History of Quilting

When the first settlers came to this country they brought with them their quilting skills. New fabric was hard to come by, so fabric for clothing and for quilts had to be used and reused saving as much as possible from worn clothing. Thus the patchwork quilt was born. Scraps of fabric were cut into geometric patterns that fit together into larger blocks of design. Many of these patterns have been passed through generations, created by the ingenuity of our ancestors and traded within communities. Names for particular patterns sometimes changed as they moved from one part of the country to another, reflecting the environment within which it was named. (i.e. a pattern called the pine tree pattern in Connecticut might be named bear's path in Ohio).

Quilt making is an art form that both individuals, as well as groups of people participated in. From the lore surrounding quilt making we learn that parents passed the skills for quilt making on to their children at a very young age. The children would start with small patches of fabric, and learn to sew the very fine stitches needed for beautiful and elaborate quilts.

Historically, quilting has generally been practiced by, and associated with women. This could be because the sewing skills needed to make a quilt have always been an integral part of women's lives. Learning how to sew was such an important skill for girls to have that it was taught and practiced in the home and at school. Women of all classes participated in this form of expression.

Quilting can be done on large hoops or it can be done on quilt frames, which were hung from the ceiling so that they could be kept out of the way when not in use. Typically, frames were used for group quilting, though individuals may have sometimes used them as well.

Quilts were not only used as bed coverings, but were also used as wall hangings, which not only kept out cold air, but were also a creative form of expressive decor. These quilts were usually more elaborate than ones created for everyday use.

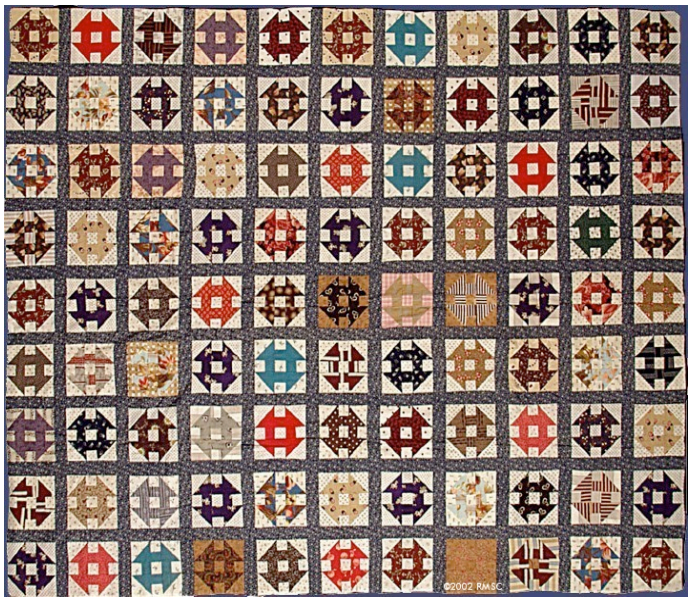
Source: Breneman, *America's Quilting History*, accessed November 2005

African-American Influence on Quilting

Although slaves were stripped of all earthly possessions when forced out of Africa, they held the memories of the symbols, colors and sense of design of their motherland. By necessity, they had to save every scrap of cloth they could - from the remnants of sewing they were forced to do, to cloth saved from their worn-out garments. Many slaves made quilts of very fine quality.

It is often said that the African American textile tradition is the visual equivalent of jazz. Born in a tradition of weaving cloth in narrow strips, which were then joined for various uses, the contemporary African American aesthetic is a fusion of many cultures, characterized by bright colors, asymmetry, large and multiple designs and strips. Construction techniques tend to include piecing and appliqué, and patterns are generally geometric in design. The designs reflect a mixture of various African, Native American, American and European traditions that developed as a result of the slave trade.

According to oral tradition in the United States, enslaved African Americans, free African Americans, and white abolitionists may have used quilts with familiar patterns to communicate the location of safe houses, dictate escape routes and convey other information vital to escape and survival on the Underground Railroad. Various symbols on quilts, which would have been displayed outside the homes of those aiding freedom seekers, passed on different messages. For example, a monkey wrench quilt—such as the type owned by the Frederick Douglass family -- may have been a symbolic representation of a home belonging to someone who would be a "tool" in the escape process. However, the idea of a quilt code used on the Underground Railroad is *only a theory*, and the use of such codes has never been proven through textual documentation (National Park Service, accessed November 2005).



