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Early Colonial Quilts in a Bedding Context

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In an effort to illuminate the history of quilts in America, some early writers unfortunately did just the opposite. Using the writing style of fifty years ago, most historians did not document their sources, and simply stated their theories and surmises as though they were fact. Quilt historians were not different, and their theories, later quoted and referred to over and over, have almost obscured the real history of quilts. We have mostly been reluctant to challenge these theories directly because we honor the women who made them, and so now they occupy a solid position in the lore of quilts.

Folklore, however, is not history. Although we need the lore to understand what people thought and how they felt about things, we need history too. We need to know what happened and what people did, and we need to document it dependably. Part of seeking out the real history of women's work and art is clearing up some of the misconceptions that have been repeated so often. Like George Washington's cherry tree story, "it ain't necessarily so."

It is the purpose of this paper to examine two particular stories often included in the "history" of quilts. One is that the first American quilts were made from economic need, the need for warm bedding being so great that early colonial women pieced together all their fabric scraps to make quilts.¹ Another story is that quilts were common and ordinary bed furnishings in all colonial households.²

The questions posed here, then, are: to what extent did early colonial households contain quilts, and what were they like?

It is important to be clear about the time period being discussed. Although we often speak vaguely of a "colonial era", as though nothing changed in more than a century and a half, the colonial period was in

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fact a time of accelerating change. It seems appropriate to me to divide the 1620-1780 colonial period into an early colonial period (17th century) and a late colonial period (18th century). This distinction, though still rather crude, allows consideration of early American quilts to take place in some more reasonable progression of time/history.

Definitions

It is also important to make distinctions between "quilts", "patchwork quilts", and "pieced quilts". The definitions I will use here are the definitions used in the 18th century. *Quilt* — the word by itself — means a bed quilt of whole cloth, quilted. *Patchwork* originally meant what we now more often call applique — the putting on of patches of cloth. It did not mean pieces of cloth seamed together. *Piecework* means: cloth specially cut to fit together when seamed, so that it finally makes a full-sized top. In the early colonial times — in the 17th century — there was no patchwork or piecework. There probably was not any patchwork or piecework on bedcoverings before 1750. That was also the opinion of Florence Peto, who had excellent access to very old quilts.³ Therefore, the quilts discussed here are whole-cloth quilts.

Early quilts were definitely bedding, and to find them and find their place in 17th century life, it is necessary to look at the entire bedding context in which they existed. The bedding of the 17th century consisted primarily of woolen blankets, woolen bed rugs, and coverlets — which were sometimes woolen and sometimes linen. In the 17th century, quilts were actually quite a rare item, so the major bedding items will be examined first.

Bed rugs

In the 17th century, rugs were always for sleeping under. The word "rugg" comes from Scandinavia where it always meant a sleeping rug. The idea of putting textiles on the floor and walking on them is quite recent in Western history.

Rugs were of a coarse woolen weave. The yarns were coarse and rather harsh. The poorer parts of the English wool clip were reserved for use in bed rugs. Rugs often — perhaps always — had a shag woven in. Samuel Johnson's dictionary of 1755 called them "coarse nappy coverlets used for mean beds." Several authorities think that the shag was always a knotted shag — and there is some evidence for this from some 18th century rugs. No presently known 17th century rugs are in existence. These were not the later embroidered rugs. The early rugs

were made in England, and the shag was made in the loom — not applied later with a needle.

An early commentary on 17th century rugs is in a letter written in 1634 by John Winter, manager of a fishing station on the coast of Maine, to Robert Trelawny, his employer and supplier in Plymouth, England. Winter reported:

"I bought some coats and rugs last year after Captain Smart arrived into the country, hoping to have put them away to the Indians last winter, but could not. But have now put away the rugs, but at the same price I bought them here. There is such a store of these goods brought here by the Barnstaple ships that all the traders are filled with them."

