

# Approaching Analysis: The Lancaster County Quilt Harvest

by Patricia Keller

*The quilt survey movement in the United States, a phenomenon largely of the last decade, was not conceived as a national effort, with standardized goals and methods. Instead, starting in 1982 in Kentucky, the idea spread across the country, so there are now few states in which quilt surveys have not been done. Inspiration and methodology were borrowed or methods reinvented, with varying degrees of sophistication and application of scholarly standards. Most of the surveys have been designed and run by quilt enthusiasts rather than people trained as scholars in the decorative arts, folklore, art history, etc., and concern has been expressed about many of the surveys' designs, methodologies, use and interpretation of data collected, and, ultimately, value to quilt scholarship.*

*Patricia Keller was the director of the Lancaster County, Pennsylvania quilt documentation project from its founding in 1988 to 1993. She and her steering committee felt that such a survey offered a unique opportunity for collecting and interpreting social and historical data. To fully exploit these possibilities Ms. Keller assembled a distinguished multi-disciplinary body of scholars and subjected the survey's design, methodologies and interpretive potential of data collected to their scrutiny and suggestions. This was the first time such an approach had been applied to a quilt documentation project; her article describes how it was conceived and implemented.*

*Ms. Keller welcomes inquiries about the methods discussed in her article as they apply to quilt documentation projects. She may be contacted in writing through this journal.*

—Editors' Note

The Heritage Center Museum of Lancaster County established The Lancaster County Quilt Harvest quilt documentation effort in October, 1988.<sup>1</sup> As conceived and developed, the Quilt Harvest is a multifaceted history project focusing on the social, economic, intellectual and political lives of women and men in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, through analysis and interpretation of 18th, 19th and early-20th century quilted textiles and quilting traditions specific to this geopolitical entity.<sup>2</sup> The design of the Lancaster project was informed by preceding artifact studies and methodologies, including several prior state and regional quilt documentation projects.<sup>3</sup> The Quilt Harvest project correlates with the Heritage Center Museum's mission of collecting, documenting, exhibiting and interpreting the decorative arts of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. The intention of this article is to describe one feature of the Lancaster project's design, an aspect that may prove useful as a resource for quilt documentation projects interested in extending the interpretive potential of project data.

As originally conceived, The Lancaster County Quilt Harvest consisted of four interrelated, essentially sequential components. The initial phase consisted of several months of detailed and comprehensive planning leading to the mass quilt documentation effort (data collection). The products of documentation required an extended phase of data organization and computerization necessary to support an extended period of taxonomic development and interpretive inquiry.\* The mass-documentation fieldwork phase of this project, similar to many previous and subsequent American regional and state mass quilt documentation projects, consisted of a series of public quilt documentation events. During these events the project team assembled an extensive written and photographic base of detailed empirical information about the physical appearance and structural characteristics of Lancaster County quilted textiles brought by their owners for documentation. By interviewing quilt owners and makers the team also collected information detailing the individual quilts' histories of use and ownership, biographical data about the quilts' makers and owners, descriptions of makers' tools and techniques, and a range of additional evidence pertaining to the production and use of quilted bedcoverings and other quilted textiles in Lancaster County during the period under study.<sup>4</sup> As was originally intended, the necessarily capsulized data collected through the public quilt documentation days provided a guide to opportunities for subsequent audio- or videotaped ethnographic interviews with quiltmakers and quilt owners. The information collected during the subsequent interview process clarified and expanded the anecdotal base of historical information, and provided opportunities to explore current attitudes and remembered aspects of individual and group behavior.

Two fundamental objectives motivated the Quilt Harvest project Steering Committee and informed the research design. On the pragmatic level, the documentation questions were designed to guide fieldworkers in recording detailed empirical information from quilts made in Lancaster County in the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>5</sup> This data would later be subject to quantitative analyses to substantiate or modify an informal yet commonly operative taxonomy of physical characteristics thought to distinguish quilts made in Lancaster County in the period under study. By identifying physical attributes which distinguish dated quilts made by members of various ethnic, religious, economic and social groups from Lancaster County's various geographic (and demographic) sub-regions, the project team anticipated de-

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veloping diachronic systems of taxonomic classification for Lancaster County quilts.

