



Telling Our Stories Through Quilts

By Bobbie Smith Bryant

Quilts have been part of our Kentucky culture since the earliest settlers found their way through the mountains at Cumberland Gap. I've discovered that quilts have a way of telling our collective story.

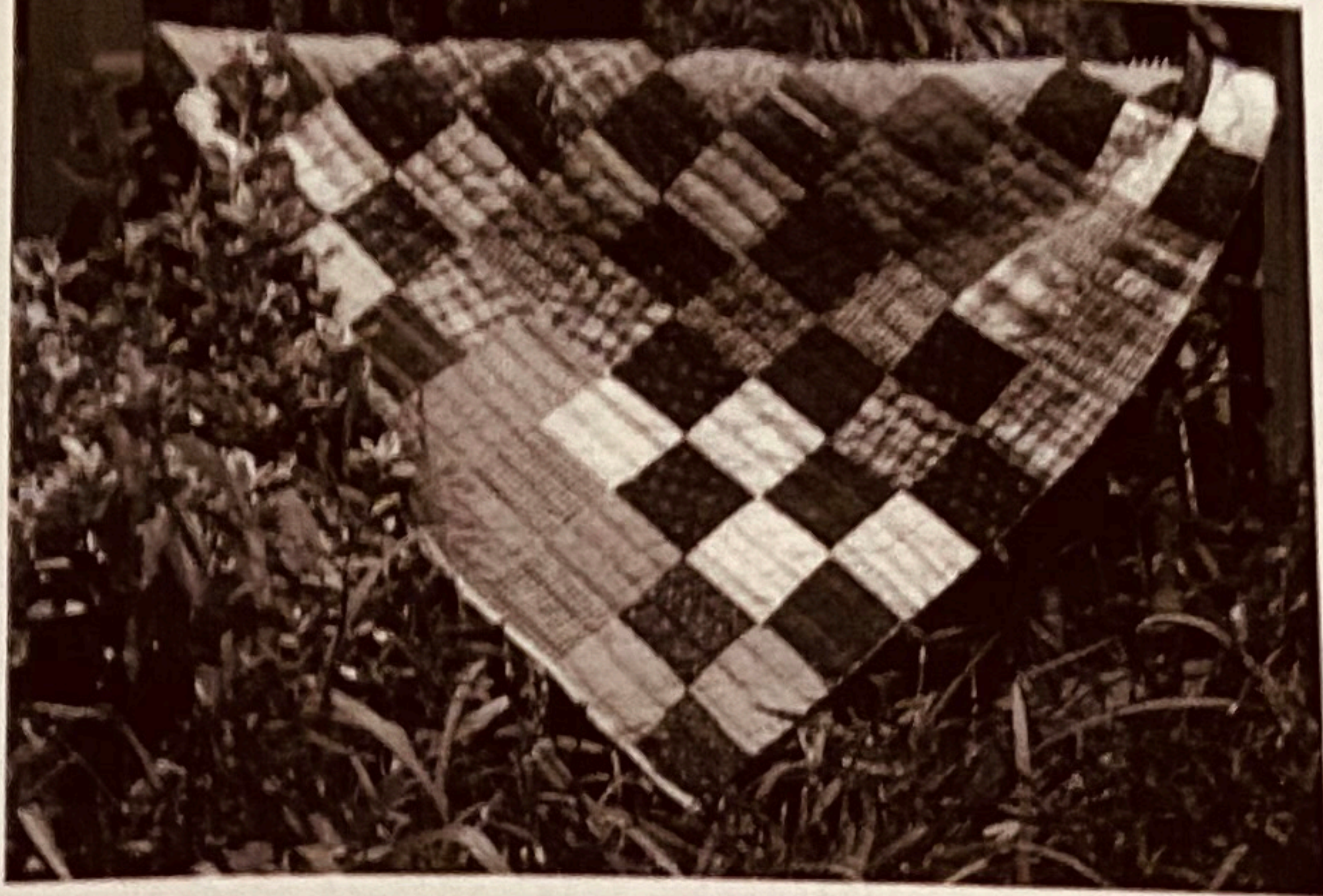
Women have been making and using quilts for hundreds of years. Quilt history is full of examples of quilters using cloth to communicate their views of the world.

There are quilts which support social causes as well as expressions of political or religious views. For people who inherited quilts, historians say the quilts play a symbolic role for those left behind.

People in nearly every part of the world used padded fabrics for clothing, bedding, and even armor. With the arrival of the English and Dutch settlers in North America, quilting took on a new life and flourished.

The term "quilt" comes from the Latin word, *culcita*, meaning a stuffed sack. The word has come to have two meanings. It is used as a noun, meaning the three-layer stitched bedcovering. It is also used as a verb, meaning the act of stitching through the three layers to hold them together.

