

MOURNING AND MEMORIAL QUILTS

by Sandra M Todaro

Sandra (Sandy) Todaro lives in Shreveport, La. with her husband and two children. Her paper, "A Family of Texas Quilters and their Quilts" was published in the 1984 UNCOVERINGS and researched while living in Texas. The research for this article was done while living in Kansas City, Mo. She is currently active in helping with the Louisiana parish pilot program for locating and identifying Louisiana quilts.*

When someone mentions commemorative quilts the ones that usually come to mind are those made as friendship quilts or patriotic quilts such as those made for the 1876 Centennial or more recently the 1976 Bicentennial. Quilts were often made to commemorate a special person, place or event in the lives of our ancestors. Our forefathers often stitched in cloth the important occurrences in their lives such as a birth, a coming of age, or a wedding. It should come as no surprise then, that they also recorded the deaths of family and friends in needlework.

Without a knowledge of the high mortality which prevailed throughout most of the 18th and 19th centuries, it is impossible to comprehend our ancestor's feelings toward death. Death was a commonplace occurrence of everyday life, one which society was helpless to postpone. Not until late in the 19th century did science begin to make some headway in the fight against diseases which took such a toll on families, especially the children. Families were considered small if they counted only three or four children. The birth of ten or more was not uncommon and the loss of nearly all, as sometimes happened, was looked upon as one of the tragic facts of life. A visit to an early cemetery will often show numerous tiny markers clustered around larger parent stones. Hardship and death were an acknowledged, if unwelcomed, aspect of life.

Even the very young learned to accept the fact that life was sometimes all too brief, as is shown by the sentiments young girls worked on their samplers. An early 19th century sampler in the author's collection contains these lines:

*"This work in hand
My friends may have
When I am dead.*

Cybene McIntire Bingham"

To understand the motivation behind these tangible expressions of grief is to erase the current belief that our ancestors indulgence in memorials to the dead was morbid and overly sentimental.

The practice of mourning, while recorded as early as the 17th century in England, reached its zenith during the Victorian era. The custom of mourning established rigid controls over every aspect of the lives of the bereaved. "It regulated every detail of costume, decreed the exact length of time the special clothing should be worn, dictated the style of stationary, (only wide black-bordered stationary was found acceptable) and, according to the intensity of one's grief, even altered the decorations in one's home."** The deeply dis-

consolate sometimes signified the depth of their loss by making quilts and bed linens of black and white to lessen the amount of color around them and thus minimize the distractions of everyday life.

The American Museum of Britain in Bath, England numbers among the quilts in its collection a rare widow's quilt made in New Jersey in the 19th century. Done in black and white, the black pieced design signifies death's darts while the quilting pattern depicts a harp or lyre in the alternating white blocks. The entire quilt is bordered in a wide mourning band of black. The single bed size calls attention to the solitary state of the sleeper.

Along these same lines, an excerpt from an early issue of the magazine ANTIQUES quoted in the ROMANCE OF THE PATCHWORK QUILT* tells of Mrs. Julia Ann Fleckinger of New Windsor, Md. Following the death of her husband she made four black and white quilts in a pattern she called "Midnight Star" (more commonly known as "Aunt Eliza's Star") for use during her period of mourning.

Perhaps the best known example of rigid observance of society's rulings on mourning was Queen Victoria. Her conduct and demeanor were a perfect example of the length to which such customs could be carried by someone intent on spending the rest of her life wrapped in sorrowing respect for the dead. Her decision to remain in mourning for the remainder of her long life had a profound influence on the social customs of the British Empire as well as those of this country which still looked to England for much of its social information.

Although the custom of mourning reached its height in the last half of the 19th century, the practice of making textile memorials to the dead began much earlier. Grief was given visible shape in the form of mourning pictures. Following the death of George Washington in 1799, a large number of memorial needlework pictures appeared and these set the style for subsequent textile examples.

These compositions adhered more or less to a standard formula heavy with symbolism—the tomb often surmounted with an urn; weeping willows; a group of sorrowing friends and relatives, and in the distance, a few houses or a church. An example of this idea expanded to create a quilt is pictured in NEW DISCOVERIES IN AMERICAN QUILTS.** Dated 1854, this appliqued album quilt contains a written inscription to the memory of Edmond H Thompson, who died June 3, 1854 at the age of twenty.

