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## Some Aspects of an 1809 Quilt

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In 1968 the Smithsonian Institution offered a course entitled "Textiles" for their Associates Program. Rita Adrosko, Doris Bowman and Gladys Cooper, the ABC's of the Division of Textiles at that time, lectured on facets of tapestry, linens, the spinning wheel, coverlets, flags, quilts, the sewing machine, and other subjects. They used the finest quality examples from the Smithsonian's collection to illustrate the lectures. In the session on quilts, they showed us a glazed wool quilt made in Vermont in the late 18th century, with the finish still as shiny as today's glazed chintz. Thanks to that course and that particular quilt, I found the subject of this paper.

I live in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, in the Cumberland Valley, where the first Scotch-Irish settler came in 1725. By 1731, four hundred Scotch-Irish families had settled in the area and began a significant influx in that decade, which resulted in a preponderance of the population at the time of the American Revolution.<sup>1</sup> The descendants of one of these families, the McCullochs, sold their household goods and farm equipment at an auction in 1980. Discarded and pushed back into a corner was a damaged quilt folded with the backing side out. On examination it proved to be the same type material as that in the Smithsonian quilt. One of my friends tells me I am a textile salvager instead of a textile collector, and I think she is correct. Rather than search for perfect items only, I look for textiles which have come apart, as they provide an opportunity to study construction techniques. It bothers me that these frayed things, created with such effort in an earlier time, have outlived the purpose for which they were made, so the torn, incomplete, faded, and repaired fabrics become my favorite things, and afford me a chance to learn from them. The quilt was only a study piece the day of the auction, and

though I have tried to make it seem otherwise, that is, a silk purse out of a sow's ear, it is still a study piece rather than a show piece.

My purpose in this paper is to present a "micro" analysis of this quilt. Sally Garoutte's paper "Early Colonial Quilts in a Bedding Context" in UNCOVERINGS 1980 was a "macro" analysis in comparison, the study of a large number of quilts mentioned in wills and inventories in given areas and times.<sup>2</sup> I will describe and analyze one glazed wool quilt with the date September 13, 1809, and initials MRMc quilted along one edge, and compare it with similar quilts to determine what can be learned by this approach.

The quilt measures eighty inches wide and ninety-five inches long. It weighs seven and one-half pounds, and is made of three layers of wool. The decorative top has sixty ten-inch squares set as diamonds. There are twenty-two equal size triangles around the edges and a smaller triangle at two corners. The pattern of the top is achieved by alternating solid watermelon pink and black squares. The backing is a dull apricot wool material, and the filling is wool fibers. The worn aspect is that all of the black glazed wool squares, fifty percent of the quilt top, have disintegrated, the wool backing has extensive edge damage, the filling shows through, and, surely, we may regard it as another salvaged textile.

In the spirit of this detailed study of one quilt we will first analyze the materials from which it was made, and then consider the construction process. The primary focus of our study, however, will be the quilting itself, especially the design elements and how they are combined. Following this, we will compare this quilt with others of its type, and finally draw some conclusions.

### *Analysis of the Materials*

Imported wool textiles were important furnishings in colonial homes. By the middle of the 18th century, moreen, camlet, harrateen, cheyney, calamanco, and other wool fabrics were listed in inventories of estates in America. The more affluent families used these materials for bed hangings and coverings, upholstery, curtains and clothing.<sup>3</sup> Some of these expensive fabrics were made in America, but the majority came from England and France. This lightweight wool cloth had plain, glazed and watered surfaces, damask-like designs permanently embossed in it by heat or pressure, and was dyed in beautiful colors. The colored photographs in

*Fig. 1. Quilting designs, all-wool quilt, Pennsylvania, maker unknown. "September 13, 1809—MRMc" in the quilting. Author's drawing. Hersh collection.*

AMERICAN QUILTS AND COVERLETS by Bishop and Safford,<sup>4</sup> and WOMAN'S DAY BOOK OF AMERICAN NEEDLEWORK by Rose Wilder Lane<sup>5</sup> will give an idea of the color range. Flowers, stripes, varying size weft threads for texture, different weave structures, plus the fact that it was relatively fire retardant, made wool very desirable as a furnishing fabric.<sup>6</sup>

It is difficult to give names and processes of manufacture to specific wool fabrics made in the 18th century because of lack of documentation at the time of production. Many definitions of fabric names were written in the late 19th century, and are not necessarily accurate for 18th century processes, so I will use the larger classification of "glazed wool" when I refer to the top. Glazing was accomplished by applying heat or pressure on fabrics after preparing its surface with a solution. Heat or friction removed fuzzy short hairs and a smooth light-reflecting cloth resulted. Calamanco seems to be the current name most often associated with glazed wool. Hazel E. Cummin's article "Calamanco" in *THE MAGAZINE ANTIQUES* quotes from early English and French publications describing wool fabrics. The characteristics of calamanco evoke adjectives like crisp, lightweight, glossy, plain, solid, beautiful, clear colors, and all of these seem to describe the material in this 1809 quilt.<sup>7</sup> There is one problem, however, in referring to this cloth as calamanco since the 18th century French source describes the weave structure of calamanco as a five harness satin weave. The weave structure of our quilt is plain weave. One interesting small discovery is somewhat gratifying on this point. Our quiltmaker used two scraps of black satin weave material. One is a corner triangle, and the other piece would never have been seen if the black material of one block had not deteriorated, exposing a hidden patch of reinforcement done in reverse applique. The patch is sewn with large linen stitches on the hidden underside, and almost invisible stitches on the top.

