

HISTORY RECORDED: HARVARD'S SIGNATURE QUILTS

Camille Myers Breeze, Principal
Museum Textile Services

For a small museum, the donation of an important historical textile can open windows of discovery and bring the community together in ways never before seen. Such was the case when, in March 2000, an 1867 family record quilt containing dozens of names and dates was given to the Harvard Historical Society in Harvard, Massachusetts. I had been the part-time curator at Harvard for only two months and was still getting to know the town and its history. The timely arrival of the quilt, therefore, was a wonderful research and educational opportunity for me that would also help to break the ice with the Board of Directors and the community.

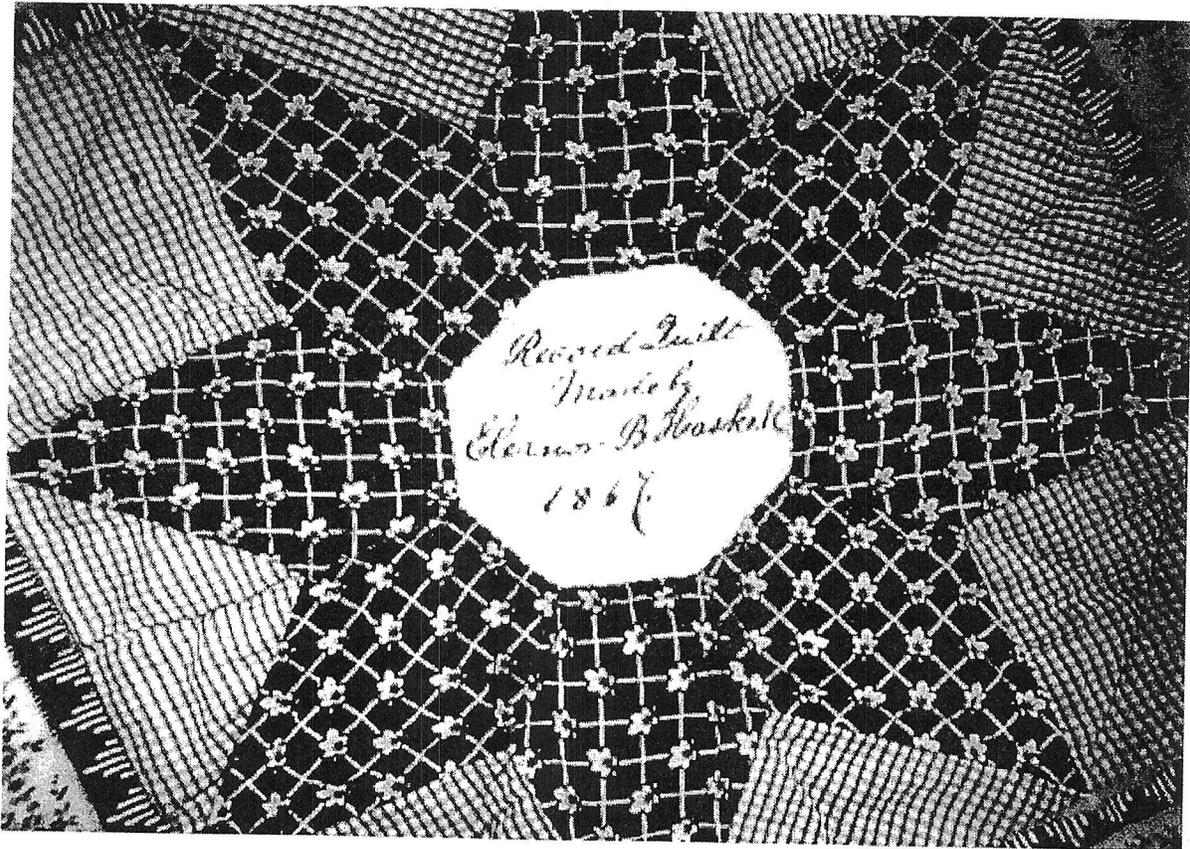
The Haskell Signature Quilt

The donors of the quilt, Donald and Vera Haskell of Goffstown, New Hampshire, belong to a venerable New England family who first settled in Harvard in the early 18th century and remained until 1985 when Don Haskell's aunt, Eleanor S. Haskell, passed away. As Don was setting up for his aunt's estate sale, a neighbor saw the quilt in a trunk and brought it to his attention. Not wanting to lose such a family treasure but not knowing what to do with the quilt, the Haskells held on to it for fifteen years, until they read in the Harvard Historical Society newsletter that I had been hired. As both a curator and a conservator, I seem to inspire donors to bring forward artifacts that are no longer stable enough for daily use. Along with the quilt, the Haskells donated a crayon print of the quilter made posthumously by her cousin, Eleanor Merrifield Willard.

The four-poster bed quilt contains four roller-printed calicos. The double-pink check of the background fabric and the rusty brown and orange leaf print used for the eight-point stars were quite common between 1860 and 1875 and could have been produced locally in Massachusetts. Double pinks, I soon learned, were first made in the 1840s and were produced unchanged until the 1920s in geometric, checked, floral, and abstract designs. Their name came from the manufacturing process, which began with a white ground onto which a red or pink pattern was printed, followed by a darker red or pink print. The other fabrics found in the quilt appear to be madder browns, which most often were a mixture of tan, orange, and occasionally blue or red. Madder-brown prints are most often associated with striped, paisley and plaid designs. Although the quilt is hand pieced, the distinctive hooked stitches seen around the binding edge indicate that the quilt was finished with a treadle sewing machine.



