

# Uncoverings

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## Uncle Eli's Quilting Party

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Eli Whitney is widely recognized as the father of the cotton gin. In the southern part of Alamance County, North Carolina, he is equally well known as the "uncle" of a quilting party.

"Uncle Eli's Quilting Party" has been a tradition in the Eli Whitney community since 1931. This all-day event takes place every year on the first Thursday in April when the countryside is bursting with bloom. White dogwood blossoms stand out against the green pine trees, and deciduous trees are budding or leafing just enough to soften and color the outline of their bare branches. The many shades of green contrast with the reds and browns of the newly-plowed fields. Masses of yellow daffodils and lavender thrift bloom along the banks at the edge of the road. Neither rain nor a cloudy sky can spoil the brightness of the landscape which appears even brighter on dark day. The spring morning journey to the quilting party sets the stage for pleasures to come.

The day begins early. By 8 am the first cars have arrived at the big old brick gymnasium which is the Eli Whitney Community Center. Nannie McBane, quilter, quilting instructor, and coordinator of the quilting party, arrives and unlocks the door.

Inside, the gym seems huge, cavernous, and bare. One or two quilts have been "put in" the previous day so the quilters can get an early start. Otherwise the gym is empty, with bleachers folded against the wall and tables stretched out along one end ready to receive food.

Gradually the room comes to life. A table is placed by the door so that everyone can sign the register and make a name tag to wear. Early arrivals unfold chairs brought from the storage room and begin to wipe off the bleachers. As women bring in quilted items for

display, willing hands help drape the quilts over the now-dusted bleachers or hang them on clothes lines which are stretched around the walls. Suddenly there is a quilt show!

Mildred Guthrie, who has been attending these quiltings since 1958, arranges her display of quilts in one corner and begins to demonstrate quilting on her oval hoop. Mildred is famous for her beautifully quilted white-on-white quilts which commemorate happenings such as Tricia Nixon's wedding, the White House rose garden, the astronauts' landing on the moon, Watergate, and the Iranian hostage crisis. Often one of these is on exhibit.

By now, more quilting frames have been set up and quilters settle down to work. Visitors drift through, observing the quilters and the quilts on display. All are invited to quilt. The tradition is that everyone who attends must put in at least one stitch. The gentle murmur of voices becomes a loud hum as acquaintances from previous years are renewed and new quilting friends are made. Quilting techniques and designs are discussed and patterns are exchanged. Uncle Eli's party is in full swing.

Nannie McBane moves around, cheerful and unassuming, answering questions, available to help. She appears to be more like a favorite quilting friend than an event coordinator. She says that Uncle Eli's "just happens" each year. Most events of this magnitude would "just happen" by means of a steering committee plus three subcommittees, each of which would meet several times and be urged to file a written report to assist next year's committees. In fact, Uncle Eli's "just happens" because the members of the community have lived and worked together for so many years and also because Nannie has checked ahead of time to make sure that enough quilts will be available to work on, enough people will bring tea, and, in her low key way is managing the many other details of the day.

The day and the quilting progress. Around noon the covered dishes are uncovered, the line forms, grace is said and a serious attack is made on the loaded tables. Quantities of deviled eggs, fried chicken, ham biscuits, sausage biscuits, home made rolls, chicken salad, potato salad, molded salads, green salads, pasta salads, three bean salad, and slaw are available. There are assorted casseroles. Desserts include pies (pecan, apple, chess, lemon chess, lemon, chocolate, coconut, and cherry) and cakes (chocolate, coconut, and

Figure 1. 1962: Mrs. Reba Vance, teacher at Eli Whitney School, explains to her second and third grade students quilting being done by Mrs. Nell McBane and Mrs. Avis Johnson. Photograph by Pat Bailey.

pound). There are also chocolate and butterscotch brownies, lemon squares, and an assortment of cookies. The quilters take pride in their cooking as well as in their quilting.

Quilting resumes briefly after “dinner” but by 2:30 or 3 o’clock the day begins to wind down. Children will be coming home from school, the evening meal must be prepared, and the evening chores accomplished. Quilting frames are dismantled and unfinished quilts folded carefully to be taken home and worked on. Gradually, the quilt show disappears and the gym returns to its empty state as chairs are put away, trash disposed of, and people leave. Few, if any, quilts have been completed, but the day has been rewarding nevertheless.

