“Everybody wants to leave somethin' behind:” Quiltmaking and Identity in Kentucky from 1800–1900

Molly Billiard

Despite the mechanization of fabric production in England in 1785, it wasn’t until after the Revolutionary War that the United States established their own commercial textile industry, much of which was located in New England.[1] Before the arrival of the power loom in North America in 1814, quiltmaking in Kentucky was a practice highly influenced by economic status and geographical location, affecting both the types of quilts created and the creation of quilts at all.[2] However, the move into the nineteenth century and all its innovations brought increasing commerce by both riverboat along the Ohio River and train, allowing more trade opportunities for what was then a largely rural state consisting mainly of frontier settlements.[3]

As Kentucky became more connected through trade and transportation, the exchange of materials and ideas influenced quiltmaking, playing a role in the development and transmission of quilt patterns and their ever-changing names. Like many other folk arts, the names of quilt patterns change, overlap, and combine—but often signify metaphor or geometry. For example, Tree of Life and Tree of Paradise are different names for the same pattern, but are also sometimes used as names for other tree-themed patterns, or are called by other tree-themed names.[4] Another example is the family of patterns known as Rob Peter and Pay Paul, or Robbing

[1] Norma R. Hollen, *Textiles* (New York: Macmillan, 1988), 2.

[2] Linda Elizabeth LaPinta, Shelly Zegart, and Frank Bennett, *Kentucky Quilts and Quiltmakers: Three Centuries of Creativity, Community, and Commerce* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2023), 10.

[3] LaPinta, Zegart, and Bennett, *Kentucky Quilts and Quiltmakers*, 10.

[4] Mary Washington Clarke and Ira Kohn, *Kentucky Quilts and Their Makers* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1976), 103.

Peter to Pay Paul.[5] These patterns are not focused on shape, but rather on the use of alternating two contrasting, overlapping colors. Within this family are even more named patterns, some incredibly variable depending on family tradition. Orange Peel, Melon Patch, The Fool's Puzzle, Around the World, and perhaps most well-known, Drunkard's Path, are all variations on this one type of quilt.[6] Rose of Sharon, Whig Rose, Democratic Rose, Ohio Rose, or simply Rose Appliqué are generally all names for the same floral motif.[7] This variation even extends to the names of quilting equipment (is it a frame or a set of frames; a hanging frame or a swinging frame; a trestle, or a horse, or a sawhorse frame?), methods, and materials.[8] All of this to say that the names associated with quiltmaking are highly variable, based not just on location and time, but on individual artists and their interpretations of patterns, religion, history, and political activity.

The nineteenth century is a time that encompasses significant shifts in American history, from westward expansion, to the Civil War, to the rise of industrialization and the advent of commercial textile production.[9] These changes directly impacted the materials, techniques, and patterns available to quilters, while the era's religious and sociopolitical currents influenced the designs themselves.

The first quilt documentation project in the world was The Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc., and unlike many places in America, Kentucky quiltmaking has never substantially slowed

[5] Clarke and Kohn, *Kentucky Quilts and Their Makers*, 104–06.

[6] Kathryne Hail Travis, "Quilts of the Ozarks," *Southwest Review*, vol. 15, no. 2 (Winter, 1929), 236–44 at 236.

[7] Clarke and Kohn, *Kentucky Quilts and Their Makers*, 108; Travis, "Quilts of the Ozarks," 239.

[8] Clarke and Kohn, *Kentucky Quilts and Their Makers*, 110.

[9] Hollen, *Textiles*, 3.

down.[10] Quiltmaking in Kentucky has always been a reflection of the state's cultural tapestry, built on generations-old traditions. The interplay of innovation and Kentucky's rural identity created a unique environment where quiltmaking thrived—both as a practical craft and as a deeply personal art form. Quilts created in Kentucky between 1800 and 1900 serve as tangible artifacts that demonstrate the internal, communal, and national identities of the women who crafted them, reflecting personal beliefs and shared traditions through their designs, materials, and construction. Beyond artistic expression and domestic labor, these quilts also serve as examples of women's broader influence in shaping society through the preservation of cultural and familial heritage as well as participation in civic and social movements.

Figure 1. Ann Eliza Belrichard Bryan, Star of Bethlehem Quilt, 1855, silk, glass, Linda Diane Reed Bofenkamp Collection, Kentucky Historical Society, https://kyhistory.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/A4F429F7-2D6B-4811-8BF8-831295190379. Reproduced by permission.

Quiltmaking was more than just domestic necessity, but also an expression of inner life where faith and personal taste found tangible form. The Star of Bethlehem pattern, also known as the Lone Star or Star of the East, first became popular in the 1830s, created by piecing together small diamonds into larger ones, which are then sewn together to create an eight-point star.[11] This is just one example of pattern names taken from Biblical passages—others including Hosanna, The Star and the Cross, Jacob's Ladder, Rose of Sharon, and Joseph's Coat.

[10] Clarke and Kohn, *Kentucky Quilts and Their Makers*, 2.

[11] Elise Shebler Roberts, *The Quilt: A History and Celebration of an American Art Form* (Minneapolis: Voyageur Press, 2010), 291.

Ann Eliza Belrichard Bryan's 1855 Star of Bethlehem quilt was handpieced, with a large, multi-colored eight-pointed center star made up of three-inch check, floral, plaid, and solid diamond pieces (fig. 1).[12] At the center of the star is a three-dimensional star formed out of clear beads with white thread (fig. 2). Diamond-shaped pieces are tacked with clear beads, and the center star is surrounded by eight, smaller, white ones inside of lime green squares. These smaller stars have clear beading at the center, and are tacked with beads and white thread at each point and green thread at each corner (fig. 3). The black background, pieced from large sections of silk, has machine-stitched stars in each piece. The ten-inch border is made from strips of the same fabric as the center star. More than just technical mastery, this quilt seems to be an exploration of artistry. Intricate beading and deliberate color choices are distinct details, especially against the contrast of the black silk background. Beyond visual splendor, this is also a deeply personal artifact, with the combination of religious pattern and meticulous craftsmanship transcending practicality to serve as a medium for faith and self-expression.

Figure 2. Bryan, Star of Bethlehem Quilt, beaded central star detail.

Figure 3. Bryan, Star of Bethlehem Quilt, detail.

[12] Ann Eliza Belrichard Bryan, *Star of Bethlehem Quilt*, Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort, KY.

The Rose of Sharon pattern was particularly favored in Kentucky, and as such, many examples have survived into the modern day, in part due to their creation as items of value rather than everyday quilts.[13] One example is the 82 × 83¾ inch sixteen-block cotton appliqué quilt attributed to Eliza Ann Raney from 1843 (fig. 4). Raney, who learned how to quilt during her time attending St. Catherine Academy in Washington County, Kentucky, designed the quilt top in her teens. According to the Kentucky Historical Society's records, she pieced the red, green, and yellow quilt top, but left the actual act of quilting to her family's enslaved workers, who stitched the quilt at night.[14] The quilt was passed through her family, and eventually donated by a descendent.

