

## Did She Sign Her Name? The History of Quilt Labels

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Quilters today are well aware that that they should label their quilts for future generations. But this was not always so. We are often disappointed when there is no way to discover who made the lovely quilt that we found at an antique shop or in our attic.



### Why So Many Quilts Went Unsigned

Even with family quilts it's sometimes uncertain who made a given quilt. We have to rely on family stories where memory may be vague or even accept an "I just don't know" from older relatives.

The earliest signatures on needlework are seen on occasional sixteenth century tapestries and samplers. Most often these were simply initials not a full name.

Most women of the past simply didn't think that the everyday or even "for best" quilt they made was important enough to sign. Some even felt it would be too prideful to sign their quilt. However some quilts are signed or at least have initialed hints on them as to who the maker might have been.

### Initials on Tapestries, Linens and Quilts



Another area related to signing quilts was the practice of initialing and dating household linens with cross stitch. In 1878 "The Useful Companion" related, "It should be bourne in mind, that too frequent washing is liable to wear out linen more than ordinary use: and therefore the process should not be repeated oftener than is absolutely necessary. It will also be found an excellent plan to have every article numbered and initialed, and so arranged after washing that each may be worn in its regular turn,

and accomplish its proper term of domestic use." <sup>1</sup>

Possibly as a result of this practice we find nineteenth century quilts that were signed or initialed with cross or linear stitches. Some were even numbered to mark the accumulation of quilts they made in readiness for marriage. But such numbers can be uncertain, for example the number 15 might indicate the year the quilt was made or the age of the quilt maker. Or perhaps it was the fifteenth quilt the young woman had made. Even with names we need to be cautious. Is the name found on the quilt the makers name or the name of the person the quilt would be given to?

### Indelible Inks Open Up New Possibilities

Around the middle of the nineteenth century indelible inks that would not damage fabric became available. After that quilts were more frequently signed with ink. This also made possible the popularity of signature quilts as these quilts could easily be signed. Of course this brings a new puzzle in terms of discovering who might have made the quilt as many names would be found on the quilt. In some instances each person made an individual block and signed it. But some were made completely by one person who then wrote the names on each block or had friends sign them.

Yet another method of signing a quilt was that of using a metal die to be used with ink. In 1771 the "New York Gazette" advertised the following: "cut gentleman and ladies names, with numbers for numbering linen, and books, wherewith they give either red or black ink which will not wash out and may be used by any person without trouble or inconveniency" <sup>2</sup>



### Ways Quilts Were Signed Both Hidden and Bold

As you can see signatures were put on quilts for many other reasons than giving the name of the quiltmaker. We also find great variety in where and how quilts were signed.

Today we usually sign or add a label to the back of a quilt. This wasn't particularly true with earlier signed quilts. The quiltmaker might have signed her name discreetly nestled among an appliquéd border or in contrast featured her name in the center of a quilt with decorative embroidery or appliqué around it. In an album quilt the maker may have arranged her name in a decorative fashion within one of the blocks. Sometimes the maker's name can even be found subtly included in the quilting of the layers.

Particularly with a quilt made after good colorfast ink was used we might find a wealth of information beyond just the maker's name. The quilt might have writing telling why the quilt was made and the person it was made for. It might even include the date it was completed as well as the town in which the quiltmaker lived. Poetry and Bible verses were also included at times. On one marriage quilt the entire family tree is inked among decorative motifs.

### Quilt Labeling Today



It wasn't until late in the twentieth century that quilt labels sewn onto the back of a quilt began to appear. Even today many quiltmakers never label their quilts. In our busy world embroidering or even artfully inking a label seems time-consuming. To make things easier delightful pre-made labels are now sold. The maker writes in the information she wishes to include and may even color the label with colored pens or pencils. Most recent has been the availability of quilt labeling software and printable fabric. With this a quilter can quickly produce a quilt label with whatever decorative touches she wants to add. Even pictures can be included on the label. The

example to the right is a label I made for my Great Grandmother's quilt. On it I was able to include not only a picture, name, and dates but also a short history of her life.

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Reference:

<sup>1</sup> p278, <sup>2</sup> p294 "[Quilts in America](#)", by Patsy and Myron Orlofsky