QUILTS IN THE WESTERN RESERVE

Ricky Clark
Oberlin College

"I washed out some fine clothes and my woolen clothes I wore on the road and my light, faded, calico bedquilt it got dirty on the road and have kept it on my bed since . . . " (Original Diary 2312-13). Twenty-year-old Laura Clark wrote this entry in her diary July 4, 1818, two weeks after she came with her husband to Wakeman (Huron County) from New Milford, Connecticut, as the community's fourth family.

In spite of her efforts, however, Laura Clark's quilt has probably not survived to our day. Textiles are fragile at best, and the dirt accumulated "on the road" and through regular use in her frontier community would have contributed to its destruction. Few quilts remain from the earliest days of settlement. Indeed, as we read descriptions of home life during the pioneer period, it seems remarkable that any survived at all. Zerah Hawley, who recorded his experience as a physician in Ashtabula County in 1820 and 1821, vividly described several homes he visited. A shanty eight by ten feet, "made somewhat in the form of a cow-house, having but a half roof" leaked everywhere (31). A somewhat improved log-house in Harpersfield consisted of a single room:

A large hole through the roof, answered the twofold purpose of a vent for the smoke, and the admission of light. The house was also lighted and ventilated by many large cracks or spaces between the logs, which in winter are sometimes filled with clay, and many times are left without filling through the years . . . . [T]In many cases little pains is taken to keep their habitation cleanly, and in all it is utterly impossible that neatness should exist in consequence of the continual falling of clay from the crevices between the logs, and of bark from which the roof is in many instances covered, and the constant accumulation of mud which is brought into the only room in the house in great profusion (28-29).

Later writers recalled the practice of hanging blankets and quilts in front of openings cut for windows and doors to afford protection from the elements (Niles 36; Wickham 2: 356, 3: 585, 4: 588). Under such harsh conditions the wear on a family's quilts was extraordinary and replacement more difficult than anticipated, since for several years fabric and bedding were either unavailable on the Reserve or exorbitantly expensive (Hawley 36, 42). It is little wonder that there are almost no extant quilts dating from the earliest days of settlement.

Those few early bedcovers brought into the Reserve which have not yet completely deteriorated probably had special functions for their owners beyond utility, for they are in remarkably good condition today. Unlike the early chintz applique quilts made in the middle Atlantic and southern states, those found in the Western Reserve are in styles popular in Connecticut and Massachusetts during the eighteenth century. One, a blanket embroidered with polychrome crewel wools, is still with descendants of the family who brought it from Connecticut to Wellington (Lorain County) early in the nineteenth century. Similar examples are in the collections of Historic Deerfield, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Connecticut Historical Society, and other east coast museums.

At least two indigo calimanco quilts are in Western Reserve collections, one at the Geauga County Historical Society (#72.39), the other at the Medina County Historical Society (#1193).
These whole-cloth quilts are decorated entirely with quilting stitches arranged in patterns. The designs are similar to those of many eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century quilts from England and America's eastern seaboard; a central floral motif within a framed medallion, surrounded by one or more borders and emphasized by four corner designs. The quilt tops are made of calimanco, a glazed woolen fabric which reflects the light, thus enhancing the effect of the quilted pattern. Both quilts are filled with brown and black carded wool. The back of the Geauga County example is a blue and white checked fabric; a similar example from Northampton, Massachusetts, is dated to the last quarter of the eighteenth century (Nylander 378).

Quilted calimanco petticoats were fashionable in the Connecticut River Valley during the first half of the eighteenth century, and the materials, designs and techniques were transferred to quilts after 1750 (Nylander 378). Most examples come from England or the New England states, either of which may be the source of the undocumented Geauga County example. The Medina County quilt, however, is attributed to Jane Eaton Chidsey of Pompey, New York, who brought it to Brunswick (Medina County) in 1833.