This is a description of Uncle Eli’s Quilting Party in the 1980s and its founder, Ernest Dixon, might be surprised at how it has changed over the years. Mr. Dixon was the principal of Eli Whitney High School, which was formed in 1921 by combining the schools from five small neighborhoods. The first classes were held in an abandoned cotton gin, hence the name. (The school song was “There Were Five Little Schools” and the teams were known as the “Ginners.”)

Ernest Dixon, a Quaker who came from a heritage of people who were trained to act on their beliefs, was the leader in the formation of the school. He believed that one high school of ninety students

could better educate students than five smaller neighborhood schools. He also believed that schools should be community gathering places. Acting on these principles, he helped establish the school in 1921, became its first principal and, in 1931, proposed and engineered the first of Uncle Eli's quilting parties.

Eighty women gathered in April 1931 at that first quilting. Thirteen quilts were put in and thirteen were completed. A lunch of sandwiches and coffee was served by the freshman home economics students. In the evening families came for supper and all admired the completed quilts. A prize was given for the first quilt finished that day. After supper there was music: fiddling, performances by local bands and two glee clubs, and then all joined together to sing old time songs. The evening ended with a candy pull. The day was such a success that it became the "first annual."

By the end of the 1930s the quilting was a well established tradition. At that time there was a school building and the quilting was held in the auditorium from which seats had been removed. Teachers marched the classes of younger children through to observe the quilters. High school students and their teachers dropped by when they had free time. Quilts were put on the frames in the morning and completed by the end of the day. A woman or a group from a church or other organization arrived with a quilt and quilters committed to working on that quilt. Sometimes the quilt owner would provide a picnic lunch for her quilters. There was spirited competition among the groups to be the first to finish a quilt. Families joined in for supper and evening activities.

In 1935 a quilt in the scarlet and black Whitney school colors was made in the Lone Star pattern for Vice President John Nance Garner, a Texas native. North Carolina representative John Umstead presented the quilt to the Vice President.

A Little Red Schoolhouse quilt, also in the school colors, was quilted at the 1937 party and given to Mr. Dixon, by that time retired.

By 1940 the PTA had scheduled a meeting on the evening of the quilting. Quilts worked on in the daytime were exhibited at the meeting and prizes were awarded for the prettiest and for the first one completed. PTA committees were in charge of hospitality, exhibits, and judging. After-meeting activities might include

Figure 2. Mrs. Myrtle Zachary, Mrs. Ossie Curl, Mrs. Daisy Guthrie, and friends quilting at Uncle Eli's in the early 1960s. Photograph by Pat Bailey.

oratory, a performance by the community choir, square dancing, or a taffy pull.

In the early 1950s Robert Hutchison, retired agriculture teacher from the Whitney school and official host at the party, designed a quilt which was a map of Alamance County. Women in the community made the quilt, quilted it at the party and presented it to Kerr Scott, governor of North Carolina and a native of Alamance County. Today that quilt is a prized possession of the Scott family.

During the 1960s, attendance decreased. A comment in a 1962 newspaper account was that the day is not to be measured by the number attending.<sup>1</sup> Even so, it is obvious that there was less interest in the party that year when only thirty-one women attended and two quilts were completed. Compare that with the record set earlier of twenty-two quilts quilted and two tied in one day. During this period it became the custom to bring recipes, plants, and cuttings to exchange. Another popular tradition began when Mildred Guthrie brought quilts to exhibit as well as to work on. Since that time bringing "bragging quilts" to show off is a well established feature of the quilting party.

Figure 3. Group of international quilters at Uncle Eli's in 1979. Photograph by Pat Bailey.

In 1974 students at Eli Whitney were absorbed into a larger school. Just as consolidation had created the school, further consolidation ended it. Some in the community were concerned lest the party cease to exist. Others believed that the quilting should end when the school closed. Through the strong efforts of a few persons such as Nannie McBane, Pat Bailey, and others, it weathered the crisis of the school's closing and continued without interruption. One year when the building was empty and had been vandalized, the quilting was moved to the fire house. By the following year, although the school building had been taken down, the big brick gymnasium which remained had become a facility of the county recreation department, so the quilting party came back to its original site.

