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Signature Quilts and the Quaker Community, 1840–1860

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In the mid-nineteenth century a new quilt form was added to the vocabulary of American quiltmakers: the signature quilt. The idea for these commemorative quilts was seized upon throughout the United States, first in the Middle Atlantic states where they peaked in popularity between 1841 and 1846, and later in New England, New York, Virginia, Ohio, and further west. This study is an examination of a group of forty of these signature quilts made between 1841 and 1860. The quilts were all made in the Delaware Valley, the area surrounding Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, which is at the heart of the geographic region where signature quilts first appeared. The temporal parameters of this research were determined by the quilts, for signature quilts sustained their popularity in the Delaware Valley only through the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Drawn from numerous public and private collections, the quilts range in design and craftsmanship from the average to the extraordinary. The goal of this study was not to isolate unusual quilts, but to locate as many signature quilts as possible and, by comparing their design, authorship, and history of use, to come to an understanding of their role as symbolic artifacts.

The term signature quilt describes any quilt composed of signed blocks. In the time period under consideration this encompasses two types of quilts, the friendship quilt and the album quilt. A friendship quilt is a quilt composed of blocks worked in the same design. This differs from an album quilt, which is an assemblage of different pieced and appliqued patterns. These definitions distinguish friendship and album quilts on the basis of formal composition; however,

in spite of their aesthetic differences, both types of signature quilts were made under similar circumstances for similar reasons.

Signature quilts were commemorative artifacts. Many were made by individuals, either for themselves or as a gift for a family member or friend. Many others were made collaboratively by a group of people for presentation to a member of their community. These quilts were frequently made in acknowledgment of special occasions, such as births, marriages, and retirements, but just as often the only circumstance that a signature quilt celebrated was the friendship that linked the individuals represented on it. This last feature is uniformly shared by the signature quilts made throughout the United States in the nineteenth century. Whether it was a friendship quilt or an album quilt, individually or communally made, every signature quilt served to preserve the memory of relationships that once existed.

The people who participated in the making of a signature quilt symbolically stayed together. Today, it is possible to reconstruct the communities represented on these quilts by tracing individuals through family genealogies, church records, censuses, and newspaper notices. The composite of these individual histories provides a picture of the type of people who made signature quilts, of the relationships that they valued, and of the events that they singled out as significant.

Careful study of the forty quilts discussed here revealed many similarities among them. A friendship quilt begun in 1844 in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, illustrates many of the characteristics of the signature quilts in this study.[1] The quilt was made for Sarah Fisher Jackson and Richard Roberts Green in anticipation of their marriage. Friends and family of the couple contributed a total of sixty-one blocks, all pieced in the Ohio Star pattern, but each made of different plain and printed cottons. The blocks were joined with crisp, new brown chintz sashing, edged with triangles of beige cotton calico, and backed with blue-and-gold glazed, printed cotton. The names of the engaged couple were written on the two center blocks. The other quilt blocks were inscribed with the names of their donors, including those of thirty-four of the witnesses to Sarah and Richard's wedding on March 15, 1848.[2]

The pattern and fabric used in this quilt, the event for which it

was made, and the community that made it are all typical of Delaware Valley signature quilts. Generally, communally made quilts like this one employed one of a few favored pieced patterns, particularly the Album Patch and various star patterns. The blocks were pieced from fabric belonging to the maker, fabric that ideally had strong associations with that person. New, and often very vibrant, fabrics were purchased to join the blocks and back the quilt.

The occasion of a wedding was one of the most popular events commemorated by signature quilts. The departure of an individual from a community, an occurrence often connected to marriage, was another very common inspiration for the making of a signature quilt. Both events involved, to varying degrees, the separation of individuals from their friends and family. Signature quilts were made to commemorate events, and at the same time to preserve for the recipient the memory of a community of which they had once been a part. For example, a friendship quilt was made in 1843 for, and possibly by, Margaret Ann Fenton prior to her marriage to Stephen Dran and her subsequent removal, with him, to New York.[3] The quilt was signed by the bride's friends and family from Buckingham, Pennsylvania, and so became a physical representation of the community that had raised her, and would continue, over distance, to sustain her. Quilts like this one helped to ease disruptive life transitions by giving the recipient a small piece of the community they were leaving to carry with them.

