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She Hath Done What She Could: Discovering Memories on a New York Friendship Quilt

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For the author, what began as a graduate class assignment in material-culture studies soon became a grand adventure in friendship and discovery. The project involved researching a large friendship quilt that had little accompanying information to determine its origin. The author used several methods of investigation, beginning with a formal artifact analysis of the fabrics and construction, followed by digital image enhancement, Internet searches, telephone interviews, and even on-site research to trace the history of the quilt. In the process of identifying the maker and her life, the author learned that some of the best sources of information are found in the most interesting places. These great discoveries also show how any clue, no matter how small, can lead to new friendships and wonderful treasures of the past, just waiting to share their secrets with a new generation.

Discovery and Adventure

Isn't it amazing how the smallest choices we make in everyday life can end up leading us on some of the most extraordinary adventures. That is exactly what I discovered when, as a graduate student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, I was asked to choose a quilt for a research project in an artifact analysis course taught by Dr. Patricia Crews, professor of textiles, clothing and design. Little did I know at the time, that it would take me a thousand miles from home, help me



to meet several wonderful people, and lead to the discovery of extraordinary treasures hidden away in attics and closets for more than one hundred years.

The project involved selecting one quilt with little or no provenance from the collection of the International Quilt Study Center (IQSC). We were asked to analyze the quilt to determine if additional information could be learned from the object itself using a material-culture studies approach described by E. McClung Fleming.¹ In making my choice from the list of approximately a dozen quilts identified by Carolyn Ducey, IQSC curator, I noticed a particular entry, which had nothing written by it except the word "genealogy." I was intrigued by this notation, which was for me, a novel approach to quilt analysis. I also thought that I could get some advice from my father, an amateur genealogist. I made my selection and started working on the project.

I was given a copy of the Center's file for this quilt, accession number 1997.007.0852 of the IQSC's Ardis and Robert James Collection, and found that it included a small, penciled note that read, "This quilt was made by the ladies of South Apalachin for Aunt Jane Blair, sister of Achsa Bancroft Moe, mother of Lucy Moe Wood, mother of Roy Wood." The quilt was identified in IQSC records as a friendship quilt without even an estimated date of origin. According to the purchase record, Ardis and Robert James had purchased this quilt at the Stamford Historical Society sale on August 18, 1993, from Ms. Jane Lury.² The accession file also included a partial list of signatures on the quilt with many question marks beside individual names. After making an appointment to get the quilt out for examination, I discovered the reason for the question-marked entries. Like many inked signatures on quilts dating from the mid-nineteenth century, several of the names had faded to such an extent that they were virtually undecipherable.

I performed a formal artifact analysis on the quilt with regard to fabric type, construction, and overall design, as well as the quality of craftsmanship, according to Fleming's model. After many recounts, I determined that the quilt contains more than one hundred different fabrics, nearly all of which are plain-weave cotton prints, with several lightweight wool fabrics included as well. Based on an examination of the prints and comparison to published prints of the nineteenth century in available sources, including Barbara Brackman's book *Clues in*



the Calico, the prints appear to represent the 1845 to 1865 era.³ Each block contains a different signature and is made of a fabric unique to that block. The blocks measure approximately 11.25 inches square with 6.75 inch square inset pieces in the center and 6.75 x 9 inch pieces in between the edge blocks. The quilt top is made up of eight rows and nine columns with a 2.5-inch border, which forms a top roughly 81 inches long by 91 inches wide. The double triangle border of the quilt contains no more than two to three pieces of any one fabric.

The overall layout of the quilt is very ingeniously planned and constructed so that each "Friendship" block shares a corner with its surrounding blocks, making it unlikely that the blocks were constructed individually and then assembled to form a top.⁴ Rather each of the blocks appears to have been assembled at one time by a single maker, using an unevenly faded rainbow print in the alternating block pattern arrangement. The complicated layout of the quilt also suggests that one person, rather than a group of persons, made it, contrary to the small note found with the quilt. The fabrics used in the blocks and border all appear to have been new at the time of the quilt's construction; some are still a bright purple, green, or blue. In contrast, the rainbow print used throughout in the alternating blocks exhibits uneven fading, suggesting that it may have been recycled fabric from clothing, draperies, or bed hangings. The quilt shows very little sign of ever having been used, displayed, or washed (see figure 1).

Another unusual aspect of this quilt is its pieced backing. The reverse is made up of a smaller pieced quilt composed of thirteen "Square on Square" blocks, approximately nine by nine inches each, with an outer border.⁵ Three sides of the border are made of the same unevenly faded rainbow print used on the quilt top. The fourth side is composed of three pieces of another blue and tan rainbow-print cotton. The pieced blocks are set with alternating blocks of a brown cotton print, which is also used in the outer border of the quilt back. One other "Square on Square" block, as well as six more "Friendship" blocks with signatures are also used on the quilt back. It appears as though the maker or makers ran out of room on the quilt top before all of the signed blocks were used and the maker(s) was determined to include them all (see figure 2).

With my initial examination of the quilt fabrics and construction



Figure 1. Top of quilt # 1997.007.852, made by Mercy Jane Bancroft Blair, Ardis and Robert James Collection, International Quilt Study Center. Photograph courtesy of IQSC.

complete, I shifted my attention to the partial list of names included in the file. Since I thought a more complete list of names would better enable me to establish other connections between the individuals, I needed to find a way to extract more information without damaging



Figure 2. Back of quilt. Photograph courtesy of IQSC.

the quilt. To do so, I took images of the signature blocks with a digital camera, using no flash, and then ran each image through photo-editing software.⁶ (See figure 3 for a chart of names on the quilt top.) This process made it possible to change the contrast, brightness, and gamma levels in different color ranges of each image, making the signatures show up much more clearly and thus made the names read-



able. I then printed the digitally enhanced signatures on transparency sheets in the same scale and placed them over one another to more easily compare the handwriting on the various signature blocks. An analysis of the signatures by this method revealed that most of the names appear to have been written by the same hand.