The same center medallion style may be seen in a white Marseilles quilted bedspread in the Geauga County Historical Society (#77.479), which also resembles New England examples. Originally one of a pair, this quilt has a central floral design within a shaped medallion, surrounded with straight lines of quilting and a serpentine floral border. A fringe is sewn to the quilt edge. This design style has antecedents both in Indian palampores and in neo-classic decorative arts. Palampores, Indian printed cotton bedcovers popular in New England during the eighteenth century, comprised a central medallion profusely decorated with floral and arboreous motifs, surrounded by a wide border. The border motif was often a serpentine floral vine. Palampores strongly influenced American appliqué and quilting patterns in their use of curved lines, floral motifs and serpentine borders.

The cornucopia in the shaped central medallion of this quilt was a popular neo-classic motif, and the use of white as the sole color for a bedcover was an interpretation of "classical purity" (Federico 30).

Handmade Marseilles quilted spreads like the Geauga County example were especially popular during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; a rare Ohio example made in Decatur Township (Washington County) in 1816 is in the Ohio Historical Society collection. Quilts like this are elaborate and time consuming to make. Given the dates of settlement in the Reserve, therefore, it is likely that this quilt was brought into the Reserve by well-to-do New Englanders, rather than made here. Unfortunately, it has no known provenance.

Among the most anachronistic quilts in Western Reserve collections is a "Puss in the Corner" quilt in the Geauga County Historical Society collection (#51.22). This pieced quilt is in the repeated block style: the quilt blocks are made by joining small, geometrically-shaped fabric pieces of different colors to form structurally identical squares. The perceived pattern is determined by the arrangement of colors. In this two-colored quilt the pieced blocks are blue and off-white (the natural color of linen), and pieced blocks alternate with plain blue blocks. This arrangement of pieced, repeated blocks alternating with plain ones probably derives from an English quilt style in which pieced blocks are joined directly to each other to create a continuous mosaic (Holstein "Block Quilt," 21). The more open appearance created by alternating pieced and plain blocks is an American contribution (Holstein, Pieced Quilt, 58).
Two factors make this quilt unusual. First, it is made entirely of linen: top, back and thread. By contrast, most pre-Civil War quilts are made of cotton, or of silk or wool. The natural-colored linen is probably home-spun and domestically woven as well, and the blue appears to be home-dyed. Since flax was grown successfully in the Western Reserve about a decade after settlement, it is entirely possible that this quilt was made in Ohio.

However, an intriguing aspect of this quilt is its provenance. A handwritten note basted to the quilt reads: "Quilt made by Jane Schmuck/in 1745/[proper]ty of Ava R. Fox." In spite of the Fox family tradition, however, this very early date is questionable, as the repeated block style has been dated to the turn of the nineteenth century (Holstein "Block Quilt," 21). Since this coincides with the period of settlement of the Western Reserve, it is not surprising to find that the majority of quilts made here before 1880 are in the repeated block style. They might be either pieced or appliqued (made from a single square of fabric to which smaller pieces of colored fabrics are stitched to create a decoration). In some quilts these decorative blocks join each other directly; in others they are separated by plain blocks, as in the case of the linen quilt attributed to Jane Schmuck. Less common was the practice of framing the blocks with interior sashes.

An appliqued quilt in the repeated block style was made by Sarah McIlrath Shaw of Collamer (East Cleveland) for her nephew, Andrew McIlrath Jr. According to family tradition, this quilt (now in the Western Reserve Historical Society, #2031) was presented to Andrew on his twenty-first birthday, December 25, 1821. The overprinted rainbow print used in its appliqued motifs, however, suggests a mid-century date of fabrication. The appliqued "Oak Leaf and Reel" pattern was popular on the east coast and is an example of the transmission of both style and pattern into the Reserve. Sarah Shaw was born in Mendham, New Jersey, March 18, 1777. In 1803 her husband, John Shaw, came to Collamer, and Sarah joined him a year later. Having spent the first twenty-seven years of her life in the East, Sarah Shaw would have had a wide vocabulary of quilt patterns and stylistic preferences by the time she came to the Western Reserve.

