

Uncoverings

1981

Volume 2 of
the Research Papers of
the American Quilt Study Group

Edited by Sally Garoutte

Documenting Quilts by Their Fabrics

Katherine R. Koob

Often when we see a quilt at a museum, an antique shop or at friends we get a wonderful story of how this quilt was made by grandmother so-and-so or Mrs. such-and-such and when and where it was made. Too often we can not tell whether these stories are truths or tales. How do we know where to draw the fine line between the two? We would like to believe all the wonderful stories which come with each quilt but one has to question them. And then there are many quilts for which the true stories are lost, never to be told.

While working at the Merrimack Valley Textile Museum with its wonderful collection of American textiles and sample books, printed and woven samples pasted into large volumes, I began to study quilts in a different way. The Museum did not have quilts in their collection so I relied on remembering prints I had seen in the museum's printed samples with prints I saw in quilts. This kind of documenting is really going beyond Grandmother to before Grandmother ever saw the fabric, to the original manufacture and date of production.

Each company appears to have kept large volumes, some 14" × 18" and some as large as 18" × 24", similar to wallpaper sample books, usually with samples of their fabrics in manufacturing order. Some companies kept the samples by different classes of fabrics in separate volumes, i.e., furniture, shirting, lawns, etc. Among the collection of volumes at the Merrimack Valley Textile Museum, I came across numerous volumes which often had samples of different shapes and sizes (not uniform) which sometimes had notes on the manufacture, selling agent and/or dates. I referred to these volumes as reference books because of their nature, being used for reference at the mill by designers.

Few of these wonderful treasures from the original manufacturers have survived over the years. Many were at the mercy of insurance companies and were destroyed by a claim that they were a fire hazard. Those sample books now in museums are invaluable. They can aid scholars in dating many objects, clothing, period furniture, curtains

and quilts. They can *not* tell when the quilt was actually made but certainly it could not have been made before the fabrics. Therefore, one can check grandmother's story. Though a quilt may not come with a story, it could have a story to tell.

By studying several print companies one realizes that there were styles and trends in the market just as there are today. It would take a book to go into the details which are unique to each company's line of prints. One has to become sensitive to color combinations and quality of design and printing; each plays an important part in the overall picture of what the company produced.

For two reasons I have narrowed my study of printed fabrics to American late 19th century. First, the availability of sources and secondly, the field is so large that it is better to concentrate on one area.

I have concentrated on the Merrimack Valley Textile Museum's collection of sample books numbering over 3000 volumes, perhaps one third printed fabrics, others woolen or cotton samples. I have studied other collections at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Cooper-Hewitt Museum, Rhode Island School of Design Museum, Goldie Paley Pavilion at Philadelphia College of Textiles & Science, and the Brooklyn Museum. The collections all seem to be around the same period, starting 1870s. I am not sure as to why, possibly it could be due to the Civil War in the 1860s and the thought of the centennial may have made the companies think more about holding onto the volumes. I have found that there were more than one set of volumes made; for example, RISD Museum, MVTM and Brooklyn Museum have overlapping volumes from Arnold Print Works.

It is hard to imagine the quantities of fabrics designed and produced in a short period of even 10 years. One collection, the Coheco Print Works, Dover, New Hampshire dating from 1881 to 1891, takes up a book shelf and half of a storage unit 8 feet tall with shelves 18" \times 48". The quantity and quality of prints is amazing.

This period that I have concentrated on is almost like a new era to the industry itself. Synthetic dyes first appeared in 1856 but really came into their own from the 1870s on. At first in the 1860s and early 1870s we see problems with knowing what to do with all that color. The manufacturers almost could not handle the freedom of color that synthetic dyes gave them. Alongside of this we have the population growing and the demand for more fabrics and somehow this is reflected in the quality. The problems of color and quality of printing seem to get worse instead of better. We find that in 1906 Hamilton Manufacturing company, Lowell, Massachusetts produced Little Red

Riding Hood in green, brown, blue, and pink hoods.

It is not hard to remember prints of unusual quality and design. We all have seen enough of the pink prints which look like fine roots to not know where to start. Almost every company produced the common shirting materials and crazy little prints. These take some concentration to remember which company might have produced what.

I would not claim to have a photographic memory, not am I sure that would totally help. One comes to a point when one can not remember whether one saw the print in another quilt or in a particular sample book and which collection.

