

HOW DEPRESSION-ERA QUILTMAKERS CONSTRUCTED DOMESTIC SPACE: AN INTERRACIAL PROCESSUAL STUDY

In this article, I examine how quilting contributed to the construction of home environments in the 1920s to 1940s. Drawing from oral history interviews with descendants of six black and two white quiltmakers, I argue that these low- and middle-income women enhanced their authority in the family and ordered domestic space through routine practices of making quilts primarily for everyday use. I posit the prominent space-taking quality of quilting as key to its effectiveness for these purposes. Thus emphasizing the process rather than product side of material culture studies, I argue that the capacity of quilting to shape how inhabitants experience a household has been a significant factor in its long-term popularity in the United States. The following section introduces concepts that I will use to analyze the eight case studies that are the foundation of this work.

Concepts and Methods

The issue of space is relatively unexplored territory in quilt studies, which more typically approaches quilting in terms of particular quilts, patterns, styles, makers, and taste arbiters; social and political uses; ethnic groups and regions; and historical developments. Sociologist Marybeth C. Stalp, who has studied how contemporary quiltmakers balance space and time needs with family demands, also notes a dearth of research on this aspect of quilting. She says, "Scholars have examined quilts as cultural and artistic objects, but the process of making quilts and the gendered cultural production that occurs during this process has had very little academic attention" (2006:112). The distinction between product and process is significant because a research focus on one or the other can lead to different interpretations of the practice. For instance, Linda Pershing's product-based study, "'She Really Wanted to Be Her Own Woman': Scandalous Sunbonnet Sue" (1993), interprets innovative 1980s versions of a popular Depression-era quilt pattern as efforts to resist or reform patriarchal society. Pershing thus frames "alternative" quilts as evidence of homemaker agency. Attention to process in the current study, however, discerns homemaker agency rooted in the capacity of the practice of quilting (regardless of whether the product is conventional or alternative) to stake out an arena in the existing social system where women's authority exceeds that of men. This ability to negotiate status within the existing system raises questions about Pershing's presumption of a patriarchal society.

A processual approach also offers insights into the particular benefits of making so-called utility quilts, those intended for everyday use even though they provide not just warmth but decoration. Attention to process makes it clear that the aesthetic standards for utility-quilting have social and psychological components such as desire for relaxation,

solidarity with family and friends, and upholding of community values such as thrift and industry. The valuing of these non-material by-products associated with utility-quiltmaking over those that more often accompany fancy-quiltmaking, such as stress, competition, and extravagant expenditure of money and time, offers one explanation for the popularity of utility-quiltmaking even though its product usually is valued lower than fancy quilts.

Among scholars who have studied the quiltmaking process, but with limited attention to domestic space, are folklorists Susan Roach (1986) and Joyce Ice (1997). Although both view social interaction as an important aspect of quiltmaking, they discuss it mainly in terms of relations between women who make quilts together, women's use of quilts as gifts, and women's use of quilts and quiltmaking to achieve recognition and agency in the (local) public realm. They give little consideration to women's use of quiltmaking activities in the home as a means of ordering relations with non-quiltmaking family members, although Roach presents some relevant data that I will discuss below in the section on *Pleasantness Factors*.

A second methodological component of the current study is its interracial approach. In this I follow Roach (1986), one of the few quilt scholars who have studied black and white women together, and whose dissertation on this topic regrettably was not published. My emphasis on African American quiltmakers aims to help compensate for the omission in early quilt histories of issues that are particular to the experiences of many African Americans. The inclusion of two European American households supports my notion that black and white women should not be segregated in quilt studies since they participated in common quiltmaking networks.

In the area of vernacular architecture studies, this work heeds Henry Glassie's call for a turn to home interiors and their often female "builders" (Glassie 2000:66). Although my research focus here is quilt studies, Glassie's vision opens the door to collaboration between these two material culture specialties. The realm of domestic space bridges them given that quiltmaking frequently occurs in home environments and, like domestic space, has been dominated in Western cultures by women historically. Particularly relevant to the current work is that Glassie, in redefining vernacular architecture to include home interiors, expands the category of building materials to include household objects and activities. When he says that a home exterior is "to see" while the interior is "to use," I understand his notion of "use" to incorporate both the placement of objects and the performance of activities (2000:52). Both of these components (objects and activities) are implied in his association of interiors with "the intimate ordering of common life," in his reference to "the ornamental urge of the interior," and in his view that an inhabitant who "receives ceramic pieces and arranges them on the dresser of her kitchen" expresses herself creatively (2000:67, 69, 155). Reinforcing this expanded notion of building materials is his statement, "The interior is crucial to the serious work of raising families and building communities through intimate exchange" (assuming that exchange includes material goods) (2000:67). Attentive to the social interaction and communicative exchange that is central to family life, this concept of space has a predecessor in Herbert J. Gans's emphasis on the role of "use" in transforming a man-made environment from "potential" space, with uses conceived by the planner, into "effective" space, with meanings attached by actual space-

users (Gans 1968:5–6). With both Gans and Glassie, a human-made bounded space is underdetermined, open to various meanings that inhabitants construct through social and material uses such as quilting. Like the present work, an edited, interdisciplinary volume titled *Making the American Home* (Motz and Browne 1988) reflects Gans's idea that a given space is made meaningful through use and Glassie's notion that women make the physical structure of a house into a meaningful "home" environment. But whereas contributors to this collection tend to represent middle-class, mainstream women of the 1840s to 1930s as isolated and limited by domestic space, the present study finds that women in mostly rural and lower-income households of the 1920s to 1940s derived agency from an activity (quilting) that was strongly identified with gender-based separate spheres.

