

# Uncoverings

## 1984

Volume 5 of  
the Research Papers of  
the American Quilt Study Group

Edited by Sally Garoutte

## Quilting Traditions in South Carolina

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The quilting traditions of a particular geographic area are best understood when examined in the context of the area's history. Human activities generally reflect the influences of geographic features such as mountains or rivers, agricultural economy, the ethnic background of its inhabitants, as well as specific historical events such as wars and depressions.

Within South Carolina, the smallest Southeastern state, there are three recognizable geographic regions: the flat, low-lying *Coastal Plain*, the pine tree covered central *Sandhills* which represent the dunes of an earlier east coast, and the higher, red clay hills of the *Piedmont*, rimmed by the southeastern edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The physical features of these three regions influenced their settlement and development in different ways, which in turn produced a variety of quilting traditions.

In 1983, McKissick Museum at the University of South Carolina and the South Carolina State Museum jointly received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts Folk Arts Program to survey and examine quilting traditions in the three geographical regions. The survey was designed to sample quilts in a representative county in each region: Charleston in the Coastal Plain, Richland in the Sandhills and Greenville in the Piedmont.

During the six months of the survey period the project held Quilt History Days in community centers within the three counties. Four to seven Quilt History Days were held in each area. Prior to these days the project staff held an orientation workshop to train community people to help gather the data. On the Quilt History Days, volunteers interviewed the owners using a two-page questionnaire while the quilts were photographed and examined. The resulting

data for over 1300 quilts are housed at McKissick Museum for use by interested researchers. Twenty quilts identified in the survey formed the traveling exhibition "Social Fabric: South Carolina's Traditional Quilts," touring during 1984-1986. The project staff also prepared a book of essays and photographs called *Social Fabric* which includes a catalog of the exhibition.

NEA Folk Arts funded the project for a second year in 1984-85 to continue the survey in six additional counties. The resulting data will add to the general findings and allow staff to examine more subtle variations in quilt styles and techniques in the state. Future plans include designing a package so that small museums, historical societies, and quilt guilds in other parts of South Carolina could hold quilt surveys in conjunction with McKissick and the State Museum. Important considerations include maintaining the quality of the photographs and data, establishing a system by which both the survey and maintenance of the data can be a continuing process, and encouraging groups to sponsor the survey in their own areas.

Following the survey phase in 1984, the project staff studied the slides and data looking for broad characteristics in historical and geographical distribution. Some of the resulting conclusions were predictable, others surprising. As these data are examined more thoroughly, other more subtle trends will appear and generalizations will break down into more complex categories. The additional data from succeeding projects will enhance the value of the basic collection. What follows is a general discussion of historical and geographical variations in South Carolina quilting as revealed by an analysis of the first year's survey.

General trends in the quilting traditions of the three geographic regions reflect the distinct history and development of each area. Charleston was the largest city and primary port in the pre-Civil War South. As the center of trade and commerce for the Carolinas and Georgia, Charleston served as the funnel for the export of agricultural and forest products and the importation of finished goods, including textiles. Early rice plantations and the use of slave labor contributed to the success of many planters, and shops and businesses developed in Charleston to meet the needs of the wealthy inhabitants. The early bedcovers in Charleston area homes



*Fig. 1. Chintz applique album quilt, Charleston vicinity, made for former S.C. Governor James H. Hammond 1846-48. 102" x 100"*

were European, including wool blankets from England and whole-cloth quilts from southern France.<sup>1</sup> Household inventories for Colonial Charleston list an impressive array of fine imported furnishings.<sup>2</sup> Gradually Charleston area residents turned to locally produced textiles to supply some of their needs for clothing and bed-covers. Experimental textile mills in the Coastal Plain produced some goods for local consumption, and there is evidence that some large planters set up weaving operations to make coarse fabrics for slave clothing and bedding.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of trends toward the use of locally produced textiles, antebellum Charlestonians continued to import many commodities and

to be influenced by European styles. Nineteenth century quilts from Charleston fall into a number of discrete historical periods, reflecting the changing fads and fashions of the times. The earliest of the styles appears to be white whole-cloth quilts made from the late eighteenth century to about 1820 modelled after imported Marseilles quilts and English stuffed quilts. Generally these are quilted, stuffed, and corded, in a framed center style in motifs of wreaths and vines. While beautifully ornamented they are usually not as complex as their European antecedents.