Figure 4. Eliza Ann Raney, Rose of Sharon Quilt, ca. 1843, cotton, Leon R. Gleaves, Jr. Collection, Kentucky Historical Society, https://kyhistory.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/62A0B473-D5B1-4A7B-989F-185750835100. Reproduced by permission.

Another is Talitha Quisenberry Watts's from 1846 with a swag and rosebud border (fig. 5).[15] The blocks are pieced, the border is appliquéd, and the piece is heavily quilted overall at ten stitches an inch. The flowers are made with red, pink, and white floral-patterned fabrics, with the center made from a yellow fabric—while the leaves and swags are green fabric with a black pattern. An inscription is quilted on the third block up from the bottom left side: "Talitha/

[13] Eliza Ann Raney, *Rose of Sharon Quilt*, Kentucky Historical Society.

[14] Raney, *Rose of Sharon Quilt*, Kentucky Historical Society.

[15] Talitha Quisinberry Watts, *Rose of Sharon Quilt*, Kentucky Historical Society.

Figure 5. Talitha Quisenberry Watts, Rose of Sharon Quilt, 1846, cotton, Rebecca Ann Davis Kennan Collection, Kentucky Historical Society, https://kyhistory.pastperfectonline.com/Webobject/F6416C5A-5345-43D7-A676-492304885199. Reproduced by permission.

Figure 6. Watts, Rose of Sharon Quilt, quilted inscription reading "Talitha/ Quisenbe/ rrys Quilt/Made 1846."

Quisenbe/ rrys Quilt/ Made 1846" (fig. 6).[16] This quilt was made before Watts's marriage in 1849, and was passed down to her son, then to his grandson, and then finally to his daughter, who donated it.[17]

Both Raney and Watts's pieces show the intersection of inner spirituality and personal expression—as well as the often-troubling social contexts in which these works were created. While they share the Rose of Sharon pattern, Raney's bold red, green, and yellow palette reflects a more traditional color scheme, while Watts's use of varying shades of red, pink, and white floral-patterned fabrics and distinctive swag and rosebud border suggests a more decorative and intricate interpretation of the design. The inscription on Watts's quilt further personalizes the work as an explicit marker of identity and authorship. These quilts, through variations on the same pattern, are both artifacts of personal artistry as well as a reminder of the intertwined histories of the distinction between "creator" and "laborer." Despite being patterns used and

[16] Watts, *Rose of Sharon Quilt*, Kentucky Historical Society.

[17] Watts, *Rose of Sharon Quilt*, Kentucky Historical Society.

adapted by many people, there's still a sense of the creators—those who chose the designs and stitched the blankets.

Florals in general were popular subjects in 1800s Kentucky. Tulips were a common quilt motif in Kentucky, due to both the tulip poplar's reputation as the Kentucky state tree, as well as a symbol of "love for generations of brides."[18] An exceptional quilt utilizing tulip motifs is the *McCain Tulip Basket Variation Quilt*, notable for its 12,949 pieces and two thousand yards of thread (fig. 7).[19] It's made of twenty-three pieced strips of cotton, with each strip containing fourteen tulip basket variations. Each basket is composed of four diamonds, which themselves are composed of nine smaller diamonds (fig. 8).[20] The fabrics include greens, pinks, reds, oranges, and prints, and are hand pieced and quilted on an approximately $^{5}/_{16}$ inch grid.

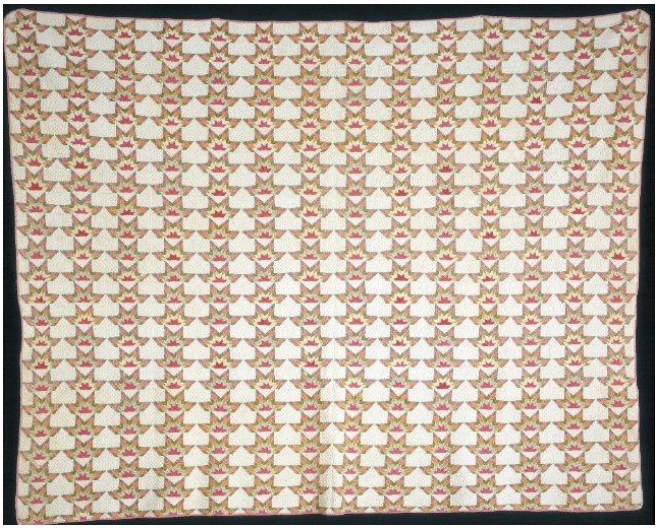

Figure 7. Millie Anderson McCain, McCain Tulip Basket Variation Quilt, 1869, cotton, Martha G. Kelly Collection, Kentucky Historical Society, https://kyhistory.pastperfectonline.com/Webobject/931D5BFC-7B0A-46F8-AFD7-123720601115. Reproduced by permission.

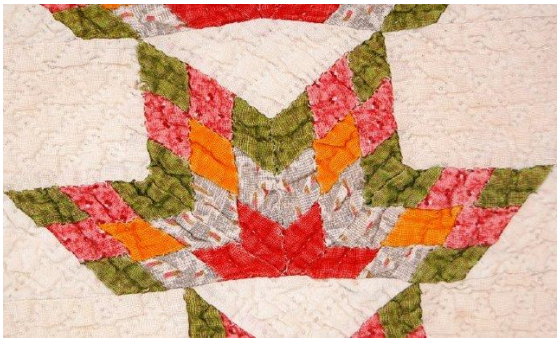

Figure 8. Millie Anderson McCain, McCain Tulip Basket Variation Quilt, tulip detail.

The quilt was made by Millie Anderson McCain prior to her marriage in 1870. McCain helped run the family farm, but was also a tailor for both men and women's clothing. She had a

[18] Clarke and Kohn, *Kentucky Quilts and Their Makers*, 11.

[19] Millie Anderson McCain, *McCain Tulip Basket Variation Quilt*, Kentucky Historical Society.

[20] McCain, *McCain Tulip Basket Variation Quilt*, Kentucky Historical Society.

Figure 9. Lucy Kemper West. Quilt, ca. 1860, cotton, fabric, Daughters of the American Revolution Museum, Washington, D.C., https://collections.dar.org/mDetail.aspx?rID=85.6&db=objects&dir=DARCOLL. Reproduced by permission.

reputation for fancywork—or ornamental needlework beyond simple stitches—including "embroidery, crochet, drawnwork, and quilting."[21] Her granddaughter, Mabel, was quoted as saying that she never recalled seeing her grandmother's hands empty.[22]

Lucy Kemper West's appliquéd floral quilt from approximately 1860 features central blocks with yellow-footed bases from which a central stem grows into a pomegranate (also suggested to be wild persimmons), topped by a stylized carnation (fig. 9).[23] Long stems near the vases end in large, red cockscombs with yellow sepals and two smaller stems between the fruits and carnations end in red buds. The blocks are arranged so that the four carnations meet in a square at the center of the quilt, and the sets of four cockscombs have blooms that meet near the corners. According to the family, this quilt won a ribbon at the Missouri State Fair before being passed down through the family from mother to daughter until it was donated.[24]

[21] McCain, *McCain Tulip Basket Variation Quilt*, Kentucky Historical Society.