Because home interiors are relatively ephemeral, "easily swept away by time," Glassie recommends a methodological switch from archaeology, effective for studying histories of physical structures, to ethnography on extant households (2000:67, 69). Since the households studied here have indeed been "swept away," my approach is historical ethnography, with oral history interviews as the primary resource supplemented by historical documents, quilt studies scholarship, and extant quilts. I argue that space-based, multistage, flexibly located social practices such as quilting provide a lens on inhabitant strategies for constructing the best possible home environment in light of the relatively fixed conditions of family structure, building structure, and neighborhood. To evaluate the relative desirability of home environments, I use "pleasantness" qualities of camaraderie, relaxation, and personal fulfillment drawn from Paul J. J. Pennartz's study (1999) of public housing residents in the Netherlands. As shown in the case studies below, quilting has the potential to produce these experiential qualities.

Two complementary spatial qualities of quilting make it particularly effective for construction of home environments: It makes major demands on domestic space, but gives the quiltmaker great flexibility in deciding how to meet them, allowing her to consider which potential work areas will best promote the experience of pleasantness in the home. These qualities have worked together to make quilting a source of two valuable albeit intangible products. First, as a highly visible and complex performance whose steps were not fully understood by other family members, it enhanced the homemaker's status in the family by adding charismatic authority to the normal quota of traditional patriarchal authority accorded to homemakers (see Weber [1978] 1993:125). Second, as an enterprise that inevitably required a degree of collaboration from other inhabitants, quilting had the potential to produce among them a sense of common purpose, interdependence, and esprit de corps.

The emphasis here on social relations as a component of material culture study recalls Michael Owen Jones's notion of "material behavior," which term "refers to activity involved in producing or responding to the physical dimension of our world" (Jones 1997:202). However, while my approach resembles that of material behavior in being process- and social interaction-oriented, Jones is concerned more with the aesthetic product. He looks at how social interactions influence the maker's creative process and at how the object expresses the conditions under which it was made. In contrast, I focus on

how subjects use material culture practices to create socially meaningful space, viewing the product (quilts) as one of several sources of data toward this end rather than as a communicative expression in itself.

The sections that follow present historical background on Depression-era quilting, outline quilting space needs, introduce consultants, offer eight household case studies, and interpret their space-use arrangements in light of concepts introduced above. Finally, I will propose a dynamic theoretical framework that accounts for inhabitant activities and interactions as an ongoing effort to build the best possible home environment. They achieve this by synthesizing aspects of a three-part domestic realm that consists of building structure, home interior, and grounds.

Historical Background on Quilting

By the late 1800s quilting had declined from its pre-Civil War prestige to associations with elderly and rural women. Under the influence of the Colonial Revival, it was elevated in the 1920s and 1930s to a patriotic emblem of founding mothers and pioneer ancestors. At this time, depending on style and context, it could be represented as ornamental: a fashionable way to beautify the home and honor ancestors; or as utilitarian: a thrifty means of keeping a poor family warm. Society women bought designer quilt kits, copied family heirlooms, and paid seamstresses to make quilts. In *The Romance of the Patchwork Quilt*, first published in 1935, Carrie A. Hall informed an apparently leisure-class readership that "[t]he making of quilts in the home has become astonishingly popular, even to the extent of interfering with bridge schedules and attendance at the matinee" (Hall and Kretsinger [1935]1988:29). The 1933 Sears National Quilt Contest drew 24,878 entries (Brackman 1985:1), an average of 518 per state. In Bloomington, Indiana, the Make-A-Block quilting club held all-day meetings (*Evening World* March 31, 1932:7; May 5, 1933:2), Wicks department store advertised antique reproduction quilts for \$2.48 compared to bedspreads at 98 cents (*Bloomington Daily Telephone* November 19, 1930:2; February 18, 1932:3), and an ad for "The Wonder Package of Hand Embroidery Designs" ("Over 800 Patterns 88¢ A Lifetime Supply") stated: "Since patchwork and appliqué quilts have come into vogue, some beautiful patterns of full size squares are included. Here is the opportunity for any family to create and hand down to future generations the most prized of all heirlooms" (*Evening World* March 20, 1933:6). With this fancy representation of quilting, women enhanced their present status through public display at fairs and contests and their future status through creation of heirlooms.

At the same time, many women were making quilts for everyday use from sewing scraps, old clothes and linens, feed-sacks, flour-sacks, and cloth remnants on sale at department stores. Quilting as practiced in the low- and middle-income households described below produced a few fancy quilts, but many more that were meant for daily use on beds in the home. These women of modest means derived multiple benefits from both the product and process of quilting. They entertained themselves at little cost (process), warmed their families at night (product), and beautified their homes (product). The commitment of extensive space, time, and resources to quilting testified to the



Example of a utility quilt: One-Patch with Trip Around the World blocks made by Mary Goering, 1940s. This quilt was cut in two for an unknown reason. Quilt owner: Teri Klassen. Photographers: Michael Cavanagh and Kevin Montague.

homemaker's agency in the domestic realm and enhanced her status in the eyes of family, peer group, neighborhood, church, and in the case of those who worked as domestics, possibly employers. These Depression-era quiltmakers continued a late 1800s trend that American decorative arts scholar Cheryl Robertson has referred to as "a reordering of domesticity from a passive, custodial duty to an active, creative vocation" (1997:85). Citing Jean Gordon and Jan McArthur (1988:38), Robertson notes that this shift was marked in women's magazines by use of the term "homemaking" in place of "housekeeping" (1997:85). Through quilting and other domestic activities, women featured in the case studies below exemplified this professionalization of housework.

For the women considered here, quilting generally was not a source of income during the period studied although one won about forty dollars in a department store quilt contest (John Drake, personal communication, 2003). Their rewards were primarily nonmonetary: the challenge of a complex task with visible, lasting results; bonding with family and friends; gratitude and admiration from family and friends; extended mortality (in the case of those whose descendants preserved their quilts and memories of their quilting after their death); and connections to the outside world. I argue that all of these capacities depended on the quiltmaker's arrangement of a routine sequence of space-taking activities with associated social interactions that gave inhabitants a feeling of belonging to a productive, orderly, respect-worthy household unit.