Though development of differentiating taxonomic profiles was an arguably sufficient impetus for the intensive undertaking planned, the Steering Committee was persuaded from the outset that the Quilt Harvest afforded an important and unparalleled opportunity for deeper social and historical analyses based on quilts and quilting behaviors as apparently gendered manifestations of material culture. To this end, the "Quilt Harvest" project design embraced a corollary objective: interdisciplinary examination of the project's empirical and anecdotal data. As suggested by Fleming's model for artifact study, such cultural analysis promised to reveal intersections of function and meaning connecting the indigenous production, use, and retention of quilted bedcoverings to the larger contexts of Lancaster County's social, political, intellectual and economic life.'

Once computerization of the Quilt Harvest project data was well under way, the enormous interpretive potential inherent in the aggregate database, as well as questions about the statistical significance of the sample, prompted design of a transitional review and planning study in preparation for the project's interpretive phase. In early 1993 the Heritage Center Museum organized an interdisciplinary team of consulting academicians and independent scholars to join the members of the project team<sup>8</sup> in a review of the Quilt Harvest project methodology and data. The consultants were asked to suggest theoretical and conceptual issues and models from the perspective of their specific discipline and/or individual research which they thought could prove applicable to the project database and developing multiple lines of interpretive inquiry and analysis. The consultants were also invited to comment on the project's sampling characteristics, and suggest additional augmentative or corrective work they thought necessary.

The composition of the panel was carefully considered to include representatives of a number of research fields and academic disciplines; it was not thought, however, that this configuration exhausted the possibilities for interdisciplinary thought relative to this project. The panel included social and cultural historian Barbara G. Carson (*Commonwealth Center for American Studies, College of William and Mary*) whose professional experience has emphasized statistical interpretation of American material culture within the context of American social and cultural history; historians Laurel Thatcher Ulrich (*University of New Hampshire*) and Louise Stevenson (*Franklin and Marshall College, Lancaster*) who approached the project data in light of overarching issues in American history and American women's history of the 18th and 19th centuries, respectively; folklorist Bernard L. Herman (*University of Delaware*), whose professional experience has emphasized material culture studies and statistical reconstruction

and interpretation of material and socio-historical contexts; textile historian Barbara A. Brackman, lecturer and author of several recognized reference works on American quilts; Thomas Winpenny (*Elizabethtown College*) an historian with specialized training in the history of technology whose research has focused upon the impact of 19th century industrialization on south-central Pennsylvania; and statistician Rebecca J. Siders (*University of Delaware*) whose cross-disciplinary approach combining American social and cultural history with social science statistical analysis supported inquiry, analysis, and interpretation of the Quilt Harvest project database.

The review and planning study was designed to afford each consultant the time and information necessary to become thoroughly oriented to the Quilt Harvest project and its methodology prior to traveling to Lancaster for a one-day roundtable conference. Three months before the Lancaster conference, each consultant was provided with a synopsis of the review and planning study's design and objectives, an extended written overview of the Quilt Harvest project methodology, a system description detailing the computerized database files, file relationships, screens, codes, and reporting capabilities; sample quilt documentation forms, and additional background materials.' Follow-up telephone conferences and meetings with each consultant clarified ambiguities and addressed questions concerning both the review and planning study and the overall project design.

Consultants and project team members next prepared informal written summaries or listings of their initial observations and suggestions for future analysis and interpretation of the Quilt Harvest data.<sup>10</sup> These were collated and distributed to all participants for review prior to the Lancaster conference. A synthetic analysis of the combined initial observations and interpretive suggestions revealed two primary and interrelated categories of investigation which corresponded to the documentation project's initial objectives: 1. visual and structural analysis of various Lancaster County quilts' physical attributes and changes in these typologies over time; and 2. investigation of social and historical contexts for quilts and quilting behavior in Lancaster County. Consultants' initial suggestions included models of quantitative testing for points of congruence between two or more of the 22 identified data fields (for example, maker religion/presence of inscription/date of object), and 82 questions relating project data to larger social and historical contexts (examples: Is there a discernible relationship between quilt production and wartime? Is there a discernible shift in the demographic profile of those making quilts in a pre-industrial era vs. an industrial society?).