Among the long list of things he asked for, Winter included "2 dozen of Barnstaple rugs, woven without seam. . . but I pray," he wrote,

"send no more hatts nor coverletts. The coverletts are not for this country. They will not pass to the English nor to the Indians, for they must have them soft and warm."⁴

Another reference can be found in Bradford's history OF PLYMOUTH PLANTATION. In 1631, Isaac Allerton who had come on the Mayflower, returned to England for a load of supplies. But all he brought back for Plymouth was 100 Barnstaple rugs. He had rented out the rest of the ship's cargo space for freight headed for Boston. To make matters worse, Plymouth somehow got charged twice for the rugs. Governor Bradford was still hot about it twenty years later when he wrote his history.⁵

The most reliable documentation of early household furnishing is found in legal documents of the day, primarily household inventories and wills. The evidence of legal records from four colonies will be examined later in this paper. These documents vary considerably in completeness of description. Most are not descriptive at all. However, according to early inventories, rugs came in many colors - white, blue, green, red and yellow being mentioned. Occasionally they were "striped" or "speckled", but none were described as having any kind of woven figure or design. These plentiful rugs from England were not like the embroidered rugs made by American women in the following century.

Blankets

Early blankets are also non-existent. Records, however, show that they were truly the commonest type of bedding all through the colonial centuries and after. They are listed over and over in wills and inventories

— in many different kinds and colors. They were imported in large numbers for trading to Indians.

Even though Americans began making blankets very early, English blankets were generally of a better quality and continued to be brought over in remarkable quantities. They were traded all over the continent, and the trade has never stopped. The famous Hudson's Bay blankets are still made in England for sale in North America.

Blankets were much finer and softer than ruggs. They were made of softer wool, fulled and teased to produce a fine, fluffy nap. Blankets were sold as finished blankets — usually in pairs — and also as "blanketting" — that is, the whole piece as it came from the loom, large enough for 16 to 18 full width blankets. The best of these were Witney blankets made mainly in Witney, Oxfordshire, but also in Somerset and Devon. They were white or nearly white, and very soft, and up to 12 quarters in width. (A "quarter" meant a quarter of a yard. 12 quarters was equivalent to 3 yards.) This was English manufacture at its finest. In Benjamin West's famous painting of Penn's Treaty with the Indians, he painted the central event of presenting an Indian chief with a roll of this supple white woolen cloth. However, Indians liked blue better than white, and blue blankets became the standard trade item — with a few red and green ones at various occasions.

In the early colonial period, there is no record of blankets having been decorated except (often) with stripes at the ends. The stripes served the practical purpose of indicating where the piece of blanketting should be cut into individual blankets. In the second half of the 18th century, however, blankets were frequently decorated at the corners with embroidered crowns or with non-floral "rose" motifs which have a resemblance to a compass rose.

Coverlets

The third kind of bedding to be found in quantity in old records is coverlets. It is less clear what a coverlet was in the 17th century, as any bedcovering might be called a coverlet at some time. However, inventories listed blankets, ruggs, and coverlets separately, so they were neither blankets nor ruggs. Some inventories listed "coverlet yarn" also, but didn't specify whether it was woolen or linen. Some mentioned that they were "wrought" or "worked", meaning embroidered, but most did not. John Winter's letter of 1634 said he didn't want any more coverlets — they weren't soft and warm enough. Probably there was quite a variety of things that might be called coverlets. Possibly what distinguishes them from blankets and ruggs is that coverlets were mainly

decorative rather than mainly warm.

Many coverlets remain from the late colonial period, and they are highly decorative. Some of these are linen, but an equal number are woolen. The woolen coverlets are frequently catalogued as "blankets", but the elaborate embroidery and (often) fringe mark them as intended for the top cover of the bed.

Quilts

Quilts in the early colonial period were few and far between. They were the most expensive bedding item inventoried. They were found in the households of well-to-do people, usually merchant-importers. They were almost certainly imported rather than home-made. In wills, a few were described: "my silken quilt", "cradle quilt, silk on one side and calico on the other," a "calico quilt" and a "blue quilted coverlet." The last three of these were actually in early 18th century wills. So few quilts were recorded in the 17th century, it is difficult to get even a sense of them. There are no references at all during early colonial period to pieced work or patchwork, however, for the good reason that those techniques were not yet practiced. Like the quilted petticoats of the period, bed quilts were quilted designs on whole cloth.

