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A Profile of Quilts and Donors at the DAR Museum

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The National Society, Daughters of the American Revolution, is and has been an influential cultural organization for the last one hundred years. The Society's Museum houses one of the most important American textile collections in the country. The quilt collection is probably the most visible part of the textile collection. This paper will explore the types of quilts donated to the DAR Museum in the last century and, most importantly, the donors. Who were they? Why did they donate their quilts to this particular heritage society? Also, what do the number of quilts donated yearly tell us about the Society, its Museum, or the interest of Americans in preserving their past?

The DAR and its Museum

During the Civil War and its aftermath the United States experienced a revival of patriotism and the awakening of interest in the early years of American history. This movement, known as the Colonial Revival, was the result of economic depression, industrialization, the influx of immigrants, and rapid urbanization following the Civil War. Inspired by such celebrations as the United States Centennial in 1876, and the 400th anniversary of the discovery of the New World in 1892, Americans, wishing to express their patriotism and explore their roots in more direct and concrete ways, organized

hereditary societies. The Sons of the American Revolution (SAR), founded in 1875 by a group of men wishing to perpetuate the memories of their Revolutionary War ancestors, was one of the earliest. On April 30, 1890, at a general meeting in Washington D. C., they voted to exclude women from membership. A small group of women felt indignant over this exclusion of women from the SAR. They argued that this discriminated against women and that they had a need to honor their ancestors, women in particular, in a relevant manner. Mrs. Mary Lockwood (1831–1922), a professional writer, wrote a scathing letter to the *Washington Post*, accusing the SAR of “one-sided heroism” and asking, “Why is not the patriotism of the Country broad and just enough to take women in, too?”¹ Lockwood cited the example of Hannah Thruston Arnett of New Jersey, who, in 1772, denounced her husband as a traitor to the Revolution and threatened to leave him if he accepted the British offer of amnesty. Mr. William O. McDowell, great-grandson of Hannah Thruston Arnett, and Registrar General of the Sons of the American Revolution, responded by writing a letter to the *Washington Post* offering to help organize a Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution. Six women responded to his letter, and within a month he provided them with application blanks, a proposed Constitution, and a book for the amended and accepted Constitution.

Armed with determination and these organizational tools, Lockwood and other like-minded women formed the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution on October 11, 1890. At the first meeting eighteen names were enrolled for membership, and Mrs. Caroline Scott Harrison, wife of Benjamin Harrison, the President of the United States, was elected President-General. At this meeting three objectives were formulated for the society. They were:

Historical: to perpetuate the memory and spirit of the men and women who achieved American independence.

Educational: to promote, as an object of primary importance, institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge.

Patriotic: to cherish, maintain and extend the institutions of American freedom; to foster true patriotism and love of country.²

Figure 1. Memorial Continental Hall was built in 1910 by Edward Pearce Casey in the Beaux Arts style. Approximately \$700,000.00 was spent on the building and its furnishings, all donated by individuals, state societies, and chapters. Photo: DAR Magazine.

The next morning the *Washington Post* wrote, "An organization, patriotic in purpose was perfected yesterday."³ The new organization adopted a resolution at a meeting a week later to "provide a place for the collection of historic relics. . . . This may first be in rooms, and later in the erection of a fire-proof building."⁴ It is clear that even at this early point, the Society envisioned a DAR building to include a museum space. Later that year the Revolutionary Relics Committee was formed to "collect, preserve and exhibit the relics."⁵ The number of relics collected by the NSDAR grew as did its membership in the first few years. Membership grew from eighteen names in October 1890 to more than 100,000 by 1913. One hundred years after its founding membership is more than 200,000. An Act to Incorporate the Daughters of the American Revolution was passed in 1896 by the United States Congress. Section Three of the Act permitted the Smithsonian Institution to house the NSDAR collection of relics, manuscripts, and books until a fire-proof building could be erected.

The cornerstone for Memorial Continental Hall was laid in 1904 using the same trowel George Washington employed to break ground for the United States Capitol. In 1909, with the completion of the NSDAR headquarters imminent, the "relics" housed at the Smithsonian Institution were transferred to Memorial Continental Hall. The south gallery, now the library office, provided exhibition space for some of the objects.