[22] McCain, *McCain Tulip Basket Variation Quilt*, Kentucky Historical Society.

[23] Lucy Kemper West, *Quilt*, Daughters of the American Revolution.

[24] West, *Quilt*, Daughters of the American Revolution.

Billiard

Aside from thematic connections, each of these quilts is an example of how quilts, whether meant for frequent use or solely for display, often were personal expressions of taste and design. Quilters chose their colors, as well as their patterns. Botanicals—often symbols for fertility, love, and resilience—are framed by carefully balanced designs. These floral choices reflect both aesthetic preferences but also cultural and personal symbolism, such as tulips culturally representing enduring love and marriage while being abstractly adapted into patterns such as McCain's. It only makes sense for these quilts to have been as cherished and passed down as they have been, physical representations of personal symbolism as well as meticulous craftsmanship.

Figure 80. Margaret Younglove Calvert, Tumbling Blocks Quilt, 1870, fabric, Kentucky Museum, https://westernkentuckyuniversity.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/E622C6D9-99BB-4931-BBFA-354136130244. Reproduced by permission.

The most difficult patterns were often set aside as "nice" quilts, only used for company or display. One type of popular quilt in nineteenth-century Kentucky was the mosaic quilt, made from small quilt blocks that create designs out of small shapes like diamonds and hexagons.[25] A rather dramatic variation of this style is Margaret Younglove Calvert's *Tumbling Blocks Quilt* (fig. 10).[26] Three-sided blocks are pieced from diamond shapes and surrounded by hexagons, which create the cross and hourglass shapes (fig. 11). The design "floats" on the blue background with outline quilting framing the hexagonal pieces. Star clusters are also quilted in

[25] LaPinta, Zegart, and Bennett, *Kentucky Quilts and Quiltmakers*, 25.

[26] Margaret Younglove Calvert, *Tumbling Blocks Quilt*, Kentucky Museum.

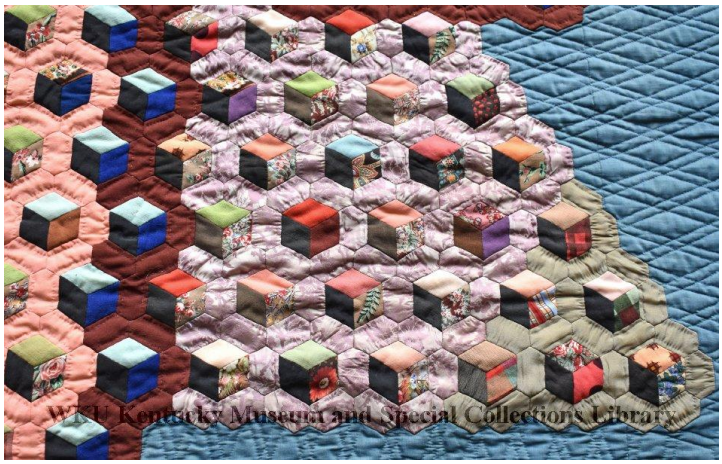

Figure 11. Margaret Younglove Calvert, Tumbling Blocks Quilt, detail.

each of the four corners (fig. 12). Curator of Western Kentucky University's Kentucky Museum, Sandra Staebell, says about the piece: "Some of our more important quilts tend to be our nineteenth-century quilts; one I consider among our stars is our 'Tumbling' Blocks Quilt…What's marvelous about this quilt is that it's not a traditional-looking quilt. It would fit right in with today's art quilts. It's rather dramatic…it truly is a very modern-looking, abstract quilt."[27]

Figure 12. Margaret Younglove Calvert, Tumbling Blocks Quilt, quilted stars detail.

The 1876 Centennial Exposition saw the exhibition of hundreds of quilts among nearly ten million visitors—the first time that number of American women had gathered to admire work on such a large scale. The Exposition was also the first time Japanese culture was introduced en masse to the American public, an exposure that led to the development and popularity of crazy quilts, which mimicked aesthetics of cracked glazes.[28] Elizabeth Thomas's crazy quilt was constructed from wool and velvet, and is composed

[27] LaPinta, Zegart, and Bennett, *Kentucky Quilts and Quiltmakers*, 25–26.

[28] International Quilt Study Center & Museum, "A Fairyland of Fabrics: Crazy Quilts," International Quilt Museum, https://web.archive.org/web/20150412002720/http://www.quiltstudy.org/exhibitions/online_exhibitions/Fairyland/crazy_quilts1.html.

Figure 13. Elizabeth Thomas, Crazy Quilt, 1870, silk, wool, Beth Patterson Collection, Kentucky Historical Society, https://kyhistory.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/D49A

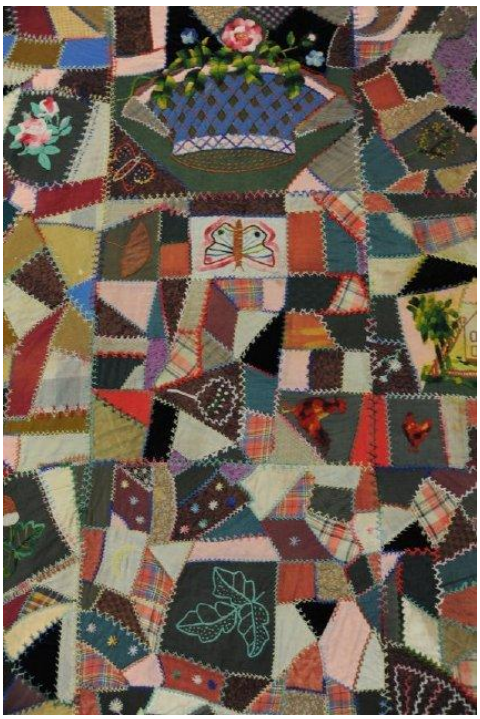

Figure 14. Thomas, Crazy Quilt, basket of flowers, butterfly, and other details.

of nine blocks surrounded by a border (fig. 13).[29] As described by the Kentucky Historical Society,

The top row of blocks has pieces embroidered with a large basket in blues and greens filled with flowers with a butterfly beneath, a cornucopia initialed with "B", a white bird, two birds in a cage, and a dog (fig. 14, 15). The center row has pieces embroidered with a butterfly, parasol, rooster, a house with a fence and trees, a white cow, and a mean [*sic*] on a horse with two dog [*sic*] (fig. 16, 17). The bottom row has pieces embroidered with flowers, leaves, a horseshoe, parasol, fan, and blue jay (fig. 18). The border has [*sic*] is embroidered with images of flowers, wheat, a bird, a woman in Colonial-style dress, and acorns (fig. 19).[30]

The top is stitched to the backing at wide intervals, and the edges are finished with a folding method. The quilt was passed through the family before being donated to the Historical Society.[31]

[29] Elizabeth Thomas, *Crazy Quilt*, Kentucky Historical Society.