To make the task of identifying quilts easier I resorted to modern techniques of photographing the quilts, making slides and then having colored xeroxes made from the slides. Though the focus on the xeroxes is not perfect it surely aided my memory. I also set up the slides in a projector and could focus in more on one particular print.

For this presentation I concentrated on 11 quilts and narrowed down to positive identification of prints on 8 quilts and one with a very similar print. In this printed version I am limited to showing two quilts which will give an idea of what printed fabrics they contain that I have been able to document. For other quilts I do have strong ideas where a few of the fabrics are from but have not found them. One can only do this kind of search intensively for short durations if one wants to remain sane. Though I have felt I was very close to identifying some prints I must admit "close" is not it. Therefore my concentration has been on Cochecho Print Works, Dover, New Hampshire.

How does one really know that these samples shown are indeed the original samples? From my experience in studying several companies over many years of their production I found that few companies reproduced the same design year after year. On occasion they would reprint a design but they seemed to change the color ways. Thus from the mills' sample books, salesman sheets or folders (6 to 8 samples shown in different color ways), or engravers sheets (a sheet with a sample in full repeat and notes on who worked on the plates, sketches, etc.) one could find the color ways matching the samples in the quilt.

Fading must also be taken into account. The samples in the sample books are rarely affected by light or washing, though acid in the paper, usually poor quality, might change their color. Through experience in seeing the changes in colors I have mental notes on how certain colors behave under different environmental exposures. Many colors change differently from what one expects.

Today one could suspect the possibility of the fabric being a reproduction. I have not found it too difficult to tell the difference between

Quilt 1: Shelburne Museum #399. 87" × 75" Handsewn and hand quilted. "Windmill Blades" made by Clarissa White Alford 1806-1890, Cavendish, Vermont. ca. 1860 (museum notation).

Prints in central blocks are Coheco Print Works print style 522 produced January 1884 in eight different color ways. The print in the ground is Coheco Print Works print style 2746 produced July 1886 in three different color ways. Two different color ways appear in the quilt.

As these prints were produced in the 1880s, this quilt was not produced in the 1860s. The quilt still could have been produced by Ms. Alford, since she lived until 1890.

Coheco Print Works Style 280

Coheco Print Works Style 522

Coheco Print Works Style 2746

Coheco Print Works Style 9183

Quilt 2: Owned by Mrs. Arvid Larson, Providence, Rhode Island. Referred to as Pineapple Design. 91" × 72½". No filling, no quilting. Hand sewn, not finely stitched, printed bias binding. No history.

Note that this quilt also contains Coheco print style 522. The second print is style 280 printed February 1884. Both prints have halos of a lighter color around the dark color forming the design. A third print from Coheco can also be seen in this photograph: in the lower right corner is a print with roses style 9183 produced in 1883. Four other prints from other parts of the quilt have been documented as Coheco Prints dating from 1881 to 1885. In conclusion the quilt was probably made in the late 1880s.

the original fabrics produced in the last quarter of the 19th century and those produced today. New spinning and weaving methods, synthetic fabrics, silkscreening and photo-transfer printing, and pigments all add up to a totally different fabric which surrounds us today. Few manufacturers could afford to go back to roller engraved methods of printing nor could they afford to print with dyes on quality all cotton goods of that same era. These factors are expressed in the fine fabrics produced a hundred years ago.

I am continuing my research in this area and hope in the future to study collections in Canada and England also to see how far American prints might have travelled.

History of the three companies mentioned in this presentation.

Cocheco Print Works, Dover, New Hampshire,

1827 organized

1909 taken over by Pacific Mills (Lawrence, Massachusetts)

1941 plant discontinued

Collection: 1881-1891, Merrimack Valley Textile Museum 69.29
& 77.6

Hamilton Manufacturing Company, Lowell, Massachusetts

1825 incorporated

1927 Hamilton Mfg. Co. (Marden & Murphy, Inc., owners)

1927-1928 idle

1929 April, liquidated

Collection: 1877-1909, 132 volumes, Merrimack Valley Textile
Museum 70.2.2

Allen's Print Works, Providence, Rhode Island

1874 listed, Allen's Print Works (incorporation unknown)

1902 Roger Williams Finishing Co. (succeed Allen Print Works)

1903 Allen Print Co.

1908 Allen Print Co. last listed

Collection: 1874-1884, 9 volumes, Merrimack Valley Textile
Museum 70.2.1