

10_b Quilts: 19th through 20th centuries

On December 31, 1839, in McDowell County, North Carolina, Hannah and Pharoah, age twelve, were given as wedding presents by John and Rebecca Logan to their daughter Margaret Ruth and her husband, Thomas Young Greenlee. Taking their new owners' surname, the girl, a house servant, and the boy, a blacksmith, later married and had a daughter named Emm. We know little about them beyond this, except that the masterful quilt reproduced here was begun by Hannah Greenlee, perhaps in the 1880s, and finished by her daughter in 1896, sometime after Hannah's death. As a freedwoman after the war, Hannah probably continued the type of work she performed as a house servant: cooking, cleaning, and sewing. She may have intended to sell or give the quilt to her previous owners, since it remained with that family until they donated it to North Carolina's Historic Carson House.

This quilt looks very different from quilts made in the colonial period, when such items were confined to homes of the wealthy, where women had leisure time to devote to complicated needlework. In colonial whole-cloth quilts, for example, the top was one single piece whose only decoration was the pattern of the stitching itself. In another type, printed images of flowers and other motifs were cut out of expensive imported fabrics and sewn (appliquéd) to the top as decoration.

Hannah Greenlee's quilt is made of irregular scraps of fabric—some of them homespun—that are stitched together in the Crazy pattern developed in Victorian England and popular in America in the second half of the nineteenth century. Many early Crazy quilts were made of luxury materials like silk, velvet,

and satin. The random pattern is a flexible and thrifty way to construct a quilt, permitting small scraps of any size or shape to be used. The design can be worked in an overall pattern or—as in Greenlee's quilt—in separate squares that are then combined in a grid. Because the grid adds a degree of order to the chaos, this type is known as a Contained Crazy.

In each square of her quilt, numerous small strips are joined into ladders that lean this way and that. These stacked, colored bands resemble a type of traditional textile made in Ghana and the Ivory Coast called kente, in which bars of color and pattern are woven in thin strips that are then joined side to side to make wider cloth. Many scholars believe that elements of this African tradition, especially its aesthetic preference for asymmetry, inventiveness, and irregular blocks of bright color, live on in many African American quilts.

Each square of Greenlee's quilt is a separate abstract composition that is constantly changing depending on the direction from which it is viewed. Fancy stitching—sometimes following the outlines of the piecing, sometimes independent of them—creates another level of patterning as do the designs within the separate scraps of cloth. As in most quilts, the top layer is attached to two more beneath with stitching (quilting) that goes through all three. The bottom layer, called the liner, can be plain or decorated to make the quilt reversible. Sandwiched between the top and liner is the layer of insulation, called filling or batting, that traps pockets of air to give the quilt its warmth.

The invention of the cotton gin in 1793, the opening of a textile factory in Waltham, Massachusetts, in 1814, and the development of the power loom would make domestic printed fabrics widely available and affordable. By the 1840s, women were purchasing commercially printed fabric to sew rather than weave the fabrics themselves. Quilt patterns multiplied and were spread by family and friends, printed in ladies' magazines, and ordered through catalogs. The introduction of the sewing machine in the second half of the nineteenth century made sewing faster. In addition to still-usable parts of old clothes, scraps left over from a dress for the first day of school or Father's Sunday shirt were saved to make quilts that were rich with personal memories.



10-B.1 Hannah Greenlee (c. 1827–before 1896) and Emm Greenlee (died c. 1910), *Crazy Quilt*, begun by Hannah and finished by her daughter, Emm, 1896. Fabric scraps (some homespun), length 90 in., width 71½ in. (228.6 x 181.6 cm.). Historic Carson House, Marion, N.C., Gift of Ruth Greenlee.

Susan Noakes McCord was a farmwife who lived in McCordsville, Indiana. She raised vegetables, chickens, and seven children, and still found time between chores to make more than a dozen quilts. Many of her creations were based on standard quilt patterns that she transformed. This quilt, like Greenlee's, is a Contained Crazy quilt, but instead of rectangular bars, wedges of fabric are joined to form irregular wheels. The pattern is based on one called Grandmother's Fan, in which each uniform block of the quilt contains a fan set in the same corner. McCord varied the size of the fans and set them in all four corners of most blocks, aligning them to form fractured gears that twirl across the surface. Nothing is still. Wheels struggle to maintain their symmetry and rims wander off to do-si-do with other discs. Everywhere there is the nervous tremor of the zig-zag stitching.

