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South Carolina Quilts and the Civil War

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Major historical events in a country or region have an impact upon the lives of its people. The more significant the event the more the influence may be seen in the behavior, attitudes and products of the affected population. Quilts are objects of material culture which reflect the times in which they were made. In South Carolina the most influential and traumatic events of the nineteenth century occurred during and following the American Civil War. These events and reactions of South Carolinians are reflected in the quilts produced during and after the war.

The conflict between North and South can be traced to differences in economic development. In the 1790s advances in industrial technology caused cotton to replace rice and indigo as the principal agricultural commodities in South Carolina and in other Southern states. The system of black slavery which had been predicted by some to decline became the basis upon which the new cotton economy was based.

During the early nineteenth century differences between the urban industrial North and the rural agricultural South became more pronounced. Northern states no longer found slavery profitable and gradually abolished the practice. While most Northerners were largely indifferent to Southern slavery and felt that blacks were inherently inferior to whites, the efforts of radical abolitionists in the Boston area incited anti-Southern sentiment. At the same time many Southerners disliked the idea of slavery but foresaw social problems in dismantling the system.

As the issues heated up, Southerners also moved toward extremism and found themselves defending slavery as a "positive good" or as divinely inspired. Added to this growing conflict were

other issues. Northern manufacturers favored tariffs on imported goods to protect their nascent industries including textiles, while Southerners who exported raw materials and imported finished goods benefited from free trade policies.

The political debates intensified, creating a rift between the two sides which finally came to the surface with the presidential election in 1860. Immediately South Carolina seceded followed by other Southern states. The prevailing mood of the time among South Carolinians was one of indignation.

At some point during the arguments that year, Mrs. Jemima Ann Cook of Fairfield County made an all-white linen corded and stuffed quilt, with designs of cornucopias, palmetto trees (the state tree of South Carolina) and stars. In the center flies an eagle carrying a banner proclaiming "E Pluribus Unum," which apparently Mrs. Cook did not take seriously, because the quilt also contains the word "Secession" and bears the names of prominent secessionists of the period.¹ The quilt symbolizes not only the strong patriotic feelings of the maker's family but also the pre-war era during which Mrs. Cook had ample time and materials to express herself through slow, meticulous needlework. The "Secession" quilt represents one of the last examples of the elaborate all-white work of the nineteenth century. Once the war started women had little time and fewer materials for such work.

The war itself started when South Carolina troops attacked Fort Sumter, a Union-held fortress in the Charleston Harbor. The outnumbered Union troops surrendered without casualties, but the incident inflamed both sides. The journal of South Carolinian Mary Hort contains a February 1861 entry which reflects the excitement and pride in the capture of Fort Sumter: "This wonderful achievement of the bombardment and bloodless assault seems emphatically to say that God is for us."²

The formation of the Confederate government and the opening of the war raised a mood of optimism. Hopes for an early victory led men to join local regiments and groups of women to form sewing societies which made uniforms and knitted socks for their soldiers. Alexander Fewell of Ebenezer, S.C., enlisted in 1861 and soon wrote to his wife from camp, "Martha we are speaking of getting a uniform having it cut out and sent home to be made. I shall send you mine

Fig. 1. Friendship quilt made for James Adam Rickart, Pomaria, S.C. circa 1862.

and there will be others sent to the Society [the Ladies Aid Society of the Ebenezer Presbyterian Church] if they will have them made which I have no doubt they will do with pleasure.”³

The optimism, confidence, and generosity of women at home is reflected in quilts made for their soldiers. Two examples show more thought to symbolic support than to practicality. A friendship quilt (Figure 1) was made for James Adam Rickart, of Pomaria, in 1862, just before he left for the war.⁴ The second quilt (Figure 2) was made by a group of women in the neighboring Prosperity area for Allen Melancthon Wyse in 1862.⁵ Wyse enlisted in the army the following year at age 16. After the war he married Marilla Riser, the maker of the basket block in one corner.

Both of these presentation quilts reflect the local German album style of the “Dutch Fork” community during the 1860s and ’70s.

Typically, applique motifs are highly stylized rather than representational and include tulips, quadrilateral floral forms, and wreaths. Dutch Fork album quilts usually feature a predominance of solid colors rather than prints, and the designs are generally less graceful than the floral chintz album quilts made a decade earlier in the Charleston area.⁶

The presentation of quilts to soldiers demonstrates both the support of the local community for their men and a possible naivete about the realities of war. Obviously less delicate, warmer quilts would have been more practical for soldiers at camp. Whether Rickart and Wyse actually carried their gifts to camp to use or whether they were put away at some point and preserved, these quilts were surely two of the exceptional bedcovers which survived the ravages of battlefield and camp life.

