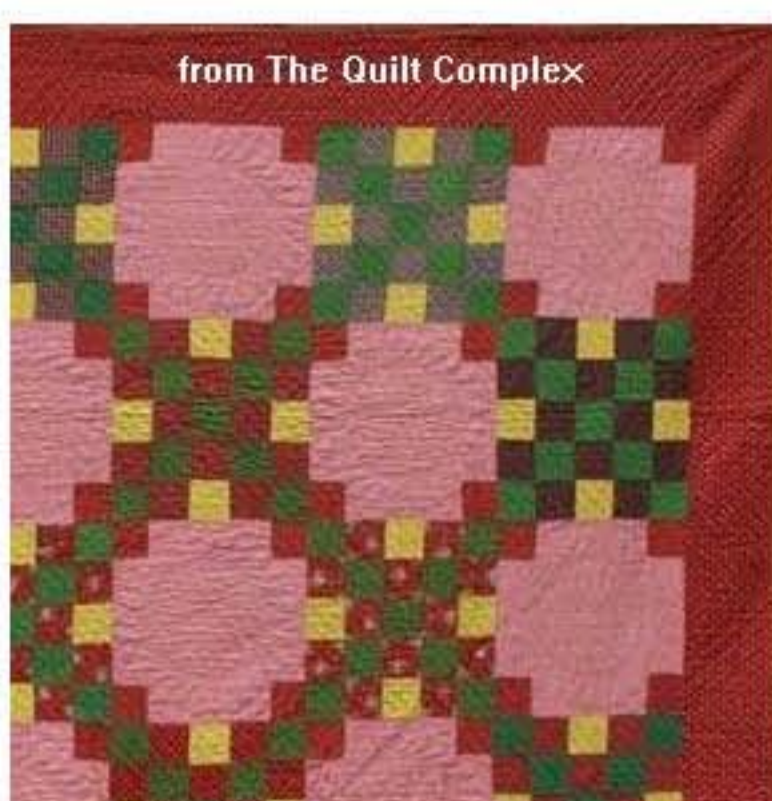


The cover of a well worn pattern book of mine displays a lovely cottage in Ireland with an Irish Chain quilt in front. It brings to mind coziness of distant times and places making you want to sit right down and commence sewing. But there is some uncertainty whether the picture could be an example of another romantic myth or if the pattern truly came from Ireland.

Current documentation on the Irish Chain quilt pattern indicates that it was developed in America in the early 1800s. Quilt historian Barbara Brackman, states that 1814 is the earliest known date for this pattern. She goes on to say, Dated examples appear consistently across the decades, indicating the design's popularity throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>1</sup>



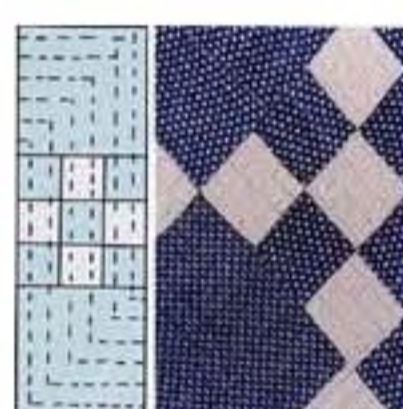
#### A Possible Connection to Ireland?



[click to see full quilt](#)

Little is certain in regards to the history of quilt patterns and there is now evidence that the seeds of the pattern originated in Ireland. The book, *West Virginia Quilts and Quiltmakers*, pictures an interesting quilt. The photograph to the left shows a small section. It was brought to America from Ireland and is very similar to this pattern. It is made much like a traditional Single Irish Chain but done on point making the chains appear in the shape of squares rather than diamonds.

This quilt was made about 1805 and was stitched with linen thread typical of thread used in Ireland. The quilting was done in a popular quilting design used in Ireland at the time. You can see the quilting pattern along with a close up of the fabric to the right. It was brought to West Virginia from Ireland when the maker, Margaret Kee, emigrated here in 1807.<sup>2</sup> We find this pattern has been used more recently in Ireland sometimes by the name "Mosaic" or "American Chain".



[click for fabric and quilting pattern close ups](#)

#### From an Old Weaving Design?

Barbara Brackman suggests that the this pattern might have been inspired by a similar weaving design.<sup>1</sup> By the second half of the 18th century itinerant weavers were known to weave elaborate double-weave patterns done in geometric patterns including the Irish Chain.<sup>3</sup>

#### Creativity Between the Chains

I suspect one of the reasons that this pattern has been so popular over the years is that it leaves a nice solid space between the chains to display the maker's needlework skills. Choice of fabric design and color can give this quilt many different looks.

In some cases the quilt maker has put a different quilted design in each solid space. There are other ways the space has been used as well. The book, *Kansas Quilts and Quilters*, displays two interesting Irish Chain quilts by Mennonite quilters. One made in 1880 has appliquéd flowers within a sunburst pattern.<sup>4</sup> An intriguing thing about this quilt is that a mixture of hand and machine piecing, applique and quilting was used.

Another Mennonite quilt (inscribed 1876) shown in the book has the traditional circular feathered quilting in the open spaces while the border is decorated with appliquéd leaves.<sup>5</sup> Another use for the spaces between the chains has been the writing of sayings and signatures for an autograph quilt. "Quiltmaking in America: Beyond the Myths", includes a picture of an 1888 quilt made to raise money for church furniture. The amount of money donated and the name of each donor is written on the quilt.<sup>6</sup>



#### Use of This Pattern Today

Today quilters demonstrate their hand or machine quilting ability by adding a special quilted motif in each central area. Applique can still bring a theme to an Irish Chain quilt. Add the fact that this pattern is fairly easy to piece together we can see why it is one of the oldest and most popular quilt patterns.

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Thank you to [The Quilt Complex](#) for giving permission to display two of the quilts shown on this page. Visit their site to discover the services they provide to museums, collectors, dealers, individuals, and quilt guilds.

#### References:

<sup>1</sup> p168, ["Clues in the Calico"](#), by Barbara Brackman

<sup>2</sup> pp40-41, ["West Virginia Quilts and Quiltmakers"](#), by Fawn Valentine

<sup>3</sup> webpage, ["Coverlets, Dated and Otherwise"](#)

<sup>4</sup> p126 and <sup>5</sup> p136 ["Kansas Quilts and Quilters"](#) by Brackman, Chinn, Davis & Thompson

<sup>6</sup> p159 ["Quiltmaking in America: Beyond the Myths"](#) Laurel Horton (editor)





**Close up of the fabric in the original Margaret Kee's quilt**



**This is the quilting pattern used on the quilt**