In 1950, an annex to the administration building provided a gallery for permanent and rotating exhibitions along with much-needed office space. The remaining offices in Memorial Continental Hall were relocated in the new addition, and vacated spaces were transformed into thirty-three period rooms, each maintained by a state society. Many of the objects in these rooms were given to the Society in the early years by generous Daughters to provide furnishings for the offices when they were located in Memorial Continental Hall. These objects now form the core of the Museum collection. The Period Rooms depict regional and domestic scenes of American life from the late seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth century. The earliest time represented is in the Wisconsin room which depicts life in a multi-purpose one-room house at the end of the seventeenth century. The Texas Room depicts a bedroom of a German immigrant to Texas between 1850 and 1880.

In the early 1970s the staff instituted a docent program featuring tours, thus making the collection and state Period Rooms more accessible to the general public. In 1973, the American Association of Museums accredited the DAR Museum as an institution dedicated to the highest standards of scholarship, education, and preservation.

The Museum's collection of quilts, coverlets, samplers, and costumes have long been a favored part of the permanent holdings of over 30,000 objects made or used in America in the pre-industrial period. Although the cut-off date for Museum accessions is 1840, a few State Period Rooms depict scenes of American life after 1840. Textiles handmade or handwoven up to 1900 are accepted. The study and exhibition of these textiles provide a means to attain an important goal of the NSDAR: "to document and preserve the achievements of American women."⁶

Recognizing the need for a more flexible gallery space to show off its rapidly growing collection and wishing to highlight the textile collection, the NSDAR, on October 4, 1990, opened its newly renovated gallery featuring a permanent exhibition site for the DAR Museum collection of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century quilts and coverlets. These textiles are exhibited on a four-to-six-month rotating schedule. One section of this gallery is devoted exclusively to the display of whitework. Two non-movable cases will backlight these quilts using timed lights. Another section of the gallery houses six sliding racks that hold quilts and coverlets.

The Quilts

The DAR Museum's textile collection includes 225 quilts, quilt tops, counterpanes, crocheted and knitted bedcovers. This number does not include quilt squares and textile fragments. The Museum classifies these textiles into nine major categories: whitework, pieced, appliqued, pieced and appliqued, crazy, wholecloth, crewel-embroidered, outline-embroidered, and painted. Some categories can be further broken down into sub-categories. Whitework quilts can be cataloged: quilted and stuffed, candlewicked, marseilles, cradle/doll, knitted/crocheted, or embroidered. The pieced quilts contain three sub-categories: traditional pieced, cradle/doll quilts, and template (hexagon) pieced quilts. Applique quilts include traditional applique, cradle/doll, or album quilts. Within the pieced and appliqued category there are no cradle/doll quilts and only one album quilt. Crazy quilts are divided into two categories: wool and silk. Within the wholecloth category there are plain and printed quilts. Of the total collection, 38.2% are pieced quilts, 23.5% are whitework, 16.4% applique, 8% pieced and applique, 8.4% crazy, 3.2% wholecloth, 1.3% crewel-embroidered, .5% outline-embroidered, and .5% painted.

The Museum's collection management policy outlines specifications for donations. The quilts must be American-made, pre-1900, in good condition, and have a verifiable family history. All quilts in the collection are believed to be American-made.⁷ By analyzing the fiber content, printing and dyeing methods, style, piecing, applique,

Figure 2. Pieced and appliqued quilt top, probably made by a member of the Bowkes family of Virginia, ca. 1830. The buttonhole stitch used to applique the floral cottons may suggest that the quilt was made in the Tidewater region of Virginia, where other quilts have been identified that are worked in this manner. DAR Museum, gift of Caroline Nixon Morris Kempton.

