

Mourning Quilts to Soften the Final Leave Taking

[Homepage](#) [Quilting History](#) [Quilt Patterns](#)

Before modern medicine the loss of beloved friends and family members was all too familiar. Childbirth was dangerous and it was a rare mother who didn't lose one or more children. Husbands were lost through war or accident. Bereavement was a part of everyday life.



Ways Quilts Were a Comfort in Grief

There was little that could be done in the face of many diseases. We tend to hope that families were able to cope with these losses better than we do today. After all, families of the past would have been so much more familiar with losing loved ones. But old letters and diaries tell that the pain of grief is timeless.

Quilts could offer some small comfort in these times of grief. One elderly woman remembers her mother getting some precious blue silk out of her own hope chest when a neighbor's baby died. "Mama and three other women set up the frame and quilted all day. First they quilted the lining for the casket, and then they made a tiny little quilt out of the blue to cover the baby." ¹ If there was no wood for a coffin as occurred at times when pioneers were traveling west, the deceased might have been wrapped in a quilt replacing the coffin.

Quilts have also been used in the laying out of the deceased for viewing. Other times quilts were used to drape the coffin during the funeral service. The quilt used might have been a lovely family quilt or a special quilt owned by the church. In all these situations quilts served to convey a sense of comfort and when family quilts were used a sense of connection to the deceased's beloved family.

Quilts Made in Memory of Those Who Passed On

Another way quilts provided comfort for the grieving was through memorial quilts made to remember the deceased. Many such quilts contained bits of clothing that had belonged to the lost loved one. Sometimes the quilt was made in the form of a friendship quilt with inscriptions by friends and family. The very act of working on such a quilt would have been a healing activity for bereaved women. The finished quilt became a comforting memory.

In the nineteenth-century Baltimore women made beautifully appliquéd album quilts. Some were made in memory of soldiers who died in the Mexican-American war. Diane Schweier Krail writes of a deathwatch quilt made by the women in a Baltimore area family. This elaborate album quilt was made over several months during the family patriarch's final illness. The author tells us this quilt displays many symbols of mourning, "Floral symbolism on the quilt includes laurel for eternity, acorns for immortality, and roses for the frailty of life..." ²

Precious Photographs Perhaps With a Quilt

During the Victorian Era a deceased child may have been photographed so that family would have a picture to help them remember their lost little one. Such a picture might show the child in bed as if asleep under a beloved quilt. In many of these pictures the child is holding flowers or a favorite toy. Looking at the picture parents could imagine the child was simply sleeping, perhaps overseen by loving angels.

Quilts Can Still Sooth The Grieving Today



thanks to Lorrie Crawford

Quilts made in the face of grief are not only a practice of the past. Numerous quilts were made in the wake of the tragedy of September 11, 2001 demonstrating that quilting in the face of shock and sorrow is still a comfort.

An example of modern use is found in the following quote from Lorrie Starr Crawford.

My Mother passed away in February. While my sisters, brother & I were making the funeral arrangements, I hit upon the idea to cover her casket with an old green and white quilt that Mother had worked on nearly 20 years. She pieced and pieced (by hand of course) all the time we were growing up. The quilt finally was quilted 15 years ago, again by hand. This time, everyone in the family had a seat at the frames while they visited. Somehow it seemed right that this "family project" should cover her while she "rested" during the service.

At the end of the service, my sisters and I came up to the casket and folded the quilt. Then we presented it to my brother for him to take home.

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An interesting variation to morning quilts can be seen on
Barbara Brackman's Blog
[Graveyard Quilts for Morning](#)

Thank you to Carol Petersen for permission to use the cross quilt by Ruth Lee.
Visit the ["Quilt Artistry of Ruth Adams Lee"](#)
to see the full quilt with the appliquéd cross that is pictured above as well
as her lovely angel quilt made in memory of her young son.

References:

"Quilts in the Final Rite of Passage: A Multicultural Study", by Carol Williams Gebel, Uncoverings 1995

["For Purpose and Pleasure: Quilting Together in Nineteenth-Century America"](#), by Sandi Fox

["Treasures in the Trunk: Quilts of the Oregon Trail"](#), by Mary Bywater Cross

¹ p 49 ["The Quilters: Women and Domestic Art, An Oral History"](#), by Patricia J. Cooper, Norma Bradley Allen

² "Lilly Family Album Quilt", by Diane Schweier Krail in the American Quilt Study Group's newsletter "Blanket Statements"