QUILTERS' JOURNAL

P.O. Box 270 · Mill Valley, Ca 94941 · (415) 388-7578

SPRING 1981 VOL.4 NO.1

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AGE OF HEIRLOOM QUILTS

by Florence Peto

This article is reprinted from ANTIQUES magazine, July 1942.

How can one determine the age of an heirloom piece when family history is obscure or lost? Is there something in its appearance that gives the key to its age? It is true that the passage of years induces a mellowing process in both white and dyed fabrics which is comparable to the patina surfacing old woods and metals. This mellowness is a quality independent of wear. The splendid condition of some quilts bearing indications of great age testifies to care taken of them - they were the "best" or "bride's" spreads and had been used only on occasions of family festivity. A quilt of much later period, by its tatters and shreds, might appear at first glance to be venerable, but spring and fall bed-washings and the romping of sturdy children can effect in a short time a spurious "antiquity." If condition is not evidence of age, neither is pattern. Traditional geometric compositions and well-known floral motifs went through periods of recurrent popularity. One example: the oldest and simplest version of the eight-pointed star was known to quiltmakers as the Variable Star. Among the heavenly bodies those known as variables are so called because they show distinct changes in brightness from time to time; so in patchwork, accent in coloring gave to this much-used and easily assembled pattern a versatility which led to its apt name. During the William Henry Harrison campaign for the Presidency, the Variable Star sprang into renewed and extraordinary popularity because a contemporary quiltmaker had endowed it with the glamour of a political slogan - it became "Old Tippecanoe and Tyler Too." Other pattern names changed with migration, current events, and personal adventures, but familiar contours persisted through successive decades of the quiltmaking era. The name your ancestress gave to her handiwork may be your clue to its date.

Methods of construction contribute something to identification of the period of a quilt. Many early bedspreads were made and decorated in one piece or in a series of borders surrounding a central medallion -a cumbersome job for the needle worker. Both applique and piecework were used on one spread, making it difficult to answer the oft-repeated question - which is the older technique? Tiny triangles, squares, and hexagons, in all-over effects, appeared on early pieces and such mosaics seem to have been a heritage from England. Generally, it was later that patterns were made in unit blocks, surely for convenience in handling. Bedcovers were interlined with wool, sometimes with a thin woolen blanket, but cotton was the great favorite. The presence of cotton seeds in an interlining, to determine age, may be taken into account with reservations. A quilt which displays, when held to the light, an interlining thickly studded with cotton seeds is not necessarily earlier than the invention of the cotton gin, for it was a generation after Eli Whitney demonstrated his first device to separate seeds from fiber that the cotton gin came into successful operation. And an interlining free from cotton seeds may exist in a very early southern-made quilt; black hands labored as skillfully as a machine to prepare a padding for the best quilts made in plantation homes.

Bindings furnish interest. Two quilts in my collection made in the first quarter of the nineteenth century show a homespun lining brought over to the face of the quilt and then felled down. Two others of the same period have been bound in tape, or braid, in fancy weaves and in two or more colors. Often such

braids were made in the home on tiny hand looms. My handsomest quilted item (c.1820) has both face and lining turned in toward each other and the two edges whipped together with an over-and-over stitch, forty stitches to the inch on a quilt three yards square! A novelty in the form of a piping of cotton cloth inserted between the face of the quilt and the fold brought over from the back contributes a tailored effect to some early examples. By the middle of the century a simple fold of bias cloth was preferred as a binding; it is still used by modern quiltmakers. Types of binding might be conclusive of periods or years if it were not for the fact that needle-women of a later generation sometimes elected to copy styles favored by their grandmothers.

Only a few quiltmakers of any era signed or dated their work; album or autograph quilts are an exception, and because the great majority of these bear dates in the 1840's, they are helpful in placing patterns and textiles in a period.

The average quilt owner is not equipped with the technical training which enables the expert to make deductions from dyes, methods of printing, and processes of weaving, but there are things for which the novice may look. East Indian printed cottons, English or French calicoes and chintzes are not difficult to recognize after study of the helpful reference books on oriental and European fabrics. Foreign cloth was expensive in the Colonies but it was available to women in the coastal towns and was purchased and used by those who could afford it; every inch was utilized and it was often combined with home woven goods. It was not many years after the Revolution that American manufacturers had advanced to a point where they rivaled each others' output as well as the European importations. The British, unabashed at depicting eagles or other symbols of the late rebels' freedom, had been successful with historical patterns, and the Yankee states produced patriotic and allusive designs of their own.

