

The Old Meeting House Museum  
450 Main Street Wilbraham MA  
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## Colonial Quilting



Old Meeting House  
Wilbraham MA



*The Quilting Bee, 19th Century Americana*

by Morgan Weistling

“There are times when an idea for a painting will linger for years in my mind before it is ever committed to canvas. I’ve thought about this painting for at least 15 years. It all began when my mother showed me a quilt her grandmother had made as a little girl in the late 1800s. I was amazed by its detail and beauty. I began to research quilt-making and discovered the wonderful American tradition of quilting bees, and I knew I had my painting.

At a quilting bee, women would have family and neighbors gather to finish a quilt. It was a real community event. Often a quilt was made to mark a special occasion, such as a wedding or an upcoming journey. The older, more experienced women would do most of the quilt work, but as in my painting, the less experienced would learn the craft alongside the veterans. The quilt in this painting is the actual quilt my great-grandmother made as a little girl, which made the creative process all the more personal for me.”



And as a little girl I would sit underneath the quilting frame at grandma's house and see the little stitches and hands coming through to sew the threads to make the shapes.

Dorothy Gill Barnes <sup>1</sup>

### **Quilting Bees**

The most romantic view of a quilting bee is that of the quilting party. Old books and stories tell of neighbors all being invited to a quilting. The women would quilt all day, perhaps taking turns around the frame while others cooked up the grand meal that would be served to the men folk that evening. Then it was a time for singing, dancing and courting among the young people. The song "Aunt Dinah's Quilting Party" tells of a couple strolling home after such a party.

Although such gatherings did occur it is hard to get the facts beyond the idealized image. Fiction written in the mid nineteenth century puts such parties as early as 1800 but it is more likely they began to occur later in the century. Many a "quilting" or quilting bee included only women helping a friend or neighbor finish a quilt. Such a feminine gathering would be a great way for women to get together to socialize. Women could share family news, exchange recipes, give child-rearing tips and all in all support each other. It has been said that next to church going quilting bees were the primary contact for women. But even this view has been romanticized a bit.

### **Fine Quilting Skills a Social Asset?**

The hitch in the commonly held view of a quilting bee is that some women were far more skilled quilters than others. It didn't matter so much if an everyday quilt was being quilted but if a woman had made a truly special top she would want to be sure it was quilted with quality work. Because of this some quilting bees were a bit exclusive. In these cases being skilled at hand quilting would be a social asset. At the most seven women plus the hostess could comfortably sit around the quilting frame. Why not invite the best? Some women even prided in completely hand quilting their own quilts, not trusting any hands but their own.

Other times the goal of a quilting bee was mainly social and beginners were welcomed along with the experienced. A fun example of this was when young women would gather to help a bride-to-be finish her quilts before she married. What joyous social events these would have been.

### **"Quiltings" as a Gathering of Rural Friends**

In isolated regions gathering women in the area together helped overcome the loneliness that so many pioneer women experienced. Often these women often didn't have a big house with a parlor for hand quilting. A southwestern woman reminisces, "One day a week, when the neighbors came to quilt, my brother would take the bed in Mama's room down to the kitchen and put up the frame for that day. It was quite a job but he never minded. There were no more than four women working because there was no room for more." <sup>2</sup>

So when we imagine women quilting together we can visualize many different settings. In my family's experience my husband's grandmother always had a quilt frame up in the parlor and sometimes others came to quilt but she did a great deal of quilting on her own as well. My great grandmother was quite sociable and my mother remembers her quilt frame as being a center of the community where women often gathered to quilt.

### **One Quilting Frame Style Just Didn't Fit All**

Of course the most essential piece of equipment for hand quilting was the quilting frame. These frames were another example of ingenuity on the part of our ancestors for one type of frame did not fit all situations.

A typical quilting frame consisted of four sturdy lengths of wood. Two strips long enough to hold at least the width of a quilt would have heavy cloth attached along the length. The ends of the quilt would be basted or pinned to this cloth. The other two pieces of wood would hold the first two apart so that the ends of the quilt could be rolled tightly leaving a nice firm area for the quilters to do their stitching. When one section was completed the quilt could be rolled presenting a new section to be

Frequently four chairs, often ladder-back chairs, were used to prop the frame up to a comfortable level for the quilters. Some frames were even built with a stand on each end so that chairs would not be required. Quilting frames were handmade until sometime in the first part of the 20th century when mail order companies began to sell quilt frames commercially. Even then the sturdy home made frames were preferred

In houses large enough to have a parlor or even a spare bedroom a frame could be left up over time as the women of the house completed a quilt. In some homes the quilting frame was left up permanently. A room that could be warmed by a fireplace in winter was ideal. A home with a fine frame and plenty of room to set it up often became a center for neighborly quilting.

### **What if the House Was Just Too Small?**

Such a setting wasn't possible for everyone. Many homes were too small. Not all of our ancestors could afford a big house and westward settlers usually started out living in a log house or even a dug out. This didn't deter women from their love of quilting. Although one or two women could manage to quilt on a frame propped between furniture in a crowded room there was another innovative solution. Quilt frames were rigged up so that the frame could be dropped down from the ceiling while quilting was in progress than lifted again to get it out of the way. Some such arrangements dropped over a bed so that a woman could work on the quilt during the day then leave it on the frame to be raised above the bed during the night.

### **A Quilting Frame Under an Arbor Brings Romance**

Quilting frames could easily be moved from place to place. A screened porch was a pleasant spot for quilting in the warm weather. One delightful story from the book, "The Quilters: Women and Domestic Art, An Oral History" tells about how a young woman's father set up her frame under a nice arbor of brush. She spent several weeks quilting outdoors under that arbor. A young man finally got up the nerve to go over to see what she was working on. Sure enough, it wasn't long before he married her.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Web page: Oral History Interviews "[Interview with Dorothy Gill Barnes](#)" from the Smithsonian Archives of American Art

<sup>2</sup> 29, "[The Quilters: Women and Domestic Art, An Oral History](#)", by Patricia J. Cooper, Norma Bradley Allen

<sup>3</sup> p72 "[For Purpose and Pleasure: Quilting Together in Nineteenth-Century America](#)", by Sandi Fox