

Benjamin Rush Quilt

Reprinted from a catalog
ANECDOTES OF EFFIE LEWIS'S QUILTS
(Mrs Fulton Lewis I)

script by Susan Lewis Cockrell

photography by James Knox Cockrell III

Mrs Cockrell is Mrs Fulton Lewis' daughter and Fulton Lewis Jr's sister. No date or publisher is noted and the only clue to James Cockrell's identity is a hand-written inscription on the title page, "Hope you enjoy this memory collection - by this old lady and her youngest grandson. Cordially Susan L Cockrell"

Among Bessie's quilt enthusiast friends was an elderly gentleman who was collecting pictures of particularly fine specimens for a book he was writing. He came to dinner and mellowed by the excellent liquor, souffle-like spoon bread and country ham that needed only a fork to cut, he admired 'Fulton's' family album quilt, and many others. But in the end he asked to photograph only the all white one ...It is of fine cotton, with alternate blocks quilted in sprays of tightly stuffed flowers.

The quilt came with papers apparently authentic, stating that it had been made for Dr Benjamin Rush by his mother, and giving the line of descent by which it had reached the present owner. Dr Rush was Surgeon General of the Continental Army and signer of the Declaration of Independence; died in 1813 at the age of 67. Family tradition also claimed that one of his close friends was Caspar Wistar, professor of anatomy at the University of Pennsylvania, for whom the flowering vine, 'Wistaria' was named. Certainly the sprays of the drooping blooms in the quilt closely resemble wistaria.

cont on pg 14

Reprinted from
OLD QUILTS by William Rush Dunton, Jr. 1946.

Neither author comments on the "Rush" in Dr. Dunton's name, so we would presume that there was no relationship.

A white quilt, loaned by Mrs. Fulton Lewis of Washington, D.C. from her fine collection of over one hundred quilts, is of interest from several stand-points. It is unusual to find these white quilts formed from blocks and this specimen is formed from twenty-five blocks about 14" square, thirteen of which are plain, and twelve of which show two different quilted designs. One of these is a vase holding wisteria and other flowers of various kinds. These practically fill up the space. The vase might be classed as a cylinder with four constrictions about it, giving the effect of a number of oval bodies superimposed. Like a cocktail shaker of 1934. No such design has been met with before. The other blocks have a large dahlia-like flower in the centre with morning glories and leaves about it, and groups of three leaves of undetermined species in two diagonal corners. This design also fills the block almost completely. Both designs are nicely padded so that they are well emphasized. The alternating plain blocks also serve to emphasize the designs for were all the blocks with designs placed together the effect would be confusing. The ground of all plain blocks is quilted with parallel lines which run from N-E to S-W. The padded blocks are usually from N-W to S-E. There is no border and the top forms the binding.

cont on pg 14

Florence Peto Reports

Florence Peto wrote to her friend Emma Andres of Prescott, Ariz about Mrs Fulton Lewis' quilt exhibit. She is the author of HISTORIC QUILTS and AMERICAN QUILTS & COVERLETS and numerous magazine articles. Other letters from her appear in Winter '79, Spring '80, and Summer '80.

"I can tell you about the Show in the Folk Arts (entitled 'Masterpieces of American Folk Art' and opened on March 1, 1943 in the Fifth Ave Galleries of the Folk Art Museum) Twelve quilts from the collection of Mrs Fulton Lewis of Washington were hung and shown. She has 120 quilts in her collection so my 32 don't sound so many. I met her and as she is an elderly woman I assume she is the mother of the radio commentator. She was pleasant and at the private tea she gave a sort of Gallery Talk as we followed her through the rooms; she told a little about each quilt. Every once in a while she turned to me

and said, 'How am I doing? Have I said anything wrong?' I had to laugh. She was doing all right; mostly she told how she had acquired the various pieces. They were nice quilts; I was disappointed that the designs were very commonplace - in an exhibition of 'masterpieces' I looked for elegant work and unusual designs. Several bore very beautiful quilting however. I am still amused that two days before the show opened, the curator called me up and asked me to send over something 'of distinction' S O S. - to help out the show! That's how my two lovely pieces came to be there. The Tree of Life and the handsome white spread which I recently bought. There are several rooms to the Galleries and mine hang in the big front room with no other quilts; they are so enormous they pretty well fill the wall space on which they hang, and they do indeed show off that way. I was glad I went for I met distinguished people; Mr Story of the N Y Times was

there and so was Georgiana Brown Harbeson, author of AMERICAN NEEDLEWORK. Miss Winchester of ANTIQUES was there and Mr Stow of the SUN. They each complemented me on my quilts, but, of course, they were not part of Mrs Lewis' exhibition so got no press notices. I am wondering how she got to put on that show; was she invited to do so or did she pay for it?