This study is partly salvage ethnography: using oral history to document how women

in the 1920s to 1940s located quiltmaking tools, materials, and activities in their homes. These quiltmaking specialists, mothers or grandmothers of the consultants, have all died. Half of the houses no longer exist. Documentation of space-use patterns preserves a largely unexploited resource for understanding the persistent popularity of quiltmaking as it has been practiced historically in the United States, as a common household activity of women whose primary roles were homemaker, wife, and mother. The focus on everyday quiltmaking and on African Americans is significant because both are underrepresented in U.S. quilt histories. A more nomothetic goal is to relate patterns of space use to individual quiltmaker conditions.

As mentioned above, key qualities of quiltmaking that make it an effective means of constructing interior environments are its extensive space needs and its locational flexibility, or "free-floating" quality. In this period, quiltmaking was a "nomad in the house," as Rudi Laermans and Carine Meulders have said of "the wandering washing machine" (Laermans and Meulders 1999:127). This quality is evident in the range of locations used for quilt frames, composed usually of two parallel eight- or nine-foot boards laid across two sawhorses. Of the eight women studied here, Fannie Greenwade and Lydia Redding put their frames in the living room and sometimes the front yard. Ida Chambers used hers in a living room that doubled as the master bedroom, but only when the woodstove was moved out for the summer. Mable Drake and Mary Brown put theirs in the master bedroom. Viola Tremble had hers in the kitchen. Mary Goering's was in the dining room. Annie Wade had no frame but her sewing machine and work table were in her sons' bedroom. Since convention did not dictate locations of quiltmaking activities, homemakers could tailor arrangements to their circumstances. I argue here that this freedom enhanced a homemaker's ability to structure household time and space in a way that generated a desirable environment.

Additional potentially attractive capacities of quiltmaking are that it had the potential to bridge public and private realms as well as race-related social boundaries. It affirmed a woman's authority in the domestic realm partly by expanding her opportunities for participation in the outside world. These included shopping for supplies, visiting and hosting other quiltmakers, using newspaper and mail-order patterns, donating quilts to charitable causes, and entering quilts in fairs and contests. In the area of race relations, it offered the potential for collegial interaction between white and black women, one where gender or class solidarity could downplay racial difference. For instance, Gladys-Marie Fry (1990:34) and Mary Lohrenz (1988) have documented cases in the mid-1800s South where black and white women experienced camaraderie related to quiltmaking and other textile work. Roland L. Freeman mentions an integrated quilt group that met in Maryland around 1950 (1996:13-15). Reports of integrated groups that met in Indiana in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1970s came to light when I was conducting fieldwork for a 2002 Black History Month quilt exhibit in Bloomington, Indiana (Klassen 2003:3, 5).

The links that quiltmaking provided to the outside world were particularly important to women in rural areas, including six (four black, two white) of the eight studied here, while quiltmaking as a symbol of the American woman's ingenuity, industry, competence, and gentility had particular significance for the six who were African American (four of

whom also were rural). An authoritative representation of this middle-class and unquestionably white model came from Marie Webster, author of the first quilt history ([1915] 1990). She said that the increasing popularity of quilting “should be a source of much satisfaction to all patriotic Americans who believe that the true source of our nation’s strength lies in keeping the family hearth flame bright” (xxii). African-American quiltmakers implicitly challenged, or at least complicated, race as a component of public conceptions of the model homemaker even as they affirmed a conventionally home-centered conception of femininity.¹

Quilting Space Needs

As quilting was practiced by the women in this study, its initial phase of constructing a top fit easily into household routine. A woman could cut patches and piece blocks for a few minutes or several hours, by herself or in company, on a sofa or a rocker, near a stove in winter or on a porch in summer. Once she had enough blocks for a top, she needed bigger, longer-term space commitments and two large specialized pieces of equipment: a sewing machine and a quilt frame (although some women quilted their quilts on beds). A woman who was sewing her blocks together on a machine with fabric lying around it might occupy thirty square feet (five by six). A quilt frame with women sitting along two sides might occupy fifty square feet (eight or nine by six), perhaps filling the open area of a room. “When you’re quilting, space gets expanded and boxes full, because you have to separate by colors and by sizes,” said consultant Kathryn News (2003). “There’s fabric everywhere, and the floor is covered with thread.” The sewing machine and quilt frame took up little floor space when not in use, about two-by-three feet for the machine and three-by-four feet for the quilt-frame sawhorses, which often were stored in a shed or closet with the boards leaning in a corner or lying next to a wall. Women stored fabric in closets and chests, sometimes in other people’s bedrooms.

Consultants

I met the six African American consultants in this study while curating a Black History Month quilt exhibit at the Monroe County History Center in Bloomington, Indiana, in 2002: Carrie Lee Bing, Ethel Clemons, John Drake, Cathy Rogers, Mary Cassie Terry, and Ernestine Winters (Klassen 2003). The two European Americans are my neighbor, Joe Dawson, of Bloomington, Indiana, and my mother, Kathryn News, of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The mix of black and white households and of male and female consultants facilitates consideration of race- and gender-related issues. The focus on the Depression era (broadly defined as the 1920s to 1940s) results from my valuing of the earliest consultant memories, given their birth dates ranging from 1917 to 1935, and from my sense that ethnographic patterns would more likely occur in common historical contexts.

The quilting households were in Mississippi, Kentucky (two), Indiana (three), Illinois, and Kansas. Except for the one in Chicago, they were all on farms or in small towns.² Except for Kathryn News, to whom I spoke by telephone, I interviewed all

consultants at their homes in or near Bloomington in winter and spring of 2003, recording information with handwritten notes and photographs. This study also uses some data gathered for the 2002 exhibit as well as from follow-up interviews with Joe Dawson (June 14 and 23, 2008), Kathryn News (August 24, 2008), and Ernestine Winters (June 27 and July 8, 2008).³ Consultants helped me draw rough floor plans and mark quiltmaking areas of the houses where their mother or grandmother had lived. Other space-taking activities included cooking and eating, sleeping, storage, recreation, and hosting guests. Often, two activities occurred in one place. For instance, living rooms doubled as bedrooms, and women used tables and beds as work surfaces for quiltmaking.