Next, I worked backwards from the known ownership of the quilt to the unknown. The sale of the quilt to the James took place at the "Stamford Historical Society Sale," and the only Stamford Historical Society I could find listed using an Internet search was that of Stamford, Connecticut. I phoned the Society and spoke with their volunteer coordinator, Grace Bounty. She explained that the event was held

Figure 3. Table of Names on the Quilt Top. (Names on the quilt back include: Miss Alice Clifford, Miss Polly Barton, Miss Sarah M. Davis, Mrs. Ana Taylor, Mrs. Carrie Marshal, & Mrs. Fanny Clifford.)



annually as a quilt show and sale to aid their tourism trade. She also mentioned that the seller, Jane Lury, is an antique textile dealer based out of a New York City shop called "Labors of Love."⁷ A subsequent telephone interview with Jane Lury revealed her sources for quilts as other antique shows and estate auctions. She said that this particular quilt was probably found at a show or sale somewhere in central New York where she spends most of her time, but she could not provide any additional details.⁸

At this point, I organized what was known and identified questions that remained unanswered. I had established that the quilt had likely been made sometime between 1845 and 1865, based on the fabric prints and the friendship block style popular during those years. This still, however, did not tell me what I really wanted to know. Several questions kept coming to mind. Who was Aunt Jane Blair? What did the quilt signify to her and those named on the individual blocks? Was it made as a gift, perhaps for a wedding? What could it reveal about the kind of life she led? To begin answering these questions, I needed to find a way of connecting the signatures to each other and to Jane.

Beginning with the facts at hand, the estimated date of the fabrics, the quilt style, and the penciled note, I could now ascertain a more specific location and timeframe of construction by conducting some basic genealogical research and examining historical maps of the area. The note claimed that the "quilt was made by ladies of South Apalachin," and a search for this name on historical maps revealed a small town in the extreme southeastern corner of Tioga County, New York, south of present day Apalachin, New York (see figure 4).⁹

I found the county seat and called the historical society; a staff member gave me the name and number of the town historian, Emma Sedore. According to Mrs. Sedore, "the town of South Apalachin no longer exists and hasn't for a great many years," but it was still there in the mid-to-late-nineteenth century.¹⁰ Since the penciled note also contained a mini genealogy and a general geographic location had now been identified, it was possible to trace the family names in the area and begin a timeline. I searched in the South Apalachin area cemetery records, census records, marriage records, and newspaper files that the Tioga County Historical Society had posted on the Internet.¹¹



Figure 4. Map of South Apalachin and overview of New York.

Since Jane Blair's sister's full name was listed on the penciled note as Achsa Bancroft Moe, I assumed that Jane's maiden name was also likely Bancroft. I began with a search for Bancrofts in the 1850 census for the area, which revealed an Osee Bancroft living with his wife, Rachel, and a seventeen-year-old daughter Sarah.¹² Since there was also a census record for an Achsa Bancroft Moe living on the same farm as Osee Bancroft in 1855, I thought that I had the right family. It seemed a reasonable assumption that Jane was a sister to Achsa and Sarah. The neighboring families also listed in the 1850 census confirmed that this was indeed the area where the quilt was made. The local surnames included Buffums, Burtons, Coffins, Knapps, Note-wares, and several other names found on the quilt. I called local historian Emma Sedore once more and sent her a list of the names found on the quilt. Between the records found on the Internet and the documentation that Emma could access locally, some mention was found



for nearly all of the individuals represented on the quilt.¹³ This information, along with an 1855 Platt map of Owego Township, Tioga County, New York, revealed an exact location for several of the families represented by names on the quilt.

I searched for the individual names in the 1860 census and found some of the same families mentioned above, including what appears to be the youngest person represented on the quilt. The name *Hat* (short for Harriet) *Barton* can be found on the quilt and the only match in the area in any of the census or church records is a neighbor girl, born in 1851. Also found in the 1860 census and confirmed in the area's marriage records were a couple of the girls on the quilt listed with their new husbands under their married names. The earliest of these that can be documented is that of *Julia Knapp*, one of Osee Bancroft's closest neighbors to the east in 1855, marrying Oliver Burton who lived just to the west of Bancroft, on September 2, 1858.¹⁴ Jane's sister, Sarah Angeline Bancroft, married Mr. Chester Ransom Patterson in November of 1855 and her married name, *Mrs. S. A. Patterson*, was used on the quilt.¹⁵ Since Sarah's name is listed by her married name and Julia's is listed by her maiden name, I could narrow the timeframe for the signatures at least. They must have been written sometime between the two marriages in November 1855 and September 1858.

The 1860 census also finally provided documentation of Jane Bancroft herself. The listing shows her living with *Angeline Lamb* Hewitt and her new husband, Benjamin Hewitt. Angeline's maiden name also appears on the quilt. Jane was twenty-seven years old in 1860, unmarried and listed as a seamstress. Since Jane was still unmarried after some of the names on the quilt had changed due to marriage, it seemed less likely that the quilt had been made for Jane as a wedding gift, my initial theory. The evidence now pointed to the quilt more likely being made for a different reason. Was there some other event in Jane's life that would have warranted such an endeavor and why was it passed down to a niece? What hands did the quilt pass through after it was made?

