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The North Carolina Quilt Project: Organization and Orchestration

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Between November 1985, and December 1986, the North Carolina Quilt Project documented more than 10,000 quilts. That number is not used as a way to measure the satisfaction we feel about our work. That number is important to us because it reflects the interest of the citizens of our state in quilt documentation.

This paper is an account of our experiences. It will not provide a formula into which others can plug people, documents, and dollars, to achieve a specific result. My hope is that as others read our story, they will think of ways in which our experiences can be shaped to their particular needs and resources.

Those of us who organized and orchestrated the North Carolina Quilt Project had a lot to learn. We learned and worked in the same way that quiltmakers have traditionally learned and worked. We admired what others had accomplished, and we learned specific techniques from them. Then we looked for ways to express our own creativity in response to our particular set of circumstances. And then we asked our friends to help us put it all together. This process worked well for us and I recommend it for others.

Origins and Design

The design for the North Carolina Quilt Project began in the fall of 1983 when the Forsyth Piecers and Quilters guild of Winston-Salem gave me a planning grant and asked me to look into the possibility of a quilt project similar to the Kentucky Quilt Project.

The charge did not require that a project be a result of the "looking into."

"North Carolina Country Quilts," an exhibition at the Ackland Art Museum in 1978 foreshadowed the North Carolina Quilt Project. That exhibition was the result of research by three students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: Joyce Joines Newman and Laurel Horton in Folklore and Mary Ann Emmons in Anthropology. That research, focusing on quilting traditions in three areas of the state, was the first serious quilt documentation in North Carolina, and, as far as I have been able to determine, in the country. It has been a special pleasure for the North Carolina Quilt Project that both Joyce Newman and Laurel Horton have been involved with our work.

I asked four quiltmakers from different parts of the state to serve with me on a steering committee: Kay Clemens of Greenville, Kathy Sullivan of Raleigh, Sue McCarter of Charlotte, and Karen Pervier of Winston-Salem.

The exploration and planning of that group led to the organization of the North Carolina Quilt Project as a nonprofit corporation with tax-exempt status in early 1985. The steering committee then became the board of directors with the addition of Martha Battle to represent the North Carolina Museum of History and Annie Teich to represent the North Carolina Quilt Symposium, Inc. The steering committee obtained the support of these two groups.

The North Carolina Museum of History agreed to (1) allow a staff member, Martha Battle, to spend some of her work time with the project, (2) mount an exhibition of quilts from the project, and (3) store all the information we collected and allow it to be used for research.

The North Carolina Quilt Symposium, Inc., gave generous and crucial financial help early in our work. This group has had a large influence on the life of quilting in North Carolina. Over the last nine years quiltmakers have come to the annual symposiums for workshops, lectures, exhibitions, and a great good time. Out of these experiences have come a strong network of quiltmakers across the state. All of the members of our board of directors have served on the board of the North Carolina Quilt Symposium, Inc., so there are close ties between the two organizations.

The Durham Arts Council provided office space for us in downtown Durham. Our staff included the director, a coordinator of quilt documentation days (Shirley Willis), and a documentation coordinator (Kathy Sullivan). Assisting Kathy with the huge job of organizing and filing information from the documentation days was Mary Scroggs.

Because our staff was limited and the response to our project was much greater than we had expected, the lines between our responsibilities blurred, and everybody pitched in to do what was needed. Shirley Willis also served as our office manager. For several months Anne Kimzey, a student in the folklore curriculum at the University of North Carolina, worked part-time with us. Volunteers from the Durham-Orange Quilters Guild and from the Piedmont Quilters Guild in Greensboro also worked with us in our office.

Scope and Limits

The excitement generated by the Kentucky Quilt Project has resulted in many efforts to document quilts in different states and regions. Each project limits the area, time span, and details of documentation in keeping with its goals.

As the steering committee of the North Carolina Quilt Project talked about goals, we decided that we wanted to know the kinds of quilts that had been made in our state over the years and the circumstances under which they had been made. We also wanted to learn about the lives of the quiltmakers as well as about the quilts.

We decided to gather information through a series of Quilt Documentation Days: days in various communities when we asked residents to bring in quilts to be documented. Our documentation was recorded on a three-page written form (consisting of a one-page interview with the quilt owner and two pages of a physical description of the quilt), a color slide, and a black-and-white print.

To get the broad picture of quilting we wanted, we decided to document all kinds of quilts brought in, and in the order that they came in. To include quilts whose makers are still alive and could be interviewed, we chose 1976 as the cutoff date. We included quilts made in other states, planning to share that information in the future.