As American printers did not use trademarks, nor did early manufacturers keep sample books, an earnest endeavor to identify printed cottons with a specific domestic cotton-printing plant has produced extremely meager results. In Fig. 1, picturing a group of swatches of domestic calicoes, there are two with indigo-blue backgrounds and fine, floral patterns of white, yellow and red. Duplicates are to be found in a sample book (1863) which had been kept by Borden

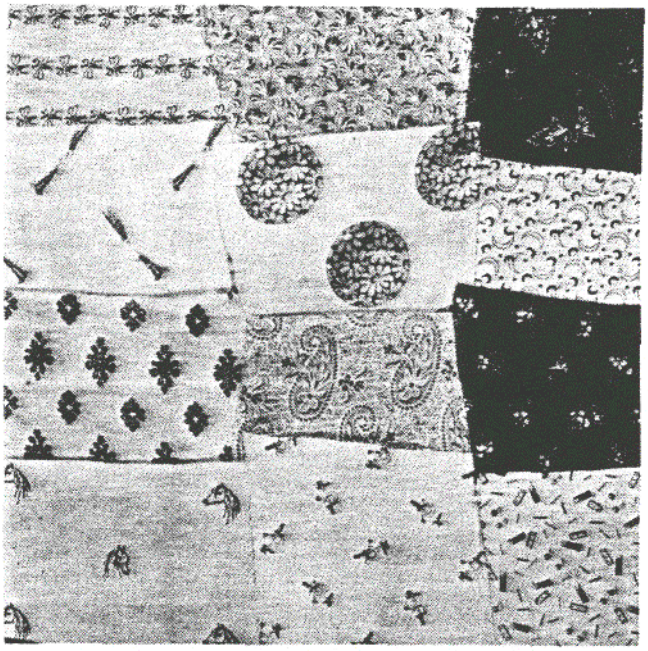

Fig 1 - Patches of American calico (nineteenth century). Taken from a friendship quilt made about 1894 on Long Island

Mills, Fall River, Rhode Island, and which is now the property of the Fruit of the Loom Co. It seems that sample books earlier than that are rare. Manufacturers, then as now, repeated their successes; these particular indigo blues may be earlier than 1863. All of the patches in this group came from a friendship quilt top in my collection. The top had been assembled by the mother of Mrs. Henry Chatfield Smith, of Stony Brook, Long Island; in a letter dated 1894, Mrs Smith's mother wrote: "I am finishing that old quilt top... some of these calicoes must be over a hundred years old." We must allow for possible exaggeration, but the materials have the appearance of considerable age. The quaint design of pins stuck in cloth, and the graceful horse's heads, are finely engraved, printed in brown on fine white cambric. The latter pattern and the one showing horseshoe and riding whip motif and also of the larger horse's heads which prevailed on shirtings for boys in the 1880's and 1890's. The amusing parade of ants (or flies?) the dominoes, the crescents, on three of the other patches, are printed in red and black on white calico. Tiny florals held their own over a long period even through the decades when the quiltmakers and dressmakers largely favored the flamboyant orange-toned paisleys of the Victorian era. The dainty Persian pear (on which most of the paisleys

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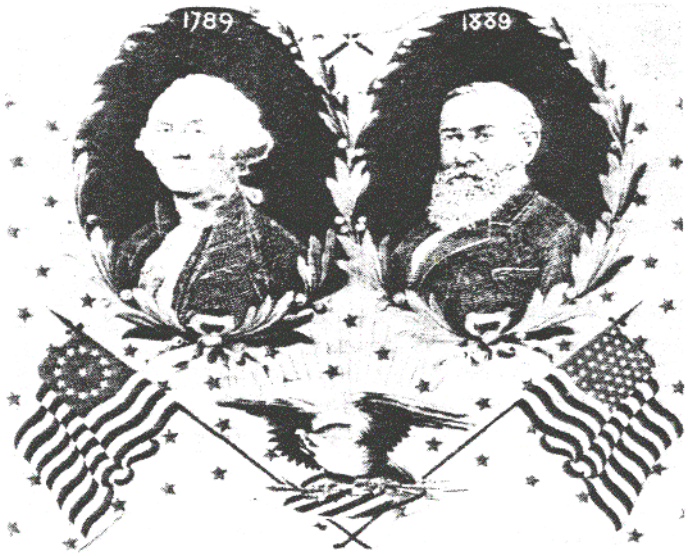