The hand-written note contained a specific line of the family down to Roy Wood, so it seemed likely that he or his immediate family was in possession of the quilt when the note was written. Since Achsa's



daughter, Lucy Moe, married William Wood on December 24, 1875 and her son was born sometime thereafter, it seemed likely that the quilt was given to Lucy either by her mother, Achsa Bancroft Moe, or her aunt Jane, personally.¹⁶ The penciled note appeared to be written by someone who was middle aged or younger instead of an elderly person, because the writing is very smooth and strong. Also, the note suggests a female perspective because it follows the maternal line. It was most likely written by Lucy Wood after her son Roy was born, or perhaps by Roy Wood's wife, Estelle Card Wood, for the benefit of their children. It is less likely that the note was written by any later generation as Jane is referred to as "Aunt" and not "Great-Aunt."

By the time I had discovered all of this, the assignment was nearly due and I wrote my paper and gave my presentation using the information I had at that point. Many unanswered questions remained, however, so when Dr. Crews suggested that I consider doing additional research and rewrite my findings for possible publication, I jumped at the chance to pick it up again. Since I had done just about everything I could do from home, I called my father and asked him if he would be interested in taking a trip with me to New York over my spring break to do some further genealogical and on-site research for the quilt project. Just as any great father would do to support his daughter's educational goals, he said, "When do we leave?" The adventure was about to take on a very different light.

After a two-day drive from Nebraska, we arrived at Owego, New York, a small valley town in the south central part of the state near the border of Pennsylvania and the county seat of Tioga County. One of my first realizations was the difference in the landscape between this area and the Midwest. The only land suitable to farming was the narrow strip of valley floor that lay between each string of high, tree-covered mountainsides. It was to be the first of many impressions over the course of the week that gave me a much better sense of the life these women would have led.

Using a global-positioning satellite-tracking system (GPS) and a laptop computer, we were able to locate the Bancroft farm and several other locations noted on the 1855 plat map for the area.¹⁷ One of my first goals upon arriving in south central New York was to visit a small cemetery, supposedly just down the road from Bancroft's farm.



Traveling on a very narrow dirt road (one of the dangers of following the GPS when you are driving) we came around a corner and the GPS indicated we were near the cemetery, but it was nowhere in sight. Suddenly, my father started to laugh and pointed up the side of the hill and told me to look through all of the trees. Sure enough, there stood about two dozen graves among fallen tree limbs and piles of snow-covered leaves. After trudging through a snow-filled ditch between the road and the fence, we reached the cemetery. I began to read headstones and all of a sudden, the crisp March day did not seem quite as cold.

We found graves not only for Osee and Rachel Bancroft, but also for two of their daughters, a son-in-law, and three grandchildren, as well as for, *Miss Carrie Coffin*, *Miss Laura Coffin*, and *Mrs. Betsey Kingsbury*, all three names on the quilt. I had checked the cemetery listings on the county's web site, but none of these names were listed. As we found here, and at several other cemeteries in the area, the Internet listings were not entirely accurate or complete. We visited two more cemeteries in the immediate area and found much the same results, several more signers of the quilt were identified, and their particulars recorded for later research, correlation, and corroboration.

Our next destination was the Tioga County Historical Society, which houses city directories, family files, microfilmed newspapers, local census records, county histories, and a card file index of every person ever researched in the county. I found entries for the Bancroft family from 1835 forward. The earliest of these entries listed one son and four daughters for Osee Bancroft. The archives included the Federal census records taken every ten years beginning in 1790, as well as New York's state census records taken every ten years starting in 1825, allowing one to check for families in five-year increments instead of ten, making it easier to identify individuals in a specific time frame.

After we had been at the Historical Society for a few hours, a lady tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Are you Melissa?" It was Emma Sedore, the town historian. She had recognized the list of names I had shown the clerk and she introduced herself. It was wonderful to meet her in person and she had some great suggestions on other sources of information. One of the places Emma directed us to was the town



hall, where land records, tax rolls, church records, cemetery listings, marriage and other records are kept, specific to the town or what we would call a township in the Midwest. It proved to be a very valuable stop and by our third day in New York, I had compiled basic information on most of the names appearing on the quilt and was able to map out their respective historic locations and probable interpersonal relationships. The layout of the blocks on the quilt, however, seemed to have little relationship to the degree of kinship or geographic closeness of each individual.

Since I knew that Bancrofts had moved to the Tioga County area between 1831 and 1835, based on the census records and Sarah Bancroft's birth record, which listed her birth in 1831 at Plymouth, New York, we moved our search to Chenango County, New York, just to the northeast of Tioga County.¹⁸ At the Chenango County Historical Society, I found a family file for a Dr. Edmond Bancroft and his wife Mercy Hale Bancroft that had been submitted by a gentleman in Minneapolis, Minnesota, named Sanford Loomis. It listed several children born to Dr. Bancroft and his wife, including Osee Bancroft. I contacted Mr. Loomis after returning home from New York and he was very helpful in filling in details of the family's history.¹⁹ Osee Bancroft was also listed in the 1820 census for Chenango County with two children, one son and one daughter. Since Sarah appeared to be the youngest, I thought that it was probably safe to assume that Jane was born in Chenango County as well, but I still had no documented record of her place of birth.