[30] Thomas, *Crazy Quilt*, Kentucky Historical Society.

[31] Thomas, *Crazy Quilt*, Kentucky Historical Society.

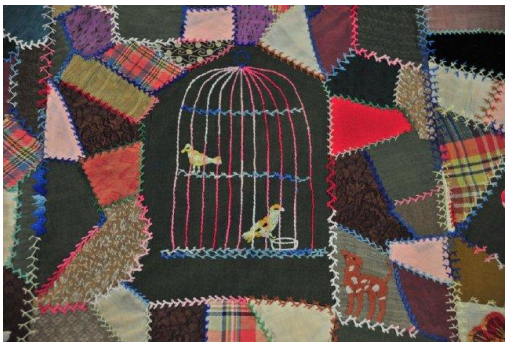

Figure 15. Thomas, Crazy Quilt, birds in cage.

Figure 16. Thomas, Crazy Quilt, roosters.

Measuring in at 66 × 63 inches, this quilt would have been a significant effort, combining embroidery with piecing and quilting.[32] Imagery ranging from birds and butterflies to a house, flowers, and a horseshoe suggest both nature and domestic life, with other elements like the parasol and fan gesturing to aesthetic tastes of the era. It highlights how

Figure 17. Thomas, Crazy Quilt, man riding horse with two dogs.

Figure 18. Thomas, Crazy Quilt, bluebird.

Figure 19. Thomas, Crazy Quilt, woman in colonial dress.

[32] Thomas, *Crazy Quilt*, Kentucky Historical Society.

quiltmakers drew inspiration from their surroundings as well as innovative styles, blending them with traditional techniques.

More than aesthetic achievement, Thomas's quilt serves as a personal record of time, place, and interests—a testament to her creativity as well as a demonstration of her skill. The embroidered motifs capture insight into the world around her: elements of daily life and cultural influences that she would've been surrounded by, such as birds, butterflies, flowers, and domestic symbols but also fashionable accessories of time. The incorporation of different embroidery techniques alongside intricate piecing indicates her technical ability in both decorative and structural elements. Thomas's personalization of the crazy quilt to contain imagery relating to her life turns this piece into a visual narrative of her experiences and artistic vision.

Beyond practicality, quiltmaking is also a medium for spirituality and personal expression. Whether through symbolism of patterns like the Star of Bethlehem and Rose of Sharon, through botanical motifs, or through abstract designs and embroidery—these works capture the quilters' inner worlds, revealing their values, creativity, and identities in ways that extend beyond their roles as functional textiles.

Careful selections of patterns, colors, and symbols are part of the connection between artistic choices and preferences, combining personal choices and the labor-intensive processes of piecing, quilting, and embellishing. Simultaneously, these quilts reflect the social and historical contexts in which they were created—highlighting the agency of their makers as well as the contributions of unnamed laborers, such as enslaved workers, whose craftsmanship also shaped these heirlooms.

"Everybody wants to leave somethin' behind"

In 1907, Kentucky native and women's rights advocate Eliza Carolina Calvert Obenchain (under the pen name Eliza Calvert Hall) produced her first collection of short stories titled Aunt Jane of Kentucky, narrated by an elderly quiltmaker recounting her life to a younger woman.[33] In the story "Aunt Jane's Album," the title character shares the stories behind some of the many quilts she created over the course of her life, and summarizes her reason as to why she devoted this time and effort:

> I've been a hard worker all my life but 'most all my work has been the kind that 'perishes with the usin',' as the Bible says. That's the discouragin' thing about a woman's work…I've always had the name o' bein' a good housekeeper, but when I'm dead and gone there ain't anybody goin' to think o' the floors I've swept, and the tables I've scrubbed, and the old clothes I've patched, and the stockin's I've darned…But when one o' my grandchildren or great-grandchildren sees one o' these quilts, they'll think about Aunt Jane, and, wherever I am then, I'll know I ain't forgotten. I reckon everybody wants to leave somethin' behind that'll last after they're dead and gone. It don't look like it's worth while to live unless you can do that.[34]

As a body of work, Aunt Jane discusses the problems of women using imagery of domestic arts, such as quilting. At a time when Obenchain was observing the "quietness" of female expression, she particularly identified quiltmaking as a means of preserving lineage. For example, in a time when women's inheritance was gained more through celebration of marriage rather than property

[33] Eliza Calvert Hall, *Aunt Jane of Kentucky* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1907; Project Gutenberg, 2008), https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/26728.

[34] Eliza Calvert Hall, Bonnie Jean Cox, and Beulah Strong, *Aunt Jane of Kentucky* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1907), 78.

upon death, wedding quilts often had the bride's maiden name rather than her married name.[35] Quiltmaking was not just a way for women to express their personal beliefs, but as a way to ensure those beliefs were remembered.

The eighteenth century rise of the "cult of domesticity," defined by Roderick Kiracofe and Mary Elizabeth Johnson in *The American Quilt: A History of Cloth and Comfort, 1750-1950*, was a "self-conscious sentimentality, probably in relation to the great religious awakening that swept the country" that led to women embracing the idea of "sensibility," or moral refinement.[36] Moving into the nineteenth century, this sensibility led to the creation of textiles focused on human connection and the nature of home, family, and friendship. These later works placed a greater emphasis on personal storytelling about domestic life through patterns, inscriptions, and imagery in order to reflect different relationships and serve as testaments to memory, lineage, and social bonds.

Figure 20. Elizabeth Roseberry Mitchell, Graveyard Quilt, 1843, cotton and paper, Kentucky Historical Society, https://kyhistory.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/90C9CB5A-6327-42F0-8085-383648601656. Reproduced by permission.

Memory and mourning quilts became popular at this time, with the former created in remembrance of important people and events, and the latter created in commemoration to deceased friends, family members, political leaders, and military heroes. The most famous of these memorial quilts was created by

[35] LaPinta, Zegart, and Bennett, *Kentucky Quilts and Quiltmakers*, 8.

[36] Roderick Kiracofe and Mary Elizabeth Johnson Huff, *The American Quilt: A History of Cloth and Comfort, 1750–1950* (New York: Clarkson Potter Publishers, 1993), 57.