Mrs Lewis said one thing that interested me: She pointed to a quilt which had been made of one color and white, a Tea Rose in one block a different calico had been used for the rose. She said this was done 'to keep off the evil eye.' Do you recall my telling you about my big Star of Bethlehem quilt which is made of such lovely tones of old rose, rosy beige and pale blue English and French calicoes? Then, in one of the right angles, the inset has been made of orange calico. I've puzzled over that for several years for it would seem that a quiltmaker running out of material

to finish her quilt could have found another old rose which would have matched better than an orange calico. I reached the conclusion that it was intentional but I did not know why. There is a tradition of the Oriental rug makers; no human must make a perfect thing for that would be trying to imitate the Deity and would be an impertinent; therefore, every rug made by a good Mussleman has an imperfection in sequence of color. I wondered if our quiltmakers were aware of that and liked the idea . . . the quilt I have just sold to my Tenn. friend had the same thing - although all green and white, one star had a different green. All these quilts on which this happens are Penn-Dutch' therefore, I believe it was done on purpose and was talismanic. A 'Good Luck' symbol or, as Mrs. Lewis' suggested -to keep off the evil eye. Sounds like a Pennsylvania superstition.

Dr. Dunton's Version

There is no bottom between the top and lining except there are padded designs and this is the first specimen met showing this. Naturally the quilt is a very light one and presumably was made for summer use.

Another interesting feature is the presence of wisteria which recalls the controversy as to whether it should be *wisteria* or *wistaria*, there being two divisions of the the family, the Wisters and the Wistars. The plant was named for Dr. Casper Wistar (1761 - 1818) an eminent anatomist and professor at the University of Pennsylvania. He was a contemporary and associate of Dr. Benjamin Rush, the original owner of this quilt. This ownership is proved by data in the possession of Mrs. Lewis.

As Dr. Rush did not die until 1813 it seems safe to conclude that the quilt dates before that time. Its size 6'11" x 7' seems to indicate that it was not used on a feather bed, and probably replaced the larger quilts when put away during the summer season.

It also is possible that the quilt had a border at one time and this was removed, thus making it the present size, but there seems to be no way of proving or disproving this. The lining is in five strips, one 5 inches, all continuous in length, which seem to afford no clue of any portions having been removed. The threads of the top are 120 to the inch, of the lining, 64 to the inch.

The owner is firmly of the opinion that at one time there were probably appliqued pieces of chintz on the blocks which are now unpadded and has tried to make me see where there has

cont on next column

The Lewises' Version

Examining this exquisite needlework, Bessie and I wondered why the plain blocks were just that - plain, crossed only by lines of quilting not connected or matched to those in the adjoining flower blocks. Moreover, the stitches were by a far less expert needlewoman. Then we noticed tiny needle holes and bits of thread. By tracing these with a pencil we recreated the design which had been originally appliqued and later ripped off. It was the design known as the 'Hero's Crown' and what could be more natural for a proud mother than to use this pattern, and add the flower that had honored his close friend?

Since this was one of her favorites, Bessie was delighted, and began at once to point out... all the interesting points, including our discovery. He examined carefully the needle holes, the bits of thread and our pencil marks, murmuring polite interest, which Bessie mistook for agreement. Imagine then her frustration when she received her copy of the published book to find that he had devoted a paragraph to courteously but firmly ridiculing her suggestion of any former appliqued design. It was the end of one beautiful friendship.

Dr. Dunton's Version

been a design outlined in stitches. Either due to my poor eyesight, Presbyterian conscience, or lack of imagination, I have been unable to convince myself that there are signs of cut out chintz having been on this quilt, much as I would like to oblige the lady. However, it gives us something to quarrel over.