The Jackson-Green and Dran quilts were made by members of the Religious Society of Friends, colloquially known as Quakers. Twenty-one of the forty quilts in this study were made by members of this Christian sect. Examined as a group, these Quaker-made quilts exhibit distinct stylistic and organizational preferences. Of the twenty-one quilts, eighteen are friendship quilts, which is a 6:1 ratio of friendship to album quilts, a sharp contrast with the 2:1 ratio found among the non-Quaker quilts. Another characteristic of these quilts is that they recorded large groups of people, including men and women, and they often represented extended family networks. Non-Quaker quilts usually represented smaller groups composed of women friends. In order to understand why Friends found the idea of memory quilts so compelling and how their quilts were

shaped by and expressive of their beliefs, it is first necessary to understand the origins and philosophy of the Quaker faith.

The Religious Society of Friends was a Christian sect established in England in the mid-seventeenth century by George Fox. Fox's followers became known as Quakers because he bade them "Tremble at the Word of the Lord."[4] Quaker missionaries first came to the American colonies in 1656, establishing Meetings for Worship in Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and Maryland. Friends began to settle in the Delaware Valley in the 1670s, becoming firmly established there with William Penn's selection of that area for his "Holy Experiment" begun in 1681.[5]

The Religious Society of Friends believed that an Inner Light, God's spirit, lay within every person and through that Light religious truth was known. Quakerism rejected mediating forms of worship, such as the use of ritual or scripture to shape and interpret religious experience, and instead relied on the direct apprehension of God. Although the emphasis was on introspection and individual revelation, Friends worshipped silently together, believing that God's presence could be felt more immediately in a group. A strong sense of community was fostered by the practice of group worship. This unity was reinforced by the Quaker belief that all people were equal as they all possessed the Inner Light. Consequently, no social or economic hierarchies were recognized within the Society of Friends, nor was one sex presumed to be superior to the other.[6]

In his book *Friends for 300 Years*, historian Howard Brinton identified what he believed to be the four basic testimonies of Quakerism: simplicity, equality, peace, and community.[7] By adhering to these tenets, Friends hoped to avoid all behavior that contradicted the dictates of Christian love or blocked the direct experience of the Truth. These testimonies manifested themselves in the physical environment as well as in Quaker behavior. Ideally, material possessions sustained a sense of equality by avoiding excesses of worth or quantity.

Plainness of speech and dress was advocated by the Society of Friends as a means of expressing equality and avoiding worldly concerns that could obstruct the Light; however, historians have long been aware of the discrepancy between the material plainness

Figure 1. Ohio Star Friendship Quilt; made for Sarah Fisher Jackson and Richard Roberts Green, 1844–49. Mercer Museum. Photograph courtesy of Winterthur Museum.

encouraged by the founders of the Society of Friends and that practiced, or not practiced, by members of the Society.[8] Quaker furnishings frequently incorporated fine and costly materials, signifying wealth and a certain social rank, into a style that in some way embodied Quaker ideology. Although not always economically or stylistically plain, the objects made and used by Friends were distinctive. Over time, Quakers learned to use the artifactual environment to record their traditions and to express their beliefs.

The predominance of Quaker-made signature quilts in the Delaware Valley suggests that this form was adapted to the Quaker practice of using objects as social and cultural signifiers. These brightly colored quilts cannot be considered plain in any accepted sense of that concept. Certainly, the common use of calicoes in signature quilts shows little adherence to the century-old admonition to "be Careful about Making, Buying, or Wearing... Striped, or Flower'd Stuffs, or other useless & Superfluous Things."[9] Many of these quilts retain the traditional Quaker palette of olive greens and beiges, but as many are worked in a kaleidoscopic array of calicoes. However, on a symbolic rather than an aesthetic level these quilts are expressive of Quaker values.

As already stated, eighteen of the twenty-one Quaker quilts are friendship quilts. These quilts have a unity of design that contrasts sharply with the riotous exuberance of album quilts, quilts in which diversity and individuality were expressed through unique blocks. The use of identical blocks gives the Quaker quilts a formal coherence and presents an image of a unified community. On the quilts, whose purpose was to preserve the memory of specific people, individuality was not denied but was presented as an incremental part of a whole. Thus, the Quaker testimonies of equality and community were affirmed by these friendship quilts which were composed, like the Quaker community, of discrete but equal units. Community was extremely important to Friends in sustaining and experiencing the Inner Light and in providing a network of support in the face of a morally corrupt and worldly society. The friendship quilt reinforced the Quaker community, first, by bringing friends and family together for the cooperative production of the quilt, and then by providing a lasting record of that group.