In each case study below, I describe and then interpret the quiltmaker's space-use decisions in light of her circumstances. In doing so, I consider five variables that I developed to account for variations in space use, as follows: (1) house "spaciousness," that is, whether the house had a separate dining room, living room, kitchen, master bedroom, and children's bedrooms, thus allowing more or less privacy and specialized usage; (2) homemaker assertiveness, which often reflects family supportiveness, especially that of men; (3) whether neighbors were "like" or "unlike," terms that I use here to indicate whether the family had friendly relations with neighbors of similar social status (if they did, I refer to them as "like"); (4) whether the homemaker preferred social or solitary quiltmaking; and (5) whether the homemaker saw her quiltmaking as mainly fashionable or utilitarian.

Environmental conditions such as temperature and light also played into space-use decisions: women often sat near windows for light or ventilation, sat by the stove in winter, and sewed outdoors in summer. However, these factors generally had uniform effects on space-use decisions rather than accounting for differences. The light factor in particular probably had less influence on room selection than on choice of location within a given room because almost all of the rooms in these houses had windows.

The household studies are listed by the name of the quiltmaker and are ordered from smallest to largest according to number of rooms (three to ten). All of the passages in quotation marks are from consultants. The interpretive paragraph that concludes each description is my own analysis, which consultants reviewed for accuracy.

Fannie Greenwade

Consultant Ethel Clemons (1917–2006) lived in a three-room house in southwestern Kentucky, near Cadiz (pronounced Kaydus), with her father, her father's parents, and her Aunt Rosetta (or Rosetter). Aunt Archie, who was married, lived nearby. Her grandparents, Buel and Fannie Greenwade, grew tobacco, corn, and sorghum on their twenty-six-acre farm. Buel also did stints on a riverboat. Fannie did white people's laundry at their homes. She and Ethel worked in the fields as well as around the house. Ethel's mother, Hattie, died when she was a baby. Her father, Johnnie, hunted and trapped raccoon, possum, rabbits, and fox, and sold "white mule" he got from a moonshiner. Most people in the area were African Americans in similar circumstances. Fannie and her daughters sewed "anywhere: bedroom, kitchen, out in the yard." Often they sewed on weekday evenings, after chores

were done. They put the frame under a tree or in the multipurpose living room where family members also slept (on straw ticks on the floor in summer), played music, had prayer meetings, and cooked over a fireplace. The women sewed clothes on a sewing machine but hand-sewed all quilts. "There didn't no machine come in contact with that. It was all finger-work." Fannie often sewed by the fireplace. "I'd run to get in that rockin' chair and Grandma would make me get out." She taught Ethel to make simple quilt blocks, such as Four-Patch (traditional, EPQP 1101 to 1103).⁴ She kept patches and blocks in a box or sack and laid them out on a bed when she had enough for a top. "That's the way they'd fix the size." Tops were made from old clothes, sewing scraps, and store-bought remnants. Wool overcoats were cut up for batting. Backings were flour-sacks. Female visitors admired quilts but "[m]en didn't care anything about whether something was beautiful or not as long as it was warm." All quilts were made for family beds. Ethel Clemons inherited a circa 1900 Ohio Star quilt with circa 1860s blocks (traditional, EPQP 1631), and four quilts from the 1930s and 1940s in published patterns of the time: Friendship Dahlia (EAPQ 37.915), Anchors Aweigh (EPQP 970), Flowing Ribbon or S-Block (EPQP 220.6, 990) and Giddap (EPQP 226.77).

With three generations sleeping in two rooms, one of which also was used to entertain visitors, the family had little privacy and was comfortable without it. Each person had a distinct identity and contributed to the common good. Ethel's Aunt Archie "could make a guitar talk." Fannie "kept a needle in her hand all the time," "specialized in aprons," and "had a green thumb." Johnnie, Ethel's father, "had an old greasy billfold full. He was a money-hoarder." Even the switch used to discipline Ethel had a name: Dr. Peachtree. The family cared for its space and made the most of it. "We kept our ground in the front yard cleaner than some people keep their house." With an assertive female presence in the house, men often gone, "like" neighbors (of similar status and circumstances), and a social and fashionable view of quilting, the women sewed when and where they pleased. "They did it because they really liked to do it. It was because they wanted to do it and enjoyed doing it, and if they didn't do it, what would they be doing out there on the farm?"

Ida Chambers

After his father died when he was nine, consultant Joe Dawson, born in 1927 or 1928, lived from 1937 to 1949 with his mother's parents, Jasper and Ida Chambers, and an older boy cousin. They lived in a three-room house in south central Indiana, a few miles from Bloomington. His great-great-grandfather from North Carolina or Virginia had paid ten cents an acre for the 141-acre farm in Brown and Monroe counties, now under Lake Monroe. It was far from town and had no electricity until 1942, but was within half a mile of several houses. Jasper and his grandsons raised corn, hay, and livestock, and sold crossties that they hewed by hand from trees on the farm. Ida, the daughter of a preacher who had eleven children, "delivered about everybody's babies in the country" in addition to doing housework and farm chores. She had just two years of schooling, but "it wasn't no use to try to outspell'er. We'd sit around sometimes of a night and have a spelling match, and she'd always come out victorious." No one else could spell, for instance,

"chrysanthemum." Before marrying, Ida had cooked and milked cows for a family for fifty cents a week. She hosted relatives for Sunday dinner and had a niece over to help with wallpapering, but she quilted alone although she had neighbors that quilted. She also played the treadle organ in the kitchen and sang hymns mostly when she was alone. Her widowed mother pieced quilt-tops when she stayed with some of her children, but she and Ida did not sew together. Ida pieced tops in winter, but did not quilt them until spring, when the drum stove was moved out of the living room and the quilt frame set up in its place. The frame came down when the stove was moved back inside in the fall, and thus Ida could quilt only during the season when she was the busiest with outdoor work, during the summer months. She sewed by hand in a rocker by the stove in the living room, which was also the master bedroom, and laid out fabrics on her and her husband's bed. Her machine was in her grandsons' bedroom, and she used their beds for workspace. "It was the logical-est place there was in the house for it. It was out of the way." She did not move the machine or the frame, once it was up. Her husband and grandsons valued quilts only for their warmth, and she sewed only when they were out of the house, quitting before they came in for supper. Visitors, however, admired her quilts, particularly her Double Wedding Ring, a fashionable and difficult Depression-era pattern (EPQP 302, 303). "Usually she'd make a new one, she'd put it on the bed in the living room where people could see it, 'oooh' and 'ahhh' and carry on, you know." The family bought only sugar, salt, kerosene, and vinegar at the store, but Ida ordered dresses and sewing supplies from the Sears catalogue. Most of her fabric was old clothes and feed-sacks, both "flowered-y" and plain. None of her quilts are known to survive.