In July 1861, Union and Confederate troops met in the first major conflict of the war near Manassas Junction, Virginia. This bloody battle ended in a complete rout of Union troops who in their retreat to Washington became entangled with sightseers and picnickers who had turned out to view the battle. Having suffered heavy losses the Confederate troops were unable to extend their victory by pursuing the retreating army. The First Battle of Manassas, sometimes called Bull Run, had a sobering effect on both sides as news of the heavy casualties became translated into the deaths of husbands and sons. Mary Hort wrote in her journal about first hearing of the battle. "Imperfect accounts terrified me. The papers were late in arriving, . . . but when the papers came, what a change. The South has had a decisive and glorious victory, ending after 10 hours of fighting, in *total* control of the Lincolnites, the capture of much of their weaponage and the slaughter of many of their men. . . . Many painful deaths have occurred."⁷

One of the painful deaths of First Manassas is remembered through a family quilt. In 1859, John Taylor Stenhouse of Fairview was the recipient of a friendship quilt made by women in the community (Figure 3). Each block is an identical red rose and the signed blocks are sashed with pink.⁸ Stenhouse, a promising businessman and eligible bachelor of thirty-three, entered the war as a lieutenant and was fatally wounded at Manassas in 1861. The quilt has been carefully preserved and handed down within the family and represents bright promise cut short by war. Later in the war an individual

Fig. 2. Friendship quilt made for Allen Malancthon Wyse, Prosperity, S.C. circa 1862.

death might not have had such impact, but the first deaths of the war were a shock to those at home.

First Manassas brought home the reality and immediacy of death, but later in the war when victories were few, the memory of the Southern victory there helped keep hopes alive. Mary Boykin Chestnut of Kershaw County mentioned the battles often in her diary, including this entry with a literary allusion to John Dryden: "Nothing will ever equal that 'first sprightly running' of our foes — at our Manassas."⁹ The mood of South Carolina women at home, while still optimistic, became tempered with anxious concern for their loved ones. Many women turned to sewing to help alleviate their stress. Alex Fewell wrote in April 1862, "Martha, you must not sew too hard yet I know when you are employed at something you are most happy."¹⁰ Several women in the Dutch Fork area made an appliqued Rose quilt while their husbands were away, thus combining the therapy of handwork with the support of other women.¹¹

Fig. 3. Rose quilt made for John Taylor Stenhouse, Fairview Community, S.C., inscribed 1859.

Martha Clark McCaslan Lindsay of Clear Springs Plantation in Abbeville County was another woman who sewed to occupy herself while her husband was away at war. She had married A.B.C. Lindsay, a dentist from Due West, in 1862. After the wedding he returned to his regiment in Virginia and she stayed at her parents' home. According to family tradition she made a number of quilts during the war and numbered and dated each one. This might indicate that she wished to have documented proof of her industry during the war, and the determination to carry out her project probably provided her with an activity she could control, unlike the events in distant battlefields. Several of Mrs. Lindsay's war quilts

Fig. 4. Quilt made by Martha Clark McCaslan Lindsay, Abbeville County, dated 186?.

survive, including a green and white applique (numbered eight on the back) of a pattern common in the Carolinas but for which the name is unknown.¹² This quilt (Figure 4) is constructed all of the same fabric, indicating that at the time it was made the hardships of war had not struck full force upon Abbeville County.

Other parts of the state were not so well-provisioned. As the war progressed, concerns for those at the front were joined by growing shortages of all kinds. South Carolina's economy depended upon the exchange of cotton for imported finished goods. By the second year of the war most South Carolinians felt the effect of shortages resulting from the blockade imposed on Southern ports. Other

problems contributing to shortages included the impressment of needed commodities by the Confederate government, the inadequate transportation system and the practices of speculation and hoarding. Ironically some shortages were caused by the spirit of generosity early in the war. South Carolinians sent gifts of food, clothing and blankets to soldiers in the field. Eventually shortages of food and textiles were the rule at home as well as in the camps.

In the optimism of the early days of the war the editor of the *Charleston Mercury* predicted that two years of war would "result in the manufacture of all our clothing. There shall be Southern chintzes and calicoes in two years of blockade."¹³ While his confidence proved unrealistic, this passage does reveal the fabrics most prized by South Carolinians for their clothing, home furnishings, and for their quilts. Chintzes and calicoes were imported, primarily from Europe, while South Carolina cotton mills produced only plain coarse goods, such as sheeting, sacking, osnaburgs and "negro cloth" used primarily to clothe slaves. Even these factories produced insufficient quantities of their coarse fabrics to supply all the state's textile needs.

