

History of American Patchwork

Quilt historian and collector Jan Baker goes right back to the start of this wonderful craft that has captured the hearts of so many women – and men – around the world.

TEXT BY JAN BAKER

A popular image from the American colonial period is that of a woman sitting in her modest cabin, usually in front of a warm fireplace, busily quilting bedcovers to keep her family warm during cold winter nights. Writers often embellish this vision by explaining that these colonial quilts were developed out of necessity by frugal housewives who made the most of what they had, patching threadbare blankets with scraps of fabric into random but appealing patchwork designs. It is a wonderfully romantic notion and one we would like to believe, but sadly it lacks historical foundation.

Textile historian and quilt researcher Sally Garoutte contributed a paper entitled *Early Colonial Quilts in a Bedding Context* to the 1980 edition of *Uncoverings*, the highly respected research publication of the American Quilt Study Group (AOSG). The purpose of her paper was to examine two common misconceptions often associated with the history of American patchwork: That the first American quilts were made because of economic hardship, the need for warm bedding being so great that early colonial women pieced together all

their fabric scraps to make quilts; and, that quilts were common and ordinary bed furnishings in all colonial households.

To dispel these myths, Ms Garoutte analysed wills and probate inventories from the states of Connecticut and New Hampshire, and included statistics from two other studies involving colonial household inventories from the state of Massachusetts. From this collective body of research, she offered the following conclusions:

“Quilts in the early colonial period were few and far between. They were the most expensive bedding item inventoried. They were found in the households of well-to-do people, usually merchant-importers. They were almost certainly imported rather than homemade. In wills, a few were described: ‘my silken quilt,’ ‘cradle quilt, silk on one side and calico on the other,’ a ‘calico quilt’ and a ‘blue quilted coverlet’. The last three of these were actually in early 18th century wills. So few quilts were recorded in the 17th century, it is difficult to get even a sense of them. There are no references at all during early colonial period to pieced work or patchwork, however, for the good reason that those techniques were not yet practiced. Like the quilted petticoats of the period, bed quilts were quilted designs on whole cloth.”

Ms Garoutte further concludes that quilts were definitely not commonplace during early colonial times. She claims they were both rare and expensive. She also maintains that quilts were not born of economic necessity nor were they meant to keep people warm. Domestic looms and English imports provided cheaper and warmer woven blankets. Even as quilts started to emerge in the late 18th century and taking into account the more prolific quiltmaking of the 19th century, we still find that quilts do not appear to be made for either economic or practical purposes. Only the minimum amount of batting was used, just enough to show off the quilting, but certainly not enough to provide a warm and cosy bed in winter.

The oldest quilts in American museums generally belong to what is called the whole-cloth tradition. Quilt historians typically include bed coverings made of large pieces of solid-coloured wool or silk, chintz or copperplate-printed cotton or linen; or the various forms of embroidered cotton or linen known as whitework in the category of whole-cloth quilts. Most



Antique English Flower Garden.



Two examples of Redwork Quilts.

examples of wool whole cloth are in solid colours, elaborately quilted by an expert needlewoman and used either as a petticoat or a bedcover. Either way, it was an expense that most couldn't afford. You either paid a professional to do it for you, or you had to be of sufficient wealth and leisure to develop and apply the necessary skills yourself.

In fact, the term 'whole cloth' is somewhat misleading, as 18th and early-19th-century looms could not produce fabric large enough to cover the entire surface of a bed. Hence, fabric of the same colour and design would be pieced together or for a more dramatic impact, contrasting colours would often be combined. In either case, it was the all-over quilting designs that created the whole-cloth effect.

Considered one of the earliest varieties of patchwork, Broderie Perse or Cut-out Chintz appliqué was popular in America from the late 18th century to the middle of the 19th century. The first chintz or painted cottons were imported to England from India as early as 1600. Initially the Indians exported prints that were in fashion in India at the time,

however, English consumers did not find Indian design motifs appealing, and it wasn't long before Indian textile manufacturers began to include the floral, bird and animal motifs popular in England and Europe. The result was a rather eclectic mixture of east and west that certainly captured the fancy of needlewomen.