John and Sarah Shaw have an important place in Western Reserve history. Although they had no children, they were interested in young people, and left their farm to the village to be used for educational purposes. Shaw Academy and, later, Shaw High School were built on that site.

Another quilt in the repeated block style appears at first glance to be appliqued, but is actually primarily pieced (Fig. 1). This "Love Apple" quilt was made by Louise Foote Stevens of Avon (Lorain County) in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Its palette of red, green and yellow on a white background was popular with mid-century quilters everywhere. The "love apples" are effectively framed by an inset of red piping between the binding and the body of the quilt, a detail also found in clothing from the same period. Louise Stevens' quilt would have been easier to construct in applique, since the "love apples" have curved edges. However, a similar example from Knox County and several from Tennessee are also pieced, rather than appliqued (Ramsey and Waldvogel 11).

More characteristic of repeated block pieced quilts is a blue and white "Ohio Star" made by Elizabeth Mook Harpster of Bellevue (Huron County) (Fig. 2). Its pieced blocks alternate with plain blocks, and Elizabeth Harpster quilted each plain block in a feathered wreath. This quilting pattern, also known as "Princess Feather," was very much favored by Western Reserve quilters throughout the nineteenth century, and was beautifully executed by this quilter, a professional seamstress.
Elizabeth Mook was born in Snyder County, Pennsylvania, in 1812. She and her husband, Jacob Harpsrer, both descended from German immigrants to Pennsylvania. The Harperses came to Bellevue in the 1830s along with other members of their families, and were probably among the first of a large group of Germanic settlers. Although the Harperses were born in America, by 1880 only Ohio and New York surpassed Germany as birthplaces of Huron County residents (Baughman 1: 9). Many blue and white quilts similar to Elizabeth Harper's were made both in Ohio and Snyder County, Pennsylvania, during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, although her descendants estimate that this quilt was made around 1840 (Lesansky 53).

A red, blue and white floral appliquéd quilt, now in the Summit County Historical Society (#100.39), was made in 1842 by Lucy Richards Adams of Portage County. More elaborate than Sarah Shaw's and Louise Foote Stevens's quilts, Lucy Adams's has a serpentine border of floral vines growing from pots of flowers. Like the white whole-cloth quilt discussed above, many appliquéd quilts inspired by palampores include floral motifs and serpentine floral borders.

Mary Nelson Nyman of Peru (Huron County) made a similar quilt, perhaps for her wedding in 1844 (Fig. 3). Mary Nyman's quilt is in a "Rose of Sharon" pattern, with red and green appliquéd blocks alternating with plain white squares. A serpentine floral border surrounds this quilt and culminates in a cartouche in which the quilter stitched and stuffed her initials. The appliqued areas are also heavily stuffed, as are quilted rose wreaths and hearts in the plain squares. Such elaborate quilts as Lucy Adams's and Mary Nyman's, often found in good condition, were probably made for special occasions, such as a wedding. Like Mary Nyman's, many include a signature or date, which are rarely found on solely utilitarian quilts.

Utility, however, was not the only role served by quilts, and functions, as well as patterns and techniques, were transplanted by makers and owners of quilts. An important function of many quilts, especially during the period of westward expansion, was the preservation of community threatened by disruption. Often when a young woman left her community to accompany a husband infected with "land fever," her female friends and relatives made her a quilt signed by each of them, thus enabling her to take her friends and family with her. These metaphoric communities were textile counterparts of the autograph albums popular at the same time, and creating them was an important ritual of separation. This "signature quilt" tradition began on the east coast and was carried west as people migrated.

