php. Also, <http://questgarden.com/106/98/6/100726101922/files/quilting.pdf>

¹³ C. Wayne Smith and J. Tom Cothren, *Cotton: Origin, History, Technology, and Production* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1999), viii.

¹⁴ *Godey's Lady's Book*, accessed March 24, 2017, <http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/serial?id=godeylady>.

during the winter months for a quilt frame to be assembled. As warmer weather arrived, neighbors came together for quilting bees.¹⁵

In early America women participated in a variety of church benevolent and social activities. By the 1830s they found a new route to public life through social reform. One example was the abolition movement, which was especially popular among Northern women.

While there have been reports and articles written about certain quilt patterns being used as a secret code along the Underground Railroad, there really is no proof to this claim. Several books have been written on the topic since the 1990s, and yet, there is no actual proof that these are more than just stories.

Late University of Louisville educator, Dr. J. Blaine Hudson, was very adamant about the fact that there was no documentation, no existing quilts. "There was nothing to support the really cool story," explains Tressa Brown, the African-American Heritage Commission Coordinator with the Kentucky Heritage Council.¹⁶ Quilt professionals at Paducah, Kentucky's National Quilt Museum and Shelly Zegart, a nationally renowned quilt expert, agree with Blaine's assessment.¹⁷

When the Civil War erupted in 1861, women worked to establish over 20,000 soldiers' aid societies to raise money and provide supplies for the war effort; over two-thirds of these societies were in the North. Much aid was accomplished through the U.S. Sanitary Commission, a relief organization.

During this time, women donated their family heirloom quilts to supply bedding for soldiers. They produced quilts, sheets, blankets, shirts, and pants, which were shipped to the nearest sanitary commission to be distributed. It is estimated that Northern women contributed \$25 million worth of supplies through the Sanitary Commission by the end of the Civil War.¹⁸

In contrast, Southern aid societies were formed out of existing church groups.¹⁹ Southern women also gathered personal heirlooms, home goods, and money to donate to Confederate soldiers.²⁰ As the south was based upon an agricultural economy and did not have the manufacturing ability of the North, women had to produce their own yarn and cloth.²¹ These hand-woven and repurposed items came to be known as "Confederate goods."

¹⁵ Worldwide Quilting Page, accessed February 2, 2013, <http://www.quilt.com/History/QuiltingBee.html>.

¹⁶ Kristy Robinson Horine, "Stitching Together History," *Kentucky Monthly Magazine*, February 2017, accessed March 1, 2017, <http://www.kentuckymonthly.com/culture/history/stitching-together-history/>.

¹⁷ Shelly Zegart, personal interview, October 20, 2012.

¹⁸ Pam Weeks, and Don Beld, *Civil War Quilts* (Atglen: Schiffer Publishing, 2011), 9-11; Virginia Gunn, "Quilts for Union Soldiers," *Uncoverings* 6 (1985): 95-124.

¹⁹ The Atlantic Guard Soldier's Aid Society, "Southern Aid Societies," accessed March 26, 2017, <http://www.agsas.org/howto/soldiersaid/southernaidsocieties.shtml>.

²⁰ Pat Ferrero, Elaine Hedges, and Julie Silber, *Heart and Hands: The Influence of Women & Quilts on American Society* (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1987), 80.

²¹ Ibid.

During the Victorian Era women focused on the sanctity of home and family. This was also a time of industrialization, urbanization, and modernization. The ideal Victorian home featured the woman of the house as “gatekeeper to all that was good and beautiful in the world.”²² As the home manager, she was expected to be a good influence on her children, the moral center and guide for her family.