The popularity of Indian chintz fabrics caused quite an uproar in the English textile industry, fearing that the wool and silk trades would be in jeopardy. The government responded with a ban on the import or production of printed cottons, causing the price to rise dramatically. The commonly held theory is that Broderie Perse or Cut-out Chintz appliqué became an established style when the cost of Indian-style chintz reached such a prohibitive level that even affluent women had to find other ways to use these prints economically. By appliquéing the ornate and colourful motifs to less expensive fabrics, they were able to extend a small amount of very expensive chintz fabric to bedcover size.

Indian chintz also became popular in America, and during the latter half of the 18th century became available to



A scrappy quilt dating from the American Civil War era.

stamp, many of which included not only their names but also small scrolls and floral motifs to be fancy and unique. When indelible inks became available in the 1830s, women started creating autograph quilts, also referred to as friendship, album, sampler or presentation quilts. The most elegant of all autograph quilts was the sampler album quilt, particularly those made in the Baltimore area. Why Baltimore? During the 1840s it was a prosperous seaport and the centre of a highly successful and emergent textile industry. The upper-class women of Baltimore had the money to buy the best fabrics available and the also time to refine their needlework skills. Another factor in the emergence of Baltimore Album quilts was the influence of German folk art traditions on the design motifs used in these special album quilts.

While Baltimore's society ladies were creating some of the most treasured quilts of all time, friendship quilts were being made to help cheer up the women preparing to embark on the journey westward to unknown destinations,

merchants in the seaport towns of Charleston, South Carolina, Baltimore, Maryland and New York City. The ban had been lifted – actually, it hadn't worked, as the government had to give in to consumer demand and allow British textile firms to learn the techniques used by the Indians so they could manufacture their own cotton prints. Just as the British wanted local production, so too did the Americans. By the end of the 18th century, American textile designers began production for the domestic market. However, it wasn't until the introduction of the power loom in 1813 and the industrialisation of towns throughout New England that domestic production could begin to keep up with local demand. By the middle of the 19th century, American women had a choice of both domestic and imported selections. With a ready supply at hand and more reasonable prices, quilting began to take off in America, giving rise to several new styles and techniques.

By 1820 the custom of signing guest books when paying a visit to a friend's home had become very popular. Trendy women's magazines such as *Godey's Lady's Book* actually published messages and poems for women to use when autographing these albums. Women who weren't satisfied with their own handwriting would use a metal stencil or signature