As the lone female in the house, Ida was torn between the fashionable, Sears-catalogue view of quilts, shared by some of her visitors, and her husband's and grandsons' utilitarian values. "People back then, they didn't get their wants mixed up with their needs." For instance, the house had no porch because "that was a waste of money back then." Ida labored over quilts far beyond what was needed to produce a warm bedcover. "It was a lot of work and problems with it, getting this kind of fabric and that kind of fabric to blend in. . . . Little old pieces, about an inch square, about a million of them all sewed together." But she got more appreciation from her family for making fried chicken and "chopped" apple pies. In a "like" neighborhood but with a family view of quilting as a utilitarian endeavor, Ida deferred to her husband and grandsons, quilted alone, and minimized its spatial impact. "She just made quilts when quilts was getting bad and she needed to replace some." Having grown up in a large family, she found pleasure in being alone and in control. Through quilting, midwifery, spelling, and music, she demonstrated her worth by standards outside the home. Quilting also upheld values of hard work, thrift, and modesty within her home even as it used creative energy and won praise from visitors who valued fashion, sewing skills, and home beautification.

Annie Wade

Consultant Carrie Lee Bing (1921–2004) lived in the 1920s with her parents, Asbury and Annie Wade, and about a dozen siblings in a five-room house near Middlesboro in



Annie Wade, possibly in her thirties, Middlesboro, Kentucky, circa 1925. Courtesy of Carrie Lee Bing.

southeastern Kentucky. They lived on the farm of the Templetons, a white family, and were the only “colored” people around. “Didn’t nobody bother us.” Asburry tended livestock, mowed lawns, and put coal in furnaces for white people. When Carrie was small, “Mrs. Templeton” built the Wades a new house and furnished it, “even put rugs on the floor,” because Carrie’s father had nursed her husband during his dying days. Annie, who died in 1930, cleaned, cooked, and babysat for Mrs. Templeton, her two grown daughters, and other white people. The white women brought Annie washing and ironing, food at Christmas and boxes of secondhand clothes and shoes. Annie remade the clothes for herself and her children. “If she didn’t, we wouldn’t have had nothing.” Asburry was gone a lot: “a mean old man, drinking and cussing. . . . We would be sorry when we saw him coming home.” Most of the Wades’ visitors were white. When Mrs. Templeton and her

daughters came, they and Annie visited in the living room while the children, white and black, rode horses and played hide-and-seek together outside. Schools, however, were segregated. Carrie and perhaps her brother Jake were named after Mrs. Templeton's grandchildren. "I can see her now: tall, slender. She loved my mama. She just acted like she was one in the family." The living room had a record-player and grandfather clock. The boys' and girls' bedrooms accommodated twelve or more children with a mix of army cots and regular beds. "It didn't seem like there were that many in the house." Annie's sewing machine and a long work table were near a window in the boys' bedroom, which had more space than the girls' or master bedrooms. She did not have a frame, but tied her quilts and perhaps machine- or lap-quilted them. "She made little bows with strings." Annie sewed quilts and clothes, including Carrie's slips and underpants, by hand and by machine during afternoons and evenings after daily chores were done. "If she had something she wanted to finish, she'd get it done." Once she moved the machine into the kitchen to make curtains. "My mother used to take old clothes and cut'm up into little squares and triangles. Then she'd take four and sew them square blocks together and just keep sewin'm together till she had a whole quilt. She could make some beautiful quilts. . . . She'd sew the blocks together on the machine. That's how she sewed quilts so fast." Annie was strict. When visitors came, "She didn't ask us to move. All she had to do was look around." When she left a sewing project, she covered it with a tablecloth, and the children knew to leave it alone: "We didn't want to get killed." Once when they refused to tell her who had broken the musical clock that Mrs. Templeton had given them, Annie "just whipped the whole bunch and got the right one." She made quilt tops of old clothes and sewing scraps; bought batting; and bleached and boiled feed-sacks for backing or bought domestic, a utilitarian fabric. None of her quilts are known to survive.

Annie went to an African American church, had relatives in Middlesboro, and some evenings visited an ailing, elderly African American woman. But her main visitors were women of superior means and social status upon whom her family depended for its livelihood. She kept her self, her house, and her children presentable to them on a fraction of their budget at the same time that she was cleaning their houses and caring for their children. "She kept us clean and sent us to school. . . . People would say, 'Annie, how do you keep that house so clean?' She didn't go nowhere but she'd get up, comb her hair, wear those nice print dresses." Annie had to sew: "That's the way we got covers for the bed and clothes for the kids. We didn't buy no clothes." And she also loved to sew: "When she was sewing, she was in heaven." Mrs. Templeton did not quilt. She had "diamonds on her fingers, lived in a mansion." Her daughter's house was "like a big old hotel." With an assertive homemaker presence but an unsupportive husband, a nonspacious house, and "unlike" neighbors (white women of higher status and income level) who viewed her quilting as utilitarian, Annie sewed alone in a back bedroom and had no quilt frame. With little expense, she filled her family's needs for nice clothes and warm covers, and her own needs for privacy and creative expression.