We planned that the information we collected would be used to produce a book and an exhibition. After use by the Project, the

information will be permanently stored at the North Carolina Museum of History in Raleigh. After guidelines for its use are set up, it will be available for research. Folklorists Laurel Horton, Joyce Newman, Daniel Patterson, and Terry Zug, were all helpful to us in making these decisions.

We decided on a statewide survey for two reasons. First, there is a strong network of quiltmakers in the state, with at least twenty-five guilds from the seashore to the mountains. We knew that those quiltmakers would be interested in the project and would want their parts of the state to be included. The involvement of the guilds would be crucial to our work.

Second, for a variety of reasons, there is a strong interest in quilting in North Carolina. I have already mentioned "North Carolina Country Quilts" and the influence of the North Carolina Quilt Symposium, Inc. Georgia Bonesteel's "Lap Quilting" program on UNC-TV began in 1979 and has been from the very beginning an important influence in the life of quilting in our state.

Another influence has been three quilting events at the National Humanities Center in the Research Triangle Park: "Bits of Fabric and Scraps of Time" in 1983, "Cold Night Beauties" in 1984, and "A Garden of Quilts" in 1985. Funded in part by the North Carolina Humanities Committee, these exhibitions and accompanying programs aimed to reflect the creative activity of quilting in North Carolina, to present some aspects of the social and cultural history in which that creativity has taken place, and to generate discussions about the values and meanings of this activity which has been kept alive by generations of North Carolina women. Those events, attracted large and lively audiences. We learned that there are many levels on which people respond to quilts and quilting.

Because North Carolina is a large state, we decided to conduct our survey by dividing the state into seven regions and asking a quiltmaker to serve as coordinator for each of those regions. The North Carolina Quilt Project owes a great debt of gratitude to those seven women: Hazel Lewis, Kay Bryant, Erma Kirkpatrick, LaVerne Domach, Sarah Woodring, Shirley Klennon, and Juanita Metcalf. As individuals, they are as different as women can be. As a group they are alike in their willingness to sign on for the unknown, their sense of responsibility,

their sensitivity in dealing with people, and their generosity.

The regional coordinator planned the documentation days that took place within her region, in cooperation with the project office in Durham. The board of directors set up procedures so that certain standards of quality and consistency would be maintained. We tried to write those procedures so that regional coordinators had as much freedom as possible in planning the days within her region.

We used a professional photographer and a trained documenter at each day. When a day was scheduled, the office in Durham arranged for a photographer and a documenter for that day. Each coordinator had a core of trained volunteers to work with her. Looking back, I marvel at that giant cooperative effort that resulted in seventy-five Quilt Documentation Days over a period of fourteen months. When the final history of the North Carolina Quilt Project is written, it will have to be recorded that the regional coordinators were the moving force behind that documentation.

Consultants

Our project got much good help from consultants. Consultants are great because they come in for a limited time, spend an intense time with your group, bombard you with information and ideas, then leave. Your group can absorb and process their presentations, and use any parts (or none) of their suggestions.

The first money spent with the grant from the Forsyth Piecers and Quilters was used to bring Katy Christopherson to North Carolina to talk with us about the possibility of a quilt project. Katy's vision combined with her experience was enormously helpful in the early stages of planning. Laurel Horton's training as a folklorist and her work in South Carolina helped us make some of the basic decisions about our goals and the scope and limits of our documentation. Anne Johnston, Arts Consultant, gave us valuable information about the organization and operation of arts groups.

Barbara Brackman spent two wonderful days with us. The workshop she did for us on dating quilts was especially useful, because we had already been through some Quilt Documentation Days and had specific questions. For that workshop we brought in our board of

directors, all of the regional coordinators, and some of the volunteers who had been working as documenters.

Fundraising

Fundraising is difficult and frustrating. Our earliest support came from guilds—the Forsyth Piecers and Quilters Guild who gave the initial grant “to look into the possibility,” and the Greenville Quilters Guild who gave a large donation in the planning stages—and from the North Carolina Quilt Symposium, Inc. The Project is deeply grateful to the members of those groups who were willing to make donations while we were organizing and writing grants for other funding. Other guilds have given donations in varying amounts, some more than once.

Because we used folklorist guidelines, we have had good support from the Folklife section of our state Arts Council. We also had a grant from the Visual Arts section of the North Carolina Arts Council. Our largest grant came from the Folk Arts section of the National Endowment for the Arts. The Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation in North Carolina gave money to help match that grant.