Available clothing was used until it was worn out, then it was often taken apart and converted or recombined into new garments. Women everywhere in the Confederacy turned to knitting, carding, spinning and weaving. To some degree these skills had never entirely disappeared but many women had to learn them, sometimes from their own slaves.¹⁴ While knitting was by far the most common practice, many households built looms and recovered spinning wheels from their attics. A friendly rivalry developed among neighbors and friends who also held "spinning bees" to make the work less tedious. All this activity created a shortage of equipment. Cards became very scarce, one of the most valuable cargoes a blockade runner could carry. By the end of the war the price of a pair of cards, when they could be bought, had jumped from forty cents to thirty dollars.¹⁵ Many households had bought sewing machines before the war, but their use was hampered by lack of proper thread. Hand-spun thread was unsuitable and imported thread very scarce.¹⁶

The result of this concentrated effort in home manufacture was a product generically called confederate homespun. "Confederate" was a term applied to many homemade, generally inferior items, such as "confederate" coffee made from peanuts, shoes made from

dogskins or old felt hats, and bonnets woven from palmetto leaves. A Georgia woman described a friend's "confederate" dress to her mother in a letter: "She has a black linsey dress that she dyed herself, and it is a beautiful black. She seems to have succeeded remarkably well with her experiments."¹⁷ A South Carolina woman recalled a similar experience, writing "I remember being perfectly delighted when I had on a complete suit of homemade clothes: a dress of cotton which we had grown in our fields and woven on a handloom by old Mrs. Dantzler. It was really pretty, being of blue and white cotton, the blue being dyed with the wild indigo plants."¹⁸

The pride taken in homemade clothing could wilt rapidly in the face of imported fabrics brought in by blockade runners. This practice was hazardous so that runners generally brought in items that were light in weight and which could be sold for high profits. Popular items included liquor, medicines such as morphine and quinine, and expensive dress goods such as calicoes and chintzes.¹⁹ A Georgia woman wrote to her daughter in 1864, "Things are going up every day. Calicoes (narrow) twelve dollars; wide sixteen dollars a yard . . . and so it goes up, up, up. It is wonderful how people live at all here."²⁰ A South Carolina woman later recalled "After a while a great longing would seize us to buy some of the expensive things brought into Charleston by the boats that ran the blockade from Nassau and I never admired a dress more than my little lilac and white calico that cost \$100 a yard."²¹

Bedding also became scarce. Linen sheets and pillowcases were converted into underwear, or torn and rolled for bandages. Wool or cotton filing from mattresses was carded and spun into yarn and the ticking made into shirts. Blankets were sent to soldiers where they were used in conjunction with oilcloth to keep them out of the damp.²² A Richmond woman described a comforter made from two homespun sheets lined with layers of newspapers, which provided a warm but stiff and noisy cover.²³ None of the makeshift "confederate" quilts are known to survive. Those which might have survived the war were surely joyfully replaced and destroyed when circumstances allowed.

Shortages in the Confederacy varied over time and space. People with plenty of money could pay the inflated prices for goods and suffered less than those with fewer resources. As the war continued and drew closer, a new more devastating concern developed. Union

troops had gradually captured most of Tennessee by 1864. After bloody battles in southeastern Tennessee and northwestern Georgia, Georgians and South Carolinians began to recognize the threat of invasion. In May 1864, a Marietta, Georgia woman wrote to her cousin, "The army is now on this side of the Etowah River. The families from above are fleeing before the enemy—the streets filled with all sorts of vehicles, people moving their property of all kinds. . . . Mr. Rogers came down with his laborers and wagons, . . . took some of Mr. Ardis' valuables and one trunk for us (containing our quilts and silver) and took them to Atlanta."²⁴

Union troops led by General William Sherman destroyed Atlanta in November, 1864. From that point the Union army encountered little serious resistance in its sweep across southeastern Georgia and northward through North and South Carolina. Sherman's army traveled light and foraged provisions from the people they encountered. Soldiers destroyed much of what they could not carry away. They often raided the homes of slaves as well as of masters. Civilians in their path, mostly women, children and slaves, hid valuables as well as they could. Some belongings were packed in trunks and buried, sometimes in the woods or in pig pens. A South Carolina woman recalled later that "Aunt Anna had buried 34 chests of clothes and valuables under the blacksmith shop belonging to the plantation." Unfortunately foragers located this trove and scattered her belongings.²⁵ A Union soldier described the comical appearance of raiders returning from foraging expeditions, "Imagine a fellow with . . . a plug hat, a captured military plume in it, a citizen's saddle, with a bed quilt or table cloth."²⁶

Many South Carolina families own quilts that are said to have been hidden from Union foragers during the last months of the war. Since the general direction of the broad swath cut by Sherman's troops is documented, we can be sure that antebellum quilts in those areas most probably did not survive unaided.

