

# HISTORY OF QUILTING AND MODERN QUILTS

GAIL THOMPSON

## INTRODUCTION

I belonged to Molly Pitcher Stitcher's Quilt Guild in New Jersey when I decided to prepare this program. Our guild felt that the community did not know much about the history of quilting and decided to do a display at various libraries. We sewed many historical quilt blocks and attached a card that explained the history of that block. At the conclusion of the displays my friends did not know what to do with their blocks and I decided to prepare this program so they gave it to me. These blocks are shown here and I'm grateful to have them. It is important for me to talk about topics that are personally meaningful to me.

I started presenting this program in 2011 to guilds and continued for several years. I'm happy to say that many quilters enjoyed it. This year I decided to start my program again and my first booking is on May 20, 2022. The modern quilts section include my own quilts. If you want to see them check my **Gallery** to see some of the quilts that I am most proud of.

I appreciate people that make things with their own hands even if they are not using fabric. Do you use your hands and talent to create something? If you do, please send me a message. I'd like to hear about it and be sure to send me pictures. I hope that you read this information and learn something about quilting.

### Migration Westward from 1830 to 1860

- **The Scrap Quilt** block was the first type of block to be sewn. The general store did not sell fabric so women had to accumulate old fabric scraps from curtains and clothing which they placed in a box. When the box was full they began to sew a quilt. The blocks were squares and the quilt was very colorful due to the many fabrics used. They did not have sewing machines so all of the quilts were sewn by hand.



## Migration Westward from 1830 to 1860

- Patchwork means that fabric was cut into specific shapes to sew what is called a **patchwork block**.
- In the mid-1800's new fabrics and economic conditions raised interest in sewing and quilting patchwork blocks.
- In later years, women started sewing other designs such as triangle and circles which were harder than the square shape.
- **The Triangle Block** It was first sewn in 1830. Only two fabrics were used ensuring that those fabric colors complemented each other. See the quilting lines I sewed.



- Colonists moved westward and quilted for necessity but this was also a means of expressing their artistic creativity.
- Young daughters were taught to sew and quilt as soon as they could sew with a needle and not poke themselves.
- By age 10 or 11 girls already had a few quilts to their credit. Their family was proud of them and they realized that by using this valuable skill they were helping their family in an important way.
- Quilts were very useful and were not only used for bedding. Quilts had others uses, such as covering the cabin doors during the winter months, to shield crops from locusts and other harmful bugs that could kill their crops and it was also used as a shroud to bury the dead.

## Migration Westward from 1830 to 1860

### The Quilting Bee

- The quilting bee was very popular. Visiting each other for fun was not tolerated, except at the quilting bee. This was a special time for women to socialize and speak about their childhood, marriage, children, how the crops are growing and even death. Indeed, they became lifelong friends.
- They gathered around the quilting frame and helped to quilt each other's quilts.
- All the blocks you see here were the foundation for hundreds of other variations of blocks to follow and they are still popular today.
- **Star Block sewn with Christmas fabric.** Notice that the fabric colors coordinate nicely. The white fabric allows the stars to show and I used hand quilting which accents the stars. Accuracy of the points is important and this block should only be sewn by an experienced quilter. This block is easier to sew than the Le Moyne star block shown next.



## Migration Westward from 1830 to 1860

### Le Moyne Star Block

This is one of the most beautiful blocks of all time. Accuracy of the points is important and this block should only be sewn by an experienced quilter. The mustard and rust colored fabrics are good because this allowed me to see the diamond shapes clearly. You cannot see it in the picture but the points in the middle intersect perfectly. I hand quilted around the diamonds with rust colored thread and the white corner blocks helped me to see the quilting stitch clearly. This was sewn by an experienced quilter in my guild.



## Migration Westward from 1830 to 1860

### Robbing Peter to Pay Paul Block

This block has the most interesting name. If a woman sewed a quilt and she did not know the name of it she would make up a name. Often times quilts were named after the state the quilter lived such as the Ohio Star Quilt.

I like the small triangles in this block. The empty space in the middle with the white fabric is the perfect space for several quilting lines you see here.



## CIVIL WAR ERA FROM 1860 TO 1865

- When the call to arms rang out, women on both sides mobilized to supplement supplies by making quilts for their men at war and for use in the hospitals. They also created elaborate quilts as a means to raise funds to buy supplies. I am going to show you the best-known historical block of all time.
- **The Log Cabin Blocks** were sewn to honor President Lincoln. This is one of the original blocks that laid the foundation for many others. Women from all over America sewed this quilt in fabrics of their choice but they had to sew it using rectangular rows as seen in the picture. If you look closely you'll see that there are 5 rows before you reach the red block sewn in the middle. I like this quilt because of the different fabrics and colors.