Following this period of preparation, consultants and project team members met in Lancaster in June, 1993, for an

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informal, day-long exchange and synthesis of observations, insights, and ideas for future research based upon the Quilt Harvest effort. A slide presentation including scenes from the public documentation effort and a broad representation of the objects documented during the Quilt Harvest project (including quilts, quilt tops, pieced and quilted pillow slips, quilting patterns, etc.) served as one catalyst for an enlightening and enormously productive discussion extending through much of the day. Reports of sample frequencies suggested by the consultants' earlier queries were also distributed, and were useful for helping the group discuss concerns relative to the sample's statistical validity and for supporting additional theoretical and conceptual discussion of topics for future research.

The entire day's proceedings were audio-tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. A hard-copy executive summary as well as a diskette copy of the entire transcription were distributed to each participant for review several weeks after the Lancaster conference. The executive summary organized the points raised during the conference discussion within topically-related categorical headings.<sup>14</sup> Each participant also received a list of specific questions requesting additional information (such as bibliographic references) and clarification of difficult concepts or comments made during the Lancaster conference. Consultants subsequently provided this additional information either in writing or during individual conferences.

This opportunity for collaborative interdisciplinary review of the Quilt Harvest project methodology and interpretive potential proved enormously beneficial and productive. Undertaken at a point of transition between data compilation and interpretation, this study provided an opportunity for valuable extended discourse helpful for assessing the overall validity of the project's actual sampling. Equally important, the multiple perspectives on the project and its interpretive potential provided by academicians and scholars from varying disciplines and backgrounds contributed new insights and promising theoretical and conceptual models to inform future quilt project data analysis and interpretation.

*Patricia Keller received her material culture training as a Fellow in the Winterthur Program in Early American Culture, receiving an M.A. in 1984 from the University of Delaware. Her research has been particularly directed toward Pennsylvania German material culture with special emphasis on paint-decorated furniture and quilted textiles, and she has written and lectured frequently on these and other decorative arts topics. As Director/Curator of The Heritage Center of Lancaster County from 1984-1993, she organized numerous original exhibitions interpreting regional decorative arts. Patricia served as director of The Lancaster County Quilt Harvest, a regional quilt documentation project sponsored by the Heritage Center, and continues as a volunteer curatorial research associate for that project. Currently, Patricia is a*

*doctoral student in the American Civilization Program within the History Department of the University of Delaware, pursuing synthesis of American social history, women's history, and material culture study. In June, 1994, she will guest curate an exhibition of quilts from Lebanon County, Pennsylvania, for the Hershey Museum of American Life in Hershey, Pennsylvania. Patricia has recently been named a 1994 Sullivan Fellow by the Museum of American Textile History in North Andover, Massachusetts. She will examine the impact of regional taste and patterns of consumption on printed cotton textile manufacturers in America, 1840-1940, through a case study of the network of commercial interactions connecting quiltmakers in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, with American printed cotton textile mills in the 19th and early 20th centuries.*

