

# Uncoverings

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## Quilt Patterns in the Frank C. Brown Collection

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*The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*, in seven volumes, represents the most extensive published survey of the verbal lore of any state, the result of nearly 40 years work by over 650 contributors.<sup>1</sup> The collection and publication of folklore was a primary objective of the North Carolina Folklore Society, which was founded in 1912. Under the direction of Professor Brown, a member of the faculty of Trinity College (now Duke University), the North Carolina Folklore Society began in 1913 to compile what they hoped would be a complete collection of the disappearing folklore in the state.

Frank C. Brown, a Professor of English at Trinity and Secretary-Treasurer of the North Carolina Folklore Society for its first thirty years, was a tireless folklore collector. He spent his summers traveling through the state, especially in the mountains, recording the voices of his informants using the latest technology available to him. While folklorists of his day were primarily interested in collecting the "classic" English ballads, Brown collected, and urged others to include, anything of possible value. As the organizer of the North Carolina Folklore Society's annual meeting, as a frequent performer of programs of folksongs for groups, and as a classroom teacher, he continually urged others to collect and submit materials for his growing collection.

Originally the Society planned to publish a small volume by Christmas of 1914, but the publication was postponed repeatedly during the ensuing years. Meanwhile the collection continued to

Figure 1. Clara Hearne submitted a crayon drawing for the quilt pattern "Four Hands Around," in yellow and green. The pattern was redrawn and attached to a sheet of standard size paper so that it could be filed in the category "6f," under "Housewifery: designs for quilting, lacemaking, sewing, knitting."

grow, as a result of Brown's own collecting and the submissions of Society members, students, and others all over the state. Dr. Brown managed to stall off contributors who variously requested or demanded to know when they might expect to see the publication, maintaining a tight personal control on the manuscript materials.

By the 1940s, the project had amassed some 54,000 individual items, some handwritten on scraps of paper, others compiled into notebooks. Frank C. Brown supervised the typing, in triplicate, of copies of all the items and organized the items into general categories, but his great enthusiasm for collecting did not extend to editing. At the time of Dr. Brown's death in 1943, the monumental task of editing the vast collection for publication still remained. Brown's colleague

and former student, Newman Ivey White, assumed the responsibility for the collection and assembled an editorial board of well-known scholars to edit the individual volumes. White supervised the work of the editors until his death in 1948 when Paull Franklin Baum took over. The first volume appeared in 1952, and the seventh and last in 1964. Though many of the original contributors did not live to see the results of their efforts, the *Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore* is still in print and remains an important resource and comparative tool for folklorists throughout the country.

Volume I of the published Brown Collection is subdivided into genres: games and rhymes, beliefs and customs, riddles, proverbs, speech, and tales and legends. The brief section on Beliefs and Customs includes a list of sixty-five quilt pattern names, arranged alphabetically, with the names of the contributors and brief bibliographic footnotes. Volumes VI and VII also include a number of popular beliefs or superstitions about sewing and making quilts.

Having known about these brief quilt references for a number of years, I began to wonder in what form the pattern names had been collected, and I speculated that contributors might have included drawings along with the pattern names. I visited the Manuscript Collection at Duke University's Perkins Library which houses the original contributions, typewritten copies, several levels of mimeographed book manuscripts, and all of the correspondence from contributors and editors.

The card catalog indicated that quilt materials were included in category "6f" ("6" indicating the general category of "Housewifery," and "f" the subcategory of "designs for quilting, lacemaking, sewing, knitting"). Within the folders of original contributions there are not only drawings of patterns but also actual cloth quilt blocks labeled with the pattern names.<sup>2</sup> Since the quilt patterns seem to be the only examples of material culture reported in the published volumes, I began to pursue questions of how the blocks came to be contributed and how they were treated prior to publication.