Elizabeth Roseberry Mitchell, who at the time lived in Lewis County, Kentucky.[37] The Kentucky Graveyard Quilt is an 88 × 77 inch appliqué cotton quilt (fig. 20). Mitchell began designing and creating the quilt top in 1836 in Ohio when her two-year-old son passed away. The family moved to Kentucky, where droughts caused crop failure and rising debts. Then, in 1843, another of her sons who remained in Ohio died at nineteen, and that same year she began stitching the piece.

Figure 21. Mitchell, Graveyard Quilt, basted graves outside of graveyard.

A brown checkerboard with alternating star patterns, the quilt depicts her deceased sons' coffins at the rear of a graveyard, with coffins for herself, her husband, and their surviving children basted outside the gate of the cemetery (fig. 21).[38] As the members of her family passed away, she moved the coffins from the gate into the graveyard to join the others. The graveyard is enclosed by a paling fence and has green leafed trees with pink buds within its confines (fig. 22).

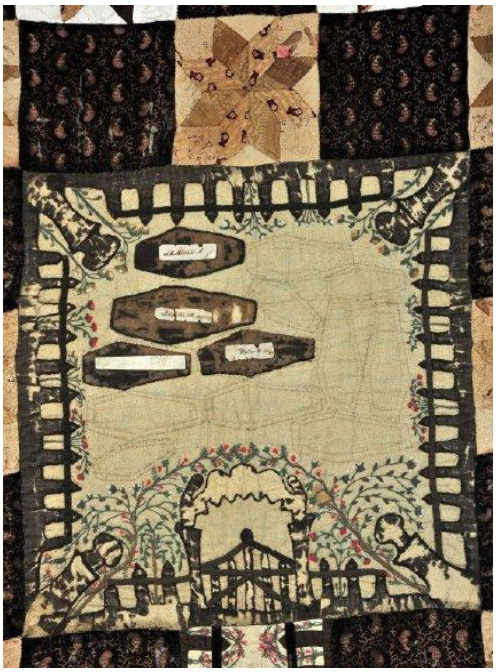

Figure 22. Mitchell, Graveyard Quilt, inside of graveyard.

The coffins each have their own papers with family names written in script and attached (fig. 23).[39] However, only four were ever moved, with Mitchell's

[37] Elizabeth Roseberry Mitchell, *Graveyard Quilt*, Kentucky Historical Society.

[38] Nina Mitchell Boggs, "Old Days, Old Ways," n.d., Kentucky Historical Society, 3.

[39] Boggs, "Old Days, Old Ways," 4.

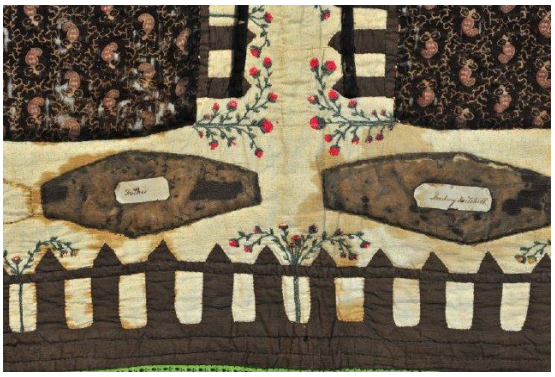

Figure 23. Mitchell, Graveyard Quilt, labeled coffins.

own coffin being the third, and the fourth moved by her daughter Sarah.[40] This act of continuation creates a genealogical map that visually connected past and present family members—particularly significant in an era where for most Americans, written records were sparse and family histories were conveyed orally.[41] Mourning quilts functioned as a tangible means of preserving and transmitting heritage, as well as a reflection of how quiltmakers viewed their roles within their families. Beyond commemoration, quilts like Mitchell's were affirmations of familial connections and a part of family histories.

Another type of quilt that became popular in the nineteenth century were friendship quilts, also known as album, signature, or presentation quilts. Collaborative efforts, these quilts were created by groups of women (members of a church, school groups, townspeople, and circles of friends) who would each make and sign a quilt block, which were then all assembled into a single quilt gifted to a community member experiencing a major life event such as a marriage or move.[42] Where album quilts in Mid-Atlantic states tended to be more elaborate in design, those created in Kentucky were often less expensive to create. The greatest demand for friendship quilts was from 1840 to 1875, the same time frame that settlers traveled west on the Oregon Trail, although there was a resurgence in the late nineteenth century.[43]

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[40] Elizabeth Roseberry Mitchell, *Graveyard Quilt*, Kentucky Historical Society.

[41] Thomas R. Ford, "Kentucky in the 1880s: An Exploration in Historical Demography," *The Kentucky Review*, vol. 3, no. 2 (1982): 42–58 at 44.

[42] LaPinta, Zegart, and Bennett, *Kentucky Quilts and Quiltmakers*, 21.

[43] Linda Otto Lipset, *Remember Me: Women & Their Friendship Quilts*, 18.

One such friendship quilt was created by women from a Presbyterian Church in Jefferson County, Kentucky (fig. 24).[44] The pattern is arranged into twelve quilt blocks, with each block made of two nine-patch blocks alternating with two half-square triangle blocks, which were then divided into fourths. Names, Bible verses, and small illustrations are embroidered onto the quilt using red thread (fig. 25). These names include the makers of the quilt, as well as their families—and in some cases, other church attendees such as the Sunday school class.[45] The illustrations range from initials to depictions of pitchers and homes (fig. 26).

Figure 24. Jefferson County Presbyterian Church, Album Quilt, 1889, cotton, KHS Museum Collection, Kentucky Historical Society, https://kyhistory.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/3AB69945-DFD9-4833-AC40-246950032776. Reproduced by permission.

Figure 25. Jefferson County Presbyterian Church, Album Quilt, embroidered signatures.

Another from 1860 was created by the women of the Episcopal Church in Frankfort, Kentucky, which was raffled for aid for yellow fever sufferers (fig.

Figure 26. Jefferson County Presbyterian Church, Album Quilt, embroidered illustrations.

[44] Jefferson County Presbyterian Church, *Album Quilt*, Kentucky Historical Society.

[45] Jefferson County Presbyterian Church, *Album Quilt*, Kentucky Historical Society.

Figure 27. Frankfort, Kentucky Episcopal Church, 1860, silk, Blanche Green Collection, Kentucky Historical Society, https://kyhistory.pastperfectonline.com/Webobject/C3C12283-557B-4464-9564-029910204150. Reproduced by permission.

27).[46] The quilt, a variation of a honeycomb mosaic, was won by a book binder named Austin Kendall, who gave it to his daughter Blanche as a wedding gift. The blanket is made of hexagonal pieces of silk that are pieced together in a rainbow tile pattern, with the center of each diamond containing four cream pieces embroidered with white daisies.