- Life changed dramatically after the Civil War as times were hard in both the South and North with shortages in all areas of daily life.
- In the West, the railroad made traveling easier for settlers. Towns were built around the railroad depots that dotted the plains. The general store offered an array of various fabric and sewing supplies.

## **History of the Singer Sewing Machine**

- In 2001, Singer celebrated the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Singer Sewing Machine Company. Singer was the leader in the sewing machine industry from the start. Singer's leadership has remained to this day due to their continued commitment to quality, reliability, innovation and service.
- Issac Singer was born in New York. He and others invented various ways of operating a sewing machine, but none of those ways were the most efficient. Issac Singer invented the first machine that operated with a straight needle that moved up and down. This same basic operation is still used today. After that he continued making improvements until he finally invented the world's first practical sewing machine used by the home sewer. This sewing machine was offered for sale all over the United States for \$100.00. Within two years, Singer became the leading manufacturer and marketer of sewing machines for both home and factory in the United States.
- In 1904, new factories opened in Europe and Canada. In 1921, portable electric sewing machines were introduced all over the world.

## **First Mail Order Catalogs**

- In 1872, Montgomery Ward was the first to make fabric, batting and supplies available to the public via a mail order catalog.
- In 1887, Sears, Roebuck's catalog started selling the same supplies. For the first time, women could compare prices in the catalog to the general store.

## **Newspapers and Magazines**

- Patterns and fabrics were printed for the first time. The publications altered the tradition of quilting. Quilters all over the country saw the same patterns and fabrics at the same time. This caused certain quilt blocks to become more popular than others.

## **1920 TO 1930 ERA**

- The 1920's were years of prosperity and change. By 1921, women won the right to vote and were liberated from household drudgeries of the past. What an exciting time for them. Can anyone think of what wonderful inventions took place?
- For the first time, people now have electricity, gas, water lines, automobiles, telephones and washing machines. More modern sewing machines revolutionized American life. Thankfully, women began a renewed interest in sewing quilts again.



## GREAT DEPRESSION FROM 1930 TO 1939

- **Depression of the 1930's** brought hard times to America. **The worst year of the Great Depression was 1933.** Women again lost interest in quilt making because they could not afford to buy fabric and supplies.
- Sears, Roebuck Company desperately needed to do something to help in the resurgence of quilt making so they decided to have the biggest quilt contest of all time. The contest took place at the **1933 Chicago World's Fair**. It was announced in the January 1933 Sears catalog that the winner would win \$1000.00. By the May entry deadline, nearly 25,000 quilts were registered, the most entered in any contest before that date.
- The grand prize winner's name was Margaret Caden of Kentucky. But Margaret did not make the quilt. She owned a business and she asked one of her employees to sew a quilt called the Feathered Star and another employee to quilt it. Of course, they had no choice but to do what she asked. They sewed the **Feathered Star Quilt**. This was a terrible thing to do and unfortunately Sears never found out that she did not sew the quilt. Over the years her conscience must have bothered her every time she looked at the quilt. She eventually decided to give her quilt to a very important woman. She gave it to Eleanor Roosevelt who gladly accepted her gift.
- The contest did cause a quilting resurgence and Sears sold more fabric than ever before. But there were still women that could not afford to buy new fabric. These women followed the colonial women and saved pieces of clothing and curtains to use for quilt fabric.

### Feathered Star Block

- This is a lovely block but it was not easy for me to sew. The hardest part were those tiny triangles, but I must admit those triangles are what makes the quilt interesting. I can understand why this quilt won the contest.



## WORLD WAR II FROM 1939 TO 1945

- When America entered World War II in 1941, women supported the war effort by working in the industrial factories while the men became soldiers and fought in the war.
- After the war was finally over, a new suburban culture of television and mortgage payments altered people's way of life in a drastic way. People were excited to do anything that was new and modern, rather than antique and colonial. It was as if people were ready for a new life and a new beginning.
- Quilt making never died out completely, but it would be nearly 30 years before quilt making again became fashionable. Women realized that they wanted to use their creative skills.

## THE JOY OF HAND WORK

- When women were not sewing quilts they often relaxed and enjoyed doing various types of hand work. Today, women young and old enjoy the same hand work. The designs they select to do have changed over time as well as the fabric. The technique used for the hand work has not changed much at all.
- **Hand Applique is one type of hand work that was done.** Early settlers from their European homelands brought their skills and styles. **This is called Tulip Twist Flower Applique.** The applique stitch is a very small stitch that is used to sew the folded edge of the design to the background fabric. It is not easy to learn but with practice and patience you can learn it.



## THE JOY OF HAND WORK

- **Hand applique used in the Sunbonnet Sue design.** Children loved the two girls with their dresses and hats. The two pictures show fabric designs that are very small and have pastel colors. The Sunbonnet fabric show pictures of animals and flowers. **This is called conversation fabric.** Manufacturers research this type of fabric and reproduce it. It is called reproduction fabric.