and quilting patterns, and sewing techniques, and by combining this with family history, I was able to ascribe dates to all 225 quilts to within ten years. Thirty-two (14.2%) of the quilts have dates inscribed on them. Two are dated before 1800 (1783 and 1788), and two after 1900 (1904 and 1918). Six (2.7%) have inscribed dates between 1800 and 1820; five, (2.2%) 1820–1840; eight (3.6%) 1840–1860; three (1.3%) 1860–1880; and six (2.7%) 1880–1900. Combining these with the uninscribed quilts, the results are: twelve

(5.3%) pre-date 1800; twenty-one (9.3%) 1800–1820; thirty-four (15.1%) 1820–1840; fifty-five (24.4%) fall between 1840 and 1860; forty-two (18.7%) 1860–1880; forty (17.8%) 1880–1900; and twenty-one (9.3%) post-date 1900. The increase in the number of quilts that date from 1840 to 1860 reflects the increase in the popularity of quilting in this period. Articles such as the January 1835 issue of *Godey's Ladies Book*, which includes instructions on making hexagon patchwork, and technological advances in the textile industry combined with an increase in the number of American textile mills, enabled cotton goods to be produced at prices affordable to the growing middle class. These trends contributed to the popularity of quilting over a larger section of American society.

When examining the family history accompanying a quilt, the Museum's curator asks four questions: Who made it? When was it made? Where was it made? How did the donor acquire it? One hundred and thirty-four (60%) quilts have identifiable makers. Another twenty-one (9.3%) are said to have been made by a member of a specific family. Thus 155 (69%) have a specific family history. To verify the family history the NSDAR's genealogical library of over 82,000 books provides a comprehensive research resource.

Of 155 quilts with family histories and others with probable locations, all can be associated with one of five geographical regions: New England, thirty-eight (17%), MidAtlantic, sixty-three (28%), South, fifty-two (23%), Midwest, twenty-two (10%), and West four (2%). Forty-six quilts (20%) have unknown locations. In a collection of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century quilts, it is not surprising to find that the vast majority were made east of the Mississippi River, where the largest population centers were located.

Of the quilts with known family histories, ten of fifty-three white-work quilts have oral traditions of being handspun and handwoven on a specific plantation by slaves. Two pieced and applique quilts have similar histories. All but two of the twelve quilts are said to have been made in the South, and the other two were made in Missouri and Ohio. Analysis of quilts attributed to slave manufacture reveals that two or three appear to be of handspun and handwoven fabric. Also, there is no documentary evidence that the quilts were made by slaves. The provenance of these quilts will remain unproven until more research is done on slave quilts and on how to determine

Figure 3. Block-printed wholecloth quilt, made by Mary Mather Sill (1812–), Old Lyme, Connecticut, ca. 1840. Family history states the quilt was made by Mary from her mother's bedhangings. The quilt was taken to Hawaii in the nineteenth century by a descendant of Mary Sill. DAR Museum, gift of the Hawaii State Society.

the differences between coarsely-woven linens and cottons and true handspun and handwoven linens and cottons.

The Donors

Who are the donors to the DAR Museum and why do they choose to give these valuable objects to this particular museum? Over 72% of the quilts in the collection came from individual members or state societies and chapters. Non-members donated 17.4% of the

Figure 4. Glazed wool star quilt, probably made by Mary Amelia Jacobs, Groton, Massachusetts, 1774–1825, cross-stitched on the back, “4”. This quilt along with a whole cloth quilt which is cross-stitched with a “2” were given by a descendant of Mary Jacobs in 1910, along with twenty objects from the Jacobs estate. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was a common practice to number household linens. DAR Museum, gift of Miss Floretta Vining.

quilts, and donor history is unknown for 10.2%. Almost all of the quilts with unknown donor history were donated before 1947. This may be explained, at least in part, by the lack of consistent and reliable record-keeping in the early years of the Museum. The only official record kept between 1890 and 1915 was the *Museum Catalogue Of The Collection of Relics Of The Revolutionary Period*. This catalog listed the accession number of each object, the location, descrip-

tion, name of donor, and the state through which it was donated. This is the sum total of information about objects accessioned during this twenty-five-year period. Recordkeeping did not improve significantly between 1915 and 1947. Accession information was recorded in the first volume of eighteen accession books and on accession cards, which contained some donor history. It was not until the 1960s that files were kept along with the accession book and cards to hold all correspondence with the donor or other parties about specific objects. Since 1987, all accession records and catalog information has been computerized for easy access to the collection. Quilts and coverlets have been photographed and put on videodisc, thus making it possible to retrieve a visual image of a particular object along with a written description. Use of the computer is available to researchers by appointment.