Despite all the information we had found, the most important person, Jane Bancroft Blair, still remained somewhat of an enigma. The only reference I had to Jane herself was an 1860 census entry. What was an unmarried woman in her twenties doing away from her family for so many years? Had she gone to school or apprenticed in a trade someplace? Had she been involved with the church as a missionary? I wanted to find some clue, some small shred of evidence that would make it all come together.

As I sat there pondering where else to look before we headed back home, my father asked me if I should try going further ahead in the life of the quilt. He suggested instead of concentrating on the original signers and owner of the quilt, that perhaps I should try moving for-



ward in time through the list of owners to see if there were any living descendants remaining in the area. I thought it sounded like a good idea. I had a direct list of ownership from the penciled note that theoretically should bring the quilt's owners up to the mid-twentieth century if the individuals had fairly average life spans. In addition, I had located a land record that listed Lucy Moe Wood as living in the next county east in 1900.²⁰

With this in mind, we turned our search to Broome County, New York, and the town records in Binghamton. Starting with the will of Lucy Moe Wood's husband, William Wood, who died in 1933, I traced each successive generation forward through the wills and probate records of their parents. I assumed from the penciled note that the quilt had passed from Lucy to her son Roy Wood. Roy's will, probated in 1953, listed a daughter Bernice Wood Brimmer and a son Leland C. Wood.²¹ No helpful information was found in Leland's records, but a will had been probated for Bernice Wood Brimmer in 1983 and it listed a daughter, Cheryl Klingensmith.²²

Cheryl's phone number was given in the will, so I tried it. Her husband answered; I introduced myself and explained my research. "Cheryl is a teacher and at school," he said; "but her aunt is still living and loves to talk family history." He gave us the address of Mrs. Ethel Wood, the eighty-eight-year-old widow of Leland C. Wood, Roy's son. When we realized that we were only a few blocks away, we decided to take a chance and pay her a visit.

As I rang the bell of a small white house on a main street, I saw a small lady with beautiful curly white hair come towards the door. I nervously introduced myself, afraid I was going to scare her, and briefly explained what I was doing and why. She listened and then looked at me with a huge inviting smile and said, "Oh, do come in, I want to hear all about it. I'd love to help in any way I can." We sat at her dining table and I showed her what I had found as she served coffee and homemade cookies. Every so often, she would explain a name or a relationship that I had not found or which had not made sense at the time. Ethel informed us that her sister-in-law, Bernice Brimmer, had several things from her father's estate, including quilts, pictures, and a family Bible, but she was unsure what had happened to them after Bernice had passed away. She thought the Bible was



around, but could not find it. Ethel suggested trying to get in touch with her niece, Cheryl, again when I had a chance.²³ I left my contact information with Ethel; then my father and I said our very grateful goodbyes.

As we headed back to Nebraska, I could not help but have mixed emotions about our progress. On one hand, I had found information on nearly all of the signers of the quilt, and I had also gained a much-needed perspective of the area and its culture, history, and geography. But, I so wished that I had found more information about Jane Bancroft Blair. There was no marriage record, no birth or death notices, and no other reference to her in the local records. My ever-wise father, seeing my disappointment, told me to cheer up. "You found more than you think," he said. "Making contact with the family will prove to be very beneficial, you'll see." He could not have known how right he was going to be!

Within a week or two of returning home, I received an e-mail from Ethel Wood asking me to call her as soon as I could. I was so excited at the prospect that she had found something that I called her immediately. "You'll never believe what I found," she said. I knew my luck had changed as I sat there listening to her recount the story of her daughter visiting her that day and hearing about our visit. Her daughter became so intrigued by the project that she decided to start going through some of the old family things in Ethel's closet and she ran across the very Bible Ethel had told us she remembered! It was a huge old stand-style Bible with birth, death, and marriage records on fancy scrolled pages. Ethel started reading off names and dates faster than I could write them down. After we got through the list and realized it named Osee Bancroft and his descendants, she laughed and said, "Guess what else it has in it?" I could not have wished for much more, but Ethel went on to say the Bible had a section in the back containing several family photographs and they were labeled! I could barely contain my enthusiasm as she suggested sending the Bible to me so that I could digitize everything (see plate 1).²⁴

From the family Bible, I learned that Jane's full name was Mercy Jane Bancroft and that she had been born in Chenango County, New York, in 1825. The pages listed her parents, one brother and three sisters, as well as their spouses and several of Osee's grandchildren. It



also gave marriage dates and locations for them all, including Mercy Jane's marriage to Addison F. Blair in 1863. With his name, I was finally able to trace her through the census records and found the couple lived just one county to the south in Pennsylvania. I felt like the project had finally opened up and I had a great sense of accomplishment and pride as I remembered my father's advice!

I began searching the Bradford County, Pennsylvania, records, and I made contact with Norma J. Maryott, a woman from the area that works on local genealogy out of their historical society. I asked her help in tracing the Blair family and she discovered that Mercy Jane had married a man with a young son whom she helped raise. They had always lived on the Blair family farm, near South Hill, Pennsylvania, until Mercy Jane's death in 1900. Norma also remembered someone in the community with whom she had grown up and that she thought was related to the Blairs. She suggested that I try to call her.

