

Is it a Ducks Foot in the Mud or a Bear's Paw Quilt?

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What became each claw in the Bear's Paw quilt block had it's beginnings as the sawtooth border used on early American quilts.



Early Saw Tooth Borders

The story of this pattern begins even before pieced quilts became common around the middle of the 19th century. Early American quilts were often in a medallion style with several borders surrounding a central area of an interesting printed fabric or solid with a large motif applied on it.

Historian, Sandi Fox, remarked, "No other border was applied with greater ingenuity and diversity than the Sawtooth. It could be applied in one of three methods to a perfect turn and direction, but it is in its less precise applications that it often assumed its greatest charm." ¹

Borders like this continued to be popular when quilts were more often made of a set of pieced blocks. You can see an example of a sawtooth border in this reproduction Log Cabin doll quilt to the left.



Saw Tooth Block Patterns

Of course the methods used to piece a border could easily be adapted to a quilt block. Quilt historian, Barbara Brackman wrote, "The sawtooth block appears in many early nineteenth-century quilts, arranged first in strip for borders and later as blocks. The earliest date-inscribed version is dated 1823." ² These triangle shaped saw teeth were used in many patterns including sawtooth stars and diamonds. Possibly the most delightful pattern related to the sawtooth is the ever popular Bear's Paw.

Varied Paw Blocks

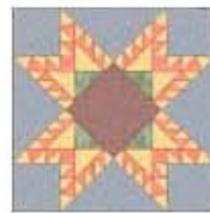
Rarely does a quilt pattern have just one name and often a quilt name is given to more than one pattern. So in the case of Bear's Paw we find related but different ones by the same name. In one unexpected version the paws appear to be walking in a circle. It is also known as [Delectable Mountains](#), Indian Trail, North Wind and Irish Puzzle. Each of these names also apply to one or more other patterns. Can you see what a muddle pattern names can be?



Regional Names for This Block

The pattern that most quilters recognize as the Bear's Paw is one with 4 paws each pointed in a different direction like the example to the right, above. But, of course even this has several names.

Early 20th century writer Ruth Finley was sometimes as much of a story teller as she was a quilt historian. After telling a great story about bears and romance she wrote, "There are as many good bear stories in Ohio as there were "Bear's Paw" quilts made before 1850." ³ She goes on to tell the story of how a friend phoned one day to say she had a quilt popular in Long Island called "Ducks-Foot-in-the-Mud". Finley quickly arranged a time when she could go see this quilt only to find it was the very same pattern as Ohio's favorite, the "Bear's Paw". Her first impulse was to disagree on the name of the quilt. But her friend pointed out there are more ducks on Long Island than bears in Ohio.



Soon after a friend from Philadelphia saw Finley's Bear's Paw quilt and exclaimed, "Oh you've got a yellow and white, 'Hand of Friendship'! Mine's blue and white." ³ It seems appropriate that the block would be called "Hand of Friendship" by the Quakers in Philadelphia as well as "Ducks-Foot-in-the-Mud" by folks who live on the coast with ducks all around. Actually this is a wonderful example of how many quilt names are regional. I wonder where some of the other names for this pattern like Tea Leaf Design and Cat's Paw originated. I think I know where the name, "Illinois Turkey Track" came from. 😊

Who First Made These Quilts?

As you can see from the history, it's not possible to know which area of the country or which cultural group first made quilts using this block. In addition it has been popular with all cultures including African Americans.

Recent stories include the Bear's Paw as having been used as a part of the Underground Railroad. This makes a wonderful tale of how the Bear Paw quilt signaled escaping slaves that they needed to follow the tracks, perhaps to find water or shelter. We need to realize there is no evidence that quilts were used during the Underground Railroad yet at the same time understand how these stories honor the brave people who escaped slavery and those who helped them.

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References:

¹ p132, ["Small Endearments: 19th Century Quilts for Children"](#), by Sandi Fox

² p171, ["Clues in the Calico"](#), by Barbara Brackman

³ p98-99 ["Old patchwork Quilts and The Women Who Made Them"](#), by Ruth Finley