The Arkansas Territorial Restoration in Little Rock has in its permanent collection a quilt showing a large black 8-point star on a white background framed with a narrow border of black. This quilt, made around 1870 in the Westfork, Arkansas area, was purchased at an estate sale by the wife of a local funeral director. The owners of the estate verified the quilt as being a funeral quilt, and it was later donated to the museum where it is one of two documented mourning quilts in the museum's collection.

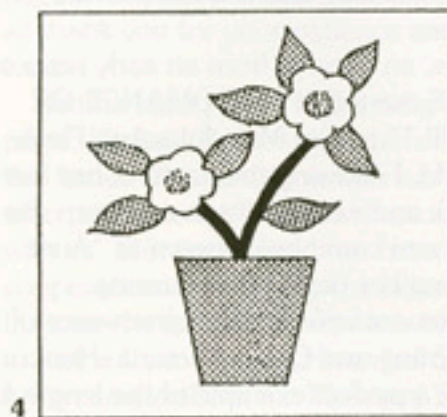
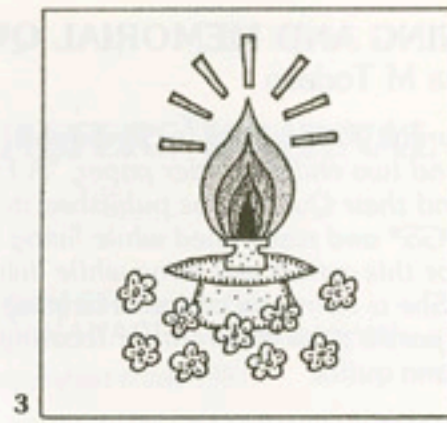
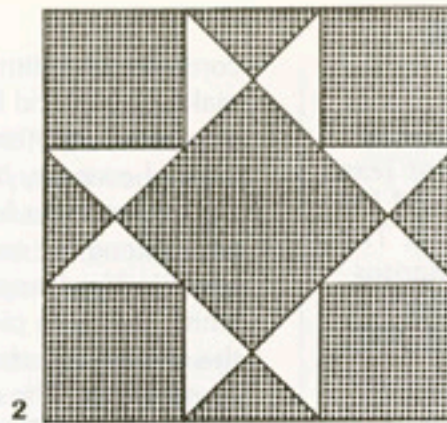
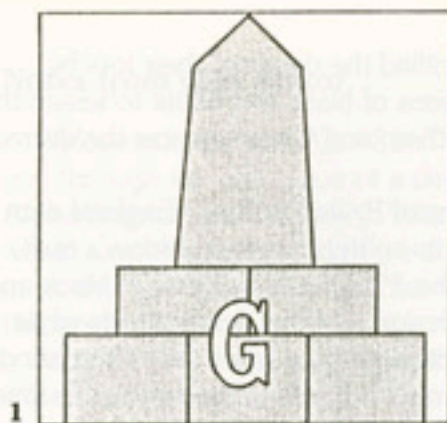
A quilt now in the possession of Oberlin College, Oberlin,

*For information on UNCOVERINGS, send SASE to American Quilt Study Group, 105 Molino, Mill Valley, Ca 94941

**DECORATIVE ART OF VICTORIA'S ERA by Frances Lichten, Charles Scribner's Sons, NY 1950 pg 215-219.

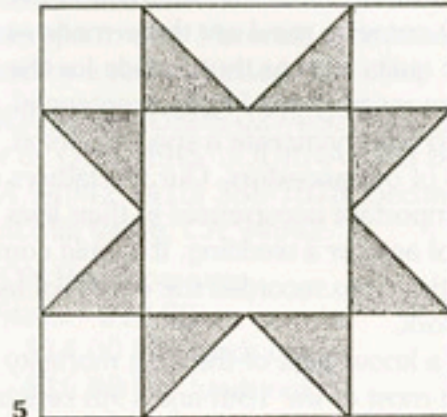
*ROMANCE OF THE PATCHWORK QUILT IN AMERICA, by Hall & Kretsinger, Caxton Printers, Caldwell, Idaho 1935 pg 38.