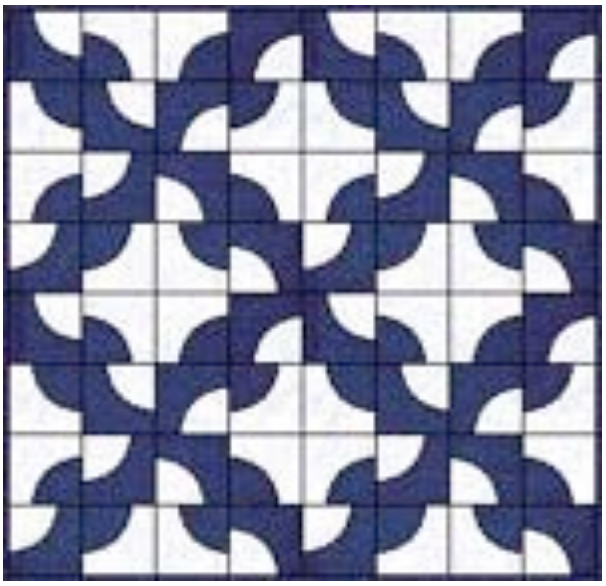
Monkey wrench quilt, circa 1900
(Source: Rochester Museum & Science Center Collections, accessed November 2005.)

Quilts as Political Statements

In 1920, the 19th Amendment to the constitution of the United States finally passed, giving American women the right to vote. For some in the women's-rights movement, full enfranchisement was the crowning victory of a long and passionate campaign. For others, it was but one milestone in a long struggle for a more fully realized and meaningful equality--a struggle that continues into the 21st century. Although the vote is perhaps the most outward, public and direct symbol of political enfranchisement, it is by no means the only or most effective political tool.

Long before pen was put to paper giving life to the Declaration of Independence, the voices of women could be heard asking what place they would have in the fledgling American society. Unable to vote or hold public office, women nevertheless found a variety of ways to express their views, thoughts and ideas. A few braved the sneers and jeers and took to public speaking in various forums while others employed the written word. Unions, associations, an assortment of societies and clubs as well as religious organizations provided ready-made distribution networks and support. Since most women lacked the opportunity to adequately express themselves through writing, they sometimes used the skills they had to express themselves through elaborate quilts. It was in this way that quilting became an outlet for the expression of women's thoughts, feelings, life experiences, as well as commentary on the social, political and community events of the time.

Through pattern names and suggested imagery, women supported and opposed political candidates, social movements and political parties. One example is the Drunkard's Path, a block favored by the supporters of the Temperance movement. Women involved in the Women's Christian Temperance Movement quilted the Drunkard's Path pattern (which is meant to represent a "drunkard's staggering walk") in order to raise funds and promote temperance.



Example of Drunkard's Path

Source: Breneman, *America's Quilting History*, accessed November 2005.

Quilting in Times of Crisis

The Civil War
For many years quilting has helped people to deal with crisis, tragedy and grief. During the Civil War, women made quilts in memory of male friends and family members lost to the war. The memorial quilts often included scraps from the lost person's clothing.

Quilts were also made for soldiers on active duty, as well as for the purpose of raising funds to support the war. In this way, women found a way to participate in the cause, and help out male friends and family who were out on the battlefield.

The World Wars
Blue Star Service Banners (sometimes called "Blue Star Flags") have long been a part of America's wartime history. Families with men and women serving in the military have been hanging these quilts in their windows since the beginning of World War One. It was in 1917 that Army Capt. Robert L. Queissner designed and patented this symbol in honor of his two sons who were serving on the front line.

Blue Star Service Banners have a blue star on a white field, with a red banner. A banner may include up to five stars – one for each family member on active duty. If the soldier dies or is killed while serving, a gold star is superimposed onto the blue one.