We also have had donations from individuals. At Quilt Documentation Days we had forms explaining the Project and asking for donations in memory or in honor of quilmakers. Sometimes there would be a way the audience could make a cash contribution. We did not push hard on donations at Quilt Documentation Days because we did not want to be misunderstood as charging for documentation.

Another source of individual donations has been from those working with the Project. They know first-hand the importance of our work. There is a special pleasure in donations that come from those who have already given great gifts of time and energy.

We had a good response to letters sent out for a specific purpose: the purchase of a computer. In December 1986, we wrote a short letter stating our needs and asking for donations. The letter was sent to individuals we thought would be interested, and we had a very high percentage of responses. I asked some friends who knew about our work to send out some of those letters, along with a personal note in support of the request. That way we had donations from some who might never have known about the Project otherwise.

We did not get any funding from businesses, although we did get some in-kind donations of furniture from Burroughs-Wellcome. The mechanics of dealing with the public response to our work kept us all so busy that there was little time for the concentration that is required for appealing to businesses. Fundraising is hard, long-term, and uncertain.

Suggestions

There are ways in which it seems that our experiences can be useful to other groups.

First, there are some basic decisions that will shape the work of a quilt project. How much information do you want about quilts? Will you document quiltmakers as well as quilts? How wide an area do you want to cover? What year will be your cutoff date? What will you do with the information you collect? Will it be used for a book? For an exhibition? Will it be available for research by others?

These questions should be carefully considered in light of the quilting climate in which you are operating, the base of volunteer help available, and the level of fundraising you are willing to do. Once you decide on your basic goals, the following suggestions may be helpful.

Talk a lot about what you want to do. Talk with the group interested in the idea. Talk with other individuals or groups with whom you plan to work. Talk with your family, with your friends, and even with strangers. It can be especially interesting and helpful to get reactions from folks other than quiltmakers and from those who do not know you well.

Ask for help. There is much help available, but you will have to look for it. Read books, look for professional help, and learn about other quilt projects. A telephone call or a visit to a quilt project director may get a better response than a letter.

Use consultants. They are great for the reasons already mentioned. All the consultants we used are highly recommended. Your state or local Arts Council can recommend consultants in various areas.

Look for workshops on fundraising, organizational management, money management, etc. These will also put you in touch with others

who have some of the same problems as your group.

Go to folks in your community. I looked for and talked with women who were involved in similar activities. Janice Palmer, Director of Cultural Services at Duke University Hospital, was helpful with suggestions for fundraising. She also became interested in our work. She sent out some of the letters requesting funds for a computer, which brought in several donations.

Anne Moore, chair of the board of the Volunteer Services Bureau in Durham, helped me with policies and procedures for a board of directors. Besides the actual information I got in these interviews, I also got practice in articulating what the North Carolina Quilt Project was doing, so another person in our community knew about our work.

Get professional help when needed. It's worth paying for the security you will feel about legal and financial matters. We used a lawyer to help form our nonprofit corporation and apply for tax-exempt status. We used a CPA to oversee our handling of money.

Go slowly. I believe this is very important. It was two years from the time we received the grant to "look into the possibility" until our first Quilt Documentation Day. As you move along, be willing to respond to your particular circumstances as they become clearer—and often change.

Develop a base of workers who are excited about this exciting work. Whatever amount of time an enthusiastic worker gives will be more valuable than endless hours by someone who is only marginally interested.

Let volunteers do what they do well and what they like to do. Let everyone know that their contributions are important parts of the total picture. It is a heady and satisfying experience to work together to produce this body of information. It could never be accomplished by the total of each person working separately.

Document your work. Keep good records for your project's history and for those who will come to you for advice on how to organize and carry out a quilt project.

Finally, no matter what decisions you make, no matter the variations of details, remember that we are performing an important

public service by uncovering this information about the cultural and women's history of our areas.

Because both textiles and human memory are fragile, there is a sense of urgency about this work. Because it is important, please do not let the sense of urgency keep you from working thoughtfully, carefully, and with consistently high standards.

Summary

An important facet of quilting always has been our longing to create something beautiful and lasting for those we love who live after us. I see the work we are doing as our legacy in that same spirit. We can never know all of the ways in which the information we are collecting and preserving will be used—nor the ways in which its use will touch other lives. We can, however, anticipate that promise in the sense of kinship we feel with women from the past as we see their quilts and hear their stories.