Fig 2 American cotton print (1889). Commemorating Benjamin Harrison's election as President of the U.S. Brown, yellow, and olive drab with flags in natural color.

were based) is shown here with a stippled effect in blue and rose on white. The patch at the left of the Persian pear shows a conventional floral in madder-rose on tan ground. When we attempt to identify the age of a quilt by its textiles, sometimes Grandmother So-and-So's spread (the date of making definitely established) may shed light on the probable age of otherwise elusive domestic cottons. Heirloom quilts may be a valuable source of information on American printed goods; hence it becomes important to record the age of items whose histories are still available.

It may be difficult to link scenic, pictorial, or historical cottons with a specific printworks, but they may be classified reasonably as to period. The Centennial brought forth much yardage with Liberty bells, shields, flags, eagles, and the likeness of the Father of his Country. By 1885 the features of Grant and Arthur decorate cotton yard goods; Figure 2 shows portraits of George Washington and Benjamin Harrison, and is dated 1889. The quiltmakers incorporated these prints in their needlework. Whenever human figures appear on textiles or patchwork, costume and hirsute adornments are nuggets of information.

Often games can be linked with years. A quilt owned in Huntington, Long Island, contains material printed in squares showing children at play - skating, sleighing, rolling hoops, playing hopscotch and London Bridge. Children in many ages have played such games, but in this print the little girls' bonnets, high buttoned shoes, and clumsy skates tell their own story. This textile bears the name Merrimack Manufacturing Company printed on the face of the pattern.

In Figure 3 the grown-up's fondness for a game is pictured in vivid colors. A puzzle keeps the whiskered gentleman, candle in hand, awake in the wee small hours, long after his spouse has given up and gone to sleep. There are fifteen numbered cubes and sixteen square spaces; the trick is to arrange the numbers in proper numerical sequence without lifting the blocks.

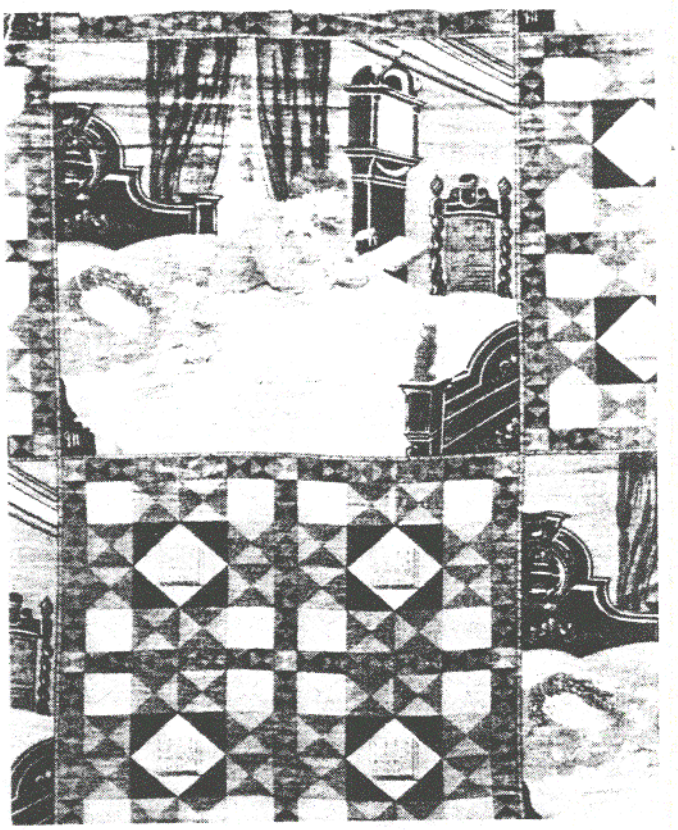

Fig 3 - American Quilt (late 19th cent.) Material printed in squares to simulate patchwork called Yankee puzzle. From the Index of Amer. Design, Art Service Project. W.P.A.