In the early nineteenth century white quilts were supplanted in Charleston by another European quilt type. Chintz applique quilts, also in a framed center style, appeared in profusion. "Chintz" describes a type of printed fabric originally developed in India. The fabric, techniques and arrangements in these quilts are mostly of English origin. The majority of extant chintz framed center quilts from the Charleston area appear to be from the period of 1830-1850. By this time fabric manufacturers were producing furnishing fabrics especially adaptable for use in quilts, both as center motifs and stripes to be cut apart for borders. The same fabrics are often found in several different quilts, suggesting that some prints may have been especially favored for quilts. Two popular prints used in the centers of several floral applique quilts are the "bouquet of flowers with scrollwork border" and the "trophy of arms."<sup>4</sup>

Friendship quilts, which combine blocks by different contributors were fashionable in the eastern United States in the 1840s and 50s. The best known of this style are attributed to the Baltimore area and contain fabrics with small figured prints.<sup>5</sup> Friendship quilts were very popular within the busy social network of Charleston residents. Almost invariably they used their favored chintz fabrics for these group projects. A chintz applique friendship quilt made by women in the Charleston area was presented to former Governor James H. Hammond in 1848.<sup>6</sup> New brides and other individuals received similar quilts from groups of friends.

In the 1850s, another European style took precedence among fashionable Charleston quiltmakers. During this decade *Godey's* and other American ladies' magazines printed a series of articles on English template piecing.<sup>7</sup> In this technique small templates, usually in the shape of hexagons or diamonds, are cut from paper, then are covered by a somewhat larger piece of fabric and the edges turned



*Fig. 2. Template pieced cotton quilt top, Charleston, c. 1875. 96" x 88"*

under and basted. The individual pieces are whip stitched together to form a quilt top. A number of template pieced hexagon quilts made in Charleston survive. Additionally, because the technique is intricate and time-consuming, many unfinished tops remain, some still containing paper templates. While the instructors in *Godey's* suggested silk as the appropriate fabric for this work, Charlestonians first adapted the technique to their favored cotton chintzes. As silks, especially remnants from northern companies<sup>8</sup> became more available, silk pieced quilts made their appearance.

In the period 1800–1900 Charlestonians like their sisters elsewhere turned to making crazy quilts. Constructed in blocks of odd-shaped pieces of silks and velvets, and decorated with a variety of ornamental embroidery stitches, crazy quilts represented a widespread fashion apparently of American origin.<sup>9</sup> Many Charleston area crazy quilts survive, and most are very similar to crazy quilts made elsewhere in the country.



Fig. 3. *Whig's Defeat*, pieced and appliqued quilt made by Sarah Adeline Stewart, Greenville County, c. 1870. 91" x 84"

Nineteenth century quilts from Charleston divide neatly into time periods marked by changing fashions. However, quilts made in other parts of the state during the same periods reflect trends which ebbed and flowed more gradually. In the Piedmont the prevailing lifestyle was rural and agricultural rather than urban and commercial. The area forming the present Greenville County was part of the Cherokee nation until 1777, by which time Charleston was a well established and influential city. After the area was acquired from the Indians by treaty, settlers flocked to the fertile rolling hills. Many were of Scotch-Irish origin who followed a trail of migration from Pennsylvania through Virginia and North Carolina. Others entered the country through Charleston and still others left their homes in the coastal settlements in search of cheaper land.



Fig. 4. Pineapple made by Ann Smith, Richland County, c. 1880. 74" x 73"

Many early Piedmont farmers took large holdings, owned slaves, and established successful farms. They raised a variety of agricultural products, both for their own use and to trade for commercial wares. The wealth of these families was measured in land, livestock, crops, and tools rather than by cash assets and bank accounts. Cash and banks were scarce in the back country, and most families relied on barter locally. Household inventories list an impressive array of farm equipment and household implements.<sup>10</sup>

Bedcovers, both in inventories and in the survey, reflect the greater use of local materials over imported textiles. Surviving bedcovers produced in the Piedmont in the first half of the 19th century included primarily overshot woven coverlets and various forms of white-work. White whole-cloth quilts and bedspreads made in this area included a variety of techniques. Some are stuffed and corded, some are candlewick, others are white-on-white embroidery. All of

those surveyed are designed in a framed center style and feature floral motifs, wreathes, and such elements as grape clusters and pineapples. While they display designs of moderate complexity, those that are quilted do not show the elaborate close rows of stitching that appear on earlier English and French whole-cloth quilts.

The conclusion drawn from the sample is that Piedmont quiltmakers continued to make whole-cloth white quilts for their fine bedcovers long after Charleston residents had dropped the style in favor of the chintz applique style. Because of the necessity of trading their agricultural and forest products in Charleston and other cities, Piedmont residents would have been aware of the new fashions; however, being apart from that society, they were less affected by the need for "keeping up with the Joneses." While many could have afforded to use some of their barter credit for imported chintzes, such choices were apparently not of high priority.

