

# Uncoverings 1985

Volume 6 of  
the Research Papers of  
the American Quilt Study Group

Edited by Sally Garoutte

## Quilts for Union Soldiers in the Civil War

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On April 20, 1861, five days after President Abraham Lincoln issued the call for 75,000 militia, a group of ladies in Cleveland, Ohio met "to inquire how the charity of women could best serve her country in its impending peril." Two companies of city militia had already left for Washington, D.C., so the ladies took up a collection to aid the soldiers' families, some of whom had been left in desperate circumstances. Two days later, the ladies met to prepare bandages and lint, a dressing for wounds made from scraped or unraveled linen. A gentleman from the nearby military camp interrupted their efforts to inform them that one thousand volunteers from nearby districts were marching into camp. Expecting to be fully equipped in Cleveland, these men "had brought no blankets, and had now the prospect of passing a sharp April night uncovered on the ground." The ladies of Cleveland quickly procured carriages and set out on a door-to-door "blanket raid." They found that "a word of explanation sufficed to bring out delicate rose blankets, chintz quilts, thick counterpanes, and by nightfall seven hundred and twenty-nine blankets were carried into camp. Next morning the work resumed, and before night every volunteer in Camp Taylor had been provided for."<sup>1</sup>

Now aware of the lack of necessities, the women obtained army flannel from the nearby post commandant. Local tailors donated patterns and their cutters' services. Merchants lent sewing machines and the YMCA offered workspace. The women turned out 1000 shirts in two days. Then they participated in the ill-advised fad of making havelocks, linen cap covers such as British soldiers wore for protection from the sun. They produced enough for each northern Ohio regiment. Looking around for further work, they began

gathering hospital supplies for the sick troops at Camp Taylor. Soon they elected officers and established committees for hospital clothing and bedding, bandages and lint, fruit and groceries. By June 1861, they formally organized as the Ladies' Aid Society of Cleveland. Similar series of events took place in other cities across the North.<sup>2</sup> Women, sending their loved ones off to war, eagerly sought ways to contribute to their well-being. Their great desire to help spared the government any necessity of having to gain support. It is estimated that more than 20,000 soldiers' aid societies were formed in the entire country, with approximately two-thirds of them in the North.<sup>3</sup> Aid society members cut, sewed, and knitted thousands of articles for Northern soldiers during the four years of the Civil War, including significant numbers of quilts and comforters.

Northern women had long been used to group work for worthy causes. Therefore, with the framework for service already in place, "home mission societies, church sociables, sewing circles, and various benevolent organizations were converted into Soldiers' Aid Societies without change of organization. A vote of the members to work for sick and wounded soldiers while the war should last, was all the formality necessary. This enabled them to enter at once upon their new duties."<sup>4</sup> A lady from Wisconsin recalls "as a rule the women who had been prominent in the earlier organizations, became the leaders in the aid societies, so that the movement... went rapidly forward."<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to the women, the Federal government found itself totally unprepared for even a peacetime provision of clothing, food, shelter and medical supplies for the huge number of men called up so rapidly. Clothing and bedding became especially critical, for these items could not successfully be foraged for and took a good deal of time to prepare. The primitive industrial conditions of the wholesale trade, coupled with a shortage of prepared textiles, made efficient manufacture a slow development. The Federal government urged the states to clothe and equip their own volunteers and to forward the bills. In spite of the best efforts of contractors and government agencies, the army could not be fully equipped for all occasions through official channels. Throughout the war, the government depended on philanthropic effort to supplement its provision of food, clothing, shelter, and medical supplies.<sup>6</sup>

Early efforts to help soldiers had a local emphasis. Towns sent donations directly to local regiments or units. But as difficulties of transportation and mailing mounted, it became increasingly necessary to organize a more efficient system of getting donated supplies to their proper destinations. Local groups began to send their contributions through state commissions and national agencies such as the U.S. Sanitary Commission, the Western Sanitary Commission, or the Christian Commission.

According to Charles Stille, about 7,000 of the local soldiers' aid societies served as auxiliaries of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, the largest private national agency channeling donated supplies to soldiers.<sup>7</sup> This agency committed itself to a national effort to help any needy soldier regardless of his background—including enemy wounded. It believed that work done in an orderly, disciplined fashion assured the best interests of the soldier. By the end of the war, the value of women's contributions made through the U.S. Sanitary Commission totaled \$25,000,000. The effort took the cooperation of thousands of women of all ranks and stations who worked their volunteer efforts into the routine of their daily lives. Women committed to the philosophy of helping any Union soldier developed a national spirit and a will to win. By 1863, a Sanitary Commission officer felt that "while our Government has one great army in the field, of those who are pouring out their life-blood in its defense, the Sanitary Commission has in the home field another great army, composed of the mothers and sisters, wives and sweet-hearts of our brave soldiers, working scarcely less earnestly and efficiently for the same great end."<sup>8</sup>

