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The Role of Haps in Central Pennsylvania's 19th and 20th Century Quilting Traditions

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What do Stephen Kurtz, John and Jacob Kennegy, Adam Hartler, Jonathan Byler, Sarah Yoder, and David and Esther Zook have in common? They are all plain people, members of the Old Order Amish sect. They all lived and died in Mifflin County, Pennsylvania between 1835 and 1885, and they all had haps listed in their estate inventories or auction sales.¹ Esther Zook's estate vendue of 1860 mentioned "...one hap or comfort for \$2.40" while David Zook's, ten years later, listed one hap cover of wool in contrast to Stephen Kurtz's (1849) which itemized one of cotton.

Haps, more commonly known as comforts or comfortables, also appear in estate inventories of Pennsylvania's gay or English people along with other bedding types. In 1842 at James McMurtin's estate sale in White Deer Township, Union County, sixteen of these comfortables sold to individuals for 28¢ to \$1.00 apiece while his one quilt went for \$2.00. In that same year Sarah Mather's sale in West Buffalo Township, Union County, listed one quilt valued at \$2.00, one comfort at 75¢, a group of three quilts at \$2.25, three coverlets at \$6.00 along with two worsted quilts at \$1.50. The estate of John Smith, an innkeeper who died in Middleburg, Snyder County, adjacent to Union and Mifflin Counties, in 1845 had five comforts, four coverlets, and one quilt. Feather ticks as well as blankets, coverlets and comforts were the dominant bed coverings in Central Pennsylvania with quilts being mentioned infrequently in this time period (1840-1865). Comforts or comfortables were often listed, sometimes by their colloquial or vernacular name "hap," as seen in Simon Hartman's auction in Lewis Township, Union County on December 31, 1857 when the clerk of the sale entered "four coverlids

at \$4.00 and to the widow four feather beds at \$4.00, four chaff bags at \$2.00, three quilts at \$1.00 and seven haps at \$3.50."

The naming of comforts, those thick bed coverings generally filled with wool and knotted, as "haps" appears to be regional although their existence and importance in the home is widespread.² Eve Granick, in her research with Amish estate inventories and sales, notes that comforts are found in great numbers in locales as far apart as Elkhart, Indiana and Somerset and Lancaster counties in Pennsylvania, but that only in Mifflin County are they called "haps." Nancy Roan and Ellen Gehret, in their research with the Pennsylvania Germans of the Goschenhoppen region of Eastern Pennsylvania, found many references to comforts but only an isolated reference to haps when interviewing Lysle Ingalls who was born in Indiana, Pennsylvania in 1893 and who grew up in Johnston (both in the western third of Pennsylvania). In talking about her grandmother, Lysle said: "I can remember when she made those large patches for her quilts. She used to call them 'haps'... there was feather stitching all over those (wool) patches."³

However, in the Union/Snyder County area of central Pennsylvania, calling comforts "haps" is the norm, not the exception, and one might suspect that if in-depth research were done in other areas of the state or nation this might be true elsewhere. The frequent and informal manner in which the term "hap" is used locally, makes it apparent that the folk know what is being referred to. This was evidenced at quilt documentation days held throughout the region as well as by current estate sale listings where quilts, haps, and coverlets are listed as separate but related items. This is not meant to imply that everyone in our area calls these thick handsewn bed coverings in the vernacular, but that most do and that those who do not are aware of the word's meaning. For example, the doll bed covering shown in Figure 1 was purchased by William Lasansky at a Lewisburg flea market in May 1985 and was casually described by the seller as a doll's hap. It is left to outsiders to catch onto the word's meaning.

Initially hap was presumed to be a Pennsylvania-German term for a comfort since those using the word most frequently were often of Pennsylvania-German ancestry. *The Unabridged Oxford English Dictionary* ended that fallacious supposition. It states that "hap" is a

Figure 1. Doll hap c. 1890–1910 in wools, crepes and flannels. $17\frac{3}{8}$ " x $21\frac{1}{4}$ " tied or knotted in pink wool. Collection of Jeannette Lasansky. Photo: Terry Wild Studios.

northern English dialect word meaning a covering of any kind “but generally applied to one of coarse material.” Dorothy Osler, in a paper entitled “Patchwork in the North East” for the Tyne and Wear County Council Museum Service (England), made reference to the nineteenth and twentieth century haps that she had had experience with, speculating that the early quilts of “cottagers” were probably much like haps, i.e., “piecing together the less worn parts of blankets and clothing.” This suggests that haps in Pennsylvania are direct descendants of haps in the north of England.⁴ The president of the English Quilt Guild, Jeanne Hutchinson, when questioned about the use of the word hap in English quilting traditions, said she was unaware of the term, but, in looking it up in a common dictionary she found it defined as “a warm covering or cape in the North Country.”⁵

