

Colonial Quilting

Background:

Quilt making has been around for a very long time, as early as 1750. But, between the years of 1830 to 1870, quilt making in America was at its height. Beyond the Mississippi materials were lacking, so many of the individuals on the prairies would turn their old calico dresses into the famous patchwork quilts. Economics made the patchwork quilt popular until the ascendancy of the machine industry of the nineteenth century.

In Colonial days, when every piece of cloth was brought from Europe at an opulent cost, each scrap left from the cutting of clothing was worth as much as its equivalent to the garment itself. Thus the "Crazy Patch," quilt was invented. Each piece of cloth was fit together so that not a strand of the valuable material was wasted. It mainly consisted of silks, ribbons, wool, and velvets. It not only was the humblest of all bed-coverings, but it served the purpose of keeping the family warm on those cold winter nights.

An individual who did not make her bedding and an abundance of it was practically unknown. Even when the household could afford to cut the larger scraps of material, the woman of the household was required to make the bedding for the home.

Soon the trading of scraps became a social event amongst neighbors. Persons in a local area would trade their scraps to make the quilts unique. Everyone would buy from the general store from the same bolts of material out of necessity. Many of the quilts found in that region would contain the same materials, but would be pieced together differently.

Soon no function was more important than the quilting-bee. Before inviting any guests, the woman of the house would usually piece together at least two to three quilts before her neighbors were invited to attend the quilting bee. Then she would borrow any extra quilting frames needed to get the job done. The whole countryside was invited to come early, and make a day of it. The quilts were put in and finished. Usually, the girls would have relays to show off their crafty needlework. Then the evening would start with a feast; all men, women, and children were invited to attend the party. They had dancing, singing, kissing-games, and courting which followed their supper.

Many of the quilts received high honors at fairs such as the Medina fair. Out of eighty-five firsts, second, and third prizes awarded for craftsmanship; twenty-six firsts and second prizes were won by women. The prizes won were either books or money.

The dower chest for the bride was supposed to hold at least a "baker's dozen," or more quilts. Twelve were made to resemble the view of everyday use, but the thirteenth was a bride's quilt, a piece so elaborate that it was difficult to make. The bride's quilt was started only after a girl was definitely engaged. Top after top was pieced together, they were laid away to await quilting, or until the bride announced that she was to be married. The reason for this custom was the cost of the wadding or backing. This expenditure was

pointless until a new home was about to be furnished. So to invite quests to the quilting of a girl's "tops" was like announcing that she was to be married.

Due to the economical stresses of the mid-eighteen hundreds, the quilting-bee became a celebration amongst neighbors. It was a way to socialize and to accomplish their tasks at the same time. Women received much recognition for their ornate needlework. Some even announced that they were to be married at such events. Over all the quilting bee is an exciting part of American history, and many of the customs have carried over to our day.

References:

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