Sarah Mahan of Oberlin (Lorain County) made such a quilt in 1850 and 1851, just before she left Ohio to teach at a mission school in the Minnesota Territory. Her quilt, now in the Allen Memorial Art Museum (#85.24), is signed by forty-four relatives and friends, including her brother-in-law, Asa Mahan, president of the Oberlin Collegiate Institute, and twenty-nine students and faculty members there. Like many other "friendship" quilts, this one played west with the quilter and her descendants (in this case, as far west as Eugene, Oregon) and was brought back to Oberlin as recently as 1985.

Not only signature quilts themselves but favorite patterns for them were transplanted from the East to the Western Reserve. One of the most popular is called "Album Block." Researchers studying nineteenth-century signature quilts have discovered many in this pattern made in New England, New York, New Jersey, Delaware and Pennsylvania during the 1840s and 1850s (Kolter plates 66, 68, 69, 75, 85, 86; Lipsett 29, 31, 50; Nicoll 8, 17, 35, 36, 38). The popularity of the Album Block pattern extended to the Reserve as well. Indeed, an entire exhibition of mid-century Album Block signature quilts from Ohio could easily be mounted. The simplest of those from the Reserve bears a single inked inscription: "Lavinia Torrey:/Saybrook Ashtabula Co., Ohio/April 6th 1850."
On the same day Lavinia Torrey signed her quilt, Mrs. Clarissa Hall, Mrs. Julia Hall and Mrs. Jedidah Cone, members of a church society in Rome, fifteen miles south of Saybrook, signed another quilt in the same pattern (Western Reserve Historical Society #40.874). Throughout the spring and summer other women, many of them pioneer settlers of Rome and relatives, added their names, dates and hometowns to the quilt. Two blocks bear names of female relatives in New London, Connecticut, underscoring the function of quilts as bonds between women in New England and the Reserve.

Another Album Block signature quilt was made by women in the Church of Disciples in Newburgh (Cuyahoga County), probably around the same time. This quilt, now in the collection of the Western Reserve Historical Society (#75.22.1), is signed in the border as well as on the quilt blocks, and some of the names on it (Hickox, Garfield, Pease, Cowles, Ruggles and Dunham) will be familiar to students of Western Reserve history.

Still another Album Block signature quilt was made c. 1870 by Helen Nims Wood and her friends and relatives in Lyme (Huron County) (Fig. 4). This quilt, now in the collection of the Historic Lyme Village Association in Bellevue, represents a strongly interwoven family-based community. The women who signed the quilt were children of Lyme's first settlers, all of whom had come from the adjacent communities of Shelburne and Charlemont, Massachusetts. Many of those families had intermarried; in one case a pair of brothers had married two sisters, thus their children who signed the quilt were double first cousins.

Like the Album Block quilts from Rome and Newburgh, most signature quilts made in the Reserve and still in collections here were made by church groups or reform societies, and were often used to raise money for their makers' causes. Undoubtedly the most important of these is the "Crusade Quilt" made in 1876 by Ohio members of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. This quilt, a fundraiser and testimonial, bears the signatures of 3,000 Ohio women and the names of their temperance organizations, including the Mothers Committee and Women's League of Lake County. It was made to honor "Mother" Eliza Thompson of Hillsboro, who began the crusade to close Ohio's saloons December 23, 1873, and was presented to her at the National W.C.T.U. convention in 1877. In her presentation speech, Frances Willard, brilliant president of the W.C.T.U., declared:

The day will come when, beside the death-sentence of a woman who was burned as a witch in Massachusetts, beside the block from which a woman was sold as a slave in South Carolina, and besides the liquor license that was issued by the State of Illinois to ruin its young men, there will hang this beautiful quilt, to which young men and women will point with pride, and say, "There is the name of my great-grandmother, who took part in Ohio's great crusade."