Documentation

The records consulted in this study are: the probate inventories of Providence, RI, from 1670 to 1726⁶, the probate inventories of Plymouth colony from 1631 to 1687⁷, the wills of New Hampshire from 1659 to 1717⁸, and the wills and a few inventories of the Hartford district of Connecticut from 1640 to 1749⁹. Although the time periods of these four record groups do not neatly coincide, they are in each case the earliest records available. In considering that three of the record groups extend beyond the 17th century, I considered also the usual longevity of bedding and concluded that most of the bedding in the later inventories was probably 17th century bedding. Although this slightly begs the question of sticking to the 17th century data, it has the advantage of enlarging the data base. In fact, strictly within the 17th century records, only three quilts were to be found!

I have seen only a random selection of inventories from Virginia printed in historical magazines and mostly from prominent families. Although similar to New England inventories, I have not seen enough southern inventories to make any comment on southern colony bedding.

Inventories vary in completeness but are usually far more complete

than wills. They also usually include the monetary values of things. Wills, on the other hand, have the advantage of showing which things were important to the legator. And they were sometimes more descriptive — especially women's wills.

Statistics

From the inventories of Providence and Plymouth, I have calculated the separate average values of the blankets, ruggs, coverlets and quilts, so it is possible to determine what their comparative values were to the people of the 17th and early 18th centuries.

In Providence, the average value of a blanket during the period examined was ten shillings. The average value of a rugg was 15-1/3 shillings, and of a coverlet 17 shillings. The average value of the five quilts recorded in Providence was 52 shillings.

The inventories of Plymouth show a remarkable similarity. There, a blanket was worth on average ten shillings, ruggs were worth an average of 15-1/3 shillings, but coverlets were worth only 11 shillings. The only quilt recorded in Plymouth in that period was in an inventory of 1633 — clearly an English quilt — and no separate value was assigned to it.

The wills of Connecticut and New Hampshire of course did not list monetary values.

Using the wills and inventories both, I have counted the number of blankets, ruggs, coverlets and quilts recorded. Many of the documents listed undifferentiated "bedding", and those were excluded from the calculations. The blanket totals are probably undercounted, as it was not unusual to find "blankets" listed with no number given. In those instances, I used the smallest possible plural number: two.

The Providence inventories list 239 blankets, 30 ruggs, 88 coverlets, and 5 quilts. The New Hampshire wills mention 36 blankets, 20 ruggs, 5 coverlets, and 2 quilts. In the Hartford wills 91 blankets, 23 ruggs, 27 coverlets and 2 quilts were specifically mentioned. In Plymouth there were inventoried 185 blankets, 85 ruggs, 39 coverlets and 1 quilt.

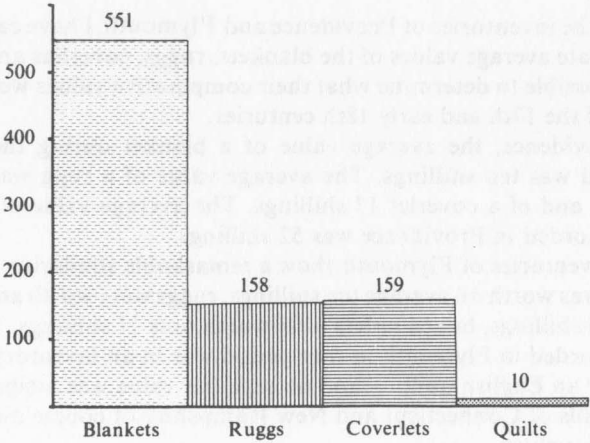
It is notable that Plymouth Colony records show such a large number of bed ruggs. Possibly it is a legacy of Isaac Allerton's poor business judgement in 1631.