The Women's Central Association of Relief, organized in New York City in April 1861, played an instrumental role in the formation of the U.S. Sanitary Commission. This association sent four male representatives to Washington, D.C. to find out what their organization could do for the war effort. The representatives included Henry W. Bellows, minister of a large Unitarian Church in New York City, and Elisha Harris, a doctor much interested in sanitary work. In Washington, D.C. these men became convinced of the soundness of their idea to establish a sanitary commission, similar to a British example formed to improve conditions during the Crimean War. They made their way through the Washington bureaucracy



and President Lincoln officially approved their goals on June 13, 1861. The newly formed U.S. Sanitary Commission opened an office in the capital and began work. It planned to investigate troop and hospital facilities and to advise the Medical Bureau and War Department on how to improve sanitary conditions in the army.<sup>9</sup>

The Commission did not originally intend to distribute donated supplies. However, contributions from the women in New York and from other societies poured into its office following the disaster of Bull Run in July 1861. The Commission officials, well aware of the government's deficiencies and inadequacies, deviated from their purposes of inquiry and advice and began distributing the badly needed supplies. One need only read about the terrible conditions following this battle to understand why the Commission added relief work to its original purposes.<sup>10</sup>

After becoming committed to relief work, the Sanitary Commission hired relief agents who worked in the field with the sanitary inspectors. These agents reported to Executive Secretary Frederick Law Olmstead in the East, or to Secretary John S. Newberry in charge of the West. These men, in turn, made needs known to branch or regional organizations of women (and sometimes men) located in major cities. By 1863 the Commission had branches in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Chicago, Columbus, Detroit, Louisville, Pittsburg, Buffalo, and Baltimore. Each of these branches was a central receiving center for the local aid societies of the surrounding districts. Some branches collected from as many as 1200 auxiliaries.<sup>11</sup>

The amount of clothing and bedding shipped, received and distributed by the regional branches and local societies is staggering. It is even more impressive when one remembers that most articles had to be hand-made by the donors. Local newspapers regularly published lists of donors and the articles they contributed. Editors also printed appeals for more goods, reports of aid societies' meetings, and publicity for fund raising events such as festivals, suppers, and dime societies. Utilizing the paper, local aid society officers urged women to attend work sessions to help make and send needed materials on a systematic, rather than spasmodic basis. They wanted women to consider themselves enlisted for the duration of the war. As the Akron, Ohio officers stated, they expected members to be present at meetings "unless detained by more sacred motives than

*Figure 1. This engraving, which illustrates the interior of an unidentified office of a Soldiers' Aid Society, appeared in The Tribute Book by Frank B. Goodrich (1865).*

patriotism, or more urgent duties than helping to save our country."<sup>12</sup>

When crates and boxes sent by local societies arrived at a branch office, workers unpacked them and checked the contents against the enclosed invoice before recording the contributions in the branch records. A typical box sent by a local auxiliary to a branch office might include "15 comforters, 9 blankets, 29 shirts, 9 pairs drawers, 14 pillows, 15 sheets, 30 pillow cases, 11 cushions, 21 cushion covers, 38 towels, 3 double gowns, 12 napkins, 12 handkerchiefs, 13 pairs socks, 2 Testaments, 1 Bible, books, magazines, papers, and rags."<sup>13</sup> Many boxes also included food items. Branch volunteers stamped all unmarked textile items with the name of the branch commission in indelible ink. (See Figures 1 and 2.) The branch secretary sent an acknowledgement and thank you back to the local society. This letter included advice as well as encouragement to keep up the good efforts. At the branch the donated supplies could be handed out to needy or sick soldiers on furlough or in

nearby soldiers' homes, but workers sorted and repacked most items. Associate members of the Sanitary Commission helped ship the repacked boxes of goods to temporary field depots or to one of the central supply depots established in Washington, D.C., Louisville and (earlier) New York City. From these depots supplies could be quickly shipped to camps, battlefields and to field, post, regimental, and general hospitals.<sup>14</sup>

Relief supplies for sick and wounded soldiers always included large quantities of bedding—quilts, comforts, blankets, sheets, and pillowcases. Careful record keeping and reporting by the men and women at each end of the supply line built accurate records of the amounts of supplies shipped and received. Regional and branch records of donations and shipments reveal, for example, that during the year 1863, people contributed 5,459 quilts to the Hartford, Connecticut Association.<sup>15</sup> The Sanitary Commission gave out supplies on the field or in hospitals by requisition only, a practice often criticized by outsiders but in keeping with military protocol and the Commission's belief in disciplined management as an essential ingredient of their work. This type of record shows, for example, that Grant's army at Vicksburg received 9,029 sheets and 2,429 comforts from May through August, 1863<sup>16</sup> During the month of May 1864, the Commission issued 2,932 blankets and 1,203 quilts to the Armies of Virginia.<sup>17</sup>