(Willard 79)

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, W.C.T.U. members made other quilts to support the many reforms embraced by their organization. While some can be recognized immediately by inscriptions on them, others are less obvious as symbols of the organization. Many, for instance, are worked in a "Drunkard's Path" pattern in the W.C.T.U. colors (blue and white), and are unsigned. A blue and white "Drunkard's Path" quilt made by Sarah Parmenter Williams of Auburn Corners (Geauga County), now in the collection of the Western Reserve Historical Society (#64.140.2) may be one of these.
Another blue and white quilt from the neighboring community of Auburn is now in the Geauga County Historical Society collection. This quilt is inscribed in ink with religious images and Biblical quotations, as well as names and dates. Made in 1886 by women in the Auburn Baptist Church as a gift for their minister, its signers hail from Michigan and Canada as well as from the Geauga and Portage County communities of Auburn, Mantua, and Hiram.

By 1880 quilt styles were changing. In addition to cotton fabrics, women began making quilts from silks, satins and velvets. Obviously such quilts could not be washed, and were more decorative than utilitarian. Two styles popular at this time were log cabin and crazy quilts.

Log cabin quilts were made by stitching narrow strips to a small square block, traditionally red, working concentrically around the center square to form a larger block. Two dark strips alternate with two light, resulting in a quilt block diagonally divided into light and dark triangles. Depending on how she joins the blocks, the quiltmaker can create a variety of patterns. "Barn Raising" was one popular arrangement, and a fine example was made by Julia Harper of Unionville (Ashtabula County) for her great-niece and namesake, Julia P. Norton. Constructed from narrow strips of wool, this quilt is still in the Harper family home, Shandy Hall, now owned by the Western Reserve Historical Society.

Another log cabin arrangement, made by placing dark and light strips across from each other, is known as "Courthouse Steps." An exceptional example of this quilt style from the same period was made by Mary Harper Strong (1845-1924) of Sandusky. Her silk quilt is in the collection of the Follett House Museum, branch of the Sandusky Library (#87.4665). Although many silk quilts from this period have deteriorated badly because they were made of "weighted" silk, Mary Strong's is in superb condition.

Crazy quilts were extremely popular during the 1880s. Like log cabin quilts, most crazy quilts made in the Western Reserve are similar to those made elsewhere in America. By this time quilt styles were influenced more by nationally available women's magazines than by women coming into the Reserve from feeder communities in the East. Crazy quilts reflect America's fascination with the Orient, the popularity of Kate Greenaway's illustrations and Oscar Wilde's American lecture tour, the influence of the "Art Needlework" movement and the proliferation of luxurious fabrics. Because of their comparatively recent date and the fact that they were rarely used as bedcovers, many crazy quilts still exist. In fact, it is probably safe to say that every institutional collection in the Western Reserve that has any quilts at all has crazy quilts, and in some they form the bulk of the collection. Outstanding examples include a lace-edged fan quilt in the Allen Memorial Art Museum in Oberlin (#49.304), and one made by or for "MSM," now in the Lorain County Historical Society (#K-81).

While many Western Reserve quilters in the 1880s made crazy quilts, Geauga County's culturally separate Amish quilters continued to work in the traditions they had brought with them from Holmes County. Amish women began quilting during the 1870s--later than their "English" neighbors, since quilts are not a part of the Germanic bedding tradition. Enormously popular with collectors today, Amish quilts can be easily recognized. They are almost always pieced, and made from solid-colored fabrics in saturated colors, including black, but rarely yellow or white. Pieced and plain blocks alternate and are arranged diagonally across the surface. Most Amish quilts have a wide outer border and a narrow inner one. Some are extremely plain, essentially whole-cloth quilts with a narrow border set in from the edge. These quilts, especially, become a canvas for beautiful quilting patterns.
Designs, techniques and functions of pre-Civil War quilts discussed above were largely transplanted from New England and New York. The same is true of innovations over time, such as the change from a center medallion style to a repeated block style, and the transformation in function of group-made signature quilts from community support to instruments of social change. Other innovative quilts are rooted in quiltmaking traditions, but include a rare, personal vision of the quiltmaker. Such quilts are unique, and were apparently not copied. Two examples come to mind.