Quilter Eleanor Bolles Haskell



Signature block reading "Record Quilt Made by Eleanor B. Haskell 1867."

The date of the quilt is firmly established by an inscription that reads, "Record Quilt Made by Eleanor B. Haskell 1867." In the center of each of the remaining forty-nine quilt blocks she wrote the names and vital statistics of members of her extended family, much as one would on a family tree. Unlike a family tree, however, the blocks are not assembled according to family unit or surname. In fact, two blocks were cut in half, including the block that announces Eleanor's marriage to William B. Haskell, and their halves placed in different corners of the quilt. We will never know what led her to assemble the quilt in exactly this way, but the inscriptions provide insight into the joy and pain that she endured during her life.

One block announces the marriage of Eleanor's husband's cousin, Julianne B. Haskell, to Dr. Augustus Robbins. Another block lists the death of Dr. Robbins just a few years later on September 13, 1855 in Brooklyn, New York. According to the quilt's donor, Don Haskell, Eleanor and her husband struggled at farming. Eleanor's father was wealthy and he helped set the couple up in the coal business in Brooklyn. For reasons we do not know, the young couple returned to Harvard around 1850, five years before Dr. Robbins's death. Their cousin Julianne appears to have remained in Brooklyn at least until the death of her husband. The ledger book from the Haskell's coal business still exists; however, every page of annotations has been meticulously covered up with newspaper clippings, and this symbolic act has rendered it no longer readable.

The saddest block on the quilt is the one stating, "Josiah W. Haskell and three sons were drowned in Perconia Bay, LI on Nov 2, 1857." Josiah was a first cousin of Eleanor's husband, William B. Haskell. The fact that the multiple drowning took place in November suggests that it was some kind of boat or ferry accident, rather than a swimming accident. Perconia Bay is in the general region of Brooklyn, which begs the question of just how many Haskells went to New York to escape the poverty of New England farming.

The story of Eleanor B. Haskell's remarkable quilt became even more poignant when I learned that she died in 1881, the year her portrait was drawn. She perished after a candle or lantern that she was carrying started a fire while she was on the stairs. The blaze was not big enough to burn down the homestead, but Eleanor did not survive her injuries.