Each Union soldier was to be furnished with two wool blankets every other year.<sup>18</sup> However, many blankets issued early in the war proved to be of inferior quality and fell apart when used or wet. Unscrupulous contractors made large fortunes on such "shoddy goods."<sup>19</sup> Quality controls improved, but the shortage of warm covers remained acute as the cold weather season approached. In October 1861, U.S. Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs issued a call for contributions of blankets:

The troops in the field need blankets. The supply in the country is exhausted. Men spring to arms faster than the mills can manufacture, and large quantities ordered from abroad have not yet arrived. To relieve pressing necessities, contributions are invited from the surplus stores of families. The regulation army blanket weighs five pounds; but good sound woolen blankets weighing not less than four pounds, will be gladly received at the offices of the United States

*Figure 2. This plate, which originally appeared on page 70 of Our Acre and Its Harvest, illustrates the indelible ink stamp used to mark textiles at the Soldiers' Aid Society of Northern Ohio (Cleveland Branch of the U.S. Sanitary Commission).*

Quartermasters in the principal towns of the loyal States, and applied to the use of the troops. To such as have blankets which they can spare but cannot afford to give, the full market value of suitable blankets, delivered as above, will be paid.<sup>20</sup>

With inspectors in the field, the Sanitary Commission had anticipated such a shortage and on October 1, 1861 had issued a letter of appeal to the loyal women of America urging all neighborhoods without an aid society to organize one and to send committees from "house to house and store to store to obtain contributions in materials suitable to be made up, or money for the purchase of such materials." The Commission's list of most needed articles included "blankets for single beds; quilts, of cheap material, about seven feet long by fifty inches wide."<sup>21</sup> The Soldiers' Aid Society of Northern Ohio (formerly the Cleveland Soldiers' Aid Society) suggested making "comfortables, 8 feet long, 4 feet wide, of cheap dark print,

wadded with cotton.”<sup>22</sup> In December 1861, the Sanitary Commission stated that “never, probably, was so large an army as well supplied at a similar period of a great war,” but noted that in the regiments it had inspected, 75 percent of the soldiers had one good blanket, 20 percent had two blankets, but of inferior quality, and 5 percent had never received a blanket.<sup>23</sup>

Women, hearing of the lack of bedding, often sent their sons and husbands off to war with a quilt from the family supply. During this first winter, “long hoarded treasures of fine linen spun by grandmothers, and relics of revolutionary times, which had been reserved in all previous emergencies, now came to light and were freely offered.”<sup>24</sup> People generally acknowledged that many heirloom quality quilts had been donated to the cause.

However, other quilts offered for Northern soldiers could not be classified as either of heirloom quality or newly made to suggested measurements. In November 1861, Mrs. A.M. Coburn of the Akron Soldiers’ Aid Society noted in her letter to Mrs. Rouse of the Cleveland Branch that “you will find some of the old quilts much worn and soiled. You will of course use your discretion whether to send them to a hospital or to Camp Wade.”<sup>25</sup>

Some donated quilts resulted from group projects where each contributor made a patchwork square. Children in schools or “alert clubs” sometimes worked on such projects in addition to collecting and raising funds for the local societies.<sup>26</sup> In 1864, a group of school children made patchwork blocks “with a white center, on which the name and age of the one who gave it was to be written” with indelible pencil. In this class the girls sewed most of the blocks, but one boy “sewed his own block with the nicest little stitches you ever saw.” The other boys earned the \$3.00 for cotton and batting. With group effort, the children finished “thirty-five blocks in the quilt: thirty-four of them had names and ages on them—none over twelve years—and on the centre one was written “Bradford County. For any soldier who loves little children.” The class sent the quilt to the Sanitary Commission with a note urging the recipient to correspond. In November 1864, a Minnesota soldier in Tennessee reported that, being unable to get a blanket from Uncle Sam, he had gone to the Sanitary Commission and been given “that splendid quilt that your pennies and busy little fingers made.” He noted “how highly I value it, how carefully I shall preserve it, and how I

shall take it home with me (if I don't wear it out, and live to go home)...<sup>27</sup>

Such letters provided important encouragement for men, women, and children laboring on the home front. Local newspapers regularly published letters from soldiers. Ladies could read that their men "are glad to feel and know, that they are not forgotten by their friends at home, but feel extremely thankful, for the valuable supplies they have received from time to time."<sup>28</sup> The *Sanitary Commission Bulletin* and the *Sanitary Reporter*, official organs of the Commission, published letters from field agents which informed the women back home that soldiers appreciated their efforts. One sanitary agent reported that he had just seen the wounded "lifted from rough blankets and undressed from the soiled clothes of march and battle, and laid, in your clean sheets and shirts, upon your comfortable quilts and pillows."<sup>29</sup> Another reported giving out over 1,800 blankets and 900 quilts to alleviate suffering and cold and assured women that "could they have observed the change produced when the soiled and bloody garments were replaced by clean and warm clothing which they had sent, they would be eager to replenish our storehouses and keep our hands filled with the means to accomplish these purposes."<sup>30</sup>