**NEW DISCOVERIES IN AMERICAN QUILTS, Robert Bishop, E P Dutton & Co, ©1975, pg 82-83



Mourning & Memorial Quilt Block Patterns

1. "Garfield's Monument"
2. "Aunt Eliza's Star"
3. "Kennedy Eternal Flame"
4. "Roses"
5. "Evening Star"



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Ohio contains a bequest designating the members of the family to whom the quilt was to be passed down. The quilt, done in the "Evening Star" pattern is signed by forty-nine friends and relatives of the maker, Sarah Mahan. It is clear however, from the inscription in the bequest block that she intended it to be a mourning quilt commemorating the death of her step-daughter, Laura Mahan, who died in 1848. Laura had begun the quilt and upon her death it was completed by Sarah. The addition of the bequest block makes this quilt the only known piece at this time to contain such an inscription.

Florence Peto* mentions an unusual autographed bride's quilt done in red and white appliqued cut-out motifs. Made in Fulton, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania in 1849, the quilt bears the following inscription in one of its blocks:

"Priscilla Haltom's work

1849

*Life looks beyond the hands of time
Where what we shall now deplore
Shall rise in full immortal flower
and bloom to fade no more."*

Among the signatures and hearts on the quilt are also clasped hands, weeping willows, sheaves of wheat and funeral urns.

An album quilt in the collection of the DAR Museum, Washington, D.C., contains a memorial inscription for Ellen B. Brimfield, age 77 years. The verse taken loosely from Longfellow's PSALM OF LIFE reads:

*"Art is long and time is fleeting
And our hearts, tho' stout and brave
Still like muffled drums are beating
Funeral marches to the grave."*

This quilt from the Lee family of Berks County, Pennsylvania contains signatures of members of several extended families who resided in the township of Exter & Amity. A number of signers can be identified as members of the Society of Friends (Quakers) and were affiliated with the Exter-Philadelphia Monthly Meeting.

The necessity of sitting with extremely ill and dying individuals led to yet another type of memorial quilt—the Death Watch Quilt. In some areas, a quilt top was worked at the bedside of a gravely ill person. If the individual lived, the top was quilted. If he or she died, the top was used as a shroud. Perhaps the best known example of this type of quilt is the Eli Lilly Family Album Quilt. This quilt was made in Baltimore County, Maryland in 1847 by the friends and family of Eli Lilly present at his bedside during his final illness. It is interesting to note that Eli Lilly's signature is present on a block appliqued with a lyre, one of the recognized symbols of death.**

Perhaps the most unusual mourning quilt known is the Kentucky Coffin Quilt. This quilt, considered by many to be a true masterpiece of American folk art, was made in 1839 in the vicinity of Vanceburg, Kentucky by Elizabeth Roseberry Mitchell. Done primarily in browns, the background motif of

this unusual quilt is the LeMoyne Star. The center medallion consists of a graveyard containing appliqued coffins bearing the names of deceased family members, the whole enclosed by an appliqued fence. Around the outer edge of the quilt are coffins bearing the names of family members living at the time the quilt was made. Evidently, as members of the family died, Mrs. Mitchell intended to move their coffins into the center graveyard, thus filling in the family plot.

Another unique mourning quilt, done in the crazy quilt style, is in the collection of Julie Silber and Linda Reuther. Made around 1900, it was the work of a widow who took her mourning coat, opened it along the seams and used it as the background for her embroidered story of her life with her husband. The central figure is coffin shaped and contains a vase holding a single white lily to symbolize death. There are also paired hearts signifying love and pansies for remembrance among the multitude of embroidered designs.

A custom popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the deep South involved making a mourning quilt or coverlet from the ribbons decorating the funeral arrangements. After the funeral service, the undertaker would remove all the silk and satin ribbons from the floral sprays and present them to the next of kin. These were often made into quilts or parlor throws and were displayed along with other sentimental tokens such as hair wreaths and waxed flower bouquets.