The first is an appliqued quilt made in Sandusky (Erie County) c. 1870. It was designed by David Dussault, a ship's carpenter, and made by his wife, Josephine Dussault. Although it is a traditional appliqued quilt, even to its popular palette of red and green on a white ground, its motifs are unusual and personal. They include anchors, wheels, port-holes, braces and grommets— all symbols of faith, hope and charity in Christian iconography, and the Dussaults, who were devout Catholics, may have included them for that reason. This quilt, a masterpiece of technique, as well as design, is in the collection of the Follett House Museum of the Sandusky Library.

Another innovative quilt was made in Monroeville (Huron County) in 1888 by a group of women, possibly "The Alphas" (Fig. 5). This quilt, now in the Firelands Historical Society, brings together several traditions: crazy quilt and signature quilt designs, fundraising function, and the popular technique of velvet painting. The quilt has in its center a painting on velvet of the town hall in Monroeville, surrounded by crazy blocks embroidered with names and occupations of Monroeville merchants, who paid a fee to have their businesses so advertised. This quilt is a veritable "yellow pages" of Monroeville, Ohio, in 1888, and affords a realistic insight into the community. An agricultural market town at the intersection of two railroads, Monroeville was the business center for freight agents, grain dealers, harnessmakers, dealers in agricultural implements and manufacturers of "bent felloes," along with druggists, grocers, dentists and farmers, as the quilt tells us. The demographic character of the region is reflected in the large number of German names embroidered on the quilt, and the secular occupations of the signers stand in contrast to the religious concerns reflected in most signature quilts in the Reserve.

Western Reserve quilts are rooted in traditions shared by quiltmakers everywhere, yet they also mirror the region and cultures of Northeastern Ohio. Those made before the 1880s reflect the geography and demography of the region; gradual changes in textile technology, and the increasing influence of popular publications; the New England roots of some quiltmakers and the Anabaptist roots of others; the high value Western Reserve women placed on religion and social reform; and the personal visions of quiltmakers. Their study contributes greatly to our understanding of the past.

WORKS CITED


Hawley, Zerah. *A Journal of a Tour through Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York, the North Part of Pennsylvania and Ohio...* New Haven, 1822.


"The Original Diary of Mrs. Laura (Downs) Clark, of Wakeman, Ohio." *Firelands Pioneer* ms 21 (Jan. 1920), 2308-26.


Fig. 1 "Love Apple" quilt by Louise Foote Stevens, Avon, Lorain County, 1825-1850. Pieced from solid-color cottons, white cotton back. Applied binding with piping insert. 81" x 78". Private collection.

Fig. 2 "Ohio Star" quilt by Elizabeth Mook Harpster, Bellevue, Huron County, c. 1840. Pieced from solid-color and printed cottons, print back. Applied binding. 86" x 74". Collection Martha Drown and Wanda Isaac.
Fig. 3 "Rose of Sharon" quilt by Mary Nelson Nyman, Peru, Huron County, c. 1844. Appliqued from solid-color cottons, white cotton back. Stuffed, back brought to front as edge treatment. 96" x 81-1/2". Collection Mary L. Stewart.

Fig. 4 "Album Block" quilt by Helen Nims Wood and others, Lyme, Huron County, c. 1870. Pieced from solid-color and printed cottons, white cotton back. Applied binding, ink inscriptions. 91" x 76". Collection Historic Lyme Village Association.
Fig. 5  Crazy quilt, probably by "The Alphas," Monroeville, Huron County, 1888. Pieced from velvets, silks, satins, ribbons, maroon satin back. Applied corded binding, embroidered inscriptions, painting on velvet of Monroeville town hall. 55" x 57". Collection Firelands Historical Society Museum.

All photos courtesy Firelands Association for the Visual Arts (FAVA), Oberlin.

Photo credits: Patricia and John Glascock.