A Second Signature Quilt

Much to my delight, the donation of the Haskell signature quilt led the Board of Directors of the Harvard Historical Society to suggest that the 2000 summer exhibit feature quilts. I was surprised at first, because concern had been expressed that, as a textile specialist, my exhibits might be too "female" for general taste. Duly warned (not to mention challenged), I set out to create a quilt exhibit that would educate those who knew nothing about quilts while still appealing to the hard-core quilting crowd.

In searching through the thirty or so quilts in the museum's collection, I made a startling discovery. Charles E. Haskell, the father of Don Haskell, had donated a double-pink signature quilt to the society in 1971. That quilt has a simple geometric pattern called Monkey Wrench, with the large-scale blocks and wide sashings that are all marks of a utilitarian quilt from the 1880s. The museum's database stated that the donor believed Eleanor Bolles Haskell also made this quilt, but this was unlikely because she passed away in 1881. In search of a more exact date for the quilt, I studied the use of maiden and married names on the quilt. By comparing the marriage dates of the women on the quilt I was able to pinpoint its construction to 1887.

It immediately became evident that the names were mostly Harvard people but not all members of one family, putting it in a different category from the other signature quilt. Many of the surnames belong to prominent Baptist families, so it was no surprise that I found most of the names in the records of the Still River Baptist Church, whose 1832 building now houses the Harvard Historical Society Museum. Although evidence pointed to this being a church-made quilt, I still did not know why the quilt was made nor inscribed.

With nothing else to go on, I began to research the history of signature or album quilts. By the 1840s signature quilts of all types were popularly made to commemorate events such as a presidential election, a marriage (which is what some of the famous Baltimore album quilts commemorated), or a strong friendship. Presentation quilts were a popular means of expressing appreciation for a friend or esteemed community member such as for a doctor by his grateful patients, or for a preacher by members of his church. Signature quilts were also sometimes used to raise money for a local church, with subscribers paying a small amount to have their names placed on the quilt.

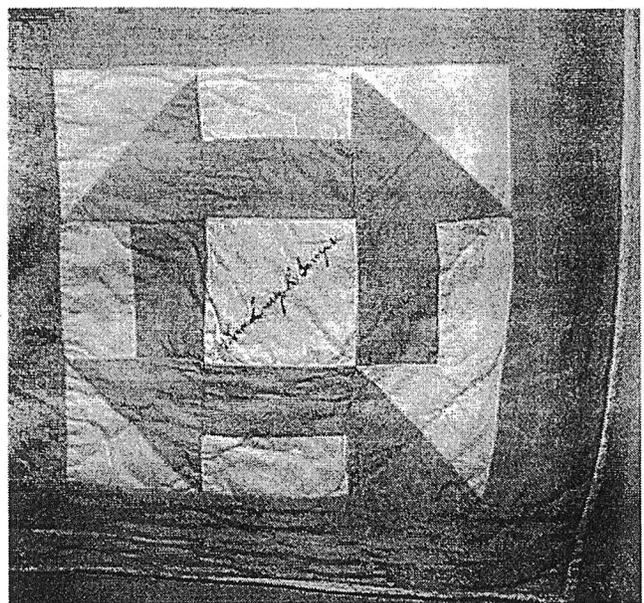
In hopes of discovering whether the Baptist Church was involved in any quilt making or fund-raising in the mid-1880s, I examined the clerk's register, which is preserved in the Historical Society's archives. In July 1885 Rev. William Read left his position and was replaced in February 1888 by a Rev. W. H. Evans. The two events bracket the date I had assigned to the quilt, and the church records make no mention of who was ministering in the interim. I found the answer in a booklet entitled "The Baptist Church of Harvard—Still River 1776–1926: A History written for the sesquicentennial celebration." Author Katherine L. Lawrence wrote in 1926 that Prof. James Morton, a librarian at the Newton Theological Institution, supplied the pulpit for nearly two years. Prof. Morton's name appears in the signature block at the center of this quilt.