Volume I lists the names of six contributors of quilt and coverlet patterns: Kate S. Russell, Clara Hearne, Elsie Doxey, Nilla Lancaster, Jessie Hauser, and Frank C. Brown.<sup>3</sup> According to an alphabetical list of contributors to the collection<sup>4</sup> all five of the women were school-

Figure 2. The submissions *Alabama Beauty* and *Georgia Fan* were redrawn onto standard paper, but in the process the contributor's name was lost. *Alabama Beauty*, described as looking "very much like a tulip," and in colors of red and green, appears to be a locally known applique design, similar to other nineteenth century applique quilt patterns. The person who redrew the *Georgia Fan* entered the word "ditto" into a blank block to indicate repetition of the design. Unfamiliar with cataloging visual representations, the editors used devices associated with writing and print.

teachers who had been in Brown's folklore class in the summer of 1923. According to the summer school catalog that year "all applicants for admission must have completed a high school course" or apply with an elementary certificate and two or more years teaching experience. "The courses are designed to meet the needs of teachers who desire professional training and further academic instruction."<sup>5</sup>

One of the available courses that summer was "The Ballad and Other Folklore," taught by Frank C. Brown. The catalog description reads as follows:

This course consists of an extensive study of the ballad and other ancient and modern folksongs and of the other fifteen kinds of folklore as found in North Carolina and other sections of

America. Much of the material used in the course is in manuscript form, and still other material studied is that collected by the class during the year: thus the student gets training in collection and classifying songs and other forms of folklore. Each student is assisted in developing some subject pertaining, if possible, to conditions in his native county or section.<sup>6</sup>

Some information can be pieced together from the list of contributors and from the college catalog. Clara Hearne lived in Pittsboro and, later, Roanoke Rapids, where she was the principal of Central School. She submitted a total of 642 items to the collection including at least eleven quilt patterns. The finding aids list a letter from Hearne to Brown dated October 20, 1923, which includes the comment, "I enjoyed my work in summer school and appreciate the grade you gave me,"<sup>7</sup> but the letter has been missing within the collection for some time. Kate Sue Russell of Roxboro submitted 537 items including twenty-two quilt designs. Elsie Doxey, of Poplar Branch, and later Thomasville, submitted 495 items including three quilt patterns. Mrs. Nilla Pate Lancaster, of Goldsboro, contributed at least five quilt patterns among her 354 items. Jessie Eugenia Hauser, of Pfafftown, a regular Trinity student, is credited with one quilt pattern among her six items. While the Duke University Alumni Office has no information on summer school students, office records indicate that Hauser, a white female, graduated in 1925 and died sometime before May 1968.<sup>8</sup>

For some reason five young women in Brown's class that summer recognized the folkloric value of quilt patterns. Perhaps as school-teachers they had visited in homes of their students and admired the quilts they saw there. Their interest seems to have centered on the design of each pattern and its name. They submitted no entire quilts, nor even drawings which would indicate how the pattern blocks were put together. In some cases the blocks seem to have been removed from unquilted tops. In other cases the cloth blocks may have served as pattern references, to remind the maker how the pieces go together.<sup>9</sup> The contributors made no mention of the quilting designs or stitches. In several of their drawings they noted what colors had been used and whether plain or patterned fabric formed the original.

The patterns seem to have been contributed, not during the 1923

Figure 3. An unnamed contributor sent in this block, which is labeled Memorial Leaf. The editors searched their references by title and were unable to locate it. However, if they had checked the pictures in their books, they would have found it as the well-known Maple Leaf.

summer session, but later, after the women had returned to their teaching jobs in smaller cities and towns in the piedmont or coastal plain of North Carolina. The cloth blocks are constructed of fabrics of the period 1910–1925; however, Kate Russell continued to send newspaper clippings offering quilt patterns from mail order sources into the 1930s.<sup>10</sup>

The quilt designs obviously caused editorial difficulties for Brown and his successors. All the other contributions to the collection were either in written form or sound recordings from which the words and music could be transcribed. There were no rules set up for the submission and categorizing of visual materials. To his credit, there is no indication that Brown discouraged the contributions of quilt

patterns, nor did he nor his successors consider "suppressing" them. Instead he categorized them and assigned each a number, just as he did for each proverb or riddle.