More collaborative quilting efforts corresponded with increasing intensity preferences in the color of fabrics, such as Prussian blue and the use of overdyed colors to create ombres, in part because of the invention of the first synthetic organic dye.[47] This also meant the availability of fabrics was expanded because silks, wool, and brocades retain aniline dyes more evenly than cotton.[48] Where ornate stitching was generally the style preference pre-Civil War, this era saw a shift into quilts with blocks nestled together, especially as the introduction of the sewing machine meant that most women could make complex quilts from store-bought fabrics.[49]

The use of quilting to promote social reform gained traction particularly after the Civil War with the founding of the Women's Christian Temperance Union in 1874 and the subsequent use of the Drunkard's Path pattern and the use of the letter "T" as a symbol of the Prohibition

[46] Frankfort, Kentucky, Episcopal Church, *Friendship Quilt*, Kentucky Historical Society.

[47] LaPinta, Zegart, and Bennett, *Kentucky Quilts and Quiltmakers*, 22.

[48] Anthony S. Travis, "Perkin's Mauve: Ancestor of the Organic Chemical Industry," *Technology and Culture*, vol. 31, no. 1 (1990): 51–82 at 51.

[49] Travis, "Perkin's Mauve," 78.

Figure 28. Sister Mary Settles, Drunkard's Path Quilt, 1890, fabric, cotton, Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill. Reproduced by permission.

cause.[50] For example, Sister Mary Settles from the Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill created a Drunkard's Path Quilt in 1890, during a time in which Shakers were increasingly wary of alcohol and supportive of Prohibition (fig. 28).[51] The quilt, originally lime green, shows just one version of the Drunkard's Path's winding route, which connects to the border of the piece.

These examples demonstrate the role quiltmaking played in fostering communal connections. Whether created to mark significant life events, fundraise for charitable causes, or promote social reform, these quilts reflect a collective spirit. Women were able to engage in social, spiritual, and political discourse—with the inclusion of names and personal illustrations linking makers to recipients in a deeply personal way that created records of communal life. It also allowed for quilting to reach beyond personal ties, serving as a vehicle for advocacy and moral expression, sitting at the intersection between craft and cause, and uniting individuals around shared ideals.

An additional quilt type known for their community and national connections are presentation quilts. Presentation quilts are, broadly, those made to commemorate an occasion, and tend to be more for ceremonial than daily use.[52] In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,

[50] Roberts, *The Quilt*, 79.

[51] LaPinta, Zegart, and Bennett, *Kentucky Quilts and Quiltmakers*, 64.

[52] LaPinta, Zegart, and Bennett, *Kentucky Quilts and Quiltmakers*, 56.

quiltmakers typically appliquéd these in the Broderie Perse style, which incorporates English and French block- and roller-printed cotton and was one of the earliest quilting trends in America.[53]

The Henry Clay estate, Ashland, is the home of two Kentucky presentation quilts created for the politician who represented Kentucky in both the Senate and House of Representatives.[54] One of these is the *Henry Clay Presentation Quilt*, created between 1842 and 1855 (fig. 29).[55] The creator is thought to be Mary Allen Houston, with the quilt presented as a gift from Clay's wife Lucretia Hart Clay to Maria Crittenden, the wife of Clay supporter and Senator John Jordan Crittenden.[56] The quilt has thirty-one panels of embroidered, appliquéd, and stuffed pastel scenes showcasing people, animals, and flowers, with the center of the quilt featuring a needlepoint portrait of Clay himself (fig. 30, 31).

Figure 29. Mary Allen Houston, Henry Clay Presentation Quilt, ca. 1850, fabric, thread, chintz, cotton, Kentucky Museum Library Special Collections, Kentucky Museum, Western Kentucky University, https://westernkentuckyuniversity.pastperfectonline.com/Webobject/7B . Reproduced by permission.

Ashland is also home to a political quilt intended to celebrate Clay, the *Henry Clay Quilt*, created by Virginia

[53] Dilys Blum and Jack L. Lindsey, "Nineteenth-Century Appliqué Quilts," *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 85, no. 363/364 (Autumn 1989): 1–45 at 3.

[54] Celia Oliver, "Value in the Eye of the Maker: Masterpiece Quilts in Nineteenth Century America," *American Quilt Collections: Antique Quilt Masterpieces* (Tokyo: Nihon Vogue, 1997), 1–29 at 3.

[55] Mary Allen Houston, *Henry Clay Presentation Quilt*, Kentucky Museum.

[56] Houston, *Henry Clay Presentation Quilt*.

Figure 30. Houston, Henry Clay Presentation Quilt, floral and faunal details.

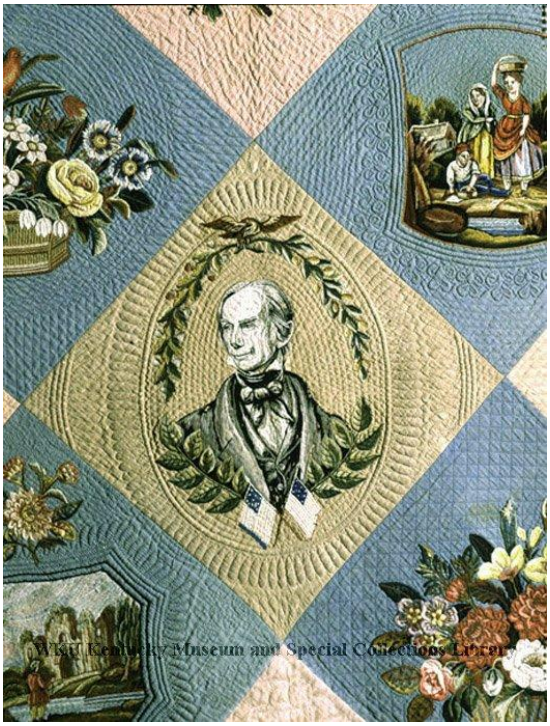

Figure 31. Houston, Henry Clay Presentation Quilt, Henry Clay needlepoint portrait.

Mason Ivey in 1860 (fig. 32).[57] This show quilt has raised images of animals and flowers, as well as a representation of a statue of Henry Clay that she copied from an engraving in *Harper's Magazine*. The borders are weaving vines, with grapes and flowers sprouting off of them. In the center is a large bouquet of flowers, surrounded by smaller bushes and stuffed details of plants and horses (fig. 33). The depiction of the politician has a quilted label reading, "Statue of Henry Clay." This work would have been a significant undertaking, partially due to the thin cotton it was quilted on, but also due to the fine, stuffed details and small florals.

In these instances, quilts are demonstrably more than just decorative or commemorative objects, but a medium used to express loyalty, support, and admiration of political figures. Just like their makers, these pieces of art had a role in fostering political relationships, such as the one between Lucretia Hart Clay and Maria Crittenden, as well as conveying shared political values. Presentation quilts were symbols of political identity, allowing women—

[57] Virginia Mason Ivey, *Figural and Floral Quilt*, Speed Art Museum.

who were otherwise excluded from formal political participation—to contribute to the political discourse of their time via tangible representations of allegiance.