So, this word which so aptly describes the objects in question, is a northern English dialect one. It has been and still is commonly used by folk of Pennsylvania-German stock in certain areas of Pennsylvania to describe heavy handsewn bed coverings made of two or three thicknesses of fabric and batting and commonly called comforts or comfortables elsewhere. That Ms. Hutchinson and most others interested in English quiltmaking traditions are unaware of the role of comforts or haps is not surprising for their place and importance within quiltmaking traditions, there as well as here, has been ignored.⁶

The construction of haps is fairly consistent and relates more closely to the Germanic feather ticks than to fine worked Anglo quilts which have been closely studied by Averil Colby and others.^{7,8} Scrap material, usually wool but sometimes cottons and on rare occasion velvets and corduroys, are sewn on a foundation and block by block are assembled in either a random or patterned design. The top is laid on a thick batting of cotton or wool placed on top of a backing fabric. The fabric sandwich is often tied together with knots of wool or thick cotton thread placed at regular intervals across the quilt. Sometimes they are quilted instead of being tied (tacked or knotted) but the needlework is always coarse, about five stitches per inch, due entirely to the thickness of the batts as well as the coarseness of the material used for the top and back (see Figure 2 for construction details). The thread used to tie these quilts is usually of one color and often contrasts to the overall color(s) of the tops. Quite often a single decorative feather or briar stitch unifies the variety of pieced blocks with a single colored thread. Both provide design cohesiveness in otherwise random patterns. These techniques are executed in this manner with such regularity as to be anything other than conscious aesthetic decisions.

The stated preference for tying rather than quilting these bed covers, aside from speed, has to do with cleanliness and health. As noted in several women's periodicals as late as 1905, the advantage was that one could untie them, remove the wool, clean the parts and reassemble them when necessary—which might be following an invalid's recovery or after a long, hard winter's use.

As Eliza Leslie remarked in her *House Book* published in 1846, “[a comfortable] should be quilted in very large diamonds, laid out with chalk and a long ruler or with a chord dipped in raw starch, wetted

Figure 2. Detail of Columbia County hap done in Log Cabin style of wools, cottons and rayons. Overall dimensions of $74\frac{3}{8}$ " x $72\frac{1}{2}$ " with 4-5 stitches per inch in dark thread. The filling is moderately thick and of wool. Collection of Betty Apple. Photo: Terry Wild Studios.

to a paste with cold water . . . you need not attempt to take close short stitches." A rash of advice on comforts appeared in *Good Housekeeping* and *The National Stockman and Farmer* in the 1880s:

A nice way to use up worsted scraps of all kinds is to piece them as 'crazy work' for a comforter. We made one this Winter. Our blocks are about sixteen inches square; twelve blocks are sufficient for a pretty good sized one. Take old calico, or anything of the kind, to sew your patches on. The beauty of it is that you do not have to cut them by any pattern. We worked the seams with yarn, all kinds of scraps were put into service, even some bright colored ravelings were used, and the comforter really does not look as though it was made of 'cast-offs.' I wish some of you would try it and report success.⁹

For a real winter comfort, large size, use four or five bats of good cotton which costs from fifteen to eighteen cents a pound. Cut a pasteboard four inches square, for a marker, and at each point of the square dot with a lead pencil indicating where to tie. This will insure exactness. Tie at these places with tidy cotton and tuft with Germantown yarn or zepher. For a large comfort four ounces of zepher will be the amount required. A pretty finish is a crocheted or a large scallop drawn with a small teacup and buttonholed with the same with which it has been tufted. Pink and blue make up prettily, but scarlet is more durable than any other color . . . White comforts are apt to soil at the top where they come in contact with the face, particularly if the spread is taken off at night, and this should be done. To remedy this, take a width of cheesecloth making it as long as the comfort is wide, sew up the ends, slip over your comfort or blanket, making it secure by basting it on, or by means of little shield pins, which will come so far from the face, as not to inconvenience the sleeper. Have two for the bed, so that they may be washed as often as desired.¹⁰

The patterns seen most often are randomly placed blocks of crazed-like surfaces united by a single colored feather stitch or single colored knotting thread. Also seen are a variety of Log Cabin designs, the Grandmother's Fan, flying geese patterns, Bethelhem and strip stars, brick designs, and Robbing Peter to Pay Paul variants—all in great numbers, usually in wool but also in cotton with some frequency (see Figure 3). One was even a fundraiser. When I have been able to date them, they have been from the period after the Civil War until the Great Depression but I know from estate inventories that they pre-date the mid-nineteenth century in Central Pennsylvania. They seemed to be necessary if not popular bed coverings in the time before centrally-heated homes. As Sara Heiser Reigle of Heiser's Crossroads, Union County remarked, "You certainly knew when you had slept under one (because of their heaviness)." In the winter months, one or two haps would have been used on every bed along with blankets, coverlets and other quilts.