A second influence contributing to the extended popularity of white quilts centered in the existence of many experiments in cotton spinning mills in the Piedmont.<sup>11</sup> Several dozen were attempted during the early decades of the nineteenth century. While most factories did not survive for very long, they converted raw cotton into a yarn that was strong enough to use for warp threads on the looms of local home weavers. This new abundance gave area quiltmakers a wider range of home-woven products, including the white cotton sheeting which forms the basis of all the white work techniques.

During the 1850s Piedmont quiltmakers also made friendship quilts, yet they rarely used the chintzes favored in Charleston. Almost invariably their friendship quilts contain applique blocks combining solid colors. Unlike the more elaborate Baltimore style, typical individual block design in Piedmont friendship quilts appear to have been drawn from the regular repertoire of applique quilt patterns, including local variations on rose, tulip, and pineapple designs.

While few Piedmont quiltmakers made chintz quilts during the early 19th century, they seem to have retained the idea that these printed florals were desirable for quilts. By the time inexpensive roller-printed chintzes became available to them in mid-century however, quilt styles had changed. Exacting pieced and appliqued patterns calling for sharp contrasts replaced the use of pictorial cutouts, and the new patterns required small figured calicoes and

solid colors. Quiltmakers therefore satisfied their desire for chintz by using whole strips of it as borders. The design and colors of these printed borders often have little or no relation to the colors or patterns in the body of the quilt.<sup>12</sup>

During the second half of the nineteenth century, while Charleston quiltmakers were keeping up the current crazy quilt and English template piecing styles, Piedmont seamstresses generally ignored these new techniques and explored a wide range of intricate pieced and appliqued patterns. Rocky Mountain Road<sup>13</sup> is an example of a pattern which was very popular in the Piedmont between about 1875 and 1900. The comparatively large number of quilts and unquilted tops of this pattern from an area of about five counties suggests that this intricate pieced pattern enjoyed a local reputation as a mark of accomplishment among quiltmakers. Perhaps the competition among needleworkers in the Upstate focused on traditional technical skills in this area in this decade when Charleston women were outdoing each other making template and crazy quilts.

The survey identified no template pieced quilts from the Piedmont. The earliest crazy quilt is dated 1890 and is visually distinctive from those made in Charleston at the same time. The Greenville County crazy quilt is primarily of wool, the embroidery joining the blocks is a simple briar stitch rather than a wide range of elaborate stitches, and the floral transfers are primarily simple and straightforward rather than fanciful. Other Piedmont quiltmakers gradually included the crazy quilt in their bag of tricks but they adapted the original decorative function to a utilitarian one. Early twentieth century Piedmont crazy quilts were made of either cotton or wool scraps (in large pieces) lapped together with a simple briar stitch with little or no additional decoration. What began as purely decorative technique was adapted and simplified to suit the more practical tastes of the Piedmont.

The 1870s and 1880s in the Piedmont saw the rapid development of the local textile industry. This activity influenced quiltmakers in several ways. Rural families moved into mill villages and traded their barter economy for one of cash and scrip. The textile mills produced a new array of inexpensive cottons prized by quiltmakers whether living in the villages, in other towns, or in the country. The mills also produced as by-products damaged, misprinted, or surplus remnants, which thrifty quiltmakers acquired at little cost. One result of these occurrences is an explosion of scrap quilts beginning

in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. In addition to fine quilts of two or three colors the new scrap quilts developed, first as variations in which one or two segments of a pattern shift while the rest remains constant. Eventually, by 1900, scrap quilts exhibited more random application of color and fabric. In this area the widespread use of scraps of inexpensive fabric in quilts appears to coincide with their local production and availability.

Richland County, located in the central Sandhills or Midlands presents a blending of the Coastal and Piedmont quiltmaking traditions. The area was settled during the mid-1800s by German, Scotch-Irish, and English immigrants and by Charlestonians seeking new opportunities. In 1786, the legislature selected a site on the Congaree River in the center of the state, for the new capital to be called Columbia. Thus a new planned city, with an established gentry and their accoutrements, was developed in the middle of the rural back country. Evidence suggests that both fashionable urban and conservative rural quiltmaking styles existed side by side in Richland County. Unfortunately, in February 1865, the major portion of downtown Columbia and its homes were destroyed in a fire during the city's occupation by Sherman's troops. Very few antebellum quilts from Columbia survived compared with other parts of the state. Late nineteenth century Midlands quilts include crazy quilts influenced by Charleston styles, intricate pieced and applique patterns resembling fine Piedmont quilts and scrap quilts resulting from the existence of local textile mills.