Ideologically, Quaker friendship quilts presented an image of a unified and cohesive social fabric, while functionally, they were records of significant social relationships. The Quakers were a recording people, taking detailed minutes at their Meetings, and maintaining family genealogies and histories. Signature quilts accommodated this penchant for record-keeping. Quaker-made quilts record much larger groups of people than other quilts and present a more complete community picture by including the names of men, women, and children. The communities that these quilts describe

are composed predominantly of family members. On all but one of the twenty-one Quaker quilts (and that one was made by a female relief organization) roughly two-thirds of the signers were related to the recipient. The familial emphasis is unusual for signature quilts in general, but is in keeping with the values and structure of the Quaker community.

In her essay "The Quaker Connection," Nancy Tomes analyzed the visitation patterns of Quaker women in late eighteenth-century Philadelphia. Tomes was struck by the wide range of kin interacting in the same social arena.[10] Similarly, a great variety of relatives are represented on Quaker signature quilts, including grandparents, great aunts and great uncles, aunts and uncles, first and second cousins, nieces and nephews, as well as parents and siblings. Another student of Quaker history, Barry Levy, has described the family as the critical social force in the Quaker community.[11] The value placed on the family is made explicit in one of the most unusual quilts in this study.[12] This unquilted top, bearing dates of 1842 and 1843, was made for Sarah Wistar Pennock, the only daughter of Caroline and Caspar Pennock. Caspar Pennock, descended from a prominent Chester County Quaker family, spent his adult life working in Philadelphia as a physician. He was disowned as a Quaker for marrying Caroline Morris whose father had been disowned in 1795 for "joining in measures of a warlike nature."[13] Caroline and Caspar were married out of meeting on December 17, 1883. Although Caspar Pennock was no longer a practicing Quaker, his family were, and it was they who made the quilt for Sarah, born on January 5, 1840.

The resulting quilt top is in essence a family icon. It records an extensive family network and is emblazoned with drawings that illustrate the Pennock history. The center block of the quilt top bears a beautifully drawn picture of Primitive Hall, the original family homestead in West Marlborough Township built in 1738 by Joseph Pennock. Below this is a drawing of the family coat of arms, and the uppermost block is inscribed with the genealogies of Caroline Morris and Caspar Pennock written on the pages of a book. This book is signed "C.W. Pennock / To His / Daughter / 1842," his gift to her being a visual record of the family traditions she would inherit. [See Tandy Hersh's article in this volume for a fuller discussion of this quilt.]

A friendship quilt sewn for Sarah Mitchell Gawthrop in the mid-1850s is another example of a Quaker signature quilt made as an expression of familial loyalty.[14] Sarah's parents Daniel and Elizabeth died tragically in 1838 when she was seven years old. Sarah and her orphaned brother and sisters (aged one, three, and five) were taken in by grandparents and great aunts and uncles in southern Chester County, Pennsylvania, and in New Castle County, Delaware. Roughly fifteen years later Sarah's family gathered to make a friendship quilt for her as she reached adulthood. The quilt survives today, in the care of Sarah Gawthrop's great-granddaughter, as testimony to the strength and importance of the extended Quaker family.

The first half of the nineteenth century was a time of social upheaval both within and without the Society of Friends. As the social order became increasingly frenetic and segmented, the informal networks that had held people together were weakening and so needed to be formalized. Signature quilts were a way to reify community, that is, to represent it as a material thing, thereby strengthening networks of social support by depicting them as a tangible reality.

The Orthodox-Hicksite Separation of 1827 splintered the Religious Society of Friends, rupturing a fellowship that had been based on unity. Broadly stated, the separation was brought about by the evolution of two sects of Quakers with incompatible interpretations of Quakerism. The Orthodox, who tended to be members of an urban economic elite, advocated a formal religion that emphasized belief rather than behavior. They sought to alter the behavioral code to give themselves more freedom to participate in worldly affairs, suggesting that material success was an indication of spiritual progress.[15] These changes were untenable for Hicksites, the followers of Elias Hicks who remained faithful to the basic testimonies of Quakerism, so they separated from the Orthodox in 1827.

