

The Mariner's Compass quilt brings to mind seas of long ago as the captain of a ship struggles to find his way in the deep fog. In truth this pattern reflects back to a seafaring guide that existed even before the compass.

Quilt pattern designer, Judy Mathieson, specializes in Mariner's Compass patterns. I asked her to share some information with us and she offered the following introduction to the Mariner's Compass quilt.

#### Design & History From Judy Mathieson

"Mariner's Compass is the name quilters use to refer to star designs that radiate from the center of a circle as opposed to the star designs that grow from a square, like Ohio Star or Sawtooth Star. If you are going to call your design a Mariner's Compass it should probably have 16 or 32 points like the compass card on a magnetic compass or a map. Barbara Brackman says that this is one of the earliest named quilting designs in America.

Although the design source is lost in history it probably had something to do with the design as seen on navigational maps. Certainly there is a large proportion of existing antique quilts from the Atlantic Coast area made with this design. Any quilter who is interested in this design would benefit from a study of sailing charts as far back as the 16th century."<sup>1</sup>

#### Mariner's Compass Pattern: Beginnings in Ancient Seas

It's not surprising that the Mariner's Compass pattern is one of the earliest quilt patterns. The design is a very old one. Before the compass was available early mariners depended on a wind chart called the windrose. Though not always reliable it was the best that could be done before the magnetic compass came into use in the late 13th century.

For some time after sailors still depended on the winds, as they didn't completely trust the magnetic compass. During this time the wind rose gradually evolved into the compass rose on nautical maps. The compass rose continued to be a useful decorative feature on charts and maps for the next few centuries. It's likely that quilters were inspired by the varied designs used to depict the compass rose over time. The first known quilt to use the Mariner's Compass design was made in 1726 in England.<sup>2</sup> Such quilts might well have been made earlier but we must depend on this first dated quilt for certainty.



pattern by name.

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#### References:

Thank you to Judy Mathieson For the information and photos that added so much to this article. .

<sup>1</sup>Judy Mathieson has also published the paper, "Some Sources of Design Inspiration for the Quilt Pattern Mariner's Compass", for the American Quilt Study Group journal. It can be found in "[Uncoverings 1981](#)"

<sup>2</sup> p170, "[Clues in the Calico](#)", by Barbara Brackman