Someone, perhaps Paul Brewster, who edited the Beliefs and Customs section of Volume I, then approached the quilt patterns in a scholarly manner. He located the bibliographic materials available at that time and searched the pattern names. His primary resource books included those by Ruth Finley, Hall and Kretsinger, Allen Eaton, and Marie Webster.<sup>11</sup> Arranging the pattern names in alphabetical order must have seemed logical; since the editors were compiling a collection of verbal lore they reduced the quilt patterns to their verbal components and treated them similarly to other verbal contributions. The proverbs, for example, are listed alphabetically by keyword, including under the word "quilt" the single phrase, "split the quilt," as a metaphor for divorce (V.I, p. 464). The editors most likely did not consider printing line drawings or photographs of the patterns; the only illustrations in the published volumes are woodcuts commissioned from artist Clare Leighton, artworks intended to evoke the spirit of the work, not to illustrate specific items.

Relying only on the pattern name in searching bibliographic references led to several problems for the editors. Two blocks, to which are pinned the label "design tag lost," are not represented at all in print. A search for analogs to a block labeled **Memorial Leaf** yielded nothing, but had the editor known to search visually for similar patterns, he would have found the pattern a popular one most often called **Maple Leaf**. In other cases references were included to different patterns of the same name, as in confusing pictorial and pressed-strip blocks both called **Log Cabin**. Reviewing the published list alongside the original submissions indicates that the editor was a verbally-oriented person dealing with materials very much outside his area of expertise. Because items in the collection generally were treated as isolated entities (quilt blocks) rather than as parts of a larger tradition (such as entire quilts made and used within families) the male editors may never have considered asking for advice or assistance from women in the community.

The patterns that probably gave the editors the most difficulty are Kate Russell's newspaper clippings. In the 1920s and 1930s a number



Figure 4. Two joined modules of the Tumbling Blocks pattern constructed over paper templates are labeled "Block quilt." An editor reproduced the blocks in colored inks which approximate the red and black of the original, but he was unable to locate the pattern by name in published references. Consequently, this piece was not included in the published list.

of syndicated columns in newspapers and magazines offered needlework patterns for sale by mail order.<sup>13</sup> One of the most widely distributed companies in the 1930s which is still in operation was Old Chelsea Station Needlecraft Service.<sup>14</sup> Patterns from this company were offered under various names, including Alice Brooks and Laura Wheeler. While occasionally these pattern companies reprinted a traditional pattern, usually under a new name, the majority of their offerings were new creations by paid designers.

Kate Russell, teaching in Roxboro, North Carolina, either clipped out Laura Wheeler columns herself or perhaps collected them from a quiltmaker in her area. While the dates and newspaper names were

trimmed off, the reverse of one clipping shows its date to be 1933. At some point an editor took all twenty or so of the submitted columns and placed them in a large folder labeled "Not of folk origin?" Yet by the time Volume I was printed most of the Wheeler designs, including **Old Fashioned Nosegay**, and **Golden Stairs** were listed along with more traditional patterns such as **Fan, Star**, and **Basket**. In an obvious attempt to eliminate those he thought might be of dubious folk origin, the editor eliminated eight published designs including **Cowboy's Star**, **Dutch Windmill**, and **Forest Trail**.

Clearly, the editor wished to include as much as possible but to exclude non-folk items. In dealing with the influence of print sources his situation was similar to that of the editors of the ballad and folksong volumes faced with the influence of phonograph records. The editor of Volume I may have felt that the influence of published sources on quilt patterns was a minor one of recent occurrence; however, an examination of the sixty-five submitted patterns indicates that at least twenty-four of the most "traditional" patterns are identical to those published by the Ladies Art Company beginning about 1889. This company was perhaps the first mail order pattern service and is particularly noteworthy because it, in fact, collected traditional patterns in current circulation and reprinted them, usually under traditional names.<sup>15</sup> Thus, for quilts of certain patterns made in the twentieth century, it may be difficult to determine whether the pattern sources are traditional or the Ladies Art Company. Editors, unfamiliar with quilts in any form, trying to separate the traditional and popular patterns, could not begin to imagine the full complexity of the situation in which they found themselves.