Seventy percent of the Quakers in the Delaware Valley joined the Hicksite sect. The majority of the Hicksite membership were farmers and craftsmen living outside of Philadelphia. Consequently, at the time of the Separation the Hicksites were more economically threatened than the Orthodox, feeling the impact of the decline in hand labor and the rise of industrial specialization. During the second quarter of the nineteenth century, Hicksites were the more mobile

of the two Quaker sects as they migrated to the city in search of employment.[16]

Of the Quaker quilts in this study, all except one were made by Hicksites.[17] The popularity of these quilts among Hicksites is understandable, for they affirmed the traditional values adhered to by the Hicksite sect. Direct reference to the Orthodox-Hicksite separation is made in an inscription on a quilt from Cantwell's Bridge, Delaware:

The sects divide and subdivide again
Like rivers seeking still the main
The nice distinction lies but in the name
For virtue truth and goodness are still the same[18]

Signature quilts also served the Hicksites by reinforcing familial and communal ties that were threatened as people uprooted themselves in search of employment and personal opportunity. Inscriptions on Pennsylvania quilts by people in Ohio and New York speak of separations that were bridged through the quilts. Thus, signature quilts symbolically attempted to impede the disruptions caused by an increasingly mobile society.

The tension within the Quaker community between urban and rural life, and prosperity and simplicity, was manifested in Quaker quilts. The three Quaker album quilts in this study are the only Quaker quilts made by or for people living in Philadelphia. As album quilts they are naturally more flamboyant than friendship quilts, and these three incorporate more expensive fabrics than any of the other Quaker quilts. Each of these quilts is expressive of the fact that they were made by or for people living in an urban area where ostentatious display was a way of signifying social position.

A case in point is the quilt made for Samuel P. Hancock in 1843 as a wedding present.[19] Hancock was a Quaker, born and raised in New Jersey, who moved to Philadelphia where he became a successful lumber merchant and, much later, city comptroller. His bride, Charlotte Gillingham, was the sister of Hancock's cousin's husband, Samuel Gillingham, a man with whom Hancock did business. Hancock's wedding quilt is composed of a vibrant array of pieced and appliqued blocks, incorporating cotton and silk, rich embroidery, and fine drawing. Of the seventy-five signatures, sixty-two belong to Samuel's relatives, most of whom were still living in

southern New Jersey. This quilt is strikingly idiosyncratic when compared to another Quaker quilt that bears eighteen of the same family names, including that of Samuel Hancock.[20] This quilt was made in 1841 for Mary Jane Pancoast, Samuel's cousin, and is signed by her family and friends from Mullica Hill, New Jersey. It is a typical Quaker friendship quilt, with all the blocks pieced in the simple album patch pattern. Based on the visual evidence it is hard to believe that the same people were involved in the production of these quilts, yet both quilts represent the same family network. The quilts formally acknowledge the different social positions of the two recipients, one a prominent Philadelphia businessman, the other a young country woman.

The Quaker album quilts express through their opulence different values than friendship quilts, but like their more modest counterparts they served to strengthen the Quaker community. The Quaker quilts in this study illustrate how one group in the Delaware Valley fixed upon signature quilts as a way of countering the disruptive forces that were weakening their networks of social interdependence. All signature quilts, Quaker and non-Quaker alike, served this purpose to some extent. They recorded and perpetuated the bonds of friendship and fidelity that held people together. As Elizabeth A. Hays of Burlington, New Jersey wrote on a quilt in 1841:

> Friendship's purposes preserved
> May this forever be
> As a mirror it will serve
> To show thy friends to thee[21]

These quilts were mirrors, or maps of particular segments of society. They combined, in a more or less harmonious whole, numerous squares representing the various individuals in a social network. The women who pieced them, the friends and relatives whose names they bear, and the individuals for whom they were made all participated in a single community, and one such community is reflected in every signature quilt.

Notes and References:

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4. Robert H. Wilson, *Philadelphia Quakers 1681–1981* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 1981) p. 3.
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10. Nancy Tomes, "The Quaker Connection," in *Friends and Neighbors*, ed. Zuckerman, p. 184.
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12. Pieced Album Quilt, 133. Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, PA.
13. Hinshaw, *Encyclopedia*, p. 605.
14. Pieced quilt Cross and Crown. Private collection.
15. Doherty, *Hicksite Separation*, pp. 30–31.
16. Doherty, *Hicksite Separation*, p. 48.
17. Pieced and appliqued Album Quilt, made by the Female Society of Philadelphia for the Relief and Employment of the Poor, 1844. Arch Street Meeting, Philadelphia.
18. Pieced quilt Snow Flake or Mountain Peak, made by Eliza Naudain Corbit, 1842–1844, 71.1317. Historic Houses of Odessa, Delaware.
19. Pieced and appliqued Album Quilt, 45.35.1. Philadelphia Museum of Art.
20. Pieced quilt Album Patch. Harrison Township Historical Society.
21. Pieced quilt Sawtooth. Private collection.