Breaking down the profile of known donors further, we find that individuals, five of whom were male, contributed 162 quilts. Couples gave seven. Sixteen were donated in conjunction with other objects, and these are designated as part of a "collection". Four quilts were purchased by the Friends of the Museum Fund and one was given by the Esprit collection.

The largest number of quilt donations came from members living in the Washington area. Over a quarter of the total number of donors lived in the mid-Atlantic states. Donors living in Maryland account for twenty-eight of the sixty-three mid-Atlantic donors, and residents of the District of Columbia contributed fourteen quilts. Fifty-five donors resided in the southern United States, Virginia having the largest number of donors from any single state at thirty-two. New England is represented by twenty-three donors. Twenty-one come from the Midwest and thirteen from the West. Geographic locations for the donors of forty-six quilts are unknown. These figures show that even though the DAR Museum is a national museum it is also an important local museum, especially for its members.

The factors influencing potential donors to the Museum are not entirely clear. Only thirty-two donors chose to record their reasons for donating their quilts in their correspondence with the Museum. Fourteen of those wanted their quilts to be in a safe place where they could be cared for and preserved. For example, in donating her

quilt, Mrs. Julia Eckelman of Wichita, Kansas, wrote in 1959, "I am very proud to present it and know that it will be cared for, and preserved for future generations to appreciate."⁸ Mary Burrows of Maryland wrote in 1988 that, "we are all so happy to know that the quilt is where it will be preserved, seen and appreciated."⁹ In 1910 Mrs. Henry Schorer wrote of donating her quilt to the Museum, "so it can be where women will admire it."¹⁰ Betty Brooks wrote in 1986, "I enjoyed them many years and I know they will not become doggie beds."¹¹

Seven picked this museum because a friend or relative was a member, and they donated their quilts as an act of friendship and loyalty. Mrs. Michael Broderick of Texas, in 1976, donated a Marseilles spread because her mother was a DAR member.¹² Five people donated their quilts because they wanted them in this specific museum collection. In 1957, Mrs. Charles Chesney wrote on behalf of the donor, Miss Hassinger, that they hoped that the donation process would hasten as "Miss Hassinger is not at all well and at present in a rest home with 3 nurses in attendance. I know it would give her a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction to know that the treasured quilt is where she would like it to be."¹³ These donors felt they owned things of exceptional quality and that those objects deserved to be in this particular collection. Mrs. M. T. White, Regent of the Massanutton chapter, wrote when referring to an early nineteenth-century pieced quilt, "I am reluctant to store it in our home, such an historic quilt should have a place in the DAR Museum."¹⁴ Kathryn Hall of Ohio wrote in 1986 when offering the Museum a lovely Feathered Star quilt, "I have had the quilt for sixty years, my daughter does not want to be responsible for this quilt and as I am now eighty years old I would like to know what is going to become of it, but I would dearly like to have it in our Museum there and hope you can welcome it to a permanent home."¹⁵ The last donor may have been echoing the thoughts of many Daughters. They are loyal and dedicated to the society and Museum, and some feel it is important to give something to the Society in exchange for what it has given them. And last, some donate because they were asked. This was the case with the Sarah Riggs Humphreys Chapter of Connecticut in 1924 when they were asked by the National Society to donate ob-

Figure 5. Friendship album quilt, made by Emma M. Fish for Eliza Moore, Trenton, New Jersey. Signed in ink and dated 1842–1844. Signatures include Eliza’s mother and father. One block is signed “Presented by my niece Emily Augusta.” Emily August Fish was 3 years old when she presented the quilt on March 4, 1843. DAR Museum, gift of Mrs. C. Edward Murray.

jects for the growing Museum collection. They presented the Museum with a whitework quilt dated circa 1830.¹⁶