Lydia Redding

Consultant Mary Cassie Terry, born in 1925, lived in the 1930s and early 1940s with her brother, her widowed mother, her uncle, and her maternal grandfather or stepfather on the outskirts of Mitchell in southern Indiana. Her grandfather Homer Clemons, who grew up in a free black community in Orange County, Indiana, died about 1939. Her mother remarried soon after and the stepfather moved in with them. The sixty-acre farm had a five-room house with three porches, fenced yard with rosebushes and limestone stepping stones, garage, barn, smokehouse, cellar, bath shed, outhouse, storage bin, woodshed, orchard, garden, and crops of corn, hay, and alfalfa. The stepfather trained horses and grew tobacco. Mary Cassie's Uncle Marion, at home, and three other uncles in town worked at Lehigh Portland Cement Co. Her mother, Lydia Redding, worked about four years at Bedford Hospital, waiting on patients and doing laundry, but quit when she remarried. Mitchell had two black churches, but neighborhoods, schools, and restaurants were integrated. The Clemonses were the only African Americans in their area but otherwise their circumstances were similar to those of their neighbors, with whom they butchered and quilted. "There was never any problem getting along with people."



Lydia Redding with her son Marion Thomas and niece Marian Louise at her sister's house in Mitchell, Indiana, circa 1940. Courtesy of Mary Cassie Terry.

Use of space in her grandfather's house changed during the time Mary Cassie lived there. She, her mother, and her brother started out sharing one front bedroom while her grandfather Homer and Uncle Marion had the other, and they all used the living room and kitchen. At that time, Lydia sewed in the bedroom she shared with the children and in the living room, and had her quilt frame in the bedroom. When the children got older, Mary Cassie's brother moved to her uncle's bedroom, her grandfather's bed was moved to the living room, and Lydia also moved her quilt frame to the living room while Lydia and Mary Cassie kept a front bedroom. However, Lydia did not use her father's bed for quilting but rather laid out fabric on beds in the room she shared with her daughter. When Lydia remarried, the back of the living room was made into a master bedroom, and she kept her machine there, near three windows. With help from the men, she often moved it into the living room, out on a porch, or under a maple tree. Occasionally she walked or caught a ride with her brothers to her sister's house in town, about two-and-a-half miles away, in order to use her sister's electric sewing machine. She usually pieced blocks by hand, then machine-sewed them into a top. "Mother would just sit in a chair someplace and cut her blocks out. . . . If it was cold weather or something, she would sit around pretty close to the stove" in the living room. She stored fabric in closets in both front bedrooms. She had her frame up most of the time and quilted about once a week with three or four other women, relatives and friends including some who were white, usually in warm weather after daily chores were done. Sometimes she served the quiltmakers coffee and a cobbler. The children played in the garage or fenced-in yard. The visiting quiltmakers sometimes helped with gardening, and Lydia gave them produce in exchange. "They just made one big happy family." Lydia used old clothes and sewing scraps for pattern blocks, but bought batting and the fabric for backing and sashing. All quilts were for family beds. The two front bedrooms both had front doors, but visitors generally used the one to the men's bedroom to get to the living room. The men did not sew but admired Lydia's quilts, saying things like, "Well, Liddy, which one's mine?" One of her brothers in town wove rugs, and her brother at home, Marion, helped raise her children. Mary Cassie inherited several quilts but gave most of them to her children and sold two. She has a circa 1930 Hummingbird, also called Kite, Periwinkle, or Snowball (EPQP 445.9, 446, 1246), that probably came from a newspaper or mail-order pattern.

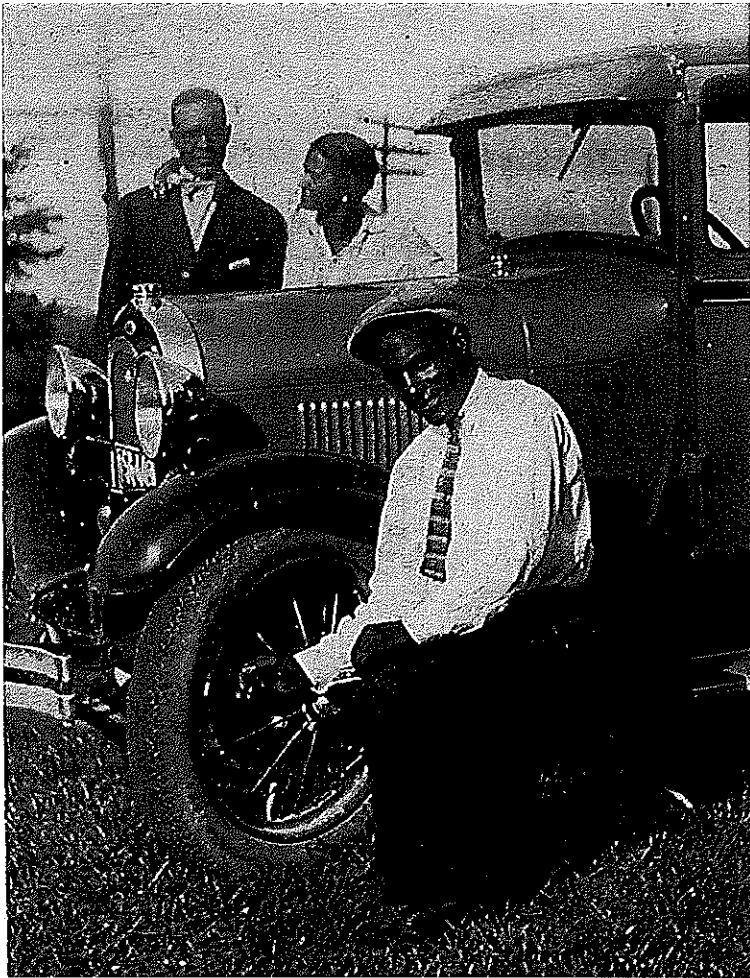
Mary Cassie can not imagine the lives of her mother and aunts without needlework: quilting, sewing clothes, making doilies and potholders, crocheting, embroidering, and knitting. "I don't think I ever had a bought dress." Sewing was close behind eating and sleeping in the Clemons-Redding household. "They didn't have anything else to do, and they needed the quilts, and didn't have money to buy blankets. They didn't work out. They had to do something to keep their minds going. . . . She kept herself busy so that she wouldn't be around there wringing her hands." Once Lydia had settled into her father's house, she focused her quilting activities in the room most used by family and guests. As an assertive homemaker with a supportive family, "like" neighbors (although they were white), and a fashionable, social view of quilting, she was not hindered by a nonspacious house, but sewed where she was comfortable, got help as needed, and stored supplies in other people's rooms.