The branch societies sometimes sent their own female representatives to check on hospitals or to help on hospital transport ships. These women returned to give eye witness accounts of conditions at the front. One woman wrote her fellow-workers at home that "blessings on the Aid Societies were invoked when the stores of sheets and comfortable quilts were brought from their hiding place, and the cots made, one after another, by their cleanliness and comfort, as inviting as those of a fine hotel."<sup>31</sup>

Difficulties in transporting supplies to distant battlefields and the rigors of campaigns in which supplies became lost or discarded in the heat of battle, meant that men sometimes lacked essential supplies, including bedding. The Sanitary Commission tried to anticipate and have supplies on hand near the site of an impending battle. But still reports would be sent back that sick and wounded Union soldiers could be found "lying on bare floors mostly without blankets, pillows, mattresses, or even straw. Their clothing fetid with filth and blood, without proper or sufficient food," and "Government supplies were wholly inadequate to the wants of these men

even if they had not been wounded."<sup>32</sup> Such reports kept the problems of the soldiers uppermost in women's minds. Never could women rest assured that their men were well taken care of. Thus their efforts continued unabated throughout the war. One woman pinned a note to her quilt stating "my son is in the army. Whoever is made warm by this quilt, which I have worked on for six days and most of six nights, let him remember his mother's love."<sup>33</sup> As women labored to make and send supplies, as well as carry out their other duties, many probably felt like the volunteer who wrote "I am so weary tonight that I have begged the assistance of my daughter in making out the invoice which I enclose."<sup>34</sup>

Huge battles in the summer of 1862 drained supplies. By the fall of 1862, nearly one million soldiers served in the Union army. The army had a constant sickness rate of one-seventh of its total. This meant that over 100,000 sick and wounded soldiers filled the hospitals, almost totally dependent on gifts for their supply of special foods, bedding and hospital clothes.<sup>35</sup> Women set aside frivolous needlework and responded to increased needs. At a county fair held in Ohio in the fall of 1862, a reporter noted that scarcely any of the usual fancy work articles could be seen on exhibit. Instead, fairgoers might see in every corner, on every shelf and platform and in every part of the Hall the sad effects of war. And well it is, for although fancy stitching and sewing are lain aside, and the brush and pallet have been forgotten, yet thousands of march-worn, sick and wounded soldiers will testify that the good ladies of our land have not been idle, and that although the handy work is not seen as much in Floral Halls as in years past, still they have been busy in preparing articles of diet and clothing for those truly in want.<sup>36</sup>

An overwhelmed Medical Bureau gratefully received the systematic aid of the Sanitary Commission on battlefield, in camp and hospital. Weary surgeons sometimes took time to write branches of the Sanitary Commission acknowledging their indebtedness. One stated that he "particularly noticed a large invoice of quilts from your society, received here just when fly-blown blankets could not be endured another day, and one of the most timely of all of your favors."<sup>37</sup>

Throughout the fall and winter of 1862-63, the demand for bedding continued. In January 1863, the Soldiers' Aid Society of



Northern Ohio (Cleveland) informed their 500 auxiliaries that: Sheets and Quilts are now very much wanted. The latter should be seven feet long, four and a half feet wide, and may be made of old calico or delaine, with cotton quilted firmly between, so that it will not lose its place on being washed. Carpeting cut into pieces seven feet long, four feet wide, thoroughly washed and bound around, makes a good bed covering. It must be remembered that hospital cots are very narrow, and second hand bedding, before being sent to us, should be cut down to a proper size. Two half quilts of ordinary size can be altered into three hospital quilts. The same advice will apply to half-worn sheets. . . . the yet unsupplied wants of hundreds of our suffering friends and brothers, whose cries ascending from hard-fought fields or ill-conditioned hospitals, should incite our utmost exertions.<sup>38</sup>

The final winter of the war, like the preceding ones, "brought on a heavy and sudden pressure for blankets, quilts, underclothing and shoes." Hospitals found supplies of quilts most welcome and "by far preferable to the rough woolen blankets."<sup>39</sup> In January 1865, the Sanitary Commission reported the need for "flannel clothing, bed quilts, socks and mittens."<sup>40</sup> As the war dragged on, growing numbers of destitute families of absent soldiers, increasing numbers of widows and orphans, disabled veterans, loyal refugees from the South, and freedmen also needed material aid.<sup>41</sup>