Donation Patterns

The Colonial Revival had a profound effect upon donation patterns between 1890 and 1950. Diane Dunkley wrote of the phenomenon in 1989, that “its impact is so total that it might truly be

called the national style."¹⁷ Prior to the Civil War, Americans looked to Europe for inspiration when recreating architectural and domestic settings. Following the Civil War it was the American Colonial period that was recreated. The word "Colonial" was used in a broad sense to refer to the years before the industrial period. By 1900 the Colonial Revival had slowed but returned with a vengeance around 1920, peaking in the 1930s. According to Kenneth Ames the Colonial Revival was spurred on after the Civil War and again after World War I by responses to modernization and technological advances; by nationalism, thus a need to create a core of myths and values that exemplify the American experience; and by responses to cultural diversification, thus expediting the socialization of immigrants that came to this country following the Civil War and World War I.¹⁸ The DAR Museum collection was formed in the spirit of the Colonial Revival. Between 1890 and 1915 only five quilts were donated. Between 1915 and 1940, eight quilts were donated. The number quadrupled in the 1940s to thirty-seven. Six of these were given by Mrs. Benjamin Catchings in 1945, along with ninety-four objects from the colonial period. Olive Graffam, Curator of Collections, and Amy Watson Smith, Assistant Curator of Collections, studied donation patterns of silver, paintings, glass, ceramics and samplers and did not find an increase in donations of these objects during this decade. Therefore, the upsurge in quilt donations does not reflect donation patterns in the decorative arts as a whole, but rather one peculiar to quilts alone. Incited by the Colonial Revival in the 1920s and 1930s, there was an increase in interest in quilts and quiltmaking. Books, such as Marie Webster's *Quilts: Their Story and How to Make Them*, published in 1915, and articles in newspapers and magazines about quilts, with quilt patterns, encouraged the spread of interest to a broad public. Furthermore, one quilt from the DAR museum collection was featured in the September 1941 issue of *Woman's Day*.¹⁹ The same quilt was recorded in the *American Index of Design*.²⁰ Publicity of any kind serves to keep the Museum in the minds of potential donors. Another factor may have been the renewal of patriotic fervor during the years of World War II and an enhanced appreciation for American objects of historic interest. According to Jay Cantor, "Revivals of interest in American arts of-

Figure 6. Applique quilt, maker unknown, probably made in Ohio or Pennsylvania, ca. 1850. In 1930 this quilt was given to the “bedding department” of McCreery & Co. department store in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, by Mrs. Jules Le Veen. It was subsequently given to the DAR Museum by Mrs. Joseph Baldrige in 1936. DAR Museum, gift of Mrs. Joseph Baldrige.

ten paralleled emerging uncertainties about the current state of the country or reflected increased pressures on the social and political fabric from some outside force.”²¹

There was a gradual increase in quilt donations in the next two decades. Eleven were donated in the 1950s and seventeen in the 1960s. A renewed interest and appreciation in American decora-

tive arts and crafts was evident as the Bicentennial anniversary approached in 1976. Quilt donations greatly increased, and by the end of the decade thirty-one had been added to the growing collection. Quilt donations tripled in the 1980s. One hundred and three were donated from 1980 to 1990. This is nearly half of the entire quilt collection (45.8%). The reasons for this increase are many and varied. Interest in American decorative arts fueled by the Bicentennial remained unabated. The most recent decade also saw record prices set at auction for furniture, paintings, folk art, and quilts. The establishment of organizations such as the American Quilt Study Group in 1980, and books and magazines devoted solely to the subject of quilts and quilting all served to fuel the quilt revival fire. One of the most important reasons for quilt donations to the DAR Museum in the past decade has been the Museum's series of eight exhibitions devoted exclusively to quilts. Two of these exhibitions were accompanied by fully illustrated catalogs. The Museum also published a book, *The Arts of Independence*, highlighting the entire Museum collection.