Some of the most accomplished quilting is found in Amish examples made in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Before the incorporation of synthetic materials around 1940, Amish quilts tended to be made of fine wool. These quilts were given only a thin layer of filler, making delicate needlework possible. Although the stitches on these quilts average from nine to eleven per inch, stitches as small as eighteen to twenty per inch have been used (most quilts average six to eight stitches).

The Amish trace their lineal descent from the Anabaptist movement, which arose in the early 1500s as a result of the Protestant Reformation. Anabaptists were pacifists who



10-B.2 Susan Noakes McCord (1829–1909; McCordsville, Hancock County, Indiana), *Grandmother's Fan Quilt*, c. 1900. Wool, silk, and cotton, length 80½ in., width 70½ in. (204.47 x 179.07 cm.). From the Collections of The Henry Ford, Dearborn, Mich.



10-B.3 *Bars Pattern Quilt*, c. 1920. Top, plain-weave wool; back, grey-and-blue plain-weave cotton. Overall dimensions 72 x 80 in. (182.9 x 203.2 cm.). Gift of "The Great Women of Lancaster." Collections of the Heritage Center of Lancaster County, Lancaster, Pa.



10-B.4 *Bars Pattern Quilt*, c. 1925. Top, plain-weave wool; back, brown-and-white printed-check plain-weave cotton. Overall dimensions 77.5 x 77.5 in. (196.6 x 196.6 cm.). Given in memory of Louise Stoltzfus. Collections of the Heritage Center of Lancaster County, Lancaster, Pa.



10-B.5 *Split Bars Pattern Quilt*, c. 1935. Top, plain-weave and crepe wool; back, black-and-white twill printed-pattern plain-weave cotton. Overall dimensions 76 x 76 in. (193 x 193 cm.). Collections of the Heritage Center of Lancaster County, Lancaster, Pa.

practiced adult baptism exclusively. The largest Anabaptist sect was Mennonite, named for founder Menno Simons. In 1693, a group of Mennonites led by Jacob Ammann, seeking a stricter observance of their religion, broke away to become the Amish. Heavily persecuted, the Amish were drawn to America by the religious tolerance promoted by William Penn. In the 1730s, they established their first sizeable communities in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

At the core of Amish life are religion, community, and family. The Amish, who live in small communities, value conformity to communal rule (the *Ordnung*), which varies according to local custom. Much of the technology developed since the Industrial Revolution is avoided. They aspire to a life of non-violence, simplicity, and humility; anything considered vain or reminiscent of the military (such as buttons or moustaches) is rejected. Amish clothing is generally patterned on late 19th century rural farm attire.

Men's suits are black or dark blue, and simply cut. Women's dress is made in a variety of solid colors (generally avoiding bright red, orange, yellow, or pink) and usually includes some form of head covering.

Amish houses are modest, and quilts provide not only pattern and bold color but an outlet for women's creativity. Amish quilts made in Lancaster County between approximately 1875 and 1950 are noted for their rich, solid colors, symmetrical design, and emphasis on a central motif: characteristics that give the compositions a sense of quiet grandeur. Within a limited number of quilt patterns, the color choices allowed by the restrictions of the Bishop (the communally elected leader of a district), may nevertheless permit a broad range of visual effects. The strong color contrast in two of the quilts (10-B.3 and 10-B.4) causes the bars to begin to quiver as you look at them. In another (10-B.5), slender bars will appear to shift. The pulsing energy of the star quilt (10-B.6) is held in check by the wide purple border that just touches the tips of its points.

Many quilts are enriched with stitches in one or more patterns — diamond shapes, feathers, wreaths, vines, and flowers — that add another layer of technical and visual complexity. Although earlier quilts like those reproduced here are thought to be the result of individual efforts among the Lancaster County Amish, in more recent times women often have gathered together to share their needle working skills in community events called quilting bees or “frolics”.



