

As in all topics in history we need to do the best we can to discern between fact and fiction.

Myths about quilt history are a part of our culture and many have romantic appeal. We can enjoy the myths but need to remember they are tales sometimes passed through generations. As you explore this site on America's quilting history you will find the truth is often more fascinating than the myth.



MYTH #1

Quilting was a common task in a woman's life in Colonial America.

MYTH #2

Specially designed quilts were used as signals by the Underground Railroad.

MYTH #3

Quilting originated in early America and is purely an American craft.

MYTH #4

In the old days women did all their quilting at gatherings called quilting bees.

MYTH #5

Women of the past used scraps for quilting as a frugal measure.

MYTH #6

Piecing and quilting by hand has always been prized over using a sewing machine.

MYTH #7

Before electricity women typically quilted in the evening by the fireside.

MYTH #8

Mistakes in antique quilts were made on purpose to demonstrate humility.

MYTH #9

Pioneer women pieced and quilted on their long journey west.

MYTH #10

The presence of cotton seeds in the batting indicates an antique quilt.

Quilt historian, Virginia Gunn introduced her article, "From Myth to Maturity: the Evolution of Quilt Scholarship" in a way that says it so well that I am going to quote it here.

"Quilting myths are realities of quilt history. Romantic myths have been combined with historical facts as people interpreted America's Quilting past. They continue to be accepted as true even when proven to be inaccurate. Myths survive and thrive because they reflect people's dreams, ideals, and values. They provide images and stories that unite and inspire members of society. Signs of maturity in quilt study, as in other fields of research, involve a willingness to revise past scholarship in light of new knowledge, and an ability to recognize and appreciate myth, without letting them impede interpretations based on accurate and documented facts."

Uncoverings 1992.

MYTH #1 ~ Quilting was a common task in a woman's life in Colonial America.

While quilting was done by those who could afford to buy imported fabric, ordinary women in early America spent their days spinning, knitting and sewing just to keep their families in clothing. Lower grades of imported linen and wool were available to almost everyone but the silks and cottons used for quilts were expensive.

It wasn't until there was widespread production of affordable textiles around 1840 that more women found time and plentiful fabric for quilt making.

I believe this Colonial quilting myth was encouraged during the Colonial Revival and renewed interest in quilting that occurred during the early 20th century. Many magazines and books of that period wrote about Colonial quilting as if it were a fact.

For more information go to [Colonial Women ~ Quilters or Not?](#)

MYTH #2 ~ Specially designed quilts were used as signals by the Underground Railroad.

Although the idea of quilts being used as secret guides to help slaves escape from the south has great romantic appeal, Underground Railroad research has found no evidence that such a practice occurred. For more information [New Jersey's Underground Railroad Myth-Buster](#) covers several UGRR myths including the one about quilts. He has also written a critique of the book, "Hidden in Plain View. For an indepth background on the Underground railroad go to [Putting it in Perspective: The Symbolism of Underground Railroad Quilts](#).

On the other hand many quilts have been made commemorating the Underground Railroad. To view some of these stunning quilts go to [Threads of Freedom: The Underground Railroad Story in Quilts](#).

There is so much more to African American quilting history than the idea that quilts might have been used in the UGRR. Consider finding other sources of information about Black American quilting than the Underground Railroad quilt myth. I encourage you to visit [African American Quilts: A Long Rich Heritage](#) to learn more.

["History of The Underground Railroad Quilt Pattern"](#)

MYTH #3 ~ Quilting originated in early America and is purely an American craft.

Quilting has a long history back to the time of ancient Egypt and earlier. Quilted clothing has been worn for centuries. Decorative quilted petticoats were worn during the 17th century in Europe, Great Britain, America and beyond. Even today quilting is popular in countries all over the world.

MYTH #4 ~ In the old days women did all their quilting at gatherings called a quilting bee.

If you read Myth #1 you know that quilting bees would have been unlikely in colonial days as very little quilting was done. We know that women who had the money and leisure to do quilting at times did sit with friends or family to do their needlework. But they did not have quilting bees like we envision a quilting bee today.

Such quilting parties did occur but were less common then we would be led to believe. In truth many women quilted alone at home. Women also quilted with family members or as a part of a church or other organized group.

Although many varied gatherings did occur over the years in the early days they were not called a 'quilting bee' but more often were referred to as a 'quilting'. The reason I have included the quilting bee myth here is that the frequency of quilting bees has been exaggerated and quilting was not always done at a quilting bee

Some old paintings are examples of an idealized quilting bee. They depict a delightful representation of a gathering of women quilting around the frame while others prepare a dinner. Children and the men folk will enjoy the meal with the women. Such events did occur but often just a few women gathered to quilt.

MYTH #5 ~ Women of the past used scraps for quilting as a frugal measure.