Curiously, during this period the party picked up in terms of the number of persons attending. In 1974 150 persons came and seven quilts were completed. In 1976 there were 180 persons and four quilts. In 1977 the April 10 issue of the *Burlington Times-News* pictured folklore student Laurel Horton quilting on her Attic Windows quilt, one of six worked on that day.

In 1979 220 persons registered, including a number of women

from other countries who brought and worked on a quilt they had made as a gift to the hostess of an English conversation class in Chapel Hill.

In 1980 there were four quilts in frames and 218 persons registered. Another quilt was brought by the same international group.

The next year marked the fiftieth anniversary of the quilting party and there was a big celebration attended by 366 people, including the North Carolina Commissioner of Agriculture and local notables. A play was presented. Special efforts were made to bring back quilts which had been quilted at Uncle Eli's parties. These included Mr. Dixon's Little Red Schoolhouse and Governor Scott's map of Alamance County. John Nance Garner's quilt could not be located. Nannie McBane designed an anniversary quilt. Each block represented a quilt which had been quilted at an earlier party: a red and black Little Red Schoolhouse, a map of the county, a Lone Star, and so on. The central medallion proclaimed in embroidery:

THE COMMON THREAD

50 YEARS

UNCLE ELI'S QUILTING PARTY

1931 - 1981

That year one long-time participant was quoted in a newspaper as saying: "All the old hands—they're gone. These are all newcomers from Chapel Hill and the home demonstration clubs."<sup>2</sup> (Chapel Hill is fifteen miles away.) All who attended, including the newcomers, were warmly welcomed.

Since the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary, attendance has very gradually decreased and the focus of the day has changed.

In the beginning, the purpose of the quilting was to use the school as a gathering place, to bring together parents and other members of the community, and to complete as many quilts as possible in one day. Only active participants attended and the audience consisted of teachers and school children with an occasional husband dropping by. Some long time residents suggest that Mr. Dixon also had in mind the fact that early in the history of the school, when children were bused in from the five small neighborhoods, parents felt some threat of a loss of their community identity. This seems natural. Four of the neighborhoods were farm communities which centered around a church (Baptist, Methodist and Friends



Meeting). The fifth and largest, Saxapahaw, was a mill town. Although the children did well together in school, Mr. Dixon recognized that the parents needed to be brought together. As Dorothy McBane put it, "Some of the neighborhoods just didn't gee-haw together."<sup>3</sup>

Today the quilting party is a social gathering for which the Eli Whitney community is well known. People attend from as far away as fifty miles. It is no longer a family community event. There is less dedication to putting in and completing a quilt. In fact, seldom is a single quilt completed by the end of the day. The number of quilts in frames has gone down and the number of visitors has increased. It has become a spectator sport. Dorothy McBane says, "It's more of a Show and See than a real quilting."<sup>4</sup> Groups of senior citizens are bused in to view the quilts and the quilters. Quilters themselves are more interested in the social aspects of the day than they are in a day of hard work at the quilting frame. Few would say today as Nannie McBane's mother-in-law did some years ago on the evening of the quilting, "I feel as if I've been working like fighting fire all day."<sup>5</sup> Edith Mogle, former teacher at Whitney, sums it up, "It has become a celebration of quilting rather than a quilting."<sup>6</sup>

There is some concern expressed about the future of the quilting. Mildred Guthrie says it is left up to the young people whether it continues<sup>7</sup> and others tend to agree. Nannie McBane says, "I hope it will continue, but I just don't know."<sup>8</sup> She wonders if changes would be helpful, such as a return to a business meeting during the course of the day. She regrets that people now leave so early in the day because when people leave and take their quilts the quilt show disappears.

No matter what the future holds, it is clear that Uncle Eli's Quilting Party has been and is presently a source of pride to this small rural community. For example, in 1948 when the county celebrated its centennial, each community was invited to participate in the parade and Eli Whitney chose Uncle Eli's Quilting Party as the theme for its entry. The float had on it a quilting frame with quilters around it. The Little Red Schoolhouse quilt which was displayed on the float bears scars from that occasion because it rained on the parade, causing the dye from the crepe paper streamers to run onto the quilt.