Among the most touching memorial quilts are those made to mourn the death of a child. Nancy Ward Butler of Jamestown, New York, made one such quilt to commemorate the death of her small granddaughter in 1842. The full sized quilt, now in the collection of the Smithsonian Institution contains as its only design the inscription:

*"Nancy A Butler
died February 3, 1842
Aged 20 months"*

In 1891-92, Katie Friedman Reiter and her mother, Liebe Friedman created a magnificent album quilt following the deaths of Katie's firstborn, Adolph, and Liebe's son, Ephriam. This lush vibrant quilt contains among its many symbols, two equestrian figures done in black. The family believes these figures were made to represent the dead boys.*

Though all mourning quilts are unique, some catch and hold one's attention more than others. One such quilt belongs to Sara Steele Doerr of Huntsville, Alabama. This quilt which descended in her mother's family, is made in the "Princess Feather" pattern. Once composed of red and green on white, it has mellowed with time and is now red and tan. The striking aspect of this quilt is the large cross and tombstone quilted in the center. In the center of the cross the year "1902" has been quilted, while the base contains the initials "L B K 66 YR." Among the large variety of quilting designs are hearts, crescent moons, stars, empty baskets, church windows and another tombstone. The quilt is believed to have been made in Atlanta, Georgia, but the identity of "L B K" remains a mystery.

Another mourning quilt worked in the crazy quilt style was made by Mrs. Benjamin Franklin (Polly) Taylor of Taylor's

*Ibid: pg 54

*AMERICAN QUILTS & COVERLETS by Florence Peto, Chanticleer Press, NY @1949 pl 21B & pg 32.

**AMERICAN QUILTS: A Handmade Legacy, Edited by L. Thomas Frye, Oakland Museum, Oakland CA @1981 pg 85

Creek, Searcy County, Arkansas in the last quarter of the 19th century. Pieced from the clothing of deceased family members, it contains naive representations of native flora and fauna embroidered on the quilt along with the names, birth and death dates of deceased family members. This quilt is now in the collection of the Arkansas Territorial Restoration.*

In January 1919, Frances Garside, writing in *HOUSE BEAUTIFUL*,** told the story of the "Twin Roses" quilt. The maker gave birth to fourteen children, but only two survived to maturity. Twin girls, Rose and Roselle, survived only a week. Buried in coffins hollowed out of pine logs, their graves were lost when the field where they were buried was plowed up the following year. In order to "keep them in mind somehow" she designed the pattern of twin roses. According to her daughter, who was past seventy at the time of the interview, her stitches were finer on this quilt than on any other and no one was ever allowed to use it.

Recent quilt documentation efforts in Texas have brought to light a large black and white quilt done in the "Lone Star" pattern. Family history states that the quilt's maker, the mother of several small boys, made each boy a quilt in this pattern and color. The quilts were given to the boys with the instructions that they were to be buried in them when they died. One wonders why this mother undertook such a project while surrounded by her brood of growing children. Could it have been that she had already experienced a great deal of suffering and sorrow and was thus always aware of the uncertainty of life? Or did she make the quilts with the idea that even in death her children would be surrounded with the tangible proof of her love? We will never know what motivated her to create these quilts as no hint of her reason has come down through the family.

Memorial quilts were made to honor public figures as well as private individuals. A silk and velvet hexagon mosaic in the collection of the Kentucky Museum appears to be a Civil War memorial. The central black velvet hexagon contains the inscription:

"W.S.
A.D. 1866"

Outer hexagons of red velvet contain the inscription:
"Gen of C.S.A."

followed by names such as Davis, Stonewall, Stewart, Buckner, Morgan & Zollicoffer. Unfortunately, nothing is known of the maker of this quilt. The notation with the quilt stated that it was "found in a drawer after Mother died." It has been suggested that the quilt was made in the Bowling Green area of Kentucky because of some of the other names which appear on the quilt. The quilt is in very poor condition due to the insubstantial nature of the silks and velvets of which it was made.

A silk and velvet crazy quilt pieced by Jessie Landis of Kansas City, Missouri, circa 1882 and now in the author's collections contains a black and white satin ribbon bearing the legend:

*From a telephone conversation with Mr Swannee Bennett, Curator, Arkansas Territorial Restoration, Little Rock, Arkansas. no date noted

**Emma S Tyrell wrote a similar article in a 1929 *WALLACE'S FARMER* entitled "Twin Roses."

"In memory of our martyred President:
James A. Garfield, Born Nov 19, 1831
Shot July 2, 1881, Died Sept 19, 1881."

