



MSU QUILT INDEX  
BLACK DIASPORA QUILT HISTORY PROJECT (BDQHP)

# EXPLORING THE LIFE & LEGACY OF CUESTA BENBERRY

Artifacts from the Archive

# BIO CUESTA BENBERRY



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Cuesta was born on September 8, 1923 in Cincinnati, Ohio. When she was three, she moved to her grandmother's home in St. Louis, Missouri, a city that became her lifelong home. In 1951, she married George Benberry and together they had one son, George, Jr.

An introduction to her husband's family's quilts ignited a curiosity about the origins of the patterns and soon Cuesta embarked on what became a lifetime pursuit. Cuesta discovered and joined a network of pattern collectors who participated in pattern exchanges, including exchanges known as round robins. Because she was not a quiltmaker, many of her round robin friends not only shared a pattern but also gave her a finished quilt block. Soon she amassed both a study collection of hundreds of blocks and had established a network of friends who were also interested in quilt pattern history.

In the early 1960s, Cuesta was prompted by her friend Dolores Hinson to look into the histories behind quilt block designs and to write and publish what she found. In 1970, she published her first article for *Nimble Needle Treasures* and then went on to publish articles in many popular publications. Cuesta's articles in these special interest publications were among the first anywhere to discuss topics of quilt history. She had also become passionate about the seriousness of the endeavor and the need to document and portray quilt history with an intellectual and scholarly rigor.

In 1976 Cuesta realized that, in that U.S. Bicentennial era, “there was a great deal of information about ethnic groups in America and how one should be proud of one’s ethnic heritage...I thought I ought to study about African American quilts. Well, it was not an easy task because there was nothing in the literature. There was so little, so little.” Undaunted, she jumped into this new and relatively unexplored realm of research. Before long she was publishing about African American quilts, and serving as a consultant to nearly every major exhibition of African American quilts.

Cuesta’s work in quilt history has been honored by many awards. She was inducted into the Quilter’s Hall of Fame in 1983 and was selected as a Quilt Treasure in the on-line multimedia-project of Michigan State University and the Alliance for American Quilts. In 2004, Cuesta was the recipient of the Distinguished Scholar’s Lifetime Achievement Award for her groundbreaking research on the history of African American quilting, awarded by the Anyone Can Fly Foundation. When she passed away, tributes to her contributions flowed in blogs, listserves, memorials, and in newspapers, including The New York Times and The Washington Post.



Cuesta Benberry, Afro-American Women & Quilts, 1979

## The Cuesta Benberry African and African American Quilt and Quilt History Research Collection includes:

- over 50 quilts (including family quilts, the only one she made, special quilts made by groups of her friends, and ones by noted artists, Faith Ringgold, Carolyn Mazloomi, and Carole Harris);
- her notebooks and scrapbooks;
- quilt patterns and quilt-related ephemera, guild newsletters, exhibition catalogues, posters, magazines, and journals - including many rare and unique items;
- a large library of books on American and African American history, art, and quilting;
- files relating to Benberry's own publications and on publications by other authors (including Kyra Hicks, Roland Freeman, and the authors of *Hidden in Plain View*); and hundreds of notes, clippings from magazines and newspapers, and photographs that encompass general African American history, African American artists, museums and exhibitions with an African American focus, and, of course, quilts, quilt exhibitions, and quilting.