### Endnotes

<sup>14</sup>The Lancaster County Quilt Harvest" project was initially proposed by Mr. Gerald S. Lestz, a prominent and well-loved Lancastrian who, with his wife Margaret Gordon Lestz, has been an untiring advocate for and patron of Lancaster County's visual arts. Although the "Lancaster County Quilt Harvest" was not officially organized by the Heritage Center Museum until 1988, Mr. Lestz excited interest in the project as early as June, 1985, when he organized a program at the Landis Valley Museum and invited The Kentucky Quilt Project's Shelly Zegart to speak concerning the need for Lancaster County to undertake a quilt documentation project. Mr. Lestz served a distinguished term as President of the Board of the Heritage Center Museum from 1987 to 1989, during the "Quilt Harvest's" most intensive fieldwork efforts. I was privileged to serve as director of "The Lancaster County Quilt Harvest" from 1988 to 1993 and wish to acknowledge the untiring and invaluable volunteer efforts of "Quilt Harvest" steering committee members Patricia Thomson Herr, Phyllis Thompson, Barbara Lenox, Evie Gleason, Cathy Krall, Linda Jemyn, and Linda Jones McKee, and those of former HCLC associate curator Susan Sharpless Messimer. Their exceptional insight, extraordinary service and unflagging enthusiasm during the project's organizational, fieldwork and data management phases have assured the project's continued integrity and success. Barbara Lenox's untiring and essential scheduling and other logistical efforts deserve special mention, as do Phyllis Thompson's and Barbara Kokenes' skills with computer entry and documentation organization. The entire project owes a debt of gratitude to Trish Herr for her deep experience with and knowledge of regional textiles and her selfless willingness to share all she knows. Computer systems consultant Cathy Krall materialized at just the right moment as if in answer to a prayer; her voluntary gift of countless professional hours of computer programming expertise has brought the project database's potential for sophisticated quantitative analysis to the brink of reality. Many dozens of dedicated "Quilt Harvest" documentation event volunteers were recruited from among the Heritage Center's caring volunteer corps, and from the enthusiastic members of the Lancaster chapter of the Embroiderers' Guild of American and the Red Rose Quilters' Guild. These cheerful helpers served as registrars, documenters, and photographic assistants throughout the project's fieldwork phase and during data organization; although these friends are not noted individually by name, each of their efforts is gratefully acknowledged. The EGA also provided funding for the volunteer's special aprons. Funding for "The Lancaster County Quilt Harvest" project's fieldwork was provided in part by generous grants from Penn Savings Bank, Lancaster Region; Bank of Lancaster County; Fulton Bank; and Commonwealth Federal Savings Bank. Additional funding to support archival organization of the project data, and in support of the review and planning study described in this article, was provided by Special Project grants from The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. The Heritage Center Museum operating fund and Board of Trustees also supported every aspect of the project.

<sup>15</sup>The formal mission of the Heritage Center Museum of Lancaster County restricts the institution's area of study to the decorative arts made and used within Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. The quilts surveyed during "The Lancaster County Quilt Harvest" were therefore limited to the

museum's arguably arbitrary but nevertheless politically defined region of interest. As noted by folklorist Joyce Ice, object surveys defined by geopolitical boundaries rather than by the realities of cultural geography are obviously problematic. Commenting on the concept of statewide quilt surveys, Ice's observations are equally applicable to any survey bounded by a geopolitical entity. Ice notes, "While state borders are clearly marked and convenient boundaries for surveys, they are also arbitrary governmental lines that do not necessarily relate to quilting in a meaningful way. Furthermore, a state survey precludes other regional groupings across state lines that might be more useful in tracing quilt patterns and styles. Assuming, a priori, that a state is a significant unit for study may in turn restrict or skew observations that can be made about regions within a state." (Joyce Ice, review of *The Quilts of Tennessee: Images of Domestic Life Prior to 1930*, by Bets Ramsey and Merikay Waldvogel, in *Southern Folklore* 46, no. 2 (1989): 192-193.) Clearly, evidence collected during the Lancaster quilt documentation effort will not be an adequate basis upon which to structure larger regional models of quilting behavior. However, quilt documentation efforts are either underway or concluded for a number of (geopolitical) areas surrounding Lancaster County; neighboring Berks and Lebanon counties to the north have completed documentation efforts, and to the south the state of Maryland's survey is presently in process. Meaningful analyses of the relationships linking quilting to cultural geography in the middle-Atlantic region and beyond will depend upon analyses based on the synthesis of these and additional documentation efforts.

<sup>34</sup>The Lancaster County Quilt Harvest" documentation effort owes intellectual debts of gratitude to a number of preceding quilt documentation projects and their leaders, including: Shelly Zegart of The Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc.; Jeannette Lasansky and the quilt documentation forms published by Quilt Project of the Oral Traditions Project of the Union County Historical Society (Ms. Lasansky served as an initial paid consultant to "The Lancaster County Quilt Harvest"); Phyllis Tepper and the quilt documentation forms published by The New York Quilt Project; the quilt documentation forms by Jonathan Holstein published in *The Quilt Digest* (1983); and the quilt documentation forms designed by Holstein and published by the American Textile Registry. In turn, "The Lancaster County Quilt Harvest" has provided a documentation model adapted by the Goschenhoppen Historians' quilt documentation project, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, and the Berks County, Pennsylvania, quilt documentation project.