The individual threads in the glazed wool top are finely spun, and there are forty-eight threads per inch in both warp and weft. The threads are not plyed, but are called singles, and, except as noted above, are woven in a balanced plain weave. There are three colors: black, watermelon pink, and shrimp. The shrimp was used to complete the top when the pink scraps ran out, and examination of hidden folds demonstrates these colors have not changed and the material is well preserved. The black pieces have changed to a dark black-green color, and their poor condition could be the result of corrosive black dyes, or from the black being a recycled material in 1809. Some squares are made of two smaller pieces seamed together to make the ten-inch square. Very likely all of this material was commercially made and was not the product of a single artisan. A final

observation on the satin weave piece should note two tan colored threads in the selvage. Ruth McKendry in *TRADITIONAL QUILTS AND BED COVERINGS* reports three blue selvage threads appear in cotton exported from England between 1774 and 1811.<sup>8</sup>

The filling is a thin layer of carded wool fibers spread between the top and back.

The dull apricot colored backing appears to have been used, possibly as a blanket made of three lengths seamed together, before it was cut into seven pieces to fit the top of the quilt. It is singles, wool, but has only twenty-eight warp threads and thirty-two weft threads per inch, heavier individual threads than those in the top, and is a two over two twill weave. It is handspun, z twist, and hand woven, with the diagonal line of the twill erratic, indicating the uneven beat of a nonprofessional weaver. It too has its story to tell. Areas are darned, a neat repair patch was made before it was quilted, and there is an inch and three-quarters band of a different weave in it. Perhaps the weaver used a different treadling to spread the warp as she began to weave. This band was woven with one twill shot followed by one plain weave shot, instead of four successive twill shots. This material after processing measured thirty-four and one-half inches wide, a width typical of seamed blankets of the period.

### *Construction*

The Scotch-Irish lady joined the materials with linen, wool, and cotton threads. All squares have been seamed together with two-ply unbleached linen thread, in back stitch, with eight to nine stitches per inch, of course by hand. (The sewing machine was patented thirty-seven years later.) The seam allowances vary, but three-eighths inch is an average. The edges of the top are folded down one-half inch toward the back. The back edges are folded down one-half inch toward the front, and these two folded edges are sewn together with two straight rows of quilting. This was an effective finish, because on the two sides where the material remained well preserved, the edges are intact. All of the quilting threads are three-ply wool, black thread on black squares, rusty red thread on pink squares and there is an average of five stitches per inch. The three-ply, rose color cotton thread was used to patch and darn the backing, and overcast the four smaller backing pieces together. Two-ply

wool, the same color as the backing fabric, was used to overcast the longest seam between the two largest pieces.

### *Design Elements*

The bold, dominant design feature in the quilt is the alternating, contrasting colored squares set in a diamond pattern. It is a design used in decorating 18th century floors and floorcloths as illustrated in Rodris Roth's *FLOOR COVERINGS IN 18TH CENTURY AMERICA*.<sup>9</sup> These bold contrasts point up the fact that the quilt is not balanced and has no center square in either direction.

The recessive feature, one that gives texture and subtle light changes, is the quilting. Because the quilting threads match the fabric, the designs do not stand out as they would if the threads were contrasting. Black on black, even viewed closely, is hard to see. Study of these quilting designs in the individual squares demonstrates what all quilters know, that is, the combination of a few simple shapes, when repeated in an orderly manner, compound, and become the basis of all quilting. Figure 1, a drawing of the whole quilt, shows what our quilter created with the circle, intersecting circle, the half circle, straight lines, and the spiral form.

This drawing attempts to copy designs, errors, and irregularities faithfully. The quilter took each ten-inch square as a separate area unrelated to the next and, using curved and straight lines, composed a unique design, and then moved to the next square for a new composition. She did duplicate within the sixty blocks many times, but only once do two identical blocks lie adjacent to each other so you can see the effect of the completion of intersecting circles. There is a combination of free-drawn patterns and the use of guides, such as an eight-inch plate for the large circle and a template for the eight- and twelve-petaled roses. All the other designs are unmeasured and not uniform.