# ARCHIVE MATERIALS

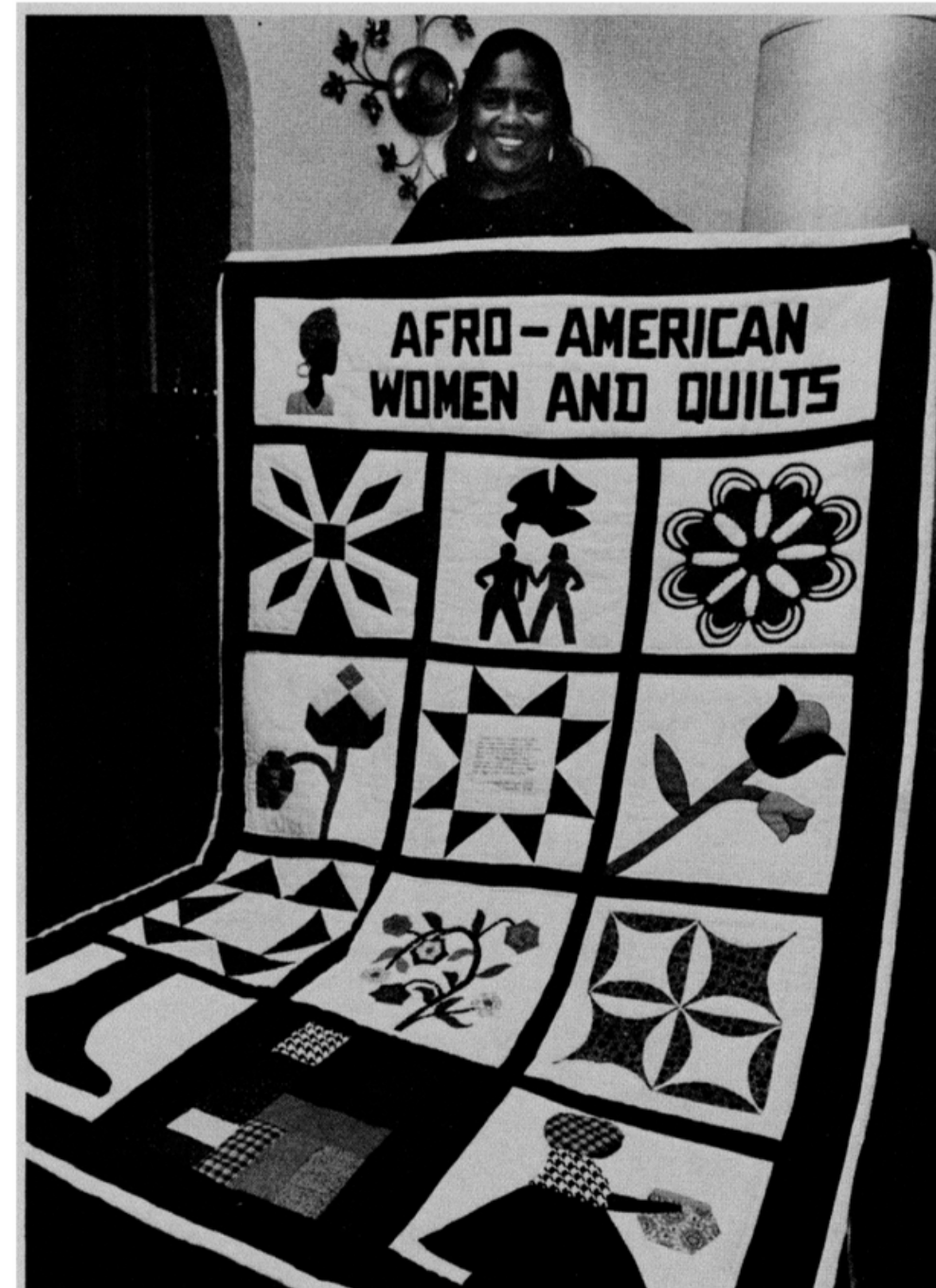
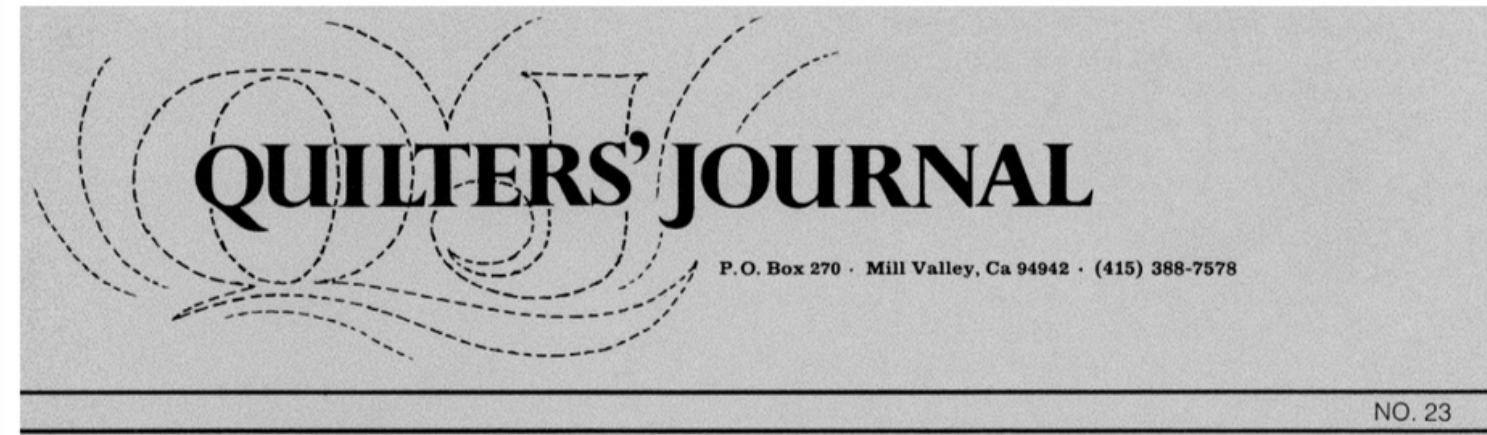
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A few notes about handling physical archival artifacts/documents:

- Please, wash and dry your hands thoroughly before touching any of the items in the box
  - when in archival spaces, use clean cotton gloves to handle materials
  - face masks are recommended
- Handle every item with care and intention
  - Some items may be fragile (old book bindings, tearing pages, thin materials, etc.)
  - use caution when removing and reinserting materials from their protective covers
  - avoid folding, creasing, or ripping pages
  - avoid creasing (or pressing back) book bindings, particularly the older books/documents



# CLOSE READING



## CUESTA RAY BENBERRY

*Born Cincinnati, Ohio on Sept 8; Mother, Marie Jones; Father, Walter Ray; Married George Benberry, 1951; One son, George Jr; One grandson, George III.*

*Educ: St Louis public schools, BA in Educ, Stowe College; MA Univ of Missouri, St Louis as Reading Specialist; Certified Librarian 1967.*

*Honors: "World Almanac Book of Buffs, Masters, Mavens and Uncommon Experts 1980"; Quilting Hall of Fame, 1983.*

*Organizations: YWCA, NAACP, Int'l Reading Assoc, Amer Fed of Teachers.*

## Document Record

1984

Dolph Briscoe Center for American  
History at The University of Texas at  
Austin; Joyce Gross Quilt History  
Collection, 2008-2013  
Mill Valley, California, United States

## Questions for reflection:

- What do you see or notice?
- What does this let us know about Cuesta Benberry?
- Why do you think this detail was included?

What connections does this artifact make you think about?

# CLOSE READING

## Document Record

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### HALL OF FAME '83

Cuesta Benberry, noted quilt historian, was inducted into The Quilter's Hall of Fame on Nov 5, 1983 at the Fifth Continental Quilting Congress in Arlington, Virginia.

The initial presentation, made Oct 27, 1979 at the Quilting Congress, honored Lenice Ingram Bacon, William Rush Dunton, Ruth Ebright Finley, Jonathan Holstein and Marguerite Ickes.

Honorees for 1980 were Averil Colby, Anne Orr, Florence Peto, Grace Snyder, Bertha Stenge; 1981, no honorees; 1982, Jean Ray Laury, Bonnie Le-man.