In the early days, women didn't have specific patterns. They relied upon their own ingenuity, creating as they went along. The first known quilt pattern was published by the *Godey's Lady's Book*, in 1835. Though it was unnamed at the time, it later came to be known as the honeycomb or hexagon pattern. Women generally created their own patterns or borrowed them from friends.



and repurposed items came to be known as "Confederate goods."

The Progressive Era brought significant changes for women. While women were still primarily at home, working outside the home became acceptable. An increasing number of women gained an education and established their place in professional positions.

A popular activity for women during this time was to join one or more of the reform movements to address social problems. A society or club championed a specific cause yet had the "moral support of all others." This meant one society would make allowance for the efforts of another with hopes that public support would increase.

Three major social reform causes of the 19th century were abolition, temperance, and suffrage. It was the temperance movement that utilized quilts and quilt making as an aid to its cause more often than the other two causes. Women such as author Eliza Calvert Hall and Francis Willard, a suffragist and temperance supporter, often wrote metaphorically about the quilt as a way to reach women, to garner their support and get them to take collective action.

Willard propelled the Women's Christian Temperance Union to the national stage. She understood a woman's traditional role was within the home. Rather than expecting women to adopt more radical political ideas, she urged women to support and publicly stand up for their traditional beliefs and values. Quilt making provided an outlet for women to express their feelings or opinions, particularly about political and social issues. The 19th Amendment passed in 1920 giving women the right to vote.

Quilts made in modern war times were more to show general support for the troops rather than to supply necessities for the soldiers. Two notable quilting efforts during recent wartimes are the Quilts of Valor and Home of the Brave Quilt Project.

A national effort run entirely by volunteers, Quilts of Valor matches up those who prefer piecing to those who prefer quilting, presenting a finished quilt to a returning soldier from the war in Iraq.

The Home of the Brave Quilt Project designs its quilts based on existing Sanitary Commission quilt patterns made during the Civil War and make them with reproduction fabrics. Their quilts create a symbolic connection for soldiers, recognizing those who came before them in service to their country.

Modern day quilters continue to express their feelings about social issues in the 21st century. At the Women's March on Washington in January 2017, there were women attending who expressed their opinions in quilts.

In terms of sending a message, the AIDS Quilt is unlike anything else in the history of quilting. People of all walks of life, many whom were

India provided most of the early fabrics such as calicos and painted designs. The ancient people of this civilization made homespun cotton garments. Remnants of their artifacts reveal needles crafted from bone and spindles made of wood.

Sewing and quilting changed significantly when the power loom was invented in England in 1785, mechanizing fabric production. The loom used water instead of human power creating a need for as much thread as spinners could create. The power loom came to the United States in 1814 and by 1820 mass manufacturing of fabric was underway.

Once fabric selections improved, quilt kits came on the market and women were encouraged to embellish their work. This was particularly true towards the end of the 19th century during the Victorian Era.

Both boys and girls were taught to sew as it was seen as a way to teach children patience, to accept responsibility and to foster an attitude of service to others. At one time sewing was taught in school curriculum. Children also learned how to take wool from their animals; card, spin, and weave it to make thread; operate a loom and create fabric; and even how to dye it.

Women's work changed dramatically when sewing machines came on the market. They were in general use by the end of the Civil War, and women could machine sew, making more quilts in less time. The 1860 Godey's Lady's Book reported that a man's shirt could be made by machine in one hour versus fourteen hours of hand sewing.

Quiltings, or quilting parties as they were initially called, began in New England in the early 19th century. This was an important means of socializing for colonial and pioneer women and families. Through the winter months, women pieced their quilt tops. With no central heating and usually only one main heated room in their homes, the room became too crowded during the winter months for a quilt frame to be assembled. As warmer weather arrived, neighbors came together for quilting bees.

While there have been reports and articles written about certain quilt patterns being used as a secret code along the Underground Railroad, there really is no proof to this claim. Late University of Louisville educator, Dr. J. Blaine Hudson, was very adamant about the fact that there was no documentation, no existing quilts. "There was nothing to support the really cool story," explains Tressa Brown, the African-American Heritage Commission Coordinator with the Kentucky Heritage Council.

When the Civil War erupted in 1861, women worked to establish over 20,000 soldiers' aid societies to raise money and provide supplies for the war effort; over two-thirds of these societies were in the North. Much aid was accomplished through the U.S. Sanitary Commission, a relief organization.

During this time, women donated their family heirloom quilts to supply bedding for soldiers. They produced quilts, sheets, blankets, shirts, and pants, which were shipped to the nearest sanitary commission to be distributed. It is estimated that Northern women contributed \$25 million worth of supplies through the Sanitary Commission by the end of the Civil War.

In contrast, Southern aid societies were formed out of existing church groups. Southern women also gathered personal heirlooms, home goods, and money to donate to Confederate soldiers. As the south was based upon an agricultural economy and did not have the manufacturing ability of the North, women had to produce their own yarn and cloth. These hand-woven