

THE SCRAPPY MOTHER

Although many writers, beginning in 1929 with Ruth E. Finley*, have said that the earliest and original patchwork quilts must have been Crazy quilts, I believe this to be unlikely.

The theory has been that patchwork was born in the need for patching blankets in the early Colonial era when every scrap of cloth had to be put to use, and that this led inevitably to Crazy quilts. The Orlofskys, while agreeing with the persuasiveness of this idea, affirm that:

"this is conjecture. There are no existing examples of this type of quilt known to the authors dating before the nineteenth century. Nor are there any written descriptions or illustrations which would confirm the existence of the Crazy Quilt at an earlier date."**

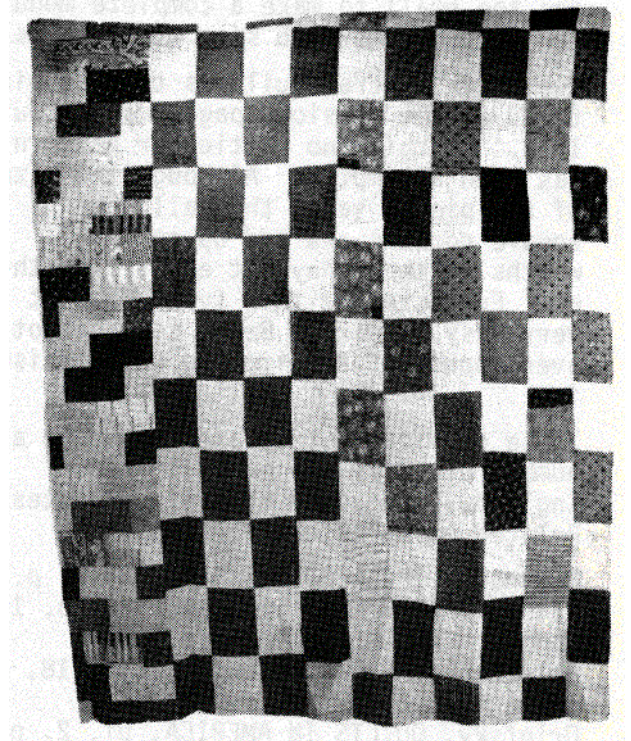
The "Forefathers' Song," composed in Massachusetts in 1630, is often referred to in support of the theory of Crazy original quilts:

"And now our garments begin to grow thin,! And wool is much wanted to card and to spin.! If we can get a garment to cover without,! Our other in-garments are clout upon clout.! Our clothes we brought with us are apt to be torn,! They need to be clouted soon after they're worn, .

However, getting from the patched clothing in this verse to the phenomenon of pieced quilts is a very long jump which skips over two practical questions. First, considering the art of mending, the wear patterns are different in bed clothing and garments. In clothing, the abrasion comes at specific places-- seat, knees, and elbows. After patching, those areas continue to be abraded and may indeed be patched more than once ("clout upon clout"). A blanket,

however, wears out very gradually in the entire center which becomes weakened overall so that a patch will not hold. It is usually re-structured for continued use by cutting it down the center and sewing the two sound sides together to form a new, stronger center. If there are moth holes to repair, darning rather than patching is preferable. Darning is a form of re-weaving which restores the woven web and is not lumpy as a patch would be. It is doubtful that patching was ever much used to restore blankets.

Second, the idea that colonial women made bedcovers by sewing scraps together in random fashion does not seem reasonable. No random group of scraps will fit together neatly like a jigsaw puzzle and turn out to be a large flat smooth bedcover. In making a quilt from scraps the alternatives are that the pieces are (a) overlapped or (b) cut to fit. (continued)



Scrap Quilt c. 1910

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(continued from p.11)

Overlapping is not as easy as it seems to be. There is the problem of the edges of the pieces; they must be either embroidered heavily or turned under in order to keep them from fraying. In the Colonial era, embroidery was limited to very few stitches--blanket, chain and stem, mostly--and embroidery floss was extremely hard to come by. In a time of scarcity, embroidery would not have been used for mending. On the other hand, turning under the edges of heavy woolen fabric gives a lumpy result, particularly when several patches overlap. And such treatment of the many edges of irregular scraps is difficult and time consuming.

The other choice--cutting to fit--more nearly resembles familiar pieced work. The simplest and most economical method of cutting is to use a rectangular module as a basic pattern. Scraps which are too small to make a complete module can be pieced out to size with others.

Just such a scrap quilt is the one pictured on the previous page, made about 1910. In this, no particular pattern has been attempted. Although the sizes of the pieces vary, they all have square corners and add up to equal widths so that they fit easily together. Furthermore, this type of quilt is very easy to make. Being seamed, not overlapped, it requires no edge finishing.

These characteristics are common to a number of early pieced quilts from England, Canada and the United States. Related examples can be seen in:

Burnham, *PIECED QUILTS OF ONTARIO*, p. 18
Colby, *PATCHWORK*, fig. 119, 120; p. 105
Conray, *CANADA'S QUILTS*, p. 17
Holstein, *THE PIECED QUILT*, fig. 18, p. 32
Orlofsky, *QUILTS IN AMERICA*, p1. 2, p.17

These quilts fit the requirements of quilts made for warmth under conditions of scarcity and hardship. They do not in any way resemble Crazy quilts.

Further, we should not be led astray by our present understanding of the word "patch." The original meaning was of a piece of cloth applied onto another fabric for decoration. "Clout" was the word for a piece of cloth to cover a hole. As our needlework vocabulary has never included "clout-work" as a technique, I do not think that patchwork is derived from a need to mend blankets or clothing. I believe that patchwork came from our need to make something pretty.

Nor do I think that pieced quilts came only from the practical desire to use up every last bit of fabric. In colonial times, mattresses--or "beds" as they were called--were only large sacks filled with anything handy. Feather beds were preferred, but a bed might be filled with ends of yarn or snippets of cloth (called "flocked beds") or leaves, corn husks, or cat-tail down. There were other uses for the last tiny bit of cloth.

It appears to me that the homely Scrap quilt, made of rectangular pieces, was the real "mother" of pieced quilts, and that the women who made the first ones were aiming to use their extra fabric in a practical and visually pleasing way.

--Sally Garoutte--


*Ruth E. Finley. *OLD PATCHWORK QUILTS*. Newton Centre, MA: Branford, 1929 (1970, p. 32).

**patsy and Myron Orlofsky. *QUILTS IN AMERICA*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974, pp. 297-8.

***Lenice Ingraham Bacon. *AMERICAN PATCHWORK QUILTS*. New York: Morrow & Co., 1973, p. 59.

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