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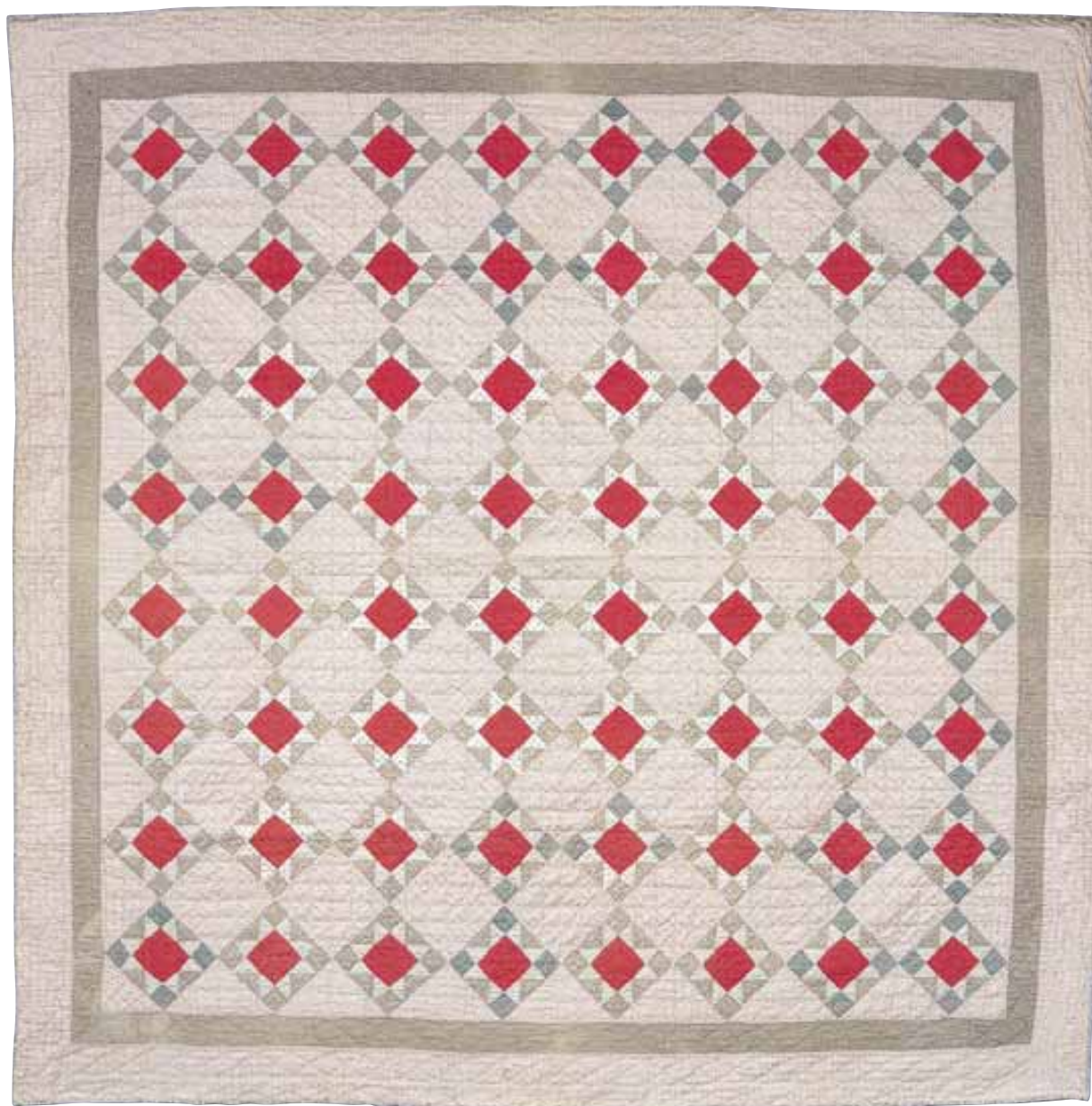
travelling with heavy hearts as they knew from the start they would never again see their family and friends. For the most part these were pieced-block patterns, with inked inscriptions. At the very least, a person's name would be inscribed, but many blocks included personalised messages or at least something copied from *Godey's Lady's Book* or other similar publications offering appropriate phrases to express their feelings of love and caring. Friendship quilts protected precious china while making the difficult crossing, and then provided solace for the heart-broken woman who was trying to adjust to her new life thousands of miles away from home.

The American Civil War broke out in 1861 and lasted a very long four years. It took a devastating toll on life and property and it quickly became obvious that women were needed in the war effort. Fairs were held in several cities throughout the north and among the most expensive items made and donated for fundraising efforts were quilts. In the last two years of the Civil War, women raised an astounding amount of money, something over \$4 million dollars. The money helped raise the standards of field hospitals, a critical need considering the majority of soldiers died from infected wounds, not from actual combat. The aristocratic ladies of the South managed to raise money for

gunboats, each one costing around \$80,000. Not only were quilts made for fundraising, but they were also sent directly to the military camps to alleviate critical shortages of warm bedding during the winter months. It has been estimated that over 250,000 quilts and comforts were made for the Union soldiers from the north.