By the early 1900s South Carolinians, responding to a growing national trend toward manufactured goods, generally preferred purchased spreads on their beds to fancy homemade quilts. However, many women continued to take advantage of inexpensive local materials and made scrap quilts for everyday use and for personal satisfaction. Made during a time when quiltmaking followed practical considerations rather than popular formulas, these quilts are catalogs of the kinds of fabrics used by home sewers for family clothing. They generally contained pieces of various stripes, plaids, and solids rather than the small-figured prints of the 19th century and, later, the 1930s.

By the late 1920s and 1930s women who had grown up with blankets and spreads from Sears, Roebuck and Company took up quiltmaking. The Great Depression often receives credit for this

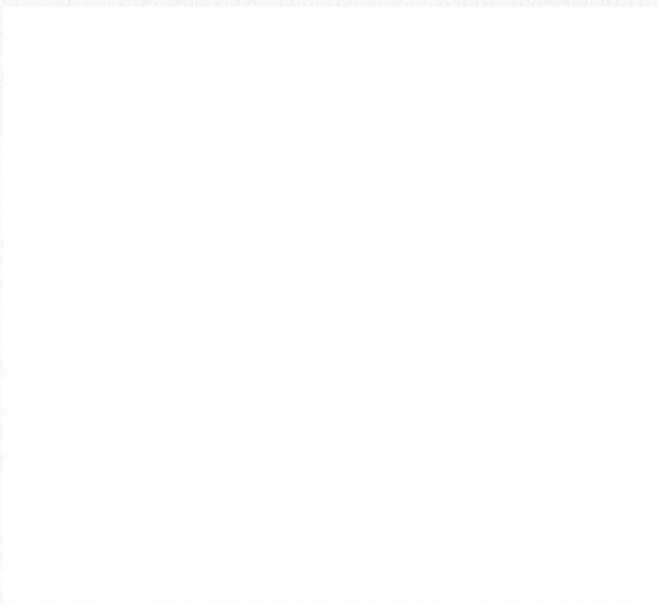


Fig. 5. String quilt, made by Mary Patterson Coster, Traveler's Rest, Greenville County, c. 1900. 71" x 69"

upsurge in quilting activity, but the reasons are more complex. Perhaps the post-World War I emphasis on modernism, characterized by automobile and "flapper" dress, was answered by the commemoration of values associated with earlier times. In an article in the women's pages of the *Progressive Farmer*, December 31, 1927, the editor introduces an article titled "Grandmother's Quilts Becoming Popular Again" with the following statement: "At no time in American history has there been more ardent love for old houses, old furniture, old songs, and old quilts."<sup>14</sup>

Pattern companies, popular magazines, and quilt books during the early twentieth century emphasize the nostalgic and romantic aspects of early American life generally and quilts specifically.

Many South Carolina quiltmakers took advantage of the variety of new and old patterns offered through syndicated pattern columns in their local newspapers in the late 1920s and 1930s. Generally women seem to have selected special new patterns and new fabrics for their "best" quilts and to have made utility quilts in more traditional patterns and with scraps. Thus an old system of individual



*Fig. 6. Star, or Sunflower made by Martha D. Richardson, James Island, Charleston County, 1977. 74" x 67"*

and local pattern transmission and a new system of mass media inspirations existed happily side by side. The juxtaposition of these two methods continued among traditional quiltmakers at least until the 1970s.

One special group of contemporary quilts, those made by Afro-American quiltmakers, are of particular interest. Many of these quilts represent a highly distinctive aesthetic tradition maintained through the years in black communities in spite of slavery, social workers and other forms of intervention. While a large number of black quiltmakers use the same patterns as their white neighbors, many other Afro-American quilts are characterized by bold, often assymetrical arrangements, large design elements, bright colors often in dynamic contrasts, and multiplicity of pattern (having more than one theme). These quilts are sometimes conceptualized and constructed in strips running the length of the quilts rather than in blocks. The intuition and innovation of Afro-American

quilt design parallels the same characteristics in sacred and secular music and other oral traditions.<sup>15</sup>

The sea islands along the coast near Charleston have been the site for the study of African retentions in Afro-American life generally, and the quilts and other folk art made there have been the subject of much attention in recent years. The interaction between black and white quiltmakers, the influence on black quilt styles by white missionaries encouraging the making of quilts to sell to whites, and the interplay between individual expression and traditional design inspiration are among the complex subjects for future research.

While earlier writers have largely ignored Southern quiltmaking or have generalized that Southern quilts were "almost invariably artistic creations little handicapped by economic conditions,"<sup>16</sup> preliminary analysis of the survey results reveals a more complex picture. Within the boundaries of a single small southern state are found examples of a multiplicity of traditions. These general quiltmaking traditions can be mapped out geographically and historically to reflect the influences of settlement history, agricultural economy, ethnic background, social organization and other cultural factors. The complex interaction of such influences must be studied in order to truly document and understand the context of quilts surveyed in a given area.

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