Notice the late-Victorian details in the furnishings. The printing of cotton cloth to simulate patchwork appeared at least as early as 1849, for a wide border of realistic baby's building blocks or cube work finishes a quilt so dated in my collection. The complete unit in Figure 3, which is of course about thirty years later, simulates a patch pattern known to quiltmakers as the Yankee Puzzle - appropriate in this case, whether by accident or intention.

In the same coppery-red, orange, brown and white which are characteristic of the paisleys, Figure 4 displays another expert simulation of patch pattern centered by an engaging feline, smug and happy over

Fig 4 - Simulation of Patchwork (Airier late 19th cent) Paisley colors of coppery-red, orange, brown and white. A dog in each corner completes the repeat.
Fig 5 - Cotton patches (Amer late 19th cent) Light piece shows both sides of French franc pieces, dated 1880, in pink and blue on white ground. Dark swatch reproduces the emblems associated with Horace Greeley.

blue ribbon bow. A dog in each corner completes the repeat. Notice the reproduction of early small prints. Pacific Mills manufactured a great many realistic and humorous designs; though those shown here have not been identified as their product, they are consideral typical. One cotton-printing plant lost valuable records when a new and over-zealous manager decided that the space occupied by barrels and kegs of "mills' which had been used in former days was more essential to the company than the out-dated engravings which he sold as junk.

At one time a silk manufacturer made some black necktie silk into which was woven in gold thread a replica of a United States ten-dollar gold piece; it was said he was restrained from putting it on the market, for no one may reproduce Uncle Sam's money in any form Apparently the restriction did not apply to French money; Figure 5 shows both sides of French franc pieces printed in pink and blue on a white ground. The coins are dated 1880. Many examples of American historical prints used an entire scene decoratively enclosed by floral and leafy wreaths; in contrast, the dark swatch in Figure 5 has small symbol motifs arranged in half-inch stripes. In color it resembles the paisleys. The initials, H G, the spectacles, the white top hat, and the axe and sickle are symbols used to represent Horace Greeley, cartoonist's joy. Charles Dickens once wrote,"... Mr. Greeley's white hat has become a sort of proverb among Americans," and he referred to Greeley as "Old White Hat." Greeley advocated an agrarian socialism which recalled his famous advice: "Go west, young man, and know your country." That's where the axe and sickle come in. During the campaign of 1872, Greeley was caricatured by his adversary in a white hat, spectacles, great coat, an boots.

No one factor in determining age of a bedspread is reliable; it is safer to seek evidence in a summary of several -design, methods of construction, trends of style in "sets and bindings, type of interlinings and the textiles of which the quilt has been fashioned.

Illustrations from the author's collection, except Fig 4. Biographical material about Mrs. Peto was published in the JOURNAL beginning with winter '79.

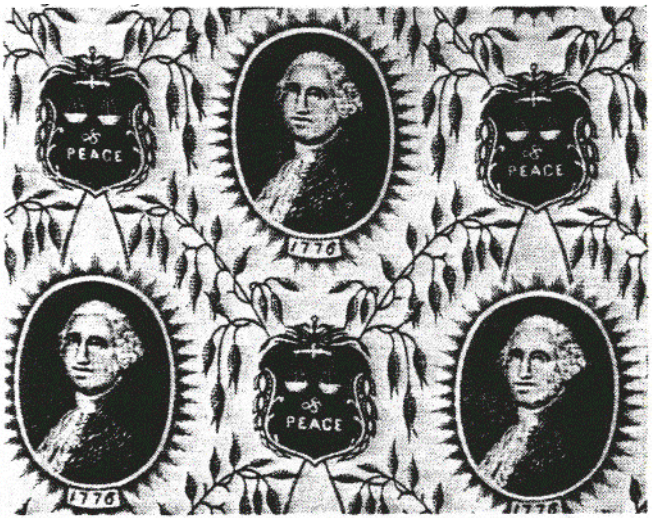

Fig 6 - Amer cotton print. Attributed to Cranston Print Works, Providence, R.I. On a white ground with brown foliage decoration, medallions of Washington in brown alternate with red shields showing scales and the word "Peace" The date 1776 suggests that the print was made for the Centennial celebration in 1876.