Another form of quilt known for their use in national expressions are whitework quilts. These quilts, constructed from white, ivory, or ecru cotton, linen, or wool fabrics, were particularly popular in Kentucky.[58] They often used "stuffed" motifs, creating designs raised in relief such as flowers, animals, and abstract embellishments. These intricate designs and use of extra cotton batting to create high-relief motifs meant that they were often created for special occasions. As Mary Washington Clarke states in a survey of Kentucky quiltmakers in the 1970s, these quilts were "archived by elaboration of the process usually considered secondary in pieced quilts, wherein the artistry is expressed in combinations of colored pieces rather than the relatively mechanical process of attaching top and interlining to backing."[59] Of course, these works served as utilitarian textiles and an expression of

Figure 32. Virginia Mason Ivey, Henry Clay Quilt, 1860, fabric, cotton, Speed Art Museum, https://www.speedmuseum.org/kentucky-quilt/figural-and-floral-quilt-2/. Reproduced by permission.

Figure 33. Ivey, Henry Clay Quilt, border and statue details.

[58] LaPinta, Zegart, and Bennett, *Kentucky Quilts and Quiltmakers*, 16.

[59] Clarke and Kohn, *Kentucky Quilts and Their Makers*, 91.

personal taste through their symbols, but they were also used to express political opinions.

In the early nineteenth century, Kentucky women often used whitework quilts as means of, as former president of the American Quilt Study Group phrased it, "expressing support of patriotic efforts to reduce dependence on imported British textiles, emphasizing their new identity of American independence."[60] One of the more obvious examples of this is Rebecca Smith Washington's wholecloth whitework quilt, which she began work on around 1805 and completed in 1812 (fig. 34).[61] A repetitive diamond pattern known as a "bird's eye" effect is framed by a medallion surrounded by grapes and their leaves (fig. 35). The outermost border features more quilted leaves, the middle contains fronds, and the innermost border has acorns and leaves (fig. 36, 37). The space between the borders has another bird's eye motif, and there is stippling—stitching in curving shapes that don't

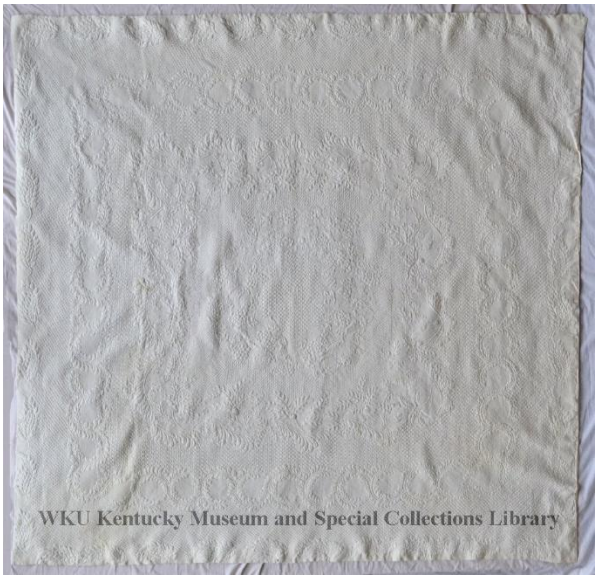

Figure 34. Rebecca Smith Washington, Whitework wholecloth quilt, 1805, fabric, Kentucky Museum Library Special Collections, Kentucky Museum, Western Kentucky University, https://westernkentuckyuniversity.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/9EDC41B2-27D5-4D96-A564-791426601680. Reproduced by permission.

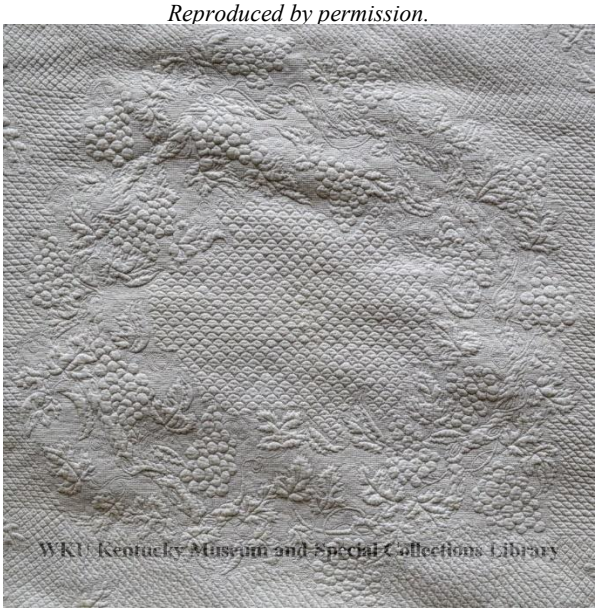

Figure 35. Washington, Whitework wholecloth quilt, bird's eye detail.

[60] LaPinta, Zegart, and Bennett, *Kentucky Quilts and Quiltmakers*, 15.

[61] Rebecca Smith Washington, *Whitework wholecloth quilt*, Kentucky Museum.

Figure 36. Washington, Whitework wholecloth quilt, stuffed acorns and leaves detail.

Figure 37. Washington, Whitework wholecloth quilt, stuffed grapes and leaves detail.

touch or intersect—throughout the piece, which was hand-quilted at approximately sixteen stitches per inch. Rebecca Smith Washington was the wife of Whiting Washington, who was a distant cousin of George Washington. This quilt was created in Kentucky, but ended up in Washington's Virginia home, Mount Vernon, until the 1960s.[62]

Figure 38. Virginia Mason Ivey, A Representation of the Fair Ground Near Russellville, Kentucky, 1856, 1857, fabric, cotton, National Museum of American History, https://www.si.edu/object/1856-1857-virginia-iveys-russellville-fair-quilt%3Anmah_556355. Reproduced by permission.

One of the most famous examples of Kentucky whitework quilting is Virgina Mason Ivey's *A Representation of the Fair Ground Near Russellville, Kentucky, 1856* (fig.

[62] LaPinta, Zegart, and Bennett, *Kentucky Quilts and Quiltmakers*, 17.

38).[63] She was also the creator of the *Henry Clay Quilt*. This piece features fairgoers, carriages, and livestock circling under trees around the fair's exhibition tents (fig. 39). In *Quilts in America*, Patsy and Myron Orlofsky calculated that it contained somewhere around 1,200,600 stitches in both its decorative reliefs and the stippling effect of the background quilting.[64] Ivey's niece, Ida B. Lewis, wrote that she "never had any lessons in art—just her own talent and creative instinct. She loved beauty in many forms and had a most attractive personality and was quite a pretty woman."[65] This love of beauty is clearly

Figure 39. Ivey, A Representation of the Fair Ground Near Russellville, Kentucky, 1856, tree and horse detail.