The assassination of President Garfield also inspired a pattern entitled "Garfield's Monument" published by the Ladies Art Company of St. Louis. The pattern represented a stone obelisk with a capital "G" in the center. The assassination of President John F Kennedy over eighty three years later inspired Cuesta Benberry to design a memorial pattern which was published in *AUNT KATE'S QUILTING BEE* (Jan '65, Aug '65). The design depicts a stylized flame which she entitled "Kennedy Eternal Flame."

Mourning is very much a part of wartime, and fallen soldiers have provided the inspiration for many memorial quilts. The previously mentioned silk and velvet hexagon is one such quilt. Another of the Civil War era is owned by Mrs. Clara Hames of Marietta, Georgia. The quilt, pieced of black, white and gray fabrics, was made by her great grandmother, India Jane Smith. The quilt is made of scraps of the mourning garments worn by the family in reverence for their loved ones lost during the war.

In the years after WWI, the Home Arts Studio of Des Moines, Iowa, published a pattern for a Gold Star Memory quilt with the legend that it was dedicated to Gold Star Mothers as a memory quilt for their loved ones. The design consisted of a large four-pointed star superimposed on a black wreath which was placed in the center of the quilt. A border of 48 stars representing the Gold Star mothers in each state finished off the quilt.

A memorial quilt from WWII has been documented in Texas by the Texas Heritage Quilt society. This quilt was made from the uniform of a soldier killed in action.

Quilts made from the clothing of the departed are also classified as memorial quilts. Several different patterns were popular for this type quilt, but most contained a white area in the middle where the name of the person and the date of death could be inscribed. This block was usually placed in the exact center of the quilt.

Among the patterns used for these and other memory quilts were: "Memory Block" (also known as "Georgetown Circle"), "Midnight Star" (also known as "Aunt Eliza's Star"), "Coffin Star", (more commonly called "Lone Star" and at least one flower applique called "Memory Block." *CAPPER'S WEEKLY* published a pattern for a block entitled "Memory Chain" in the 1930s.

The pattern commonly known as "Turkey Tracks" when made in black was renamed "Tents of Kadar." When made in black the pattern, which takes its name from the BIBLE, was used to cover the dead prior to burial. A superstition arose that anyone who slept under this quilt was cursed.

According to one source, the "Double Wedding Ring" pattern was originally a memorial quilt designed to honor a beloved spouse after death.

It was the custom that following the death of a friend or relative, friends and family members would gather to hold a quilting bee to make their memorial offering.

Quilts have also been used as casket linings and as palls. In *THE QUILTERS: WOMEN and DOMESTIC ART** an elderly

**THE QUILTERS: Women and Domestic Art* by Norma Buford & Patricia Cooper, Anchor Press/Doubleday, Garden City, NY @1978 pg 49.

Classified

Advertising rates: 25 cents a word pre-paid.

POSTCARDS FROM SPENCER MUSEUM; Set of 3; Kretsinger's "Paradise Garden", Malcolm's "Sunflower" and a crazy quilt; Set of 3 - \$1.50 (postpaid). Prairie Flower Publishing, 500 Louisiana, Lawrence, KS 66044.

AMERICAN PATCHWORK QUILT: Spencer Museum of Art. New catalog of collection that features Kretsinger quilts and 38 others. Full color plus text by Barbara Brackman. Published by Kokusai Art, Tokyo. \$21.95 (postpaid) Spencer Museum Bookstore, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045.

BED AND BREAKFAST FOR QUILTERS available Washington D.C. area (Maryland, Virginia, ect.) reduced rates. Send SASE for info to MarySue Hannan, 5801 Nebraska, Washington D.C., 20015.

QUILTS OF TENNESSEE: Images of Domestic Life prior to 1930 by Bets Ramsey & Merikay Waldvogel. Hardcover, \$19.95 + \$1.75 shipping. Tenn residents add sales tax. To order: Rutledge Hill Press, PO Box 140483, Nashville, TN 37214.

FOR SALE: KANSAS STAR QUILT PATTERN INDEX & HISTORY. KCS quilt patterns publ 1928-1961. (No sketches or patterns) \$11.00 incl. postage. Wilene Smith, 815 W 61st, North Wichita, KS 67204.

MISSOURI HERITAGE QUILTS by Bettina Havig. A catalog of the 1985 Exhibition quilts of the Missouri Heritage Project. \$14.95 + \$1.25 post and handling to The Quilt Cottage, 1108 Sunset Lane, Columbia, MO 65203.