Figure 4. 50th anniversary quilt made in 1981 and presented to Nannie McBane. Blocks represent quilts quilted at the party over the years. Photograph by Lynette Shum.

Furthermore, there is evidence that residents have given high priority to their attendance at the party. Miss Sallie Jane Braxton for many years was known for being the first to arrive and one of the oldest quilters present. In 1973, just before her 90th birthday, she died. The newspaper account of her death reported that she had

quilted until a week before her death and that she had missed only one of Uncle Eli's quilting parties (and that, the newspaper explained, was because she was that year expecting a shipment of baby chicks).<sup>9</sup>

Dorothy McBane, who worked in five different local mills, told each employer when she was hired that she needed to have the day off on the first Thursday in April. She was never turned down. Dorothy is still a regular attender, and has missed only five of the parties (all because of illness).<sup>10</sup>

Mrs. Addie Richardson in 1972 explained that she had missed only one quilting and that was because she was in the hospital in 1936. Dorothy McBane tells that one year when Mrs. Richardson was all ready to go to the quilting she discovered that her car would not start. She was so confident that she would be missed that she simply sat on her front porch waiting for someone to come for her. And someone did!<sup>11</sup>

James and Donna Patterson, packed and ready to move to Georgia, delayed driving to their new home so that Donna could attend the quilting.<sup>12</sup> Margaret Elkins, in 1979, took the day off from her job as a secretary at Wachovia bank to attend the quilting. Also in 1979 Barbara James took her three daughters out of school and brought them to the quilting, explaining that she believed that this was an important part of their heritage.

Newspaper coverage has been extensive. Every year the *Alamance News* and the *Burlington Times-News* have covered Uncle Eli's party in great detail. Other newspapers have run occasional feature stories. Several area residents have better clipping files than the newspapers.

From time to time a political candidate has considered this gathering worthy of his presence and has dropped by and allowed himself to be photographed with a needle in his hand.

One remarkable fact is that it has never been a fund raising event. There is no admission charge, there has never been a quilt raffled. There is not even a donation basket to defray the cost of paper plates, utensils, napkins, or ice for the tea. Members of the community, the recreation department, and the local technical college quietly underwrite the costs.

"The Common Thread" was the name of the quilt made for the

fiftieth anniversary celebration in 1981. In some ways today's party has very little resemblance to the ones of earlier years, but there is a common thread. The common thread is that quilting, through all the changes in the nature of Uncle Eli's Quilting Party, has been the means of bringing people together, once more demonstrating that the process of quilting often has a value greater than that of the quilted product.

*Notes and References:*

1. Unidentified clipping in Aretta Barrett's scrapbook.
2. Wendy McBane, "Y'all Sit Down, Quilt a Spell at Uncle Eli's," *The News and Observer* (Raleigh, NC), April 4, 1981, p. 7.
3. Taped conversation, Dorothy McBane and author, July 16, 1986.
4. Taped conversation, Dorothy McBane and author, July 16, 1986.
5. Taped conversation, Nannie McBane and author, July 22, 1986.
6. Telephone conversation, Edith Mogle and author, July 24, 1986.
7. Taped conversation, James and Mildred Guthrie and author, July 31, 1986.
8. Taped conversation, Nannie McBane and author, July 22, 1986.
9. Unidentified clipping in Pat Bailey's file.
10. Taped conversation, Dorothy McBane and author, July 16, 1986.
11. Taped conversation, Dorothy McBane and author, July 16, 1986.

*Sources:*

1. Newspaper articles from the following:  
*The Daily Times-News*, Burlington, NC  
*Alamance News*, Graham, NC  
*Winston-Salem Journal*, Winston-Salem, NC  
*News and Observer*, Raleigh, NC

(Most of these articles were from scrapbooks and clipping files belonging to members of the community and some had no identification as to date and paper. Files and scrapbooks belonged to Aretta Barrett, Daphne Newlin, Pat Bailey, and Nannie McBane).

2. Taped conversations with:  
 Nannie McBane, Dorothy McBane, Aretta Barrett, Mildred and James Guthrie, and Pat Bailey.
3. Personal recollections from attending nine of Uncle Eli's parties in the 1970s and 1980s.