With the name and number from Norma, I telephoned Mrs. Ruth Smith of Towanda, Pennsylvania. She is the great, great-granddaughter of Mercy Jane's husband, Addison F. Blair. Ruth was very interested in the project and, although she thought that she did not have much information, she said she would do what she could to help. Ruth said that the farm and farmhouse were still there, but no longer owned by the Blair family. We had a wonderful conversation and she became quite intrigued with the history of the quilt and how it ended up in the IQSC collection. She said that she would speak to her ninety-two-year-old mother, Neva Blair Jones, a great-granddaughter of Addison Blair, to see if she had any more information. I hung up the phone feeling very fortunate to have made such significant contacts on this project. Little did I know what putting this "bug in Ruth's ear" would lead to.

I had spoken to both Norma and Ruth several more times before I began compiling my findings and writing this paper, when I got the surprise of a lifetime in the mail. It was a letter from Norma Maryott that included several pages of hand-written transcriptions from a diary of Mercy Jane Bancroft dated 1863, the year of her marriage! Norma's letter read, "Dear Melissa, I was bursting to tell you our find as we talked *on the phone* tonight! I would love to have seen your face when you opened the packet. Are you able to put a face and personality to Mercy already?"²⁵



As could be expected I received phone calls from both Ruth and Norma a couple of days later wanting to know if I had received the package they sent and what my thoughts were. Norma even joked that she could hear my screams of joy clear back in Pennsylvania! It turned out that they had gotten together and taken a drive out to the old Blair farm one Sunday afternoon on their way back from the cemetery. Ruth had knocked on the door and spoken to Perry Cooley and his wife, the current owners, explaining to them the reason for the research I was doing and what kind of information I was looking for. Perry invited them in and immediately went up into the attic, only to return with an old egg crate full of old leather bound diaries and family photographs. He said his father had been a hired man at the farm

Figure 5. Diary Page. Photograph by author.



in the 1940s, working for Addison's granddaughter, Theda Blair. When the farm was turned over to him in the 1950s, it included all of the household furnishings and personal items left in the house. They had just left everything up in the attic since they never used the space. The Cooleys very graciously told Ruth to take all of the diaries and photos since they were of her family instead of theirs.²⁶

I was so overwhelmed by the news! When the final count was made, there were thirty-two diaries ranging in date from 1859 to 1900 written by Mercy Jane Bancroft Blair. Several contained newspaper clippings, letters from family, and other small notes from everyday life (see figure 5). Ruth was unsure what to do with them, so Norma and her mother began to transcribe the few years they knew to be important to my research and sent the transcriptions off to me. From the diaries, I learned that Mercy Jane had been a traveling seamstress, going from household to household, making clothing for her clients. I was absolutely amazed and I could not wait to rewrite Mercy Jane's story with all of this new information.

The Life of Mercy Jane Bancroft Blair

Mercy Jane's parents, Osee Bancroft and Rachel Pixley, married on September 23, 1817, in Great Barrington, Massachusetts.²⁷ Osee and Rachel began their life together, having their first child, William Hale Bancroft, on December 19, 1818. William was baptized in the Congregational Church in Otis, Massachusetts, on April 25, 1819.²⁸ Although, Osee came from a fairly affluent family, his opportunities as a younger son were probably limited. He appears to have spent more time working for someone else, usually his brother-in-laws, rather than for himself. It was not long before he followed two of his siblings to Chenango County, New York, leaving Rachel behind to give birth to their first daughter, Achsa, on October 3, 1820.²⁹ He may have traveled back and forth from New York to Massachusetts for a few years, as Rachel gave birth to a second daughter, Esther E., on March 2, 1823, in Massachusetts.³⁰ Within the next year or so, however, he resettled his whole family in Chenango County, New York. His widowed mother, Mercy Hale Bancroft, also migrated to the Chenango



County area around the same time, presumably to be with her children and their families.

Mercy Jane Bancroft, the fourth of five children born to Osee and Rachel, was born in Plymouth, Chenango County, New York, on July 13, 1825 (see figure 6).³¹ She joined her brother and two sisters, along with several cousins living in the same area. Mercy Jane and her siblings probably attended a local primary school that was established by her uncle David Dimmick in the early years of Chenango County. Rachel Bancroft gave birth to their last child, another daughter, Sarah Angeline, on June 11, 1831, at their home near Plymouth, New York.

Mercy Jane's grandmother and namesake, Mercy Hale Bancroft, passed away on October 8, 1834, and was buried in Plymouth. Her estate, however, was probated in Berkshire County, Massachusetts, by her son-in-law, Ezra Kingsley.³² It was about this time that Osee and Rachel moved their young family fifty miles south, to a farming community in Tioga County, New York, as they are listed in the 1835 State census for that area. There is also a record of Osee and Rachel joining the Presbyterian Church in Owego in May of 1835. It is possible that with his mother gone, Osee felt the freedom to move out on his own, or perhaps her death and his subsequent inheritance allowed his family the financial means to start a life further away from their support circle. Whatever his reasons for moving his young family, the Bancrofts settled in the very southern part of Tioga County, New York, within a few miles of the Pennsylvania border, near South Apalachin.

Details of Mercy Jane's early life can only be speculated upon, as the records for this time period are limited. She was likely one of the accounted persons in the 1845 New York State census of her father's household given the ages and categories of the family members, but I could not locate her in the 1850 census, when her parents and younger sister, Sarah, were still living at the same place in South Apalachin.

Jane's second sister, Esther Bancroft, had married Charles Buffum, a local businessman and widower with three young children, in 1847 and is listed as living in Apalachin. Esther's name appears on the quilt as *Esther E. Bancroft*, using her maiden name as she did throughout her life.³³ Two of Esther's stepchildren are represented on the quilt also, *Miss Esther M. Buffum* and *Mr. Wallace Buffum*.