Mable Drake

Consultant John Drake, born in 1920, lived with his parents, a sister, a brother, and a boy cousin in a five-room, spacious house at the southwest corner of Seventeenth and Madison streets in Bloomington: 1227 North Madison. It was a "mansion" compared to some around there. Most African Americans in Bloomington lived a mile or so away. "We being out on the north end away from the clientele, that's when you didn't get the visiting. . . . That was considered in the country: Twelve Twenty-Seven." John's grandfather was among the first six men hired at Showers Brothers furniture factory in 1868. His father, J. Phillip Drake, also worked for Showers, was a handyman at an Indiana University fraternity, and owned a Model T and later a Hudson. His mother, Mable Drake, cooked at an Indiana University sorority until her diabetes prevented it, and her family owned property in northwest Bloomington. Family members often were mentioned in the "Among Colored People" newspaper column, for example: "Mrs. Phillip Drake gave a party Thursday afternoon at her home on north Madison street in honor of her daughter, Lucille's birthday. The guests included . . ." (*Bloomington Daily Telephone*, July 25, 1931:5). Mable did most of her quilting after diabetes confined her to a wheelchair a few years before she died in 1936. She sewed alone, usually on weekdays while her husband and children were gone, using the sewing machine and table in the dining room, and putting the quilt frame in the master bedroom next to it. "She used to work on them for hours on end. . . . She was so meticulous. I couldn't understand how she would do work that would drive a person completely stone nuts." The children spent most of their time in the kitchen and their bedroom at the back of the house. Visitors were entertained in the parlor and dining room. Visits almost always were arranged rather than impromptu. The parlor was cleaned and dusted several times a week. "The only reason you would go in was to listen to the radio." Whenever his mother felt well enough, John set up the quilt frame before he went to school. He took it down or moved it to one side of the room when he got home. He also pushed his mother downtown in her wicker wheelchair to buy fabric. His father made the quilt frame, bought the treadle sewing machine, and later motorized it. Mable made fancy, color-coordinated appliqué quilts as well as pieced quilts from scraps. "Her endpoint was to make a quilt for each of us." She won a second prize of perhaps forty dollars in a quilt contest at Bloomington's J. C. Penney store, which was at 115 North College Avenue on the west side of the square from 1930 to 1980, and also showed her quilts to visitors (*Bloomington Daily Telephone* November 10, 1930:3; *Bloomington City Directory* 1980 and 1981). She used old clothes to make patches, some given to her by friends, and bought remnants and batting. John inherited two quilts, two tops, and three blocks, all from the early 1930s: the prize-winning China Aster (EPQP 3474); Double Wedding Ring (EPQP 302, 303); Birds in the Air (also called Flying Birds or Flock of Geese) and Hourglass variation (traditional, EPQP 3161; traditional, EPQP 2301, 1195a); Hummingbird, a design also used by Lydia Redding (EPQP 445.9, 446, 1246); and three Flower Garden blocks (traditional, EPQP 160j, k, l). All of these patterns probably came from the newspaper, a mail-order company, or white women for whom Mable worked.

As an assertive homemaker with a supportive family, and as a fashionable, solitary

quilter in an “unlike” neighborhood, Mable quilted in adult family rooms where and when she would not be interrupted. Her quilts were not casual, everyday quilts, and she gave them her full attention. The parlor was needed as a formal reception area because of the family’s high social status and the “unlike” neighborhood. As an African American housewife, Mable used quilts to participate in and achieve recognition from mainstream society. As a mother who had not long to live, she made them for her children as undying tokens of her love. Because of her illness, she needed extra help and her family went to great lengths to give it.



Mable Drake with her husband, J. Phillip, their son James “Jimmy,” about 15, and a Ford car owned by friends, Bloomington, Indiana, about 1927. Courtesy of John Drake.