<sup>35</sup>Because the project's research design anticipated the need for sophisticated quantitative analysis, the written documentation was collected in a hard-copy format designed for easy adaptation for subsequent computerization. Computerization of the project data began in 1992 on an IBM compatible PC running MS-DOS and using Enable, a relatively inexpensive software package that includes integrated database, spreadsheet, graphics, word processing, and telecommunications modules. Cathy Krall, an experienced computer systems analyst, developed the input forms and database structures using the Enable database module. The design was intended to correspond with the hard-copy documentation forms, the confidential owner/subject identification system, and filing system already in place. The analyst designed the programs to be menu driven and to present a self-contained application interface for data entry. Three members of the project steering committee thoroughly familiar with the "Quilt Harvest" and its findings were responsible for entering the data. As analysis requires, researchers will be able to support and select data from each of the files and prepare a variety of reports. Provision is made within the program for keyword search capability among the anecdotal information recorded. Additionally, the Enable package can export data in a variety of other formats (ASCII, dBase, Lotus, etc.) for input to other analysis packages. (Much of this description is derived from an unpublished internal document, "Quilt Harvest Database: System Overview" compiled in June, 1993, by Cathy Krall.) The data compilation phase also included archival organization of the original documentation materials, including photographic slides and negatives, original documentation forms, and other written information such as photocopies of quiltmakers' diaries, quilt pattern clippings, or marriage certificates.

<sup>36</sup>The ten public quilt documentation days were subsequently supplemented by several additional documentation periods scheduled to accommodate the numerically large holdings of several private collections. Special documentation sessions were also arranged for a small number of persons requesting documentation who were unable to attend the scheduled public events.

<sup>6</sup>Quilt documentation projects in the later 20th century confront a significantly limited "window of opportunity" for direct access to those few women and men still living who were born in the latter decades of the 19th century. They and their now aging sons and daughters are frequently the last remaining keepers of oral tradition and family lore. Although the "Quilt Harvest" project team recognized the importance of Lancaster County's entire continuum of 20th century quilting activities, the realities of diminishing direct access to elderly informants, as well as available time and funding for the fieldwork, led the project team to restrict its 1988-89 documentation efforts to quilted textiles made in Lancaster County prior to the impact of American involvement in World War II.

<sup>7</sup>E. McLung Fleming, "Artifact Study: A Proposed Model," *Winterthur Portfolio* 9 (1974): 157-159. For a general discussion concerning the potential for application of Fleming's model to quilt study, see Patricia Keller, "Methodology and Meaning: Strategies for Quilt Study," *The Quilt Journal*, Volume 2, Number 1, 1993, pp. 1-4. For a general discussion concerning the potential for application of Fleming's model to quilt study, see Ricky Clark, "Quilt Documentation: A Case Study," in *Making the American Home: Middle Class Women and Material Culture 1840-1940*, Marilyn Ferris Motz and Pat Browne, eds. (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1988) 158-192; and Patricia Keller, "Methodology and Meaning: Strategies for Quilt Study," *The Quilt Journal*, Volume 2, Number 1, 1993, pp. 1-4.

<sup>8</sup>Members of the "Quilt Harvest" project team who participated in the transitional review and planning study included author, lecturer, and regional textile historian Patricia T. Herr, now a trustee with the Heritage Center's (HCLC) Board; historian and former HCLC associate curator Susan Sharpless Messimer, now curator with the Lancaster County Historical Society; HCLC trustee and dedicated volunteer Phyllis Thompson, now President of the HCLC Board; computer systems consultant Cathy Krall, and the author.

<sup>9</sup>The consultants were also provided with copies of local news clippings on the Lancaster quilt documentation project as well as project-initiated press releases announcing documentation events throughout Lancaster County. These helped them gain perspective on the way the project was "marketed" and perceived within the community and how that might have influenced the sample.

<sup>10</sup>Several consultants requested that summaries of their observations and potential interpretive questions be extracted from extended telephone conferences during which the project and its methodology were discussed.

<sup>11</sup>Categorical headings suggested by the conference discussion and included within the executive summary are: 1. *Quilt Design and The Lancaster Quilt Aesthetic*; 2. *Quilt Production*; 3. *Quilt Function*; 4. *Quilt Transmission*; 5. *Gender and Quilts/Quilting*; 6. *Theoretical and Conceptual Modes/Issues*; 7. *Project Biases*; 8. *Architecture and Quilts/Quilting*; and 9. *Work to be Done*.