Continuing Causes
Even today, people create quilts for purposes of comfort, as well as to express opinions on various causes. In 1987, quilters joined together to create a giant AIDS memorial quilt. During the Gulf War against Iraq in 1991, quilts were created both supporting and opposing the war. Quite recently, quilting became an outlet to express fear and compassion regarding the attacks of September 11, 2001. You can see examples of 9-11 memorial quilts at www.september11quilts.org.

Sources: Breneman, *Patches From the Past*, accessed November 2005.
Breneman, *America's Quilting History*, accessed November 2005.

The Quilting Bee

Quilting bees were an opportunity not only to work on a quilt, but also to share recipes, advice, local and familial news, and just generally socialize with other members of one's community. A quilting frame (which may have been strung from the rafters for storage) would be brought down, and chairs placed around it to accommodate the quilters. A typical quilting frame would comfortably allow for seven quilters and the hostess.

There were many purposes for quilting bees. For example, young girls invited friends to help with the quilting during the time of their engagement. Church and community groups made elaborate quilts for departing ministers and friends, as well as to raise money for charities or for the church. Equally common were the spring and summer bees organized for the purpose of quilting the tops made during winter months.

Sometimes, however, the quilting bees became somewhat exclusive. Women took pride in the handiwork shown on their quilts, even on the mainly utilitarian (these were usually less decorative) ones. This does not mean that the lesser skilled quilters were not invited to some quilting bees; in fact, they were simply given tasks such as threading the needles, or cooking a meal.

Quilting bees were usually all-day events. The quilters arrived early in the morning and began to quilt. After a morning of quilting and conversation, an elaborate lunch was served. After lunch, the quilting resumed. Diaries and letters written during the 19th century describe day-long bees that included evening suppers, sing-alongs, and dances in addition to quilting. A big gathering could include up to five generations of quilters, as well as their husbands and children!

Although the bee is often associated with the frontier, quilting bees were not held exclusively by pioneers in the American west. Bees are common wherever quilt making traditions are strong – both yesterday and today.

Source: Breneman, *America's Quilting History*, accessed November 2005.

Quilt Patterns and Pattern Names

The first known quilt pattern published in an American periodical was the “honeycomb,” or “hexagon” pattern published by *Godey’s Lady’s Book* in 1835 (see example at right). While we know that some early periodicals like *Godey’s* featured patterns for quilt making, they seldom gave names to these patterns when describing a quilt or giving directions for making them. When they were named, however, those names often described the look of the quilt, like the previously mentioned “honeycomb” pattern.

In the 1880’s, magazines began publishing articles on quilt making on a regular basis and more frequently featuring quilt pattern illustrations. During this time, periodicals also began selling patterns. Due to this, and the creation of quilt pattern mail order companies, quilt patterns began to be illustrated and named with regularity. Periodicals also encouraged women to submit quilt patterns by designing new patterns or by sending in old family quilt patterns.

In the 1920’s, the art of making quilts was embraced by a new generation and the quilting revival of the 1920’s and 1930’s was underway. Periodicals employed designers to run quilt pattern columns and create new patterns. These quilt designers added a new 20th Century sophistication to the repertoire of patterns available to the quilter. It was also during this period that a cottage industry was born: women began selling quilt patterns and kits from their own home-based businesses. The number of patterns available multiplied with the abundance of periodicals, newspapers and cottage industries selling quilt patterns.

Today, there are quilt pattern names signifying home and family life, as well as names relating to the environment in which a quilt maker lives. Patterns can also be found with names commemorating national and political events, religious beliefs, and war heroes. Unfortunately, research done on the earliest quilt pattern names and where they originated has not been very successful. Some names are mentioned in old diaries and journals kept by quilters. The few diaries that do mention a quilt by name, though, usually fail to describe the quilt or give any hint as to what the pattern looked like (much less any type of drawing), leaving us to guess about the pattern’s appearance. There are still many patterns with no proper name, and many patterns still have more than one name.

Source: Carroll. *Quilt Pattern Names*, accessed November 2005.