Northern families found it increasingly difficult to supply all the needed items. In 1862 about 90 percent of the supplies had been donated, often from goods people had on hand. However, by 1863 supplies in homes had become exhausted. Often aid societies needed to purchase raw materials which could be given out and made up by their members.<sup>42</sup> They found cotton and wool in scarce supply and increasingly expensive. Calico cost forty to fifty cents a yard.<sup>43</sup> The Cleveland Branch gave donated quilts a value of \$4.00 each, approximately the cost of the materials used to make them.<sup>44</sup> In addition to local needs for money, the Sanitary Commission needed cash to continue paying their agents, to transport supplies, and to purchase in bulk the huge quantities of food they provided for hospitals. A timely and significant monetary gift from the state of California helped to keep the Commission's work going.<sup>45</sup>

To help raise needed funds, women decided to try their traditional



fund raising techniques on a grand scale. Beginning in the fall of 1863 and continuing through 1864 and 1865, they organized great Sanitary Fairs in cities across the country. Mary Livermore and Jane Hoge of the Chicago Branch planned the first fair which opened in Chicago on October 27, 1863. It raised \$78,000 and set off a chain reaction. Boston held a fair in December which netted \$145,000. Cincinnati's fair started on December 21st and made \$235,000. On Washington's birthday in 1864, fairs opened in Albany, Brooklyn, Buffalo, and Cleveland. The New York Metropolitan Fair, the largest of all, took place in April 1864 and netted \$1,200,000. Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Pittsburgh, as well as many smaller cities, also sponsored successful fairs. This series of Sanitary Fairs raised an amazing \$4,500,000 for the cause.<sup>46</sup>

The planning, preparation and execution of these huge projects involved hundreds of men and women from all walks of life. Humble farmers from outlying districts linked hands with the "creme de la creme" of metropolitan society in a concerted effort to make each city's fair a grand success. The fairs became regional social events and provided a means of cultivating patriotism as the war became prolonged and depressing. Some fair committees erected special buildings which they decorated with greens, flags, patriotic motifs and pictures of military and civilian leaders. Fairs opened with parades and ceremonies. In a spirit of friendly competition each city tried to outdo the others, but they also cooperated by sharing ideas. Branches sent delegates to visit fairs in other cities. People often contributed to several fairs. The *New York Times* devoted a special daily column to fair announcements.

As previously noted, patriotic women laid aside leisure pastimes of fancy needlework when they turned to making garments and doing plain sewing for hospitals. The great fairs gave an excuse to do fancy work once again. A ladies' bazaar featuring a great variety of fancy articles "formed the staple of each Sanitary Fair."<sup>47</sup> People made and bought frivolous items without feeling guilty because the money raised went to a worthy cause. Quilts ranked among the more expensive items made and donated to the fairs. At Cleveland, quilts and other fancy items could be seen on display in country booths in the great bazaar section of the fair. One reporter noted that "silk patchwork quilting of elaborate fashion, woolwork, pin cushions

*Figure 3. This photograph by M. Stadtfeld gives a view of the Hartford Booth at the New York Metropolitan Fair. There are patchwork pillows and a patchwork quilt among the items offered for sale. (From A Record of the Metropolitan Fair, opposite p. 178).*

and cobweb knitting tempt the purses of buyers.”<sup>48</sup> As in all Commission work, volunteers kept records of donations to the fairs. Records of the Cleveland fair show that the branch received six crib quilts, twenty-one bed quilts, and three silk bed quilts as well as smaller quilted items. Donors placed a value on articles they gave. They valued the quilts from \$1.75 to \$18.00, for an average of \$7.00 each. Silk quilts received values of \$30 to \$50 each. An American Flag quilt donated by the Christian Commission of Michigan had a value of \$15.00. The most highly prized fancy item, a magnificent afghan, listed originally for \$125.00, an amount later raised to \$200.00.<sup>49</sup> Although controversial, some fairs used raffling as a means of selling expensive items which were beyond the purchasing power of most fairgoers, since the annual income for a family was about \$500 a year.

The reports of the Great Western Sanitary Fair in Cincinnati gave a few descriptive details about quilts. At the booth of the Willow Glen Aid Society, a reporter “observed a silk patchwork quilt, lined with silk, valued at \$50. This quilt was made by the ladies of the

society in one week, expressly for the Fair. It is a beautiful quilt, of the 'log-cabin' pattern."<sup>50</sup> Another reporter mentions that this quilt was to be raffled off at \$100.<sup>51</sup> The Morris Chapel Soldiers' Aid Society displayed "a silk log-cabin quilt, by Mrs. Glenn, an elderly lady."<sup>52</sup> And in the booth of the Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church, fairgoers could see a "half-grown" marble-topped bureau and matching bedstead "furnished with a silk log-cabin quilt, and all the other indispensables of a real bed."<sup>53</sup>