Frank C. Brown himself is listed as the contributor for thirteen patterns. Searching backward through the files from typescript to notes, I found the documentation for his contributions, such as it is. (Brown was not known for recording the details of his field research.) On a five by seven slip of paper he wrote "Names of quilt patterns" followed by the thirteen names, all apparently jotted down quickly at the same time.<sup>16</sup> In a description of Professor Brown's collecting habits in the introduction to the published collection Newman I. White indicates that this undocumented slip of paper is one of many: "The collection contains a number of items in his hand hastily

Figure 5. An unknown contributor sent in a block called Sweet Gum Leaf. A similar Ladies Art Company pattern is called the "Lily Quilt Pattern." The sweet gum is a common North Carolina tree sometimes represented in embroidered quilts. West Coast residents know it by its species name "liquidambar."

penciled on old envelopes, cards, or pages from desk memorandum pads that were evidently taken down on the fly, without anticipation or previous plan."<sup>17</sup> There is no indication where, when, or from whom Brown collected these names. I suspect he either recalled them from his own memory, or perhaps noted them as someone else recited them. In addition to familiar names such as **Wild Goose Chase** and **Log Cabin**, he included some mysteries such as **Strangers** and **Widow's Troubles**. These names do not appear in known reference books; they may indeed be localized quilt patterns, or possibly, names for woven coverlets.

Immediately following the quilt pattern names in Volume I is an interesting list of recipes for dyeing fabric, including instructions from

Zilpah Frisbie of McDowell County for "a good dye for quilt linings" made "by boiling the material in a mixture of pure red clay and water."<sup>18</sup>

Volumes VI and VII, *Popular Beliefs and Superstitions*, edited by belief specialist Wayland Hand, include superstitions concerning sewing generally and a few specific references to quilts and quilting. Under death beliefs is included the following anonymous contribution: "If anyone starts to piece a bed quilt in the form of a star, someone in their family will die before it is finished," (#5133). Under "Domestic Pursuits" are included Clara Hearne's contribution from Roanoke Rapids that "It is bad luck to begin a quilt on Friday," (#3277) and, from Durham County, "It is bad luck to borrow a needle from somebody," (#3293).

On the happier side are a number of beliefs involving love and marriage: "Make a new bed quilt, shake it out the front door, and the first person who enters will be the one you will marry," (#4360) from Greensboro; "After finishing a quilt, the first one over whom it is thrown will be married first," (#4361) from Wilson County; "If somebody wraps you in a new quilt, you will get married within a year," (#4362); and finally, "A girl who begins piecing a bedquilt will not marry until she finishes it," (#4624). There are also many examples of superstitions regarding finding pins; typically the finder can expect good luck if the point of the pin is toward her when she picks it up, (#3309-3345). Perhaps as significant as the presence of these beliefs is the absence of some that have been considered universal. No one collected any mention of a woman making twelve or thirteen quilts before marriage, of divining the next young person to be married by placing a cat in the center of a new quilt, or of making a deliberate mistake as a symbol of humility or imperfection. If these beliefs were popular in North Carolina during the early twentieth century, they escaped the dragnet of Brown's collectors.

Quilting bees are mentioned briefly along with other communal work activities such as apple peelings, corn shuckings, and log rollings. Most contributors indicated that these events were things of the past, though Gertrude Allen Vaught reported them still "quite common" in her area.<sup>19</sup>

Not all of the material submitted by contributors appeared in the

published work. In 1970–1971, Duke student Charles Bond compiled “A Tabulation of Unpublished Items in the Manuscripts of the Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore.”<sup>20</sup> Bond mentions that several “swatches of quilt patterns” were not included, probably a reference to those labeled “design tag lost.” The most curious omission was one of the items compiled by playwright Paul Green and his wife Elizabeth, who turned over their entire manuscript of folk beliefs to Frank C. Brown:

Of interest are descriptions of holidays and get-togethers in slave times. They emphasize the “privileges” of slaves on special occasions. One such description of a slave women’s quilting bee reports the practice of “trusting” or enwrapping the first man in from the fields in the newly made quilt. This custom seems to have been performed as a minor rite of sexual entrapment, a reward for the women’s day long labor. There followed a feast for all consisting of chicken stew (stolen wings) coffee and dumplings.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to the outdated racist assumption that slaves must have stolen chicken for their stew, one notes the irony that when white quiltmakers wrap someone in a new quilt is a sign of impending marriage, but when blacks do it it signifies sexual entrapment.

For a student of quilting history the Brown Collection seems to offer few leads for future research. There is no information about the makers of the blocks, only the scantest hints of where the blocks were made, and very little about the place of quilts in daily life.

However, as correlative material on early-twentieth-century quilting, the information in the files is fascinating and might yield insights beyond the present exploration. Furthermore, tracing the treatment of the patterns through the intricacies of the manuscript collection into the published work is an informative exploration into the minds of early-twentieth-century folklorists, both amateur and academic. At a time when most folklorists were concentrating their collecting efforts on the more prestigious ballads and on the expressive culture of male occupations, the contributors and editors of this work collected and annotated an incredible variety of materials of a domestic nature. According to White, Professor Brown repeatedly made clear his point of view to his audiences:

The term folklore may be said to include in its definition everything which makes up the body of knowledge and of material things possessed by the simple illiterate people, created by them, and inherited from past generations . . . . All legends and stories, songs, sayings, games, toys, cures, charms, implements of war or of the chase, designs of lace, carpets, rugs, quilts go to make up the body of folklore, which originated with the folk and which belongs to them.<sup>22</sup>

Recognizing the importance of quilts as folklore, Brown and his followers strove to make a place for them along with verbal and musical lore in order to present a more accurate, and complete, collection of North Carolina folklore. While only six of the 650 contributors to the *Brown Collection* were involved in locating 65 quilt patterns, this work probably represents the earliest example of detailed study of quilts by folklorists.

### Appendix: Quilt patterns in the *Frank C. Brown Collection*

<i>Pattern Name</i>	<i>Format</i>	<i>Probable Source</i>
Alabama Beauty	ink drawing	traditional applique
Basket	drawing	LAC #305
Basket	cloth block	LAC #58
Basket of Broachee	cloth block	unknown
Bear's Paw	cloth block	LAC #357 or traditional
Bird of Paradise	name	traditional
Broken Chain	name	unknown
Brunswick Star	name	LAC #21
Buzzard's Roost	name	traditional (Brackman 3219)
Capital T	crayon drawing	LAC #84
Catch Me If You Can	cloth block	traditional
Cherokee Rose	name	unknown
Cross	name	unknown (LAC #407?)
Diamond	cloth block	LAC #49
Fan	pencil drawing	LAC #296 or traditional
Flying Bat	name	LAC #44
Forbidden Fruit	name	LAC #224
Four Hands Around	crayon drawing	LAC #402
Friendship Basket	clipping	Laura Wheeler #511
Georgia Fan	ink drawing	traditional
Golden Stairs	clipping	Laura Wheeler #528
Hen and Chickens	name	LAC or traditional