Two quilts and an overshot coverlet belonging to the Paul Allen Williams family were among household possessions saved when their Allendale home was set afire by Union troops. Their home was then in Barnwell County, which the Yankees renamed "Burn well." Both quilts suggest that the Williams family had been well-to-do before the war. One is a chintz applique album quilt typical of fashionable society in coastal South Carolina during the 1850s.²⁷

Fig. 5. Turkey Track quilt made in Allendale, S.C., circa 1860.

The second (Figure 5) is an applique Turkey Track with a lustrous black chintz border.²⁸ Fine quilts such as these must have served as reminders of former prosperity to homeless war survivors and their descendants.

On February 17, 1865, Sherman's troops entered the South Carolina capital of Columbia virtually unchallenged. The inadequate Confederate guard had quietly withdrawn leaving a civilian population of 20,000, over half of whom were refugees from other parts of the state. While some had evacuated the city, many others apparently decided there was no other place to retreat to. Much of the city was destroyed by fire that night.

Among the refugees who fled the burning city was Hariette Catherine Kennedy Steel. According to her descendants Mrs. Steel, a Charleston resident, carried with her the pieces for an unfinished

Fig. 6. Rose quilt, Rutledge family, Lowrys, S.C., circa 1860.

quilt as she fled to York County. Completed in 1867 the quilt is constructed in a framed center style with floral printed chintzes appliqued onto a piece of white.²⁹ In format and materials the quilt is similar to those made in the Charleston area in the first half of the century, yet its smaller size (83" x 82") and the narrow solid red outer border are characteristic of its completion date. The quilt is among the last of the antebellum style that, like the social order that produced it, gave way after the war to newer, perhaps more democratic, styles. Hariette Steel had preserved the chintz pieces with difficulty, perhaps in defiance of the collapse of her world around her.

From Columbia the troops moved northward in a wide band through the towns of Winnsboro, Chester, Cheraw, Lancaster, and Camden. The invasion experience for families in these areas is remembered by descendants who have inherited surviving quilts. Rose patterned quilts seem to have enjoyed a popularity as special quilts during the pre-war years. One applique quilt of this pattern with a chintz border (Figure 6) was saved by being buried by the Rutledge family of Lowrys in Chester County.³⁰ In the same way the nearby Wherry family preserved a pieced Rose.³¹

Fig. 7. *Double Irish Chain*, Jefferson, S.C., circa 1860.

Another popular and valued pattern of the era immediately preceding the war was the *Double Irish Chain*. Several quilts of this pattern reportedly escaped the pillaging of Sherman's army. One (Figure 7) was buried with the family silver in Chesterfield County,³² a second, made by Mary Shuler Hutto of Providence was buried in a nearby swamp in Orangeburg County,³³ and a third, made by Mary Elizabeth Leech, of Hickory Grove in York County, may also have been buried during the war.³⁴ A fourth *Double Irish Chain* is accompanied by an enigmatic anecdote. In 1865, Henry McCarthy of Lexington County was sent to Rob Frick's mill for corn. He is said to have been arrested by Federal troops who wrapped him in the quilt. Probably it had been pillaged from a nearby home.³⁵ All the

Fig. 8. Civil War Quilt made by Clarice Conner Warr, Quietude Community, S.C., 1963.

places from which these family narratives originate were in the path of the Union army.

On May 24, 1865, Confederate General Joseph Johnson surrendered to Sherman near Durham, North Carolina, making official the end of the war. In South Carolina, people were taking stock of their remaining possessions and learning to live in a situation in which the government had crumbled, currency was worthless, and the slave-based economy and accompanying social structure had collapsed. Through reconstruction policies, radical experiments in land reallocation and representative government, and experiments with fee labor contracts, the new social and economic order experienced slow and painful evolution.