If haps or comforts were as common as early estate inventories and contemporary oral interview suggest, why are they not studied

Figure 3. Seebold family hap c. 1890. Pieced cotton with figured cotton back. Back is turned to front as edge treatment. Tied with white cotton thread. The filling is quite thick and of wool. Collection of Margaret Seebold. Photo: Terry Wild Studios.

and appreciated along with other types of quilts? I would surmise because they are not naturally brought forth by their owners who consider them too dark, too heavy, too ordinary and often too worn to be shown. In their old age they often were relegated to the sleigh or spring wagon, the hunting cabin, or used as last minute padding or insulation. I would also suggest that they are rarely illustrated (with few exceptions such as Ruth McKendry's *Traditional Quilts and Bed Coverings* published in Canada in 1979) because they do not fit into the present concept of what is salable, collectable, and therefore showable. But no matter what the dictates of the collecting world are, we as quilt scholars must pay them their deserved attention and seek them out within our respective state and regional projects.

Based on work not only in Pennsylvania and Canada but more recently in New Mexico, the hap or comfort (there known as the

"britches," "suggan," "hunting," "camp," "cabin," or "fishing" quilt), is there to be studied and in great numbers.¹¹ That, in areas where tough, rough and ready quilts are needed, they still are being made by contemporary traditional quiltmakers but now of trouser leg trimmings, denim castoffs, and double knits.

Notes and References:

1. From unpublished research of Eve Granick on Pennsylvania's Amish.
2. Many areas where the full range of bed coverings has been examined show that comforts or haps were made in great numbers. The research effort undertaken by the Museum of International Folk Art throughout the state of New Mexico in the summer of 1985 is the most recent example. Of the seventy-five quiltmakers seen in every part of the state by fieldworkers Jeannette Lasansky and Nora Pickens, all recalled and many had made this heavy type of bed covering; some still do.
3. Interview with Lysle Apple Ingalls October 1983 at the Frederick Mennonite Home in Frederick, Pennsylvania.
4. A folder purchased for thirty pence at the Quilter's Patch, 82 Gilly Gate, York, England by Mary Susan Hannan of Washington, D.C.
5. Letter from Mary Susan Nannan, 1985.
6. The only books that illustrate or discuss a body of comforts are Ruth McKendry, *Traditional Quilts and Bed Coverings*. (Toronto: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1979) and the author's *In the Heart of Pennsylvania/19th and 20th Century Quilting Traditions*. (Lewisburg, Pennsylvania: Oral Traditions Project, 1985).
7. Averil Colby, *Quilting* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971); Mavis Fitzrandolph, *Traditional Quilting: Its Story and Practice* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1954); *Notes on Quilting* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1949); Anne Ward, "Quilting in the North of England," *A Journal of the Society for Folk Life Studies*, 1966, pp. 75-81.

8. Alan G. Keyser (see his "Beds, Bedding, Bedsteads, and Sleep," *The Quarterly of the Pennsylvania German Society*, The Pennsylvania German Society, Breinigsville, Pennsylvania. October 1978, pp. 1-28) and other scholars of Pennsylvania-German material culture maintain that quilting was a skill acquired by the Pennsylvania Germans from their English speaking neighbors and that the earliest documented Pennsylvania-German quilt, made by Barbara Schenken, dates from 1814, one hundred and thirty-three years after their arrival in the Commonwealth. See also Susan Burrows Swan, "Household Textiles" in *The Art of the Pennsylvania-Germans* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1983) and Beatrice B. Garvan and Charles F. Hummel, *The Pennsylvania-Germans / A Celebration of Their Arts 1683-1853* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1983).
9. "Make Use of the Scraps" by Lisena in *The National Stockman and Farmer*, February 28, 1889, p. 916.
10. *Good Housekeeping*, March 1882, p. 130.
11. For the use of "Suggan," see: Suzanne Yabsley, *Texas Quilts, Texas Women* (Texas A & M Press, 1984). Comforts were called "soft quilts" in the *Progressive Farmer* of 1886, according to Erma Kirkpatrick, "Quilts, Quilting and the *Progressive Farmer*."