For more affluent families, having a wife that lived a life of leisure was admired. This new role for women was espoused in all sorts of literature, women’s magazines, sermons, and essays in local newspapers. Sewing and quilting were seen as desirable and essential skills, part of the femininity of being a woman. It was during this time that quilts moved from bedrooms to parlors and were seen as art.²³

The Progressive Era brought significant changes for women. While women were still primarily at home, working outside the home became acceptable.²⁴ An increasing number of women gained an education and established their place in professional positions.²⁵

A popular activity for women during this time was to join one or more of the reform movements to address social problems. A society or club championed a specific cause yet had the “moral support of all others.” This meant one society would make allowance for the efforts of another with hopes that public support would increase.²⁶

Three major social reform causes of the 19th century were abolition, temperance, and suffrage. It was the temperance movement that utilized quilts and quilt making as an aid to its cause more often than the other two causes. Women such as author Eliza Calvert Hall and Francis Willard, a suffragist and temperance supporter, often wrote metaphorically about the quilt as a way to reach women, to garner their support and get them to take collective action.

Willard propelled the Women’s Christian Temperance Union to the national stage. She understood a woman’s traditional role was within the home. Rather than expecting women to adopt more radical political ideas, she urged women to support and publicly stand up for their traditional beliefs and values. Quilt making provided an outlet for women to express their feelings or opinions, particularly about political and social issues. The 19th Amendment passed in 1920 giving women the right to vote.²⁷

Traditional quilt history indicates that most scrap quilts were “make do” projects, quilts constructed from leftover patches in order to be thrifty, and used every scrap of fabric available.

²² Ellen Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America* (New York: Facts on File, Inc, 1997), xi.

²³ Shelly Zegart, personal interview, October 20, 2012.

²⁴ The National Women’s History Museum, “Reforming Their World: Women in the Progressive Era,” Online Exhibitions, accessed March 2, 2017, <https://www.nwhm.org/online-exhibits/progressiveera/home.html>.

²⁵ Caitlin McElligott, “Women’s Education in the United States,” Miami University, accessed February 5, 2017, <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=textilesdiss>.

²⁶ Nancy Rosenbloom, *Women in American History Since 1880* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 18.

²⁷ Judy Anne Breneman, “America’s Quilting History,” accessed November 14, 2013, <http://www.womenfolk.com/historyofquilts/>.

More recent research into the history of quilts has shown that most 19th century quilts were largely made of the finest materials the maker could afford.²⁸ That being said, during the Depression Era, women continued quilting out of necessity, reusing old clothing, flour, and feed sacks, as materials were often scarce or unaffordable. Most quilts made during the Civil War and World War I were given to soldiers or auctioned off to raise money for war efforts.

Quilts made in modern war times were more to show general support for the troops rather than to supply necessities for the soldiers.²⁹ Two notable quilting efforts during recent wartimes are the Quilts of Valor and Home of the Brave Quilt Project.

Quilts of Valor is an organization started by Catherine Roberts, the mother of a soldier. After her son enlisted, she wished to honor returning veterans to express thanks for their service.³⁰ A national effort, run entirely by volunteers, Quilts of Valor matches up those who prefer piecing to those who prefer quilting, presenting a finished quilt to a returning soldier from the war in Iraq.

The Home of the Brave Quilt Project began in 2004. Based in California, the Citrus Belt Quilters wanted a way to honor the families of fallen soldiers. This organization designs its quilts based on existing Sanitary Commission quilt patterns made during the Civil War, and makes them with reproduction fabrics.³¹ Their quilts create a symbolic connection for soldiers, recognizing those who came before them in service to their country.

Modern day quilters continue to express their feelings about social issues in the 21st century. At the Women's March on Washington in January 2017, there were women attending who expressed their opinions in quilts. One such quilter, Jessica Skultety of New Jersey, posted this excerpt on her personal blog prior to the march, "As a quilter, I'd rather make a quilt that will last, rather than a sign that probably won't. Plus, since this was a 'Women's March' and women are traditionally associated with sewing, it would be a really cool way to send a message."

After the march, Skultety wrote, "I hope that quilters will continue to use their voices to speak up about things that are important to them. Much more good than bad has come of speaking out so far. I could not have made this quilt if I hadn't felt so strongly about the cause."³²

In terms of sending a message, the AIDS Quilt is unlike anything else in the history of quilting. People of all walks of life, many whom were not quilters, made a panel in the approximate size of a grave. They used a wide variety of personal objects to share a story about

²⁸ Shelly Zegart, personal interview, October 20, 2012.