FOR SALE: Notecards with quilts from the DAR Museum collection on heavy ivory folders. Brief individual biographies of quiltmakers on back. Send SASE envelope for info to DAR Museum, 1776 D Street, Washington DC, 20006.

FOR SALE: An Encyclopedia of Pieced Quilt Patterns. 8 volumes and a large loose-leaf binder for \$50.00 incl postage. Prairie Flower Publishing, 500 Louisiana St. QJ, Lawrence, KS 66044.

FOR SALE: Exhibition catalog of "New Quilts of the Mid-South". 8 quilts in color, 11 in B & W. To order: \$7.00 + .75 post and handling. The Hunter Museum of Art Gift Shop, 10 Bluff View, Chattanooga, Tn 37403.

FOR SALE: Limited supply Historic Preservation Jan/Mar '72 "American Quilts as Visual Objects, A Personal View" by Jonathon Holstein. Pg 28 thru 33 (7 quilts full in color + article.) \$2.00 incl post & handling, Box 5427, Mill Valley, CA 94942.

FOR SALE: "Vernice's Rose Quilt Pattern Book". (1983 Santa Rosa Guild opportunity quilt) 11 full size original rose patterns plus a large center medallion to make a 78" x 95" quilt. Yardage requirements & border designs incl. Blocks would be appropriate for pillows etc. \$2.50 incl post S.R.Q.G., PO Box 9251, Santa Rosa, CA 95405.

FOR SALE: "The Applique Book" by Charlotte Patera, Creative Home Library @ 1947. Out of print and still one of the best books on applique. \$25.00 includes postage. Journal, Box 5427, Mill Valley, CA 94942.

QUILT LIBRARY with Cuesta Benberry, Joyce Gross, Bettina Havig and Barbara Brackman at QUILTERS' GETAWAY, Point Bonita, (North of the Golden Gate Bridge) Jan 24-29, '88. Gross Collection of quilts, quilt blocks, swatches, slides, photographs, early periodicals, memorabilia from famous quilt people, diaries, correspondence, out-of-print quilt catalogs and much, much more. Day students accommodated. For info: MVQA, Box 5427, Mill Valley, CA 94942 or (415) 388-7578.

QUILT REFLECTIONS catalog from '83 Lyon Co Historical Museum quilt exhibition, Emporia KS. Drawings of blocks, descriptions, & history of quilts as well as copies of clippings from the Lyon County Historical Museum archives and the Gilson scrapbooks 1929-1962. \$2.00 (postpaid) Lyon County Historical Museum. 118 East 6th Avenue, Emporia, KS 66801

PINE EISFELLER'S GARDEN Pattern \$2.50 incl post & handling. F. Smith, 175 Manor Dr., Mill Valley, CA 94941

MOURNING AND MEMORIAL QUILTS *continued from pg 10*

lady tells of watching her mother and other neighbor ladies work all day quilting the casket lining and a tiny quilt for a neighbor's baby who had died.

An Amish quilt of unusual dimensions (38" x 92") was made around 1900. Ron & Marilyn Kowaleski, the owners suggest that it may have been intended for a coffin cover*.

Joyce Gross has in her collection an elaborate pall made for the Loyal Order of Odd Fellows. This beautiful and unusual cover is extensively appliqued with signs and symbols, among them the three linked chains, associated with this organization.

Memorial quilts play an important role in modern day North American Indian funeral ceremonies. According to custom, a memorial dinner and "give-away" takes place on the first anniversary of the person's death. At this time,

family and friends receive gifts in honor of the deceased and as a sign of gratitude and appreciation for their help during the family's time of sorrow. Frequently these gifts take the form of quilts, usually done in some version of the "Lone Star" pattern. Stars have long played an important role in the cultural and religious rites of the North American Indians and the design has come to be identified with their cultural activities.

With the passing of the Victorian era and the coming of more "modern" times, outward signs of mourning gradually began to disappear. Today, few remain. Like the hair wreath and waxed funeral flowers, the mourning quilt has become a thing of the past.

*A GALLERY OF AMISH QUILTS by Bishop & Safanda, E P Dutton, NY @1976. pg 62.