The splendor of the ladies' bazaar at the Metropolitan Fair proved to be, so reports claimed, beyond the descriptive powers of the male reporters sent to cover it. The fair's historian describes the great hall as "a realm of bewildering profusion, where one was smothered with afghans and sofa pillows, buried amid pincushions, tidies, and glove-boxes, and triumphed over by wax-dolls and fate-ladies." He goes on to say that "it was a true region of the indescribable, and those who went in to spy out the land, if they came back at all, came with no report."<sup>54</sup> Engravings and photographs show patchwork for sale and one record mentions "a silk quilt, representing a flag, made by a lady seventy years old."<sup>55</sup> (See Figures 3 and 4.) The Woolsey family of New York City made and donated large quantities of supplies to the Commission. As the time approached for the city's Metropolitan Fair, Mrs. Woolsey wrote a letter to her two daughters serving as nurses. She described family preparations for the fair and reported that they were making "three silk comfortables, all spandy new, none of your old gowns, lined with silk and beautifully quilted in scrolls and medallions by a Fishkill woman, and trimmed with ribbon quillings... I dare say we shall all do our full part, both in making and purchasing."<sup>56</sup>

At the Brooklyn and Long Island Fair, visitors could look up and see "a spectacle of wonderful brilliancy... afghans, quilts, and spreads, of the most vivid colors" draped along the circular balcony of the Academy where the event was held.<sup>57</sup> The fair committee sent several of the most noteworthy articles to President Lincoln as gifts. An anonymous donor gave \$179.00 toward the "quilt for the President."<sup>58</sup> This "superb silk bedspread... formed of the National Colors, and emblazoned with the Stars and Stripes and the National Eagle" had been made by an eighty-one year old woman. On April 1, 1864, Lincoln wrote expressing his "most cordial thanks for

*Figure 4. This photograph by J. Gurney and Son of New York City shows a portion of the exhibits in the Main Hall, 14th Street Building, at the Metropolitan Fair held in April 1864. There is a quilt in the center booth. (From A Record of the Metropolitan Fair, opposite p. 122).*

the beautiful present transmitted by you, and for the kind and graceful manner in which it was conveyed.”<sup>59</sup>

The New England Kitchen became one of the most popular spaces at the Brooklyn and Long Island Fair. The committee decorated this section with genuine antiques in order “to present a faithful picture of New England farm-house life of the last century.” Tableaux events featured in this setting included a quilting party with “‘old folks’ industriously stitching on the quilt during the afternoon, while the ‘young folks’ were summoned in to close the evening.”<sup>60</sup> (See Figure 5.) A few weeks later, New York City’s Metropolitan Fair featured a Knickerbocker Kitchen. By the 1860s, urban dwellers considered quilting a country craft of nostalgic interest.<sup>61</sup> The Brooklyn Fair closed with a “calico ball” to raise money for soldiers’ families. More than half the ladies attending wore plain calico dresses, many of which they later gave to the wives and daughters of soldiers.<sup>62</sup>

## NEW ENGLAND KITCHEN: A QUILTING PARTY.

*Figure 5. This engraving from Frank B. Goodrich's The Tribute Book, shows the old-fashioned costume of the women quilting in the colonial settings which were a feature of the Brooklyn and Long Island and the New York Sanitary Fairs of 1864.*

Most fair committees arranged a museum or room of curiosities which featured a profusion of antiques, exotic treasures, and battle-field souvenirs lent for the occasion. Here valued quilts might be displayed next to Japanese and Chinese artifacts. In New York, the Curiosity Shop display included "a quilt that had once covered the beautiful Mary of Scotland . . . and one made by one of the earlier among the American sovereign people—a patchwork quilt of calico—bought during the Revolutionary War, when calico was a

dollar and a quarter a yard."<sup>63</sup> The Great Central Fair in Philadelphia displayed relics believed to have belonged to George Washington. These included "a bed-quilt, of elaborate patchwork, sewed by Mrs. Washington herself, after the fashion of that time."<sup>64</sup>

Of special interest is a money raising event used at the Cleveland Fair. The report states that in a "busy corner hangs the 'crazy bed quilt,' a grotesque piece of newspaper patchwork, which is sold by lot every day, with the express condition that the unlucky possessor is not obliged to keep it, but will be allowed to present it to the fair. A considerable sum of money and a great deal of fun are realized by this transaction which takes place every noon just as the clock strikes twelve."<sup>65</sup>