During Prof. Morton's tenure, Katherine Lawrence tells us, "A part of that time services were held in the chapel while the auditorium was frescoed, repainted and recarpeted. Mr. Morton endeared himself to the church and community: but we needed a pastor." I did not find any record of quilt-related church activities or fundraising. Nevertheless, the names of Baptist families and the prominent location of Prof. Morton's name at the center of the quilt tell us that this Harvard community made it. The Haskells, who owned the quilt prior to its donation to the Harvard Historical Society, were active members of the Baptist church.

Close study of the workmanship and materials in this quilt make it clear that it was made by a single hand and that all of the signatures were written in the same hand, just like the 1867 Haskell signature quilt. Although there is no record of who made this quilt, it does contain an interesting anomaly. One block of the quilt contains the name of then-fourteen-year-old Lucy Farwell Sawyer. In it, a piece of the monkey wrench design is turned around. The quilt is otherwise meticulously pieced. This block is located in the bottom-right corner of the quilt, which is a traditional location for a signature on works of art.

The Birth of an Exhibit

Armed with the two signature quilts as centerpieces, as well as an impressive selection of other quilts from Harvard's permanent collection, I put together an exhibit describing the history of the art form and its place in the lives of American men and women. The information I provided was technical in some cases and general in others. I spent enough time monitoring the exhibit to see that husbands who accompanied their wives would pass through the exhibit quickly; however, when faced with nothing else to do while they waited for their wives to finish, they would read the labels again, this time more closely. Children, I also found, loved the quilts.



Lucy Farwell Sawyer's block

The initial success of the exhibit encouraged the Board of Directors to allow me to include a substantial amount of money in my budget for the conservation of both signature quilts. Buoyed by the high attendance over the summer, I planned an expanded calendar of events and programs for the fall of 2000. The Historical Society welcomed lecturer Jennifer Gilbert, curator of the New England Quilt Museum. We later hosted a Massachusetts Quilt Documentation Workshop and were able to book all twenty-four time slots. One Sunday we held a reception for the quilters of the town, who were invited to bring examples of their work and display them for the day. A local artist made us a quilt for the purpose of a raffle, and we used the proceeds to purchase twelve new archival storage boxes specifically for the quilt collection. And in October I was invited to give the keynote speech at the Historical Society's Annual Meeting.

The keynote speech provided me with an expanded forum for connecting Harvard's quilts to the history of the town. With the help of the staff genealogist, Susan Lee, I found in our collection photographs and paintings of most of the people named on the two signature quilts. I showed slides of people along with slides of the houses in which they lived and the businesses that they ran. I also pored through autograph books, scrapbooks, and documents and was rewarded with actual signatures, poems, and letters written by the people immortalized on the quilts. Finally, I discovered that many of the women named on the quilts had made samplers, clothing, and other textiles that were also in our collection.

Conclusion

The donation of the Haskell signature quilt opened the door for the people of Harvard to experience their history in a tangible way. The earlier Haskell quilt painted a large and impressive picture of a local family and its most heartfelt events. Many of the current residents of Harvard are descendants of the Haskells or one of the many other families who intermarried with them and are also recorded. The second signature quilt told us of the relationship some of these families had with their own church community, who had worshipped in the same building in which the quilts now hung.

Textiles have always had the ability to bring the past to us because we live with them every day and yet rarely stop to appreciate them. Seeing a lovingly made quilt or a meticulously embroidered sampler forces us to stop and think about the person who gave skill and time to its creation. Most historical societies have large collections of costume and textiles because they were preserved and valued, and yet we almost never have the resources to devote the same level of study and care to them as we do to our valuable furniture or paintings. Exhibition is one of the few ways in which we can let our public know about our valuable textile heritage and how important it is to protect it. As one scholar expressed, when speaking about our planet, "In the end, we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, and we will understand only what we are taught."