10-B.8 *Diamond in the Square—Sunshine and Shadow Variation Pattern Quilt*, c. 1935. Top, purple plain-and twill-weave wool; back, purple twill-weave cotton, c. 1935. Overall dimensions 80 x 80in. (203.2 x 203.2 cm.). Gift of “The Great Women of Lancaster.” Collections of the Heritage Center of Lancaster County, Lancaster, Pa.



10-B.7 *Bars—Wild Goose Chase Pattern Quilt*, c. 1920. Top, plain-weave and crepe wool; back, wine-and-white floral-print, plain-weave cotton. Overall dimensions 72.5 x 79.5 in. (184 x 201.9 cm.). Gift of Irene N. Walsh. Collections of the Heritage Center of Lancaster County, Lancaster, Pa.



B.6 *Lone Star Pattern Quilt*, c. 1920. Top, plain-weave wool; back, red, green, and white printed-plaid, plain-weave cotton. Overall dimensions 89 x 89 in. (193 x 193 cm.). Gift of Irene N. Walsh. Collections of the Heritage Center of Lancaster County, Lancaster, Pa.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to look closely at these quilts, noting color and pattern.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE

E Ask students to point out ladders and circles in Greenlee's *Crazy Quilt*.

E M S

Ask students why they think quilt patterns like Greenlee's were called crazy quilts. *It's an informal pattern with shapes that go in random directions.*

E M S

Encourage students to find pieces of a printed fabric repeated several times in Greenlee's quilt. *A brown and pink floral is repeated in the second row, third square, and in the third row, second and third squares. A red, white, and black plaid is in the third row, second and third squares.*

E M S

Have students locate stitched or embroidered designs on Greenlee's *Crazy Quilt*. *Stitched designs are in the second row, second square, and in the third row, first square, as well as in many other places.*

E M S

In McCord's *Grandmother's Fan Quilt*, how are most of the squares alike? *A fan is in each corner of almost all the squares. Find the two squares with fans in only two corners. They are in the second row, fifth square, and in the bottom row, fifth square.*

E M S

Have students compare the patterns of Greenlee's *Crazy Quilt* to that of McCord's *Grandmother's Fan Quilt*. What is the main difference between these two quilts? *Greenlee's is made primarily of parallel lines like ladders and McCord's has wedge shapes forming circles. How did both quilters create unity in their quilt designs? They repeated colors, shapes, and patterns, and arranged their design into an ordered grid.*

M S

Ask which quilts on this poster the students think took the most advance planning and why. *It was probably the Amish quilts because of their geometric regularity. Which ones do you think took the longest time to sew? The ones made from many small pieces of fabric and with the finest stitches took the longest to construct.*

INTERPRET

E M S

Ask students why women made quilts. *The main reason was to keep their families warm, but quilts also added decoration and color to homes. Many women also enjoyed designing and sewing quilts.*

E M S

Ask why quilters often sewed small bits of fabric together rather than using one large piece of material. *By using fabric scraps and pieces of discarded clothing, they could create inexpensive bed covers.*

E M S

Ask students how quilts could record a family's history. *Quilt pieces made from old clothes could remind the family of the people who wore them and special occasions when they wore them.*

M S

Show students examples of kente cloth. (There are many images of kente cloth on the Internet.) Ask how Greenlee's quilt is similar to kente cloth designs. *They both have contrasting parallel bands of color that resemble ladders.*

S

Ask students what nineteenth-century developments made it easier for American women to make quilts. *The invention of the cotton gin and power loom and opening of New England textile factories made commercially woven and printed fabric available and affordable. Catalogs and magazines printed quilt patterns. The introduction of sewing machines made sewing quicker.*

CONNECTIONS

Historical Connections: Slavery; Reconstruction; women's oral history; Industrial Revolution
Geography: Central and West Africa (origins of the African American quilting tradition); Southern slave states; Amish Country (Eastern Pennsylvania, Eastern Ohio, Northern Indiana, Eastern Illinois)

Literary Connections and Primary Documents: *From Sea to Shining Sea: A Treasury of American Folklore and Folk Songs*, Amy Cohn (elementary); *Under the Quilt of Night*, Deborah Hopkinson (elementary); *Homespun Sarah*, Verla Kay (elementary); *Stitching Stars: The Story Quilts of Harriet Powers*, Mary Lyons (middle)

Mathematics: geometric elements
Arts: folk art