With time there remained few who rationally defended the institution of slavery, yet there were many who mourned the destruction of the comfortable way of life which had depended upon it. During

the late nineteenth century many confederate regiments held reunions which were popular and well-attended. Reunions helped to regenerate feelings of Southern pride and to encourage the image of the pre-war South as a golden age (which for some fortunate families it indeed had been). Around 1910 Elizabeth Catherine Haigler Gates of Cameron made a crazy quilt in which she included ribbons from Confederate Veterans reunions attended by her husband Frederick. Rather than spreading them out across the entire quilt, she concentrated all of them in one corner square.³⁶

Memories of the war experience, along with some of the pride and arrogance, have survived in some families for generations, sometimes clarifying, sometimes obscuring the actual events, but always playing a part in the family's image of itself. In 1963, Clarice Conner Warr, of Quietude Community in Darlington County made a quilt (Figure 8) for her grandson Gene. She had just read *Lee's Lieutenants* by Douglas Southall Freeman and that gave her the idea for a pictorial album quilt with a Civil War theme.³⁷ She says she did further research to authenticate the designs. In answer to the question "How would you describe this quilt?" she answered "Southern patriotist."

Notes and References:

(Identification numbers were assigned during quilt survey days during 1983-85.)

1. Whole-cloth Secession Quilt, made by Mrs. Jemima Ann Cook, Fairfield County, S.C., dated 1860. Pictured in Patsy and Myron Orlofsky, *Quilts in America*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974) Fig. 88.
2. Mary Hort Journal, 1830-1868. Manuscripts Division, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, S.C. Entry dated February 1861.
3. Alexander Faulkner Fewell, *Dear Martha: The Confederate War Letters of a South Carolina Soldier*, (Columbia: R.L. Bryan, 1976) p. 7.

4. Applique friendship quilt made for James Adam Rickart, Pomaria, S.C., c. 1862. (NEW-6).
5. Applique friendship quilt made for Allen Melancthon Wyse, Prosperity, S.C. (Newberry or Saluda County) c. 1862. (SAL-24).
6. Laurel Horton, "Quiltmaking Traditions in South Carolina," *Uncoverings 1984*, (Mill Valley, CA: American Quilt Study Group, 1985), p. 58.
7. Mary Hort Journal, July 1861.
8. Applique Rose quilt made for John Taylor Stenhouse, Fairview Community, dated 1859. (GRE-18). This quilt is described in Nancy Roberts, "An Antebellum Album Quilt" in *Social Fabric* (Columbia: McKissick Museum, n.d.).
9. C. Vann Woodward, *Mary Chestnut's Civil War*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) p. 278.
10. Fewell, p. 59.
11. Applique Rose quilt. Dutch Fork area, Richland County, S.C., c. 1861. (RIC-32).
12. Applique quilt, unknown pattern, made by Martha Clark McCaslan Lindsay, Abbeville County, dated 186? (ABB-6). The pattern appears in some Dutch Fork album quilts, such as Figure 2. (SAL-24).
13. Mary Elizabeth Massey, *Ersatz in the Confederacy*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1952) p. 79.
14. Massey, p. 86.
15. Massey, p. 87.
16. Massey, p. 88.
17. Robert Manson Myers, ed., *The Children of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and the Civil War*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1972) p. 1140.
18. Elizabeth Allen Coxe, *Memories of a South Carolina Plantation During the War*, (Privately printed, 1912) pp. 8-9.
19. Massey, p. 14.
20. Myers, p. 1211.
21. Coxe, pp. 11-12.
22. Fewell, p. 140.
23. Massey, p. 110.
24. Myers, pp. 1172-73.
25. Coxe, p. 51.
26. Burke Davis, *Sherman's March*, (Random House, New York, 1980) p. 40.
27. Applique album quilt made in Allendale, S.C., c. 1850. (ALL-3).
28. Applique quilt, Turkey Track, made in Allendale, S.C., c. 1860. (ALL-4).

29. Applique quilt made by Harriette Catherine Kennedy Steel, Richland and York Counties, S.C., c. 1867. (RIC-125).
30. Applique quilt, Rose, Rutledge family, Lowrys, S.C., c. 1860. (CHE-2).
31. Pieced quilt, Rose, Wherry family, Lewis Community, S.C., c. 1860. (CHE-30).
32. Pieced quilt, Double Irish Chain, Jefferson, S.C., c. 1860. (CHF-1).
33. Pieced quilt, Double Irish Chain, made by Mary Shuler Hutto, Providence, S.C., c. 1860. (ORA-22).
34. Pieced quilt, Double Irish Chain, made by Mary Elizabeth Leech, Hickory Grove, S.C., c. 1860. (YOR-66).
35. Pieced quilt, Double Irish Chain, Lexington County, S.C., c. 1860. (LEX-115).
36. Crazy quilt, made by Catherine Haigler Gates, Cameron S.C., c. 1910. (CAL-2).
37. Applique and embroidered quilt, Civil War, made by Clarice Conner Warr, Quietude Community, 1963. (DAR-16).