Although some quilters used scraps from clothing in their quilts others bought fabric specifically for the quilts they made. Other times quilts were made with a combination of both. Fawn Valentine points out in her book, [West Virginia Quilts and Quiltmakers](#), "Although imaginative lore spinners claim that patchwork quilts themselves are made with worn-out cloth it was typically the good pieces (not the worn) that were cut and stitched into patchwork. It would be counter-productive to spend time sewing fabric that was already worn out." ^{P194} Of course scraps left over after making garments were used in scrap quilts much as we use left over scraps from our quilting projects today when we want a scrappy look.

The frugality theory also implies that quilt making was a necessary drudgery. Instead we find that most women enjoyed the creativity involved in making a quilt whether with new fabric or scraps. Although quick and simple quilts were made for everyday use many quilts were far too intricate in the piecing and quilting to have been made just for necessity.

This is not to say that women never used scraps to make a quilt in order to save money or to get by because they had no money to spend on fabric. Women did use scraps left over from making clothing. They also made quilts using feedsacks during the years they were available. But the frugal quilter myth implies that most if not all quilting was done out of need to make something frugally.

Hand Quilting is Superior Myth - Quilt History Myths[Homepage](#) [Quilting History](#) [Quilt Patterns](#)**MYTH #6 ~ Piecing and quilting by hand has always been prized over using a sewing machine.**

When the sewing machine became available the possession of one was quite a status symbol. Piecing was often done by sewing machine and a few women even machine stitched their quilting or appliqué. Considering how much harder it must have been to do this compared to using modern sewing machines it certainly wasn't out of laziness but because of a desire to use the sewing machine. These visible stitches advertised that the quilter was a proud owner of a sewing machine. Sewing the binding by machine was another way to show off machine stitching.

During the Colonial Revival during the early decades of the 1800s hand quilting was valued more but this was a part of a movement toward going back to fine handcrafts. During the earlier years when the sewing machine was first available we do not find that most people considered hand piecing and quilting to be the superior method.

[Hand Quilting History: Gathering Around the Frame](#)

MYTH #7 ~ Before electricity women typically quilted in the evening by the fireside.

It was and still is difficult to do fine stitching in poor light. Before modern lighting was available most quilting was done in the daylight, outside if possible. A good deal of quilting was done in the summer due to longer daylight hours. Farm women may have been too busy to quilt during planting and harvest time but they quilted when they could find the time in the lighter months. Sometimes the quilting frame was brought outdoors in good weather so the quilters could enjoy the good light.

More likely women worked on things like mending and knitting when the light was too poor to do careful hand stitching. Yet the quilting by the fireside myth persists along with the myth of Colonial quilting.

[Hand Quilting History: Gathering Around the Frame](#)

Learn more about the kinds of quilting frames used in the past.

MYTH #8 ~ Mistakes in antique quilts were made on purpose to demonstrate humility.

This myth has various possible origins. One is from the Greek legend of Arachne the weaver. Most likely the quilting version of this myth came from the belief that Amish and Mennonite women put a mistake in each quilt because only God is perfect therefore it would be prideful to make a perfect quilt. Yet it has been pointed out by some Amish women that making such a mistake would be prideful in itself as it would imply the quilt maker believes herself to indeed be perfect.

Though some rare purposeful mistakes may have been for religious reasons it appears for others it was more a matter of superstition. In reality all quilters make mistakes, it's almost impossible to make a perfect quilt. The purposeful mistake myth prevails though, mistakes in antique quilts are sometimes said to have been made on purpose. A good line to help sell a quilt, I suspect. As making a mistake on purpose was never a common practice a mistake found in an antique quilt is unlikely to be a purposeful one.

Learn more about Amish quilt history at [Amish Quilts & Quilting History: Beauty in Simplicity](#).

MYTH #9 ~ Pioneer women pieced and quilted on their long journey west.

Rarely did a woman work on a quilt while migrating westward. Because everyone, including women and children, walked most of the way quiltmaking was pretty much impossible during the day. Even if one were traveling in the wagon the ride was too rough for fine sewing. In the evening the light was poor and knitting was preferred as it could be done with little light. There are a few examples of pioneer women piecing patches together for a quilt but this was uncommon. [Pioneer Quilts, Comfort Through Hardship](#) tells more about quilts and the Overland Trail.

Yet the pioneer quilting myth continues today even in reenactments of the journey on the overland trail.

MYTH #10 ~ The presence of cotton seeds in the batting indicates an antique quilt.

Cottonseeds are knobby and about the size of a small pea so they were rarely missed even back when women handpicked the seeds from the cotton to be used for batting. What people mistakenly think of as cottonseeds is debris from cotton hulls. Debris is even found in some modern cotton batting so it would in no way indicate a vintage or antique quilt.