Figure 40. Ivey, A Representation of the Fair Ground Near Russellville, Kentucky, 1856, horse and carriage detail.

[63] Clarke and Kohn, *Kentucky Quilts and Their Makers*, 91.

[64] Patsy Orlofsky and Myron Orlofsky, *Quilts in America* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), 32.

[65] Virginia Mason Ivey, *A Representation of the Fair Ground Near Russellville, Kentucky, 1856*, Kentucky Historical Society.

displayed in the details of the quilt, which depict the smallest minutiae of the event, such as fence rails, men shaking hands, wheel spokes, and saddles on the backs of horses (fig. 40, 41).

Figure 41. Ivey, A Representation of the Fair Ground Near Russellville, Kentucky, 1856, corner detail.

The national significance of whitework quilts lies in their ability to take artistry and domestic labor into expressions of national identity—whether through the use of domestic textiles or as a narrative tool to document and celebrate civic life. More than aesthetic expressions, they are visual records of shared political and cultural identity, emphasizing self-reliance as well as distinct communal and national pride and connection.

It was estimated by Charles J. Stillé in 1866 that women's contributions through the US Sanitary Commission during the U.S. Civil War totaled to around twenty-five million dollars.[66] The original purpose of the commission was to investigate hospital and troop sanitary conditions, but expanded to include distribution of donations from women's society relief efforts, which surpassed those of the federal government.[67] In the way of quilting, women's efforts included both the creation of quilts as well as the organization of Sanitary Fairs in large cities that helped raise funds for purchasing supplies. These fairs served as both individual and collective experiences—allowing women to create decorative, less utilitarian quilts, but with the same

[66] Charles J. Stillé, *History of the United States Sanitary Commission, Being the General Report of Its Work during the War of the Rebellion* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1866), 39.

[67] Stillé, *History of the United States Sanitary Commission*, 47.

patriotic goals as their companions. Additionally, these gatherings allowed the sharing of techniques, patterns, and artistic practices.

In 1860, Olivia Shryock, sister-in-law of architect Gideon Shryock, created a silk and cotton *Log Cabin Courthouse Steps* variation quilt (fig. 42).[68] The log cabin pattern gained significant popularity during the Civil War, being seen as a connection to Abraham Lincoln's 1860 campaign that linked him to his rural Kentucky roots.[69] This quilt is made of fifty-four multicolored and patterned silk and ribbon blocks, and is six blocks wide by nine blocks tall. The center of each block features two strips of black (or black with white pinstripes) silk, with a strip of coral red silk between them (fig. 43).

Figure 42. Olivia Shryock, Log Cabin Courthouse Steps, 1860, silk/cotton, Kentucky Historical Society. https://kyhistory.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/D71F82CE-BC13-458A-B17F-245724480407. Reproduced by permission.

Even outside of the war effort, women continued creating. For example, in 1812, Union soldiers appropriated the first floor of Mary James Ratcliffe's home, confining her to the second story. During this time, she and her two sisters created a 76¾ × 68 inch version of a Texas Star quilt (fig. 44).[70] This pattern is identical to the Star of Bethlehem, with the name

Figure 43. Olivia Shryock, Log Cabin Courthouse Steps, detail.

[68] Olivia Shryock, *Log Cabin Courthouse Steps*, Kentucky Historical Society.

[69] Shryock, *Log Cabin Courthouse Steps*, Kentucky Historical Society.

[70] Mary James Ratcliffe, *Texas Star quilt*, Kentucky Historical Society.

Figure 44. Mary James Ratcliffe, Texas Star Quilt, 1862, silk, wool, Kentucky Historical Society, https://kyhistory.pastperfectonline.com/Webobject/33CFDC83-E806-4757-8F62-722444720746. Reproduced by permission.

change in memory of the Alamo and as a symbol of Texas statehood—just one example of how the meaning of patterns can shift over time, or when utilized for different reasons.[71] The stars are separated by hexagons, and themselves form a hexagon surrounded by striped yellow, green, pink, and black borders. The pink silk binding was attached via machine sewing and connected to a green wool blend background.[72] Despite the use of a sewing machine, the quilt was pieced and quilted by hand with around nine stitches per inch, with threads alternating to match the color of the stars. The colors, in retrospect, are now considered the contemporary colors of the late nineteenth century.[73] This quilt was passed down to Ratcliffe's daughter, Mary K. Guthrie Wheeler, wife of Congressman Charles K. Wheeler.[74]

Quiltmaking during this period was as varied as it always is—acts of solidarity, but also statements of identity. They bridged the intimate and national, allowing an expression of loyalty, resourcefulness, and artistic vision in service of a larger cause. Traditional designs were also adapted to have contemporary meaning—again, a demonstration of innovation and shared purposes. Women's role in shaping the nation was not solely through artistry and homemaking,

[71] Travis, "Quilts of the Ozarks," 234.

[72] Ratcliffe, *Texas Star quilt*, Kentucky Historical Society.

[73] LaPinta, Zegart, and Bennett, *Kentucky Quilts and Quiltmakers*, 62.

[74] Ratcliffe, *Texas Star quilt*, Kentucky Historical Society.

but through civic engagement and cultural influence. In a way, these quilts—regardless of original purpose—commemorate the resilience and ingenuity of their creators in service of both community and country.

The tendency to associate quiltmaking and other examples of "women's work" with "craft" over "art" is one that's been questioned more as the effects of patriarchal standards and colonization are discussed within historical fields. While we can look back at these works and quantify them as art, the women creating them—especially rural women—would not themselves have considered themselves artists for these quilts alone. The social convention of modesty would have forbidden praise for material objects such as these, and even in the diaries of women at the time, comments focus more on technical descriptions rather than expressions of pride.[75] This is a fact evermore present in Kentucky, where illiteracy rates were high and formal, higher education opportunities were limited. As summarized by Lowell Hayes Harrison in A New History of Kentucky, "The great majority of Kentucky's women lived and died in obscurity."[76]

It's important to remember that historically, quiltmakers were not always striving to create works of art. Many times, they were copies of existing designs or were just a way to create warm blankets. However, not all paintings are great, original works of art either. In the 19th century, quilts were both functional and decorative, personal and abstract. They certainly satisfied a need for warmth and decoration, but were also reflections of their creators' internal, communal, and national identities. Best said by the narrator of Aunt Jane,

[75] Oliver, "Value in the Eye of the Maker," 3.

[76] Lowell Hayes Harrison and James C. Klotter, *A New History of Kentucky* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 146.

> Patchwork? Ah, no! It was memory, imagination, history, biography, joy, sorrow, philosophy, religion, romance, realism, life, love, and death; and over all, like a halo, the love of the artist for his work and the soul's longing for earthly immortality. No wonder the wrinkled fingers smoothed them as reverently as we handle the garments of the dead.[77]

[77] Hall, *Aunt Jane of Kentucky*, 82.

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