

Americans tend to idealize the life of early colonists but in truth it was a hard and unforgiving life. Quilting for these colonial women was a rare pastime.

### Life for Women in the New World

Their homes were no more than roughly built structures that gave just a little protection from the elements. Food was scarce and their diets were poor. Sickness was always at their doors and often entered uninvited.



During America's beginnings the Puritan religion had a major influence. This religion was extremely restrictive to everyone and especially for colonial women. Ministers often reminded their flock that women were inferior to men and more inclined to sin and error.

Although some women were taught to read it was only so that they could read the Bible. Few learned to write as writing was thought to be the prerogative of men. A woman was expected to be subservient to her father until she married and then to her husband.

### Typical Tasks of Women in Colonial America

After colonial settlers became established in America an ordinary woman's daily life was still difficult. Typically she would be expected to do the spinning, sewing, food preservation, cooking and cleaning while caring for her often-large family. The woman to the right is carding wool in preparation for spinning. Obviously the image of colonial women sitting in their cabins quilting before the fire is far from the truth. There were, of course, exceptions. Some quilting was done by those who could afford household help thus leaving the woman of the house with time for decorative needlework. These women used quilting methods from their mother countries, styles of quilting far different than what we think of today as patchwork.

Even the image of sewing by the fire is dubious. Not to say that no one ever quilted by the fire but it was far too dim for any fine stitching. In fact all artificial lighting of the time was quite meager. Add to that the short days and long nights in winter and it makes sense that women's diaries and journals tell us that most of the quilting was done from May through November. <sup>1</sup>



### Quilt Styles in Early America: Far Different Than a Pieced Quilt

One style of quilting done was broderie perse. Imported prints were hard to come by so this method of quilting was a popular way to stretch the use of these lovely printed fabrics. Women would cut out flowers and other motifs from a small amount of this fabric. They would then carefully turn a tiny seam and applique each to a large piece of solid fabric.

Whole-cloth quilts were also made during this period. These quilts were made by layering together a solid top, backing and filling. They were then quilted together with elaborate designs resulting in a beautiful pattern seen in texture and shadows.

When pieced blocks were used it was usually in one of the many borders of a medallion style quilt. In these quilts several borders surrounded a central motif. Star blocks, Hour Glass, Saw Tooth and other pieced patterns were often used in these borders. An occasional very rare early quilt was made with overall pieced blocks almost always with a star pattern.

Very few examples of quilts from the early years in America have survived. Those that have tend to be fine quilts that were used for special occasions by those who could afford such luxuries.

### Then What Did They Use for Bedcoverings?

Another form of bedcovering we find listed in records from this early period is the coverlet. Coverlets appear to have been mainly decorative and were found primarily in well to do households. These coverlets were woven with wool, linen and cotton. Inventory records indicate that people sometimes prepared the fibers then paid to have them woven into a coverlet.

Bed rugs, both manufactured and hand made, were also used as bedcoverings as well as ordinary blankets. These bedrugs varied greatly in quality and comfort.



Many people are surprised to hear that blankets were also available. Coarsely manufactured blankets were more affordable than other bed coverings. Most people had no more than a couple sets of clothing and the cutting and sewing methods left few scraps. Only much later would it be economical to make a quilt of scraps and old clothing.

### The Myth of Colonial Quilting is Born

By about 1840 the textile industry had grown to the point that fabric was readily available to most families. Only then did quilting become a common way for American women to express their creativity. Interestingly it was after quilting became a widespread activity that somehow the idea that quilting was common in colonial times became a romanticized myth. In truth, "Quilts of any kind were rare in New England in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and it is unlikely that New England women were making quilts in any number until at least the 1750s." <sup>2</sup>

This notion of colonial quilt making was reinforced in the 1920s and 30s. During that time there was a revival of interest in everything colonial including furniture design and an idealized vision of colonial quilting. Manufacturers and magazines took advantage of this fad by promoting as "Colonial Quilts" quilts that were actually made in the mid nineteenth-century.

Believe it or not, this myth is still ingrained in the minds of many Americans today. Hopefully writers and teachers are gradually becoming aware of this inaccurate view of American colonial women. The history of the lives of these women is no less intriguing just because most of them didn't make quilts.

### [NEXT > Gathering Around the Frame - the Quilting Bee](#)

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#### References:

<sup>1</sup> p11 "[Northern Comfort: New England's Early Quilts 1780 - 1850](#)", by Lynne Z. Bassett & Jack Larkin

<sup>2</sup> P66, [Quiltmaking in America: Beyond the Myths](#), "Bedcoverings in Kent County, Maryland: 1710-1820", by Gloria Seaman Allen