²⁹ Nancy Cameron Armstrong, "Quilts of the Gulf War, Desert Storm - Participation or Protest?" *Uncoverings* 13 (1992), accessed March 24, 2017, <https://americanquiltstudygroup.org/uncoverings-1992-quilts-of-the-gulf-war-desert-storm%20ac-participation-or-protest/>.

³⁰ Quilts of Valor Foundation, "Background Information," accessed January 25, 2017, <http://www.qovf.org/>.

³¹ Home of the Brave Quilt Project, accessed January 22, 2017, <http://www.citrusbeltquilters.org/home-of-the-brave/>.

³² Jessica Skultety, "Quilty Habit," accessed January 25, 2017, <http://www.quiltyhabit.com/>. Personal correspondence January 30, 2017.

their loved one.³³ This expression of grief by family and friends was brought to the National Mall in Washington on October 11, 1987, and pieced together. This visual act made a political statement and raised awareness for funding that was desperately needed for research.³⁴

Another medical cause supported by a passion for quilting is the Alzheimer's Art Quilt Initiative (AAQI). This is a national charity with a mission to raise awareness and fund research through art. Created in 2006 by Ami Simms of Flint, Michigan, AAQI is a nonprofit operated entirely by volunteers. As a quilter with a mother suffering from Alzheimer's disease, Simms was eager to raise funds. When the AAQI stopped soliciting funds at the end of 2013, more than \$1.1 million had been raised for Alzheimer's research.³⁵

There have been a few pivotal points in history when needlework and quilt making have seen a great surge in popularity. One such time was when an art exhibit was mounted by Jonathon Holstein and Gail Van der Hoof at New York's Whitney Museum in 1971. *Abstract Design in American Quilts* featured quilts as works of art, setting attendance records at Whitney. The show received widespread media attention and afterwards toured North America and Europe for many years.³⁶

There was another historic moment in 1985 when quilt enthusiasts, Meredith and Bill Schroeder, hosted the first quilt show in Paducah, Kentucky, where more than 5,000 people showed up. The following year, Mrs. Schroeder started the American Quilters Society in order to gain national recognition for quilters and their work, and to set the standard in the industry.

In 1991, the Schrodgers opened the quilt museum in Paducah, citing a desire to give back to the community in which they have lived for many years. The museum was honored in May 2008 when the U.S. Congress designated it The National Quilt Museum of the United States. It continues to be a huge tourist draw and financial benefit to the economy of Paducah and surrounding communities in western Kentucky.³⁷

Quilting is a legacy that we in Kentucky can take pride in. As this overview of quilt history surely shows, quilting does matter. Quilts have a way of telling our stories. It is an honor to

³³ "History." The AIDS Memorial Quilt, accessed January 22, 2017, <http://www.aidsquilt.org/history.htm>.

³⁴ The NAMES Project Foundation, "Quilt 2012, accessed March 17, 2017, <http://www.aidsquilt.org/about/the-names-project-foundation>.

³⁵ Why Quilts Matter," accessed January 5, 2017, http://www.whyquiltsmatter.org/welcome/news/aaqi-to_cease-fundraising-in-december/. Also <http://www.amisimms.com/aaqi.html>. Accessed March 5, 2017.

³⁶ World Quilts: The American Story, accessed February 25, 2017, <http://worldquilts.quiltstudy.org/americanstory/creativity/abstractdesign> accessed February 25, 2017; See also Jonathan Holstein, *Abstract Design in American Quilts: A Biography of an Exhibition* (Louisville, KY: Kentucky Quilt Project, 1991), 91.

³⁷ The National Quilt Museum, "History," accessed March 22, 2017, <http://quiltmuseum.org/about-us/history/> and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Quilt_Museum.

reflect upon a craft that has been passed along from one generation to the next throughout our shared Kentucky and American history, connecting our past to the present.



Bow Tie

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