Mercy Jane's older brother, William, married Caroline Allen, a woman from the northern part of the county in 1842, and bought a farm near Ketchumville, New York, in the far northern end of the county where they raised two daughters. The fact that they are not represented on the quilt may be due to their more distant location.

Mercy's eldest sister, *Mrs. Achsa E. Moe*, married Ezra Moe in 1842. It is unclear where Achsa and Ezra lived during the early years of their marriage, but they returned to the area sometime around March of 1851, when their youngest daughter, Lucy, was born. In April 1852, Ezra Moe bought the section of land that Osee Bancroft's family had been living on since their arrival to the area. It is possible that Mercy

Figure 6. Mercy Jane's family and the path of the quilt.



Jane spent some time with her sister, Achsa Bancroft Moe, and her family wherever they lived throughout this period to help with her sister's pregnancies.

The earliest record of Mercy Jane's life after she leaves her parents' home in the mid to late 1840s, is over ten years later, when at 34 years of age, she begins writing in her diaries, a daily habit that she faithfully kept for over forty years. The very first entry, dated January 1, 1859, shows her faith and trust in God as she states, "Surrounded by the mercy of God, I now commence the year."³⁴ She attended some type of religious service or prayer meeting several times a week whenever possible and gave a considerable portion of her income to the causes of the church and its missions.³⁵ She may have been a missionary during her early adult years, mentioning later in her diary, "Father went to see Br. Warren, he is better; he sent my missionary certificate."³⁶ Perhaps she spent some time teaching Indians on a reservation or free blacks from the South. Her antislavery sentiments are fairly clear in most of her writings as was common for a member of the Congregational Church to which she belonged.³⁷

Mercy Jane's diaries record that she spent the majority of her time in Tioga County working for other people, mostly her neighbors in the South Apalachin area, such as Mrs. Delia Lamb and her daughter, *Miss Angeline Lamb*. She also traveled to Newark Valley, New York, the next township to the north, where her youngest sister, Sarah, lived, and worked for families in that area. Mercy Jane's primary occupation appears to have been that of a private dressmaker. She would travel from household to household, spending several days cutting, fitting, and trimming gowns for her clients, then moving to the next household to work. She also did other types of domestic jobs while staying with certain families, including acting as a midwife, caring for the sick, and helping to "lay out" someone after death.

Whether her skills with a needle or her nursing skills were in demand, she appears to have been paid for her time and labors. Mercy Jane kept very precise track of her time and pay, noting in her diaries the number of hours worked for someone and what had or had not been paid for that day. Her pay was based on what type of work she did and how long she was there. A typical entry reads, "Cut a dress for Mrs. Settle for which I received 25 cts."³⁸ Another set of en-



Figure 7. Mercy Jane's Portrait. Photograph courtesy of Mrs. Ruth Smith.



tries, which dates twelve days apart, gives an extended job's pay rate: "Started work for Angeline Lamb today" and "finished Angeline's work and received of her \$2 and 25 cts."³⁹ At times, she also seemed to have a surplus, as she "let out" money several times to family and neighbors, keeping the same type of accurate records of debts owed her (see figure 7).

Mercy Jane was over thirty-eight-years old when, on a visit to her sister, a younger widower from across the Pennsylvania border asked her to marry him. Addison F. Blair was a friend of her brother-in-law, Ezra Moe, and visited his home quite often in the year before his engagement to Mercy Jane according to her diary entries. On October 29, 1863, Addison made a visit to Moe's home and Mercy Jane wrote, "Mr. Blair was over at Sister Moe's, of course I was there too and consented to become his wife, how strange that seems." Her comment gives the impression of a woman who may have hoped, but no longer expected, to ever marry and was unsure of its possible impact on her life. She had spent many years as an independent woman with her own money and agenda. Did she welcome the proposal or feel obligated to accept due to her family's position? Perhaps she simply questioned the idea of no longer being independent.

Unfortunately, she made no further comment in her diary regarding her marriage and its impact on her life and simply went on with her everyday agenda for the next few weeks. She did, however, stop in Owego a few days later and have a fitting for a wedding dress of her own, for which she "paid 7 dollars and 56 cts to Mrs. Bothwick."⁴⁰ This appears to have been a fairly high price for the day and type of community from which she came, because only a few years earlier, she had made a wedding dress for Angeline Lamb, one of the wealthier families in the community, for which she had been paid \$5.⁴¹ Even if the price included the cost of the fabric, Mercy Jane's wedding dress was a large expense for someone in her position.

Mercy Jane made many references to quilts and quilting in the months preceding her engagement. At times she mentions quilting with someone else while they visited, other times she mentions quilting as work for a client. Her diary entries also give an idea of what certain quilting materials cost at the time. She stated, "Went to sister Buffum's and bought some batin [batting] for a bed quilt and a bar of



soap paid 48 cts for the same."⁴² She also wrote in September 1863, "Sister Moe helped me work on *my quilt* today and we finished it."⁴³ She even mentioned finishing the binding on *her quilt* just days before her marriage.

Could this be the very same quilt now in the James collection that I chose to investigate? To test this theory, I returned to my digital images of the signatures and compared them with digital images of Mercy Jane's own writing taken from her diaries. After comparing several transparencies of similar words, I felt confident that it was none other than Mercy Jane herself who wrote most of the names on the quilt. Was Mercy Jane making her own "friendship" quilt to remember the people from her home by using the dressmaker's cuttings left over from the garments that she had made for them?