Not all special quilts went on exhibit at the fairs. Some women worked on special quilts for the soldiers. The Cleveland Branch reported that "'album quilts' were a favorite conceit of sewing circles, where each lady would contribute a patchwork square made from scraps of her own dresses, writing upon it her name and a patriotic sentiment or cheering couplet."<sup>66</sup> The Hartsville, Pennsylvania Society made up twenty quilts, some of them "album quilts." They sent these to their contact, Mary Pollack, who distributed them in Washington, D.C. hospitals. A regular visitor to one of these hospitals found a ward "quite in a commotion over some Album Quilts Miss Pollack had been distributing." One of the recipients, who had lost his leg in the Battle of the Wilderness, wished to take his quilt home with him. The visitor wrote the Hartsville Society stating that "if the ladies and gentlemen who have ornamented his quilt with their names think he is deserving of it for a keepsake, he would appreciate the gift highly."<sup>67</sup>

A quilt made in 1864 in Green Bay, Wisconsin turned up again in 1884 "in the cabin of a negro family living near Bentonville. The piece that remained contained eight blocks, each of which had in the centre a white cross running diagonally, while the outside pieces were of colored calico, bordered with white. On each square was written the name of its maker in indelible ink; a few of the blocks bore also timeworn inscriptions." The reporter felt that the verses on the quilt "illustrate the sturdy and uncompromising spirit of the makers of the quilts:"

For the gay and happy soldier  
 We're contented as a dove,  
 But the man who will not enlist  
 Never can gain our love.

If rebels attack you, do run with the quilt  
 And safe to some fortress convey it;  
 For o'er the gaunt body of some old sesesh  
 We did not intend to display it.

'Twas made for brave boys, who went from the West;  
 And swiftly the fair fingers flew,  
 While each stitch, as it went to its place in the quilt,  
 Was a smothered "God bless you, boys," too.<sup>68</sup>

Early in the war ladies made company flags and presented them to local units leaving home. They also made American flags. One family used "stripes of muslin and turkey-red calico, and a piece of the daughter's blue apron (for cotton cloth was dear) formed the background for the stars, which were six-pointed and patterned after a drawing by the younger son."<sup>69</sup> Northern patriots prominently displayed the American flag and patriotism prompted the making of flag quilts. In April 1865, the New Haven, Connecticut Society "received from a country town a quilt made in the form of a flag—red and white stripes and a blue field with the white stars sewed on, all nicely quilted." They sent "this Union quilt" on with a request for acknowledgement. In May, a Pennsylvania soldier at Fairfax Station, Virginia replied that "the first night the flag quilt was spread over me, I did dream of the loved ones far away."<sup>70</sup> The New Haven Society received another flag quilt fashioned from a flag made by a mother and son shortly after the war began. The son later lost his life at Chancellorsville. When Lincoln died, his family mournfully draped the flag he had helped make and then a sister "converted it into a quilt, and wishes it sent to some one of our released prisoners still in hospital."<sup>71</sup>

Women made quilts for Northern soldiers from the beginning of the Civil War until the very end. They made many utility quilts of cheap practical materials which were meant to be used up keeping soldiers warm. However, in desperate times, families relinquished

treasured textiles for the good of the cause. Quilts purchased at Sanitary Fairs probably received careful treatment, but most of the quilts made for soldiers did not survive the war or hard use in the years which followed. Many became lost or destroyed in the heat of battle. Refugees and destitute families quickly picked up quilts laid aside by marching soldiers trying to lighten their loads. The Sanitary Commission worked to install washing procedures for hospital textiles and saved some quilts for a second use by boiling them in kettles of water.<sup>72</sup> But, when field hospitals moved, they often left behind piles of quilts and comforts caked with blood and dirt. All this helps explain why so few Civil War era quilts still exist, in comparison with the numbers thought to have been made before and during the war.

It is impossible to know exactly how many quilts and comforts women made and donated in this four year period. No one attempted to make a grand total of recorded donations. However, it is possible to make some estimates based on data available. As aid societies gradually ended their work after the war, they often tallied up the records of their achievements and sent in reports. Some branches circulated summary reports. Others published reports in books. Of course, some records became misplaced or lost. Archival holdings of U.S. Sanitary Commission records are sizeable, though fairly widely scattered. Remaining records show that Chicago received a final total of 15,131 donated comforts.<sup>73</sup> Cincinnati reported a total of 13,892 comforts.<sup>74</sup> Cleveland's final totals included 13,473 comforts and quilts.<sup>75</sup> The New York Central Association ended with a record of 26,408 quilts.<sup>76</sup> The final report of the Philadelphia Branch recorded 4,986 comfortables and quilts.<sup>77</sup> These figures are from only five of the twelve branches, but the total is 73,890. Even if these five branches had provided over half of all bedding taken in by the Sanitary Commission, the total would have amounted to over 125,000 quilts and comforts.

Another way of estimating gives similar results. By October 1864 the Western Department of the Sanitary Commission had disbursed 50,177 comforts and quilts.<sup>78</sup> At a meeting in November 1864, delegates from the Eastern division, representing New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and parts of Vermont, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Massachusetts and Canada estimated that they had issued 60,000 quilts.<sup>79</sup> This would be a conservative estimate for the East,



as not all branches sent representatives to this meeting. Together these figures give a total of about 110,000 comforts and quilts issued in the Western and Eastern divisions by late 1864, for an average of about 30,000 per year. Since quilts continued to be issued throughout the following winter or for another six months, an estimated 15,000 more can be added to the total, suggesting that the U.S. Sanitary Commission distributed at least 125,000 quilts and comforts.