The war finally ended and the country healed its wounds. The 1870s was a time of rapid expansion and more industrialisation, and in 1886 the last railway company standardised their rail gauge to accommodate freight and passengers from one end of the country to the other. The year 1876 marked the first hundred years as an independent nation, and America had much to celebrate. The Centennial

Exposition in Philadelphia introduced Americans to the art and culture of Japan, with nearly 10 million visitors to the Japanese pavilion. Crazy Quilts came into fashion as American quilters adopted Japanese designs, and blended them with other trends of the time related to the Decorative Arts Movement to upstage the more traditional geometric patterns. Crazy Quilts were showpieces, typically smaller and mostly used to decorate formal parlours. Women showed off their needlework skills while men were able to demonstrate their wealth. After all, most Crazy Quilts were made using expensive velvets, silks and brocades, and considering the number of hours involved, only wealthy ladies would have had the time.



Antique Sawtooth Star – an example of a Civil War quilt.



Antique Pickle Dish Quilt – from the Depression era.

It took only five years for the Crazy Quilt craze to come to an abrupt end. Another fad during the last decades of the 19th century was the Charm Quilt. The idea was to collect fabric from as many sources as possible for use in a one-patch design and not to have any repeats. Since this often meant asking friends and family for fabric scraps, it also became known as a Beggar Quilt. Another style influenced by the centennial exhibitions was that of Redwork. Many examples of decorative surface embroidery on practical household linens were on display in Philadelphia and this gave rise to commercial stamping kits for purposes of transferring a wide array of embroidery motifs to plain background fabrics. Since Turkey-red thread was colour-fast and widely available, it quickly became the colour of choice and it didn't take long for this type of needlework to become known as Redwork. By the end of the century, full-size quilts were constructed from Redwork blocks, and there was never a lack of designs, considering every magazine was full of advertisements for all kinds of kits and

patterns. Little girls – and boys – used to do Redwork as well, and since it cost a penny for a single pattern to be stamped on a single block at the corner dry goods store, it was also known as Penny Squares. Redwork remained popular until well into the 20th century.

During the 1920s and '30s, quilting became commercialised as newspapers all over America introduced syndicated columns to discuss the art of quilting and to offer exciting new patterns for quilters to try. Quiltmaking was now being promoted as the feminine ideal and to further simplify the process, manufacturers started marketing quilt kits. Three types of quilt kits emerged – appliqué, pieced and stamped for embroidery. Depending on the manufacturer and the price you were willing to pay, you could get any combination of die-cut pieces, appliqué components, background fabrics, binding, backing and supplies required to complete the project. Apparently kit quilts were peculiarly American, and only appeared elsewhere if someone happened to purchase it while overseas. Whether a



An example of a Friendship or Signature Quilt.

kit quilt or a pattern published in the newspaper, Depression-era quilts were typically made from clear, bright pastel solids, and patterns that became extremely popular include Grandmother's Flower Garden, Dresden Plate, Lone Star, Double Wedding Ring, Butterfly, Trip Around the World and Grandmother's Fan.

When Pearl Harbor was bombed on December 7, 1941, a lot of things changed in America. Many women then had to work outside the home, filling in for the men who had gone to war. In fact, many additional workers were required to manufacture the necessary materials for the massive war effort. It is no wonder that quilting went out of vogue. That doesn't mean that everyone stopped quilting, but certainly there were other priorities for most women. Even after the war ended and the economy picked up, the general opinion in postwar America was that quilting was an activity for poor people who couldn't afford to buy modern bed coverings. It wasn't until the Bicentennial in 1976 that quilting staged a significant comeback.

In fact, the Quilting Revival of 1976 affected not only America, but Australia, England and other parts of Europe, and continues to be strong today.

No longer relegated to the bedroom, quilts have become an accepted art form and are often displayed on the walls of corporate official buildings, as well as in prestigious museum collections. And, according to all we have learned from historical accounts, that is exactly what early quilters had in mind – an art piece, a thing of beauty. From an anonymous source, writing about quilting in the 1870s, we have this observation:

"... a woman made utility quilts as fast as she could so her family wouldn't freeze, and she made them as beautiful as she could so her heart wouldn't break."

For more information about this collection or to schedule a lecture, contact Jan Baker by email at jan@americanheritagequilts.com or ring 0418 999 806. ■