Mary Brown

Consultant Ernestine Winters, born in 1935, lived in the late 1930s and 1940s near Vicksburg in southwestern Mississippi. She and a brother lived with their grandmother about ten miles from their parents, Richard and Mary Brown, and four younger children. Richard had been a sharecropper, but was able to buy twenty acres and a house that he eventually expanded to six rooms after he hired on at Annison-Truly Lumber Company about the time Ernestine was born. He raised corn, soybeans, cows, hogs, and chickens. Mary did some cooking and cleaning for white people. Their neighbors were African Americans in similar circumstances. White people came to the house only on business, such as to deliver groceries. Two front doors opened off a porch into the living room and master bedroom. "The living room was quite busy, people coming in and out. . . . The bedroom was off limits. . . . You could set something up and it would be free from traffic." Mary sewed alone or with six or seven African American relatives and neighbors in the front four rooms of the house: the living room, dining room, and two bedrooms. The women often made their own tops, then got together to quilt them. "We're gonna make one for Mary today, and we'll make one tomorrow for Sally." The frame was set up in the master bedroom, which had three windows, or outdoors. The sewing machine was in the girls' bedroom, behind the master bedroom, between a stove and a wall with a window. Mary and her quiltmaker friends used the living room, dining room, and porch to cut patches and sew blocks by hand. They laid out patches and blocks on beds, the dining room table, and the living room sofa. Mary sat on the sofa to sew blocks, and lined up patches sorted by shape and color next to her. "They'd get it organized before they'd start sewing." Mary stored fabric in a big basket, the girls' bedroom closet, and a cedar chest in the master bedroom. She sewed on weekday afternoons and evenings, after finishing chores. "It was something that she enjoyed. You might call it a hobby." The quilt group met most often in winter, when there was less outdoor work. Men chopped wood or hunted while the women quilted. At Ernestine's grandmother's house, where she spent part of her childhood, the quilt frame was hung by ropes from pulleys in the ceiling so that unfinished quilts could be lifted out of the way. "They were very clever to make full use of their space." Sewing scraps, old clothes, and store-bought remnants went into Mary's quilts. She bought batting or used an old sheet or flannel blanket in place of it. She boiled and bleached chicken-feed sacks for backing. Although guests were entertained in the living room and dining room, the family also used those rooms informally. Mary took female visitors to the bedrooms to look at quilts. "That's how they exchanged ideas: 'Oh I like that pattern. I don't have one like that.'" Not long before she died, in 2004, she and Ernestine recorded names of several patterns in her repertoire. Among the appliqué patterns, often considered fancier than pieced patterns, were: ABC Block (possibly EA 75.51), Butterfly (EA 51.12 to 51.28), and Dutch Girl (EA 47.12 to 47.17). Among the pieced patterns were: Nine-Patch (traditional, EPQP 1601), Gentleman's Bowtie (EPQP 2533, 1376), Texas Cockaburra (a five-pointed star, possibly EPQP 3675 to 3682), King's Crown (probably EPQP 2039), and Road to California (possibly EPQP 1687 or 1963). Mary pieced most of her family's quilts, but a few were gifts. A friend gave her a Bowtie quilt

top as a wedding present in 1934. Ernestine has four quilts from her mother: a circa 1930 Dresden Plate variation (EPQP 3471a), and from the 1940s a Broken Dishes (EPQP 1193a), strip Framed Center (traditional, unlisted), and string LeMoyne Star (traditional, EPQP 1063, 3735).

As a fashionable, social quiltmaker, and as an assertive homemaker with a supportive family in a spacious house and a "like" neighborhood, Mary located sewing and quilt-group activities in the more refined areas of the house rather than in the kitchen and boys' bedroom. Since the living and dining rooms were used as everyday living space as well as for guests, Mary used the more sheltered master and girls' bedrooms for the most space- and time-consuming parts of quiltmaking. She bestowed special insider-guest status on quilt group members, allowing them to use the more private front door to the master bedroom as well as the more public one to the living room. Like the piano in the living room purchased when Ernestine was ten, quiltmaking gave the house an air of refinement. It enhanced Mary's stature as a homemaker, contributed to a sense of community in the neighborhood, and affirmed the Brown family's status within it.

Viola Tremble

Consultant Cathy Rogers lived in the 1930s with her parents, two sisters, and a little brother (who died at age seven) in a second-floor flat in southeastern Chicago near Gary. They were the only African Americans in a "little United Nations" of Poles, Chinese, Jews, Mexicans, and Italians. Cathy's father, Reverend Eugene Tremble, was assistant pastor at an African American church. The house had six large rooms with high ceilings, and bay windows in the parlor. The sewing machine and boxes of fabric were kept in the master bedroom, next to the kitchen, but her mother, Viola, did most of her sewing in the kitchen. "This kitchen was probably bigger than some people's apartments." Viola's plants were there, and the children did their homework at the kitchen table. Viola hosted ten or twelve quiltmakers from her church on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Her husband set the frame up in the kitchen on Tuesday and it often stayed up through Thursday. The quiltmakers came with young children in the morning and sewed through the afternoon. They sat around the frame, cut patches from old clothes, and sewed at the machine, all in the kitchen. "They would talk about family gatherings they had been at. . . . They would just laugh and chuckle. It was very social." Most, like Viola, came from the rural South and did not work outside the home. In her friendly kitchen they tried to make sense of their new environment. "I think they were better people for that time spent together, more able to adapt to life's situations, more able to acquire skills." On their quilts they used traditional Southern techniques such as triple sashing and string piecing, along with patterns they got from Chicago newspapers, such as Midget Necktie (EPQP 1899, 1900). "They'd bring them in and talk about them, whether it was too hard to do." They used old clothes but also bought fabric. Inspecting a well-worn dress she had just washed, Viola would determine, "We can get a good piece out of this." Old household linens often served as batting. The Trembles spent most of their time in the kitchen and bedrooms. The dining room and parlor were for formal visits. Viola served dinner to the quilt group in the dining room. All

of her quilts were used on family beds, but not just to save money on blankets. "It was sort of higher status to have quilts. When visitors would come, it was quite the thing to take them into various rooms, and they would talk about the quilts on the bed." Cathy has a Six-Pointed Star silk-and-rayon show quilt made in the early 1900s by her mother's mother, Eliza Wilcoxson (traditional, EPQP 142d, e, f variation); and Flower Garden (traditional, EPQP 160k), String Square (EPQP 1303, 2326, 2327 variation), and Midget Necktie quilts made around 1950 by her mother and the quilt group.⁵

In an "unlike" neighborhood, Viola hosted "like" quiltmakers gathered from across the larger urban area who shared and affirmed her social, fashionable view of quilting. She had Polish and Chinese friends, but they were not part of the quilt group. Like Mary Brown, Viola bestowed special, insider-guest status on her quiltmaker friends. She welcomed them into the kitchen like family, but served them a formal dinner in the dining room like honored guests. She did not sew in the parlor, which was needed for formal visits given the unlike neighborhood and her husband's position in the church. As an assertive homemaker with a supportive family and a spacious house, Viola focused her quilting activities not in an adult area, but in the room most used by children as well as their parents. Factors in her choice were the special "like"-ness of the quiltmakers in contrast to the unlike neighborhood, the sense that hosting the quilt group supported her husband's pastoral duties, and the fact that the kitchen was very large and served as a living room.



Viola Tremble, possibly in her twenties, Chicago, circa 1935. Courtesy of Cathy Rogers.

Mary Goering

Consultant Kathryn News, born in 1