Hidden Flower	clipping	Laura Wheeler #540
Irish Chain	crayon drawing	traditional
Jacob's Ladder	ink drawing	traditional
Lady Finger	crayon drawing	unknown (Brackman 2680)
Lazy Girl	cloth block	traditional
Log Cabin	cloth block	unknown (Brackman 864)
Log Cabin	name	traditional
Love Knot	pencil drawing	traditional
Lover's Knot	pencil drawing	traditional
Memorial Leaf	cloth block	traditional
Missouri Trouble	name	unknown (Brackman 4085?)
Monkey Wrench	crayon drawing	traditional
Morning Star	clipping	Laura Wheeler #545
Odds and Ends	name	LAC
Old Fashioned Garland	clipping	Laura Wheeler #500
Old Fashioned Nosegay	clipping	Laura Wheeler #486
Old Woman's Puzzle	cut red paper	traditional (LAC #10)
Palm	clipping	Laura Wheeler #469
Patience	name	LAC #90
Rising Sun	name	traditional or LAC #177
Road to Oklahoma	cut red paper	LAC #239
Rolling Stone	cloth block	LAC
Rose of Sharon	paper pattern	traditional
Rose Star	clipping	Laura Wheeler #534
Saw Tooth	ink drawing	traditional border
Snake Trail	name	traditional or LAC #504
Snowball	name	Wheeler or woven coverlet
Spider Web	clipping	Laura Wheeler #509
Star	cloth blocks	traditional
Star of Bethlehem	cut red paper	unknown (Brackman 3655)
Star of the East	name	traditional
Strangers	name	traditional
Sunflower	cloth block	unknown
Sweet Gum Leaf	cloth block	traditional
Tree of Paradise	name	LAC #260
Tulip	crayon drawing	Laura Wheeler #508
Tulip Block	crayon drawing	traditional
Washington Pavement	clipping	Laura Wheeler #457
Wheel of Fortune	clipping	Laura Wheeler #517
Widow's Troubles	name	unknown
Wild Goose Chase	name	traditional or LAC #94
Wild Rose	crayon drawing	traditional (?)
World's Fair	clipping	Laura Wheeler #507

*Notes and References*

1. The information about Frank C. Brown and *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1952–1964), was drawn from the Introduction to Volume I, by Newman Ivey White, and from finding aids to the Frank C. Brown Papers, Manuscript Department, Perkins Library, Duke University.
2. Brown Papers, Box 34, Folders 1, 2, 3.
3. *Brown Collection*, I, 264–66.
4. Brown Papers, Box 73, Book 2.
5. Trinity College Catalog, Summer School, 1923.
6. Catalog, 145.
7. Brown Papers, Box 127, “Catalog of Folklore Correspondence,” 119.
8. Conversation with Duke Alumni Office personnel, September 5, 1985.
9. Wilene Smith, “Quilt Blocks or Quilt Patterns?” *Uncoverings 1986*, ed. Sally Garoutte (Mill Valley, Calif.: American Quilt Study Group, 1987), 101–14.
10. Brown Papers, Picture Cabinet V–10.
11. Ruth Finley, *Old Patchwork Quilts and the Women Who Made Them* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1929; reprint Newton Centre, Mass.: Charles T. Branford, 1970); Carrie A. Hall and Rose Kretsinger, *The Romance of the Patchwork Quilt in America* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton, 1935; reprint New York: Bonanza); Allen Eaton, *Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1937; reprint New York: Dover, 1973); Marie Webster, *Quilts: Their Story and How to Make Them* (New York: Doubleday, 1915).
12. *Brown Collection*, I, 464.
13. Louise Townsend, “Kansas City Star Quilt Patterns, 1928-1949,” *Uncoverings 1984*, ed. Sally Garoutte (Mill Valley, Calif.: American Quilt Study Group, 1985), 115–130; and Barbara Brackman, *An Encyclopedia of Pieced Quilt Patterns* (Lawrence, Kans.: Prairie Flower, 1979–1984).
14. Brackman, *Encyclopedia*, 602.
15. Cuesta Benberry, “An Historic Document: The Ladies Art Company Catalog,” *Quilters’ Journal*, vol. 1, no. 4, (Summer 1978), 13–14; Brackman, *Encyclopedia*, 602.
16. Brown Papers, Box 54.
17. *Brown Collection*, I, 21.
18. *Brown Collection*, I, 266.
19. *Brown Collection*, I, 243.



20. Brown Papers, Box 126, 3.
21. Brown Papers, Box 126, 2-3.
22. White, "Introduction," *Brown Collection*, I, 7.