One of the most revealing entries in all of her diaries gives credence to that very scenario. She often worked for a lady named Elnina Brown who lived in Newark Valley, just a few doors away from Mercy Jane's younger sister, Sarah Bancroft Patterson. Mercy Jane wrote, "Worked for Mrs. Brown today on her brown polka dotted dress & received 25cts for the same." The block in Mercy Jane's quilt which contains the name, *Mrs. Elnina Brown* is made from a brown polka-dotted fabric, a fabric which is used no where else in the quilt. Other entries for different people represented on the quilt give a similar impression, including references to brown zigzag fabric matching the *Miss Adaline Noteware* block and a red beaded print fabric Mercy Jane used to "cut a reticule" for the young *Miss Hat Barton*.⁴⁴

Mercy Jane Bancroft and Addison Franklin Blair were married on November 19, 1863, in Little Meadows, Pennsylvania, by Reverend Ira D. Warren, on their way south to Addison's home in Bradford County. She joined Addison's household, which included his elderly parents, Thrall and Mary (Robinson) Blair, and Addison's five-year-old son from his first marriage, Lester. Mercy Jane not only became an instant mother, but also had to live a very different lifestyle from that to which she had become accustomed. Her independence was gone and she now had to rely on her new mother-in-law to orient her to this new way of life. Within a few years, however, Mary Blair passed away and Mercy Jane was, for the first time in her life, left to manage a house and family of her own at the age of forty-two.



Her skills with a needle remained in demand, but she reserved her talents for her family after her marriage, noting in her dairy, "Mrs. Warner called to get a dress repaired, but I am not doing that kind of business now."⁴⁵ It would appear from her diaries that she had little time for outside work, as her work at home kept her quite busy. She devoted most of her time over the next thirty-seven years carrying out domestic duties. She spun and wove cloth, and sewed clothes for herself, and for Addison, his father Thrall, and her stepson, Lester, always noting her work in her daily diary entries. She still quilted, but most of her fabrics were now homespun woolens, from sheep they sheared each year, and linens, made from flax that they harvested.⁴⁶ Addison bought a butter machine in the early years of their marriage and she made butter for the market, often sending in twenty or more "pails" a week. They harvested a nearby grove of maple trees and "boiled off" the sugar for sale at market or to local neighbors (see figure 8).

Mercy Jane's life was an annual cycle of seasonal duties required to fulfill her domestic obligations and manage her household. She often wrote of being very tired and feeling worn out, but always managed to get more work done in a day than I would undertake in a week.

Figure 8. Sugar Shack. Photograph courtesy of Mrs. Ruth Smith.



Figure 9. Standing: Mercy Jane Bancroft Blair, Malinda Blair (daughter-in-law). Seated: Chester Ransom Patterson, William Hale Bancroft, Addison F. Blair, and Lester C. Blair. Photograph courtesy of Mrs. Ruth Smith.

The hardships of rural life in the nineteenth century were indeed toilsome, but Mercy Jane took great pride in her home and her ability to advance her family's position. She wrote years later with great elation on the day she made the final payment for the farm's mortgage and she obviously felt that she had made a significant contribution to that accomplishment (see figure 9).

Mercy Jane and Addison never moved from the land and home that they bought and managed together (see figure 10). Her life was always centered on her duties to her family and her faith in the "better world beyond." She never seemed to forget those people recorded so carefully on the quilt that she kept hidden away, often cutting out their marriage or obituary notices from the newspaper and tucking them away in the back folds of her diaries. She remained closest to her niece Lucy Moe and noted, with partial sadness, her marriage to William H. Wood on December 24, 1875, barely a month after Achsa, Lucy's mother and Mercy Jane's sister, passed away.⁴⁷

Lucy, and her husband, William Wood, visited Mercy Jane often and were her last visitors just days before her death.⁴⁸ Mercy Jane



Figure 10. Blair Homestead, circa 1880. Photograph courtesy of Mrs. Ruth Smith.

Bancroft Blair died in her home on June 18, 1900 at the age of seventy-five, after an illness of several months. She was buried in East Herrick Cemetery, just west of her home in Bradford County, Pennsylvania. Her last diary entry was made only four days before she passed away (see figure 11).

Conclusion

With the results of this research project, the Mercy Jane Bancroft Blair Friendship Quilt is now one of the best-documented quilts in the International Quilt Study Center's collection. I have never been so glad to have knocked on a stranger's door or called someone up out of the blue. This project has shown me just how much can be learned from a few simple clues, and that even the most obscure reference can lead to amazing treasures of the past! What began as a simple artifact analysis assignment soon became one of the greatest adventures of my life! I now had not only a specific location and probable date of the quilt's construction, but more importantly, I had gained a glimpse into the life of the quilt owner and probable maker herself.



Mercy Jane Bancroft was a resourceful, independent woman, who let nothing go to waste. She was as careful with her money and time as she appears to have been with her fabrics. To Mercy Jane, her needle was not just her trade, but also her way of leaving her mark on the world. I now believe she used the fabrics left from her work to commemorate each of her friends and to take a small piece of them to her new home after her marriage. She would save just enough fabric from each person's project to make a block and carefully pen the person's name on a scrap of white cloth to make the center. She probably did not assemble the quilt until she was asked to marry and then realized there were too many blocks for the top. Refusing to waste any blocks or leave out any friends, she used the remaining blocks on the back to preserve their memories as well, and took her treasured quilt with her when she left for her new life as a married woman. Each block served as a small memento of a life touched by hers. After

Figure 11. Blair Headstone. Photograph courtesy of Norma Jean Maryott.



reading her diaries, I believe those lives were probably made better by Mercy Jane's friendship. Even one hundred years later, she managed to touch one more life, mine.