- Notice the small floral design printed on pastel colors, such as violet, yellow, pink and blue. I designed the half circle with the ruffle on the top.

### **The Buttonhole Stitch**

- This stitch is done by hand and embroidery floss is used instead of thread. The only name that appears reads Mrs. Mullin. She has sewn this stitch absolutely perfect. I like them all, but my favorite is the large butterfly. The picture below shows the top two blocks and the second picture show the bottom two blocks.



## THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD SAMPLER BOOK

WRITTEN BY ELEANOR BURNS AND SUE BOUCHARD

- History of the Underground Railroad has always fascinated these authors, who are well known quilters. After Eleanor Burns read a book titled, **Hidden in Plain View” written by Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dubard**, she decided to write this book. Eleanor Burns was born in Western PA where safe houses still remain today. There were white people that thought slavery was wrong and they were called abolitionists. The house they lived in are called safe houses. They wanted to help the slaves escape so these women sewed specific blocks for their quilts. Some people don't believe in the history of the underground railroad but I will let you decide that for yourself.
- You're probably wondering what the name the Underground Railroad means. Safe houses which belonged to abolitionists were known as **stations**. The abolitionists who helped the slaves were called **conductors** and the slaves were called **passengers**. These words relate to trains and that is why they called it the Underground Railroad. The word underground relates to the journey itself.
- Now I will tell you how these quilts helped them. In 1994, Jacqueline Tobin met a woman named **Ozella McDaniel Williams from South Carolina**. Ozella told her that quilts were used to communicate information to the slaves that would help to keep them safe during their escape. According to Ozella 10 quilts were sewn. The women hung their quilt one at a time on a fence or cabin door left to air out. Each quilt communicated a specific action or step that a slave should take in their journey. Another reason for leaving the quilts outside is that when a slave saw a quilt, they know that this family wanted to help them. They knocked their door and was given help and support.
- I am going to show you 5 out of 10 of the blocks that Ozella spoke about. I used the directions in the sampler book that was written by Eleanor and Sue to sew these blocks. I've used a fabric design and color that were used during that time period. Many of these blocks are still being sewn today.

## QUILTS FOR THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

### JACOB'S LADDER QUILT

Notice that the diagonal lines formed by the blocks contrasting triangles create an illusion of connected ladders crisscrossing the surface of the block. The ladder shown in the middle can be used to show direction. When a slave looked at the direction of this ladder or path they could determine if they were traveling north. When they arrived in a northern state this meant freedom and provisions.



## MONKEY WRENCH QUILT

The monkey wrench (see red design in the middle) was a tool used by the blacksmith who was considered the most informed slave on the plantation. This tool was used to fix a wagon wheel and for other uses. This was the only quilt displayed on the plantation and it acted as a signal for slaves who planned to escape. The blacksmith knew when the master would be gone and for how long. He began to hit his tools to a different rhythm from what he normally used. The slaves could hear this rhythm while working in the fields. They knew that this meant that their master was gone and this was a good day to escape. He continued using this same rhythm every day until the master returned. When the master returned he began to hit the tools in the normal way.





## WAGON WHEEL QUILT

Wagons with hidden compartments were one of the primary means of transporting escaping slaves. If they saw this quilt they knew that this abolitionist family were willing to transport them in their wagon. The quilt was a message to pack provisions for their journey as if they were packing a wagon. Provisions such as food were supplied by the family. Due to limited space, they only packed supplies that were essential for survival. The wagon was symbolic of a chariot that was to carry them home. The spirituals they often sang while working in the fields carried hidden messages. One of those songs is called Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.



## CROSSROADS QUILT

This quilt reminded slaves that once they make it safely through the Appalachian Mountains they should continue traveling to the crossroads or city where they would find protection. The red squares that are sewn to look like a triangle represent the lights that direct the trains to stop. The main crossroads were Cleveland, Ohio and Detroit, Michigan. Five overland trails connected with Cleveland and numerous water routes, crossing Lake Erie into Canada and freedom. They referred to Cleveland as the City of Hope.



## BEAR'S PAW QUILT

This quilt was used to help slaves prepare and be safe while on their journey. This quilt reminded them that bears lived in this area. Slaves were directed to follow the actual trail of a bear's footprints because this would indicate the best path, just like a road map, through the mountains. The bear paw's trail would also lead them to food and water. Most escapes took place in the spring when the rain would make it easy to follow a bear paw's trail. It was not good to escape in the winter for obvious reasons.

Reference has been given specifically to the Appalachian mountain range, closest to the South Carolina area and plantations owned by slave holders. The range ran parallel to the Underground Railroad route.