The first major quilt exhibition at the DAR Museum, "Old Line Traditions: Maryland Women and Their Quilts" opened in 1985 and included an accompanying catalog with new primary research. That year the Museum received fourteen quilts, the third largest number ever received in any single year. The next year, 1986, was the last year before the tax laws changed, which made it financially less attractive to donate objects to museums. Twenty-two quilts came into the collection, making 1986 the banner year for quilt donations. Again in 1987 the Museum held a major quilt exhibition, "First Flowering: Early Virginia Quilts," and published an illustrated catalog. A smaller exhibition of doll and cradle quilts called "For My Little One" followed. Both of these exhibitions focused on new, primary research, and helped to establish the DAR Museum as an institution dedicated to serious scholarship in the field of American textiles. In that year quilt donations totaled eighteen.

The last two years of the decade saw a decrease in the number of quilt donations. Eleven were given in 1988 and nine in 1989. This may be a result of changes in the tax laws in 1986 concerning donations. Beginning in 1987 the donor did not receive a tax credit for

Figure 7. Pieced quilt made by Sarah Hall Gwyer (1812–1883) in Omaha, Nebraska, ca. 1860. Sarah married William Augustus Gwyer in 1846 in New York. Prior to their move to Nebraska they lived in North Carolina, where William was a merchant. The roller-printed cottons were probably acquired in North Carolina. DAR Museum, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jack Glass, in honor of the Glass, Schlossberg, Gwyer, and Yates families.

the full market value of the object. Donors received credit for the amount they paid for an object. The United States Congress passed legislation, for 1991 only, returning the tax credit for full market value to donors. Museums and similar organizations hope that this credit will be extended permanently.

The Museum has recently noticed an increase in the number of

people who contact the Museum to sell their quilts instead of donating them. The skyrocketing prices quilts now bring in the marketplace and the new tax laws have combined to result in fewer donations. Some potential donors may hold onto their quilts as investments then sell them to the highest bidder.

Conclusion

The quilt collection of the DAR Museum reflects the interests of its parent organization. The NSDAR has long been involved in preservation activities. To join the Society, prospective members must prove that their ancestors were veterans of the Revolutionary War or recognized patriots. This is accomplished using primary records such as birth and death certificates and census records, thus the society has accumulated a large body of research which augments the books and periodicals in the genealogical library. Other preservation activities include, since 1897, the recording and marking of previously unknown gravesites of Revolutionary War veterans. The Society donated over \$700,000 toward the preservation of Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty.

The quilt collection also serves to further the goals of the Society by promoting historical, patriotic, and educational activities. Some quilts incorporate patriotic motifs, and many were made by wives, daughters, and granddaughters of Revolutionary War veterans. Educational purposes are fulfilled by the many programs the Museum sponsors each year. The Museum hosts a textile dating clinic once a month to assist the public in identifying textiles. A force of a hundred docents each contribute approximately a hundred hours a year in giving tours and educational programs. One program, the quilt workshop, has been conducted by Kendal Martin, a docent from Virginia, for the past three years. Twenty-five quilts from the permanent collection are featured once a month in this historical overview of American quilts. Other programs conducted by docents are the Colonial Adventure and the Colonial Child programs. Both look at eighteenth- and nineteenth-century life for five-to-seven-year-olds and elementary school children through a self-discovery process.

Over the last century several trends are apparent in the donation of quilts to the DAR Museum. The gradual increase in donations to the Museum from 1890 to 1950 reflects the popularity of the Colonial Revival. The years during the second World War spawned patriotic feelings resulting in an unprecedented number of quilts donated during those years. Donations increased at a steady pace until the 1970s when the Bicentennial anniversary inspired patriotic fervor which resulted in the doubling of the size of the collection in the 1980s.

The increase in donations also reflects the increase in the popularity of American folk art, particularly quilts, in the last twenty years. Exhibitions accompanied by serious scholarship have resulted in increased publicity, which subsequently has stimulated donations.

The DAR Museum quilt collection is significant because it represents the major types of quilts made in America from the second half of the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth. Sixty-nine percent of these quilts have specific family histories. Most importantly, the Museum, through its collection, exhibitions, and research, continues to serve the goals of its parent organization, and at the same time participate in the forefront of institutions actively involved in furthering the understanding of quilts and quilting in America.

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