The totals of these bedding items show 551 blankets, 158 ruggs, 159 coverlets, and 10 quilts. Adding these figures gives a total of 858 bedding items, of which only ten are quilts. This is only 1.16%.

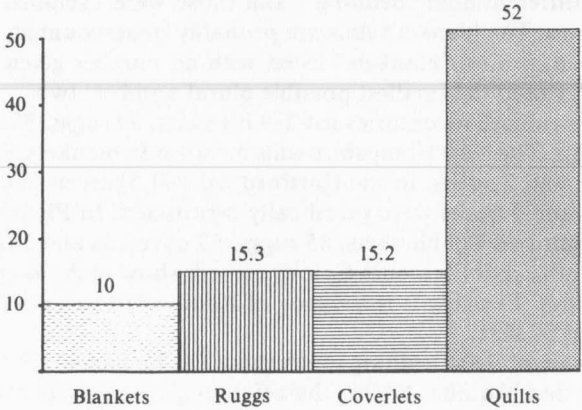
Other studies

Two earlier studies of colonial household inventories in New England

**NAMED BEDDING FOUND IN THE EARLY RECORDS OF
PLYMOUTH, PROVIDENCE, HARTFORD
AND NEW HAMPSHIRE**



A. TOTAL NUMBER



B. AVERAGE VALUE IN SHILLINGS

Graphics: Bill Garoutte

are of Essex County and Suffolk County, Massachusetts. More than fifty years ago George Francis Dow surveyed the Essex County (Salem area) inventories recorded between 1635 and 1674. In an article, Dow commented on his survey: "coverlets are mentioned 142 times and rugs 157 times while quilts are listed only four times."¹⁰ His article does not mention blankets.

In a study of fabrics used in interior furnishing, Linda R. Baumgarten examined 485 selected household inventories of Suffolk County (Boston area) between 1650 and 1695. In her paper published in the Winterthur Conference Report for 1974, Baumgarten stated: "Few quilts are listed in the inventories; the ones mentioned are described as calico, painted calico, and East India, indicating an Indian origin. Other quilts were silk. No references to pieced quilts were found."¹¹

Thus the Salem and Boston areas provide the same picture as the four areas examined in this paper.

Conclusions

From this information, I have concluded that quilts were not common or ordinary articles in early colonial times. Far from it. They were both rare and expensive.

I have concluded also that quilts were not born of economic necessity or, at least primarily, as a practical means of keeping warm. There was clearly plenty of other, cheaper, bedding available — from domestic looms as well as English looms. Further, a significant number of late 18th century American quilts are not warm at all, containing as they do only the minimum amount of filling to show off the quilting. The "need" for American women to make handsome quilts does not appear to be either economic or practical.

Quilts in Early Colonial New England

- 1633 Plymouth. Samuel Fuller inventory. On flock bed.
- 1647 * Salem. William Clarke inventory. 1 quilt on flock bed in chamber over kitchen.
- 1648 * Ipswich. John Whittingham inventory. 2 quilts.
- 1685 * Salem. George Corwin, merchant, inventory. In house, "1 large white quilt, 40s; 1 ditto, 30s; 1 ditto, 20s. 1 quilt of calico Colered & flowred, 30s."
- 1689 Portsmouth. Jane Joce, widow & merchant, will. "my silken quilt . . ."
- 1693 Portsmouth. Joshua Moody, will. "one of the best quilts."
- 1712 Providence. Freeloove Crawford, widow & merchant, inventory. 1 Calico bed quilt, 45s.
- 1720 Providence. William Whiteway, mariner, inventory. A quilt and a blanket, 35s.
- 1720 Providence. William Crawford, merchant, inventory. (Son of Freeloove Crawford) 2 quilts, value not stated.
- 1721 Providence. John Jenckes, physician & merchant, inventory. a quilt, 60s.
- 1744 Hartford. Dorothy Stevens, will. "a cradle quilt, silk on one side calico on the other."
- 1748 Hartford. Mary Sweeny, will. "a blue quilted coverlid."

**Listed by George Francis Dow*

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