

# What Is a Quilt?

Margaret M. Meador, WVU Extension Professor Emerita

## MOTHER'S PATCHWORK QUILT

*I see my mother's patchwork quilt  
Upon my bed upstairs  
And stitched into each tiny piece  
Are all her love and care*

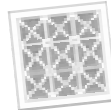
*I see my sister's dresses,  
A piece of mother's skirt,  
A bit of brother's rompers,  
A square of daddy's shirt*

*I see her work worn hands  
By fading evening light,  
Piecing tiny diamonds  
Far into the night*

*A square of yellow,  
Bits of blue and red,  
Oh! I am so proud  
To spread it on my bed*

*How I cherish that old quilt  
A thing of beauty rare,  
For I saw my mother stitching  
Love in every square.*

— Willie Wilcox Garner in *A Garden of Quilts*  
by Mary Elizabeth Johnson



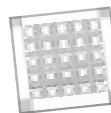
## Quilting in America

Quilted garments and bedcovers were very important to America's early settlers, although it is not known exactly when they were introduced. Most quilt scholars agree, however, that the use and development of quilting came from English and Dutch immigrants. There is no evidence that the Spanish or French colonists made use of the technique. The Spanish who settled in the warm climate of the southern areas of the country had little use for the warmth provided by quilted items, and the French in Canada sought protection from the cold with furs, which were easily obtained.

The English and the Dutch who settled along the upper half of the eastern coast are given credit for developing the arts of patchwork and quilting. They applied their skills in spinning and weaving to make quilted garments to protect them during the colder months and used the leftover scraps and the best parts of worn-out garments to fashion quilted bedcovers.

This frugality was repeated during the Depression years of the 1930s, when homemakers saved the buttons from worn-out dresses and used the least-faded pieces from under the collars and inside the pockets for quilt patches, the larger pieces of the skirts for aprons, the smaller pieces for dustrags, and the leftover strips to tie up tomatoes in the garden. Along with their ingenuity in using what they had, they were also satisfying their need for self-expression and beauty in their harsh lives.

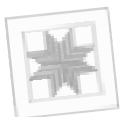
The wealthier settlers during the late 1700s and early 1800s were able to import beautiful fabric to have clothing made for the wives and daughters. Servants were given the task of applying the left-over pieces, usually in a floral pattern, to plain backgrounds for use as a bedcovering.



## Quilting as a Means of Self-expression

Quilts have been made to express political feelings and commemorate historic events. Everyday living provided many of the names of these old quilts and some quilt names came from their makers' abiding faith.

Quilt-making also helped the makers assuage their sorrows, with the ultimate example of this being the "Kentucky



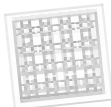
## History of Quilting

Quilting did not originate in America, although it certainly took on a new form in this country.

The earliest known quilted item is a garment found on the statue of an Egyptian pharaoh who lived about 3400 BC. Quilted garments were worn for protection under the armor of the crusading knights in the Middle Ages. They were all made of whole pieces of cloth, as were the "bed rugs" made in Europe by men in tailor guilds. Although patchwork was developed much later, the appliqué technique was widely used to make the ornamental unquilted hangings for the churches of the Middle Ages. Appliqué also decorated the robes of the royal elite.

Coffin” quilt. Made in 1839 in shades of brown, it features a fenced-in cemetery in its center that contains coffins with the names of dead family members inscribed on them. Coffins appliquéd with other family members’ names are placed around the border. Despite these quilts to relieve sorrows, probably more of the quilts made over the years celebrated happier times, such as births, weddings, and graduations. As the development of the country spread westward, quilts were often used as departure gifts. An example of this is the quilt made by Ankey Hutchison of Monroe County for her step-grandson who was leaving for Nebraska. A similar quilt, documented by the West Virginia Heritage Quilt Search in 1992, was made by Ankey for her niece in 1884, and both are covered with appliquéd verses from a Church of the Brethren hymn (*West Virginia Quilts and Quilt Makers*, p. 166).

Another quilt that was made as an act of homage can also be seen in *West Virginia Quilts and Quiltmakers* (p. 170). This quilt, with a separate block for each of the 48 states, was made by Ella Martin, a coal miner’s wife from Montcalm. It was a gift for President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933 expressing her appreciation for the National Recovery Act, which was designed to stimulate the economy and protect the workers. Her quilt was given to the West Virginia Cultural Center in Charleston by the person who purchased it from its last owner, Mrs. Roosevelt’s mail clerk.

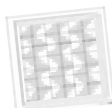


## Decline and Renewal

Despite of its great popularity, quilting declined around the turn of the century, probably due to the availability of mail-order blankets. The few quilters left were quilting without enthusiasm or development of new patterns or styles. It was not revived until the mid-1920s, reaching its peak in the 1930s. Its renewal was probably due to a revival of interest in our country’s history and its crafts. Patterns developed during these years were the “Double Wedding Ring” and “Grandmother’s Flower Garden” and appliquéd quilts were once again popular. The somber blues and grays used during the years of decline were replaced with pink, lavender, yellow, and a very distinctive green. Printed feed sacks were widely used during this time because they could be obtained for nothing when buying animal feed. Although store-bought fabric was plentiful and cheap, money was scarce.

Some people continued to quilt during each of the periods of decline, but there was little quilt-making between 1940 and 1970. Then the second great revival began, and it has not declined to this day. This renewed interest probably stemmed from the country’s bicentennial coinciding with the “Back to the Earth” movement, with its emphasis on

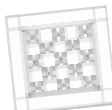
handmade crafts and the values of conservation and frugality. This interest shows no sign of abating, although it probably will in time.



## Calico Clues

Colors are significant as a clue to a quilt’s history. Floral appliquéd quilts of very bright greens and reds on white backgrounds generally were made in the first three-quarters of the 1800s. About 1875, these imported dyes were replaced with synthetic ones, and the greens from that era faded to a dull tan color over time. Probably for this reason, the quilts made from fabrics around the turn of the century up to the mid-1920s were in subdued blues and grays. In the mid-1920s, reliable dyes became available to give quilts the beautiful pastels typical of this era, and they were widely used in the 1930s.

Pattern selection also is a strong clue to a certain era, such as the crazy quilts that began appearing around 1875. Polyester batting, which was introduced in the 1960s, is another important clue.



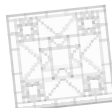
## Documenting the Quilt’s History

In order for future generations to be aware of your quilt’s maker and any other information about it, a label may be made to fasten to the back of the quilt as follows: Cut a piece of laundered white or off-white muslin large enough to handle the information you wish to impart. Tape it to a firm surface and using a marking pen with a non-water-soluble ink, such as a laundry pen or a fabric marker, write on it the maker’s name, location, and actual or approximate date of completion. Other information, such as the name of the pattern and the occasion for which it was made or to whom it was given, may also be added. Turn the edges under and stitch the label by hand to the quilt’s lining. A decorative embroidery edging can be used for a finishing touch.



## So, What Is a Quilt?

It is a diary of the maker—full of her hopes and dreams, as well as her sorrows—made over a particular period, remaining as her legacy for following generations. But another important characteristic, which has not been mentioned, is the quilt’s warm, tactile qualities that make the person sleeping under one feel sheltered from the cold and life’s harshness.



## References

- Johnson, Mary Elizabeth, *A Garden of Quilts*, Oxmoor House, Inc., Birmingham, Ala., 1984.
- Valentine, Fawn, *West Virginia Quilts and Quiltmakers*, Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio, 2000.