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Pieced Lettering on Seven Quilts Dating From 1833 to 1891

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Very few quilts with pieced lettering have come to light, up to the present time. A prodigious example was discovered in 1979 and exhibited at "Patch in Time #4" in San Francisco. It was number 38 in the catalogue of that show, under the title "Quotation Quilt". Its design is entirely a lettered message pieced of red calico and natural muslin rectangles. The central message reads: "& FROM EVERY QUARTER FLOWING JOYFUL CROWDS ASSEMBLE ROUND AND SPAKE WITH EXALTED ZEAL". The border contains a benediction: "May the blessing of God await thee," with the name of the maker: "Cornelia Catherine Vosburgh" and the date and location: "Red Hook Dec, 25 1874." (Red Hook is in the state of New York.) This quilt is now the cherished possession of a great-grandson of the maker, living in northern California.

The Vosburgh quilt is a masterpiece of its kind; it warrants a study of its lettering style, and an effort to trace the source of its message. It provokes a number of questions: What prompted Cornelia to make a lettered quilt? Was she inspired by other lettered quilts? Did she use a pattern for the letters or design them herself?

A search of the literature turned up six other 19th century quilts whose monograms or messages display the same general style of lettering. Simply listing the origins of these quilts revealed a regional identity for the group. Documentation indicates that four of the seven quilts were made in upstate New York: the Vosburgh quilt from Red Hook¹, the Wildman and Waldron quilts from Castile^{2,3}, and the Covel quilt from Canandaigua⁵. One of the seven — the Woodhouse quilt — is from Newark, New Jersey⁷, another, initialed "J.S.", is from Con-

VOSBURGH QUILT

photo — Kokomo Print Works

necticut⁶. The seventh, made by Maria Cadman Hubbard, is described as of "probable" New England origin⁴. This clustering in the north-eastern section of the country has no ready explanation.

Five of these quilts pre-date the Vosburgh quilt, so a possibility exists that Cornelia had viewed one or more of these lettered quilts — perhaps at a County Fair or an Agricultural show. These occasions afforded exhibitions of women's handiwork, although the meager newspaper reports do not make it clear whether quilts were part of the show. It is logical to assume that 100 years ago more lettered quilts existed than do now survive, which increases the possibility the Cornelia could have seen an example, not necessarily one of those now under consideration — perhaps one pieced by a relative or friend.

How closely Cornelia's lettering resembles these others can best be seen by comparing the variations on each letter of the alphabet in turn, as exhibited on all 7 quilts. Only the "upper case" or "capital" letters were used on 5 of the quilts, so the comparison is confined to these (See Appendix). It should be noted that all the letters are 7 units, or 7 "blocks" in height. Their widths vary from 3 units, (letter "I") to 15 units (for an oversized letter "W" on the Waldron Quilt, which may be a mistake in piecing — deliberate or otherwise — so awkwardly is it fashioned.) The descendants of Cornelia Vosburgh believed her message was a Bible quotation, but a careful search of Concordances by several Bible scholars has failed to find a trace of such a quotation, although its Christian emphasis is not in dispute. It has also been likened to the style of PILGRIM'S PROGRESS and to the style of many fervent hymns, but these possibilities cannot be easily traced, lacking the indexing of Bible passages.

The comparison of letters A to Z on all these quilts revealed the wholly unexpected fact that *every* letter of the alphabet occurs in the 14-word central message of the Vosburgh quilt. This seemed very unusual, so, as a comparison, the content of the Hubbard quilt was examined. Its many short, pious messages contained an even 100 words in all, yet these many words still did not include the entire alphabet. The letters J, Q, X, and Z were missing.

So the question arose: How unusual is it for a 14-word phrase or sentence to contain every letter of the alphabet? This led to more extensive comparisons, the analysis of an additional 20 phrases, all 14 words long, chosen for their religious or philosophical slant, using longer words than the Hubbard quilt — indeed, as nearly as possible of similar context to the Vosburgh message. Five of the phrases were from the Bible, five from the Book of Common Prayer, two from the Koran,

three from *Pilgrim's Progress*, and one each from Shakespeare, Dryden, Defoe, Congreve and Johnson.

None of these 14-word phrases contained every letter of the alphabet. Every phrase lacked from 5 to 10 letters. Considering the entire group of phrases, 280 words in all (20 x 14), two letters of the alphabet (x and z) did not appear in any of them. Yet both of these rare letters appeared in Cornelia's 14 words.

Based on the foregoing, it appears probable that Cornelia Catharine Vosburgh had several motives for making this quilt: It is an obvious expression of her Christian faith, proclaimed in a lasting form. And now it seems likely that she also wanted to execute and preserve an entire pieced alphabet from A to Z. The fact that her message includes all 26 letters of the alphabet in a mere 14 words can hardly be considered coincidence. One can only conclude that it was carefully planned within her remarkable paraphrasing of the Coming of Christ.

If the style of the pieced letters seems familiar one need look no further than the samplers dating around 1800, to find the same lettering formations.^{8, 9} These sampler alphabets, with their letters formed of cross-stitched or satin-stitched "squares", were intended to be used as patterns for future projects. Cornelia Vosburgh's letters so closely follow the "classic" sampler alphabet that she almost certainly used such a guide or pattern. It may well be that her sampler was old and disintegrating, needing to be replaced by the giant sampler that her quilt became, preserving the letters for another century or two.

Appendix:

PIECED LETTER VARIATIONS IN SEVEN QUILTS
FROM 1833 - 1891



H I J K L

M N O P Q

R S T U V

W X Y Z

A B C D E

F G H I



Graphics: Winifred Reddall and Jane Cook

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