The Commission records probably account for only half the number of quilts and comforts donated during the war because aid societies also donated supplies through personal representatives and through other state and national agencies. Contemporaries felt that "not more than half of the supplies and stores collected throughout the country have ever been recorded; that is, that fully half have been employed in such a way as to preclude their entering into any general account."<sup>80</sup> Research in northern Ohio records upholds this assessment as fair. For example, the Canton, Ohio Society noted that while they forwarded 255 packages to the Cleveland Branch, "many boxes were sent direct to regiments in the field, to hospitals at the front, and to State Relief agencies, with some supplies of money and stores to the Freedmen."<sup>81</sup> In addition, Canton fitted regiments for service, and aided soldiers in transit. Some societies sent all their contributions outside the U.S. Sanitary Commission channels.<sup>82</sup> Thus it would seem that 250,000 quilts and comforts is a conservative estimate of the number of quilts women made for Union soldiers in the Civil War. This number is even more impressive when one remembers that in addition to quilts and comforts, women of the North made thousands of other items of bedding, clothing, and food for the soldiers.

The material aid provided by the soldiers' aid societies helped to significantly reduce the death toll of this war. Clothing and bedding played an important role in the success or failure of military units.<sup>83</sup> Before the Civil War experts estimated that for every soldier killed in battle, four would die of disease. The efforts of agencies like the Sanitary Commission lowered these statistics to two Union soldiers dying of disease for every one who fell in battle. Some 186,000 Union soldiers died of disease. The total might have been as great as 372,000 without the concerted efforts of the Commissions and aid societies.<sup>84</sup>

A comprehensive history of the aid societies, *per se*, has still not appeared among the 45,000–60,000 books and pamphlets printed on the Civil War. While home front activity received much recognition in its day, later literature emphasized the work of soldiers and politicians, and “workers in benevolent societies were relegated to bit parts.”<sup>85</sup> However, the men and women of the U.S. Sanitary Commission and its branches and auxiliaries acknowledged the mutually beneficial aspects of their joint efforts. Henry W. Bellows, president of the Commission, wrote that “it was another feature of the case that there was no jealousy between women and men in the work, and no disposition to discourage, underate or disassociate from each other.”<sup>86</sup> Using their traditional skills, women moved onto a new plane of responsibility. They became interested in causes outside their immediate circles and experienced the feelings of self-confidence that come from successfully completing a hard task. Women also began to see the power of networking with one another across class, social and regional lines. The New England Women’s Auxiliary Association’s final report comments on this universal cooperation, and states that “rich and poor, wise and simple, cultivated and ignorant, all—people of all descriptions, all orders of taste, every variety of habit, condition, and circumstances, joined hands heartily in the beginning, and have worked together as equals in every respect.”<sup>87</sup> When Henry W. Bellows sent his greetings to the women of the Northwest assembled at the Chicago fair, he compared the women’s work to a “great national quilting party.” He considered:

the States so many patches, each of its own color or stuff, the boundaries of the nation the frame of the work; and at it they have gone, with needles and busy fingers, and their very heart-strings for thread, and sewed and sewed away, adding square to square, and row to row; allowing no piece or part to escape their plan of Union; until the territorial area of the loyal States is all of a piece, first tacked and basted, then sewed and stitched by women’s hands, wet often with women’s tears, and woven in with women’s prayers; and now at length you might truly say the National Quilt—all striped and starred—will tear anywhere sooner than in the seams, which they have joined in a blessed and inseparable unity!<sup>88</sup>

Mary Livermore, co-director of the Northwestern Branch of the Sanitary Commission at Chicago, gives valuable insights from a woman's perspective:

Peace came at last, but during those days of hardship and struggle, the ordinary tenor of women's life had changed. She had developed potencies and possibilities of whose existence she had not been aware, and which surprised her, as it did those who witnessed her marvelous achievements.<sup>89</sup>

Many leaders of this volunteer home army would, like Mary Livermore, provide leadership to other social reform causes, including women's rights and suffrage, during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Very early in the war the editor of the Akron, Ohio newspaper perceived the way the war would change the lives of women as well as men. He predicted that "it is possible, that one of the great benefits which is to grow out of this wicked rebellion, will be the discovery of the important fact that the young ladies of our country can be useful as well as ornamental members of society."<sup>90</sup> From 1861 to 1865 women used their traditional skills to make thousands of quilts and textile items for the soldiers and country they loved. In the process they began to transform their own lives and to change the paths which they would follow.

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