In Figure 2, row 1 shows the simple fundamental shapes from which all the patterns developed. Row 2 shows two squares with examples of background or overall patterns: cross hatching and shells. The next line shows the six corner patterns the quilter used: two fans, concentric quarter-circles, a single quarter-circle, diagonal lines, and one in which all ribs of a fan emanate from a point on the long side of a triangle.

*Fig. 2. Basic shapes included in the quilting designs. Author's drawing.*

In the center of many blocks she drew a large circle and put a twelve-petal rose, spiral shapes, and interlocking circles inside, sometimes putting scallops around the edge, sometimes not. Other times she used scallops without a large circle. Midway between corners on the edge of various squares she made two concentric arcs, three shells, four petals or two nested "L" shaped lines. Hearts developed from two ribs of the fan. These are geometric designs. There are no large scale squares, no vines, grapes, plumes, feathers, tendrils, or designs based in nature.

You can see the variety of combinations of patterns, the lack of orderly placement of the patterns and the mistakes, but being quilters and people who study quilts, you can also see the potential from any single block pattern to its compounding, and thus to its becoming the overall quilting design for a single quilt. I was so busy



finding the date block after I got home from the auction and trying to research the settlement of the area and the maker by searching deeds, genealogies and cemetery records, that I didn't study the quilt, and missed the point that is obvious now, but that my husband had to suggest. The quilt is indeed a sampler of quilting designs which could be referred to for subsequent use.

My interest then shifted to the source of the designs. Is it possible that the rural area of Cumberland County with the McCrae, McCulloch, McKinney, McMeans, McMurray, McCormick, McKeon, and other Scotch-Irish families was so insular that in 1809 these ladies were still using the designs the families brought here in the 1730s? Averil Colby's book *QUILTING*, written in England with much of the research done in the British Isles, has cross hatching, shells, fans, roses with scalloped petals, concentric circles, intersecting circles, even the idea of spirals left and right off of a vertical line, in diagram form in Chapter 4. Photographs of 18th century articles on which these designs were quilted are in Chapter 8.<sup>10</sup> I have not taken the next step to research other cultural backgrounds of quilting, so I can't say with confidence that the design elements of our quilt are definitely from the British Isles, but certainly there is an affinity.

### *Comparisons*

We have looked at the detailed features of this quilt, and now should consider where it fits in the chronology of American quilts by asking some questions. What was its forerunner? The glazed wool whole-cloth quilt was an earlier bed cover and often more elegant. Widths of one solid color wool material were seamed together, interlined, and backed. Using this full top as a single large square, designs of natural forms such as pineapples, palm leaves, grapes and vines, flowers, and feathers were arranged in mirror image in an overall design. The quilting was the only design element and close rows of diagonal groundwork made the intricate pattern stand out in relief.

Is this 1809 square-set-as-diamonds quilt one of a kind? No. The Smithsonian has such a quilt made by Lucy Adler in New Hampshire with the same design and colors, but it employs different naturalistic, rather than geometric, quilting in every square.<sup>11</sup>

Did embroidered designs influence these quilting designs? Plain weave blankets were woven and then marked off into squares, and large checks were woven into blankets, both creating plain squares in which wool embroidery was worked, in the same period as this quilt. You find the fundamentals of lines, curves, intersecting circles, but the designs seem to be based in natural forms rather than geometric forms, and are more complex. The embroidered blankets do have the sampler variation idea rather than one repetitive design.<sup>12</sup> The picture in Susan Burrows Swan's book *PLAIN AND FANCY* shows wool embroidery on wool squares set as diamonds. One design is made of circular shapes left and right of a principle vertical line.<sup>13</sup>

Are there other quilts conceived with a sampler idea? The "album" or "friendship" quilt, made twenty to thirty years later, often appeared to be a sampler of design blocks. However, the purpose of demonstrating the individuality of each friend's effort seems quite different from the design experimentation on our quilt.

### *Conclusions*

You realize by now that this is not an extraordinary quilt, that it followed the early American practice of saving all fabric for future use and of using what was at hand, that its maker was an average needlewoman, that much of the quilting was free hand, that it was not planned as a work of art, that it is rural and not high style, that it recorded designs for future references, and that it could possibly stem from a Scotch-Irish heritage.

I have included 18th century with the early 19th century comparisons because of the fabric, and also because of the lag in the time when styles of furniture, decorative arts, and clothing were popular in an urban area, and when those same styles were interpreted in a sparsely populated area.

For me, this study quilt, despite its worn appearance, has provided an incentive to read sources unknown to me before, and to reread familiar works on weaving, quilting, and textiles in general. It has stimulated a need for me to visit curators and staff members at the Smithsonian Institution, Winterthur Museum, William Penn Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It has given me an

excuse to talk with my friends in the textile field, and courage to visit some outstanding antique dealers in New York. Finally, it demonstrates the value of retaining damaged fabrics in their entirety for detailed examination, an approach which provides for another perspective for quilt study.

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