



a Manx style quilt by Joan Thrusell

By Jane Hall, Quilt Teacher, Author

Log Cabin quilt designs are among the most popular and easily recognized of all quilt patterns. Beginning with a center shape, usually a square, the traditional design is made by sewing strips in sequence around the sides of the square, varying the values between light and dark.

The blocks can be set together in too many ways to list, although there are a number of named designs such as Barn Raising, Sunshine and Shadow, and Straight Furrow. Simple to construct and easily made with either scraps or planned yardage, the pattern appeals to beginning and advanced quilters alike.

Early blocks were almost always pieced on fabric foundations. The older Log Cabin quilts are often scrappy rather than color coordinated. Since the blocks were made of narrow strips of fabric, sewing them together on a foundation provided the necessary precision as well as stability.

When I began quilting, I was told with great authority that Log Cabin quilts were always tied, never quilted. Once I began to collect old quilts, I understood why. These foundations were often waste fabrics of different weights, perhaps recycled, and in the days before sewing machines were widely available, would be almost impossible to quilt through by hand.

We Americans have long considered this pattern the quintessential American design. Quilters are told that it represents log cabins on the prairie with red center squares for the hearth, light values on one side for the sunny side of the house and dark values on the opposite side for the shady side of the house. The heyday of the Log Cabin in this country was in the third and fourth quarters of the 19th Century, corresponding to the widespread trek Westward after the Civil War, so the "little-house-on-the-Prairie" figure fits nicely. The graphic Pineapple Log Cabin design, is a classic log cabin with strips laid on the diagonals in addition to those on the horizontal and vertical planes. It too derives its design from the placement of dark and light values

Log Cabin quilt designs, however, have been found across the Atlantic quite a bit earlier than we have documented them in the US. Our earliest signed/dated Log Cabin quilt was made in 1869, according to Barbara Brackman's database begun with the Kansas quilt project in the 1980's. The British Quilt Heritage Project found extant Log Cabin quilts made as early as the second quarter of the 19th Century. Log Cabin patterning on the other hand, has been found in very early inlaid wood designs, in weavings, and in embroideries. In Great Britain, a square perfume bag (sachet) worked in lattice silks in the pattern is shown in a 1926 book. A beautiful small box made for sewing tools, embroidered on four sides with classic Log Cabins and a row of Courthouse Steps Log Cabins can be found in the National Museum of Scotland. Both are dated around the mid-1700's.



When you begin to explore the origins of the pattern, and its translation into fabric, it gets more and more interesting, and can turn into a treasure hunt. There are several theories, and bear in mind we quilters can find patterns anywhere we look....bathroom floors, plowed fields seen from an airplane, the back of a jacket worn by someone in a line in front of us. Unfortunately, none of these theories can be verified at this point, but wouldn't it be fun to try?



The "Mummy theory" is one of the most plausible. In the early part of the 19th Century, when the tombs in Egypt were opened, the British found thousands of small animal mummies, put there as funerary objects of respect for the departed royalty. Some of these are housed in the British Museum today and you can easily see the Log Cabin patterning in the way the strips of linen are wound around the cat or ibex. Some of the mummies are even colored, with some sort of dye, in light and dark areas on the diagonals, exactly like our contemporary Log Cabin blocks. There were vast numbers of these mummies, and not knowing what to do with them, many were shipped back to England and distributed to farmers for fertilizer. Can't you just see a farmers wife finding the pattern sitting in her yard and copying it with strips of fabric?

The French were also caught up in the Egyptian craze. In Quilter's Newsletter Magazine, #293, Darcy Pattison cites "Description de l'Egypte" which is a document published by French scholars who went to Egypt with Napoleon in the early part of the 19th Century. It contains pictures and drawings of mummies and the Log Cabin design. She discusses the Mummy theory in some detail, from both the British and French viewpoints.

Janet Rae, in Edinburgh, raises another possibility for the source of the design: land cultivation as commonly practiced from the Middle ages onward in Europe and the British Isles. Farmers lived within the confines of the village walls, going out each day to work their fields. To be equitable, every tenant was given a portion of both wet and dry fields, known as "run-rigs". Early maps of run-rig farming shows fields laid out in patterning very close to Log Cabin designs. Janet has just published an excellent book about Log Cabin quilts, tracing several of these theories, including a possible relationship to early Greek and Roman geometric designs as the origin of the pattern.



In the British Isles, the pattern is often called "Canadian Logwork" and there are many Log Cabin quilts found in Canada. Which direction the pattern traveled across the sea is unknown. The Log Cabin designs found throughout Great Britain are very similar to the ones we are familiar with here in the United States....some cotton, many scrappy, some silks and velvets from the late 19th Century, some even color coordinated with fabric obviously chosen specifically for the project.

On the Isle of Man, they claim the pattern, call it "The Roof Pattern", and piece it with folded strips, sewn by hand onto a fabric foundation. As well as designs made with scraps, red and white Log Cabin quilts set in a traditional zig-zag are commonly found here, some said to be dated earlier than 1850. The Isle is fairly isolated and rural, without easy access to modern tools and equipment. Lacking scissors and rulers in the past, quilters tore fabric into strips and used the length of their fingers, thumbs and size of hand-spans as measurements for the parts of the block. This meant the blocks sewn by one quilter wouldn't necessarily match those of another quilter. Joan Thrusell, of the Isle of Man, made samples of Log Cabin blocks for our book, *Foundation Quilts*.



The Log Cabin is a totally fascinating pattern, in all of its variations. From what we have been able to discover, it probably has been executed in fabric for less than 200 years. Maybe eventually we will discover more of its origins, both pattern and quilts. It may turn out to be synchronicity, with the same idea occurring to different people at roughly the same time, in completely unrelated areas. It may simply

be that this is an obvious way of patterning rectangular shapes. There are many examples of what we consider quilt patterns today (Flying Geese and Square-in-a-Square for example) which have been found centuries ago in Asia and the Middle East on tiles and carvings and textiles. We know for a certainty that the Log Cabin's appeal has lasted for several centuries and certainly continues unabated today.

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Go to [Jane Hall's website](#) To learn more about the author of this article. You will find information on her classes, books and much more.

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Related Information:

View variations of the [An Example](#) from the Illinois State Museum.

[Free Log Cabin Block Pattern](#)