Mrs Benberry was "selected for her tireless contributions to two important aspects of the world of quilting; history research and pattern collecting. Her skill and dedication in documenting each of these key areas not only records history but acquaints and inspires those who follow with all of the various facets of quilting. Thanks to the talents and energies of people like Cuesta Benberry, the knowledge of quiltmaker and quilts will not go unnoticed and unrecorded.

### CUESTA BENBERRY'S ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

I thank the Continental Quilting Congress and the Selection Committee for awarding me this signal honor. I believe this award means that contemporary quilt researchers are being recognized for making worthwhile contributions.

For a very long time the history of quilts has been characterized by romantic and charming narratives. That's not all bad. For certainly, the story of quilting is inextricably intertwined with the lives of the quiltmakers and the customs and mores of the times in which the quilts were made. In the main, quilt history is a unique personal history. I do hope the field of quilt research will not be dominated by over zealous quilt researchers, who in the name of debunking myths, proceed to destroy the quilt mystique. We should not turn quilt history into a pale imitation of the dull, dry academic model. Our history is different in character and process. It is essential that the record will reveal that quilt history is as unique as the quilts and the persons who made them. What I see as the quilt investigator's obligation is the expansion and enrichment of quilt information undergirded by accuracy and truth, set in a frame of serious scholarship.

Some of the pressing concerns quilt researchers should have, include:

1. the overwhelming anonymity of early quiltmakers of the 18th & 19th centuries.
2. the anonymity of quilt source information.
3. the development of quilting in this huge country of ours - county to county, state to state and region to region.

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*A souvenir booklet honoring Mrs Benberry pictures her Afro-American quilt along with the story behind the quilt is available for \$2.50 pp from The Continental Quilting Congress, P.O. Box 561, Vienna, VA 22180*

**QUILTERS' JOURNAL**  
P.O. Box 270  
Mill Valley, Ca 94942

Controlled Circulation  
Postage Paid at  
Mill Valley, CA 94942

Rosemarie Eisner  
619 Corbett  
San Francisco CA 94114 #31

## Questions for reflection:

- What do you see or notice?
- Why do you think this detail is important?
- What does this artifact let us know about Cuesta Benberry?
- What does this tell us about her beliefs about quilts and quilt makers?

How does this relate to other topics we've discussed in class?



Cuesta and her older brother, Walter

## CUESTA RAY BENBERRY

as told to Joyce Gross

Since the early 1960s, Cuesta Ray Benberry has been quietly collecting, cataloging and researching quilt history. In those days, not many people knew her except by her yellow legal pad correspondence and the telephone. Today she is acknowledged as the foremost quilt historian in the U.S.

Nowadays friends and friends of friends send her material. Her list of correspondents reads like "Who's Who in the Quilt World" and we are indebted to her for the patient and thorough collecting, cataloging and researching.

And the wonder of it is, that Mrs Benberry still gets excited when she finds "a piece of a puzzle." I remember several years ago when she phoned me one Saturday night so excited I could hear her rapid breathing. She had just received pattern "C", a long sought Stearns & Foster pattern for which she and other pattern buffs had been searching for years. She carefully explained to me what it meant to the total Stearns & Foster history.

Then there was the time at the Continental Quilting Congress when we met for dinner after she had spent the afternoon at the Smithsonian. She exclaimed with her eyes shining and face beaming, "I felt like I had died and gone to heaven. There I was in the Smithsonian with their files and slides in my hands. I even found 2 or 3 slave-made quilts." She also admitted that when she was alone in her room that afternoon, she was so excited she did a little dance.

The material for this article was obtained from a tape recording of our conversation in Ms Benberry's St Louis home on March 12 & 13, 1983

# Take Note:

- Life & history of Cuesta Benberry
- Quilting and quilt history
- Personal connections &/or memories that come up for you

## I WANT TO BE A WRITER

As a child I wanted to be a writer. My father encouraged me from childhood and I used to write little stories. When he would come home from the railroad he would ask me what had I written and I would read them to him.

Then when I went to high school I did a little writing. I guess when I was taking English Literature we had to write. I remember the time each student had to select a poem and write an introduction. I selected the poem "Abou Ben Adhem". The words still stick with me. I was listing who had benefited mankind and I used the phrase, "Jesus Christ was a humanitarian."

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The teacher came over to me and said to the class, "I want everyone to listen"

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The teacher shot up from his seat so fast he scared me. I was standing in front of the class and he came over to me to get everyone quiet. Then he said, "Read that again. I want everyone to listen." After that he took quite an interest in me.



I wrote little plays for the class and various things like that. I guess I wanted to be a writer but by the time I got married I didn't have any active interest in writing.

I liked history in grammar school and in high school too. When I was in college it was my minor and when I did graduate work at St Louis "U" that was going to be my major. I had accumulated quite a few hours before I left school when the baby was little.

When I went to college, history was straight from the history books but when I took graduate work, I did a lot of studying from primary sources of history. We were required to take a course in research as a prerequisite. Then I went into the primary and secondary type of research.

## I GET INTERESTED IN QUILT HISTORY

I think I really got started in quilt history by marrying into George's family. They were from the rural part of Paducah in western Kentucky. His mother gave me a quilt for our wedding and whenever I would go down there with George it seemed to me the whole little community was interested in quilts. Now I had seen quilts because my grandmother made them but she made what I call "under the spread" or utilitarian quilts. A woman in the neighborhood worked in a factory and would bring huge boxes of pieces which they would just piece randomly. They might look in a paper and cut their own pattern, but they never bought a pattern.

But when I went to Kentucky there was great interest. They knew the names of all these quilts and they called them by name. "Have you seen my new 'Cake Stand'?" or "Do you like my 'Catch as Catch Can'" I thought that was so great. Then they would pull them out of their trunks and talk about them. I really think that was the way I got interested.

I pieced a few blocks but I didn't do too well with the sewing. When I learned there were so many patterns I became interested in patterns.

In the 1960s there were a lot of little quilt magazines - not magazines by today's standards but rather little mimeographed journals which were basically pattern books. They also had lists of names of people who were interested in pattern collecting, quilt making or exchanging friendship blocks. The magazines served as sort of a coalescing agent to gather in quilt people. I got to know there were a number of people all over the U.S. who were interested in quilts.

There were several publications none of which lasted very long. What they did was to try to feature old patterns that were long since forgotten or had not been used in recent times. Those women were really very good at uncovering information about old quilts and old quilt patterns from old sources - old newspapers and magazines. They also sponsored Round Robins.

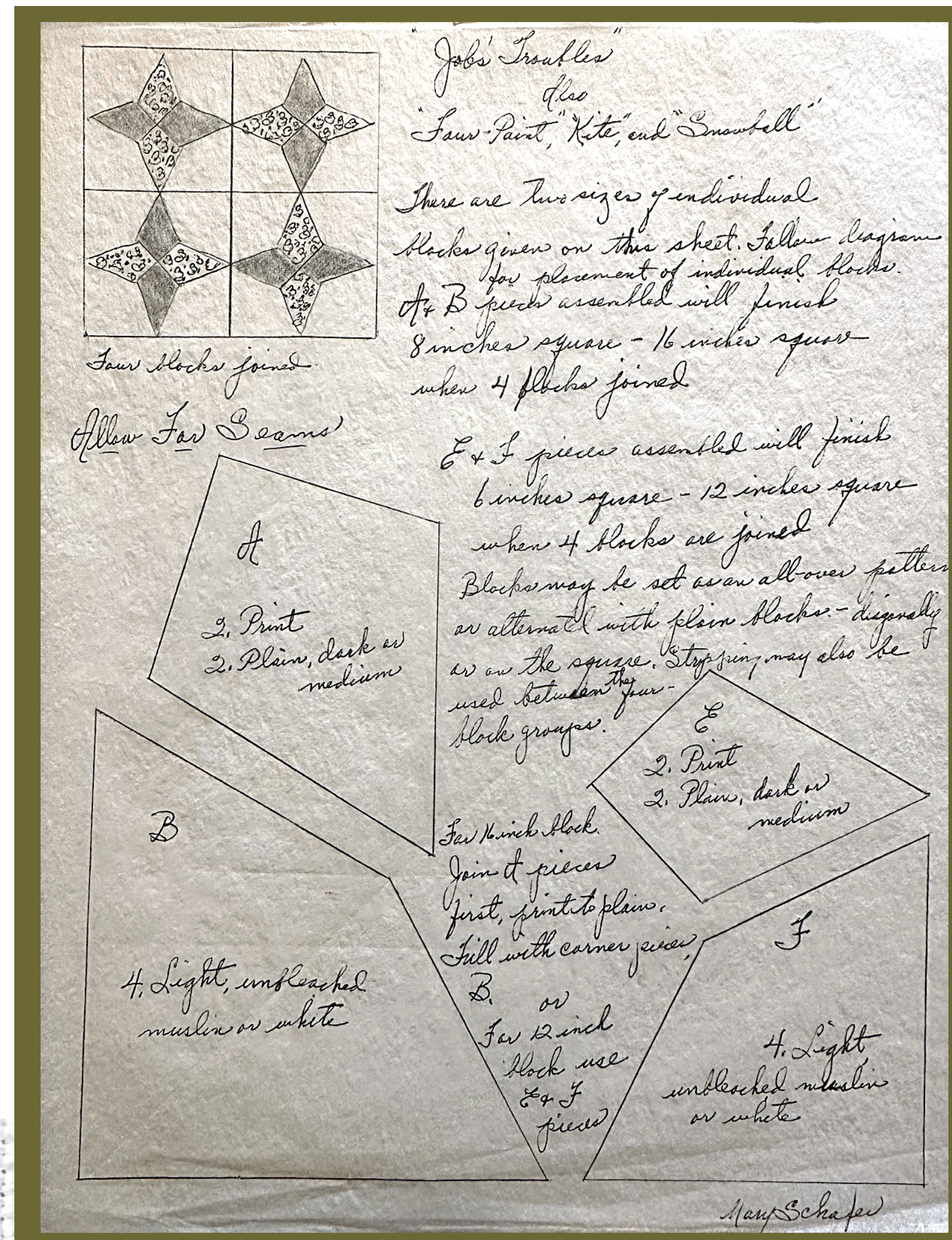


# CLOSE READING

## Document Record

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Austin; Joyce Gross Quilt History  
Collection, 2008-2013  
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## Questions for reflection:

- What do you notice about this artifact?
- What is unique about this artifact?
- Why do you think this was included in the archive?
- What does this let you know about quilting and quilt makers?

What connections does this artifact make you think about?

## HANDS-ON ACTIVITY

# ENGAGING ARTIFACTS FROM THE ARCHIVE:

- Look through the box of materials (or the scanned artifacts on the Quilt Index website) and select 2-3 items to engage more closely
- Write/journal notes about the artifacts you selected concerning the following questions:
  - What do you notice about this artifact?
  - Why do you think this was included in the archive?
  - What does this let you know about quilting and quilt makers?
  - What does this artifact let you know about Cuesta Benberry?
  - Does this artifact relate to other things we've learned or discussed in class?



# Full Group Discussion:

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## Thoughts &/or Reactions to:

- Cuesta Benberry
- archives & archival documents
- legacy of quilters, quilt history, quilt scholarship

## Stories & Legacy:

- Whose history &/or stories are embodied within the archival documents we explored? Who is excluded?
- Why is it important to know &/or share these stories?

## Implications of this Experience:

- What are the implications of these artifacts in the world today?
- How can these items inform how we think about and engage with one another and the world, both now and in the future?
- How do you collect information about your own legacy? How is this information stored, sorted, &/or shared? Will this change in the future?