Since Mercy Jane had no children of her own, most of her personal possessions were given to her favorite niece, Lucy Moe Wood, including the family Bible she bought in 1870 and many of her treasured quilts. These items were handed down from generation to generation until the names on them no longer had personal meaning and their stories were obscured with time. Mercy Jane's treasures seemed to take on a life of their own, patiently awaiting the day when the separate pieces of one woman's life could once again come together and illuminate a spirit long passed; telling us the story of a life hidden by time, but a soul that, even today, is still so kindred to our own.

Notes and References

1. Thomas J. Schlereth, *Material Culture Studies in America* (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 1999), 162.
2. International Quilt Study Center, Ardis and Robert James Collection, 1997.007.852.
3. Barbara Brackman, *Clues in the Calico: A Guide to Identifying and Dating Antique Quilts* (McLean, VA: EPM Publications, Inc., 1989), 81.
4. Barbara Brackman, comp., *An Encyclopedia of Pieced Quilt Patterns* (1984), 442.
5. *Ibid.*, 325.
6. I used a Kodak 4800 digital camera taking the images in macro mode about 8" away from the object. The software used was Microsoft Photo Editor, a part of Microsoft's Office 2000 Professional.
7. Grace K. Bounty, Stamford Historical Society, telephone conversation with author, 6 November 2000.
8. Jane Lury, telephone conversation with author, 12 November 2000.
9. I used Delorme Street Atlas software and supplemented the search with 1875 maps of the United States held in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Love Library.
10. Emma Sedore, telephone conversation with author, 9 November 2000.
11. Tioga County Historical Society's website, part of the USGENWEB Project, currently located at www.rootsweb.com/~nytioga/ and hereafter cited Tioga Co. Website.
12. U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1850 Federal census, State of New York, Tioga County, Town (Township) of Owego, hereafter cited as 1850 census, Owego, NY.
13. The Tioga County Historical Society has index cards with names and infor-



mation on its county's residents. Emma also searched local newspaper records, town histories, and other indexes located in the Society's archives.

14. Tioga Co. Website, "Marriage, Baptism, and Funeral Records of Rev. William H. King, DD, First Baptist Church, Owego, NY."

15. Sarah Bancroft's marriage record is found on an Internet site sponsored by the Church of Jesus Christ—Latter Day Saints, currently located at www.familysearch.org/Eng/Search/frameset_search.asp and hereafter cited LDS Website.

16. *Owego Gazette*, 13 January 1876.

17. I used a Delorme Earthmate GPS unit, which sits on the dash of the car to receive its signal and Delorme Street Atlas mapping software, version 6.0 to track the information.

18. LDS Website, Sarah Angeline Bancroft birth record.

19. Sanford K. Loomis, telephone conversation with author, 28 March 2001.

20. Tioga County Deeds, Owego, New York, Book 138, p. 369.

21. Surrogate's Court -Broome County, New York, Estate of Royal T. Wood.

22. *Ibid.*, Estate of Bernice Brimmer.

23. I contacted Cheryl Klingensmith on March 27, 2001 and she was able to fill in more of the history of how the quilt came into her possession and then how it left her family. She gave me the name and number of the dealers she sold it to, Jim and Joyce Olmstead. A call to them on March 28, 2001 revealed the sale of this particular quilt to Jane Lury in 1984. This information gave me a continuous path of ownership for the quilt.

24. Ethel Wood, feeling that the Bible would be better preserved and would be of more use to the IQSC, donated it and all of its photographs to the University of Nebraska—Lincoln Love Library's Archives (UNL Archives).

25. Norma J. Maryott, letter to author, 15 April 2001.

26. Since the diaries proved to be such a valuable asset to the study of this quilt, Ruth Smith decided to donate them to the UNL Archives.

27. Otis Vital Records File, Berkshire County Historical Society, Berkshire County, Massachusetts.

28. *Ibid.*

29. Bancroft Family Bible, UNL Archives.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. Berkshire County Probate Records, Berkshire County, Massachusetts.

33. Her name appears on her tombstone as "Esther E. Bancroft" and in all of her letters to Mercy Jane.

34. Mercy Jane Bancroft Blair Diary Collection, 1859–1900, UNL Archives. Diary entry of 1 January 1859, hereafter simply cited as "Diary."

35. Mercy Jane's diaries include monetary records in the back of each year, keeping track of her finances, including her income as a dressmaker and money loaned out to family and friends down to the penny.

36. Diary, 24 June 1863. My initial search of church records has revealed no reference to Mercy Jane in missionary listings to date.



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37. W.B. Gay, *Historical Gazetteer of Tioga County, New York, 1785–1888* (Syracuse, NY: W.B. Gay & Co., 1887), 404.

38. Diary, 15 January 1863.

39. *Ibid.*, 28 July and 1 August 1859.

40. *Ibid.*, 3 November 1863.

41. *Ibid.*, 11 February 1860.

42. *Ibid.*, 12 July 1861.

43. *Ibid.*, 19 September 1863.

44. *Ibid.*, 14 August 1861.

45. *Ibid.*, 7 April 1864.

46. Her diaries repeat an annual cycle of harvesting the flax and shearing the wool, treating the fibers, spinning and dyeing the thread, and weaving the cloth during the winter months.

47. Diary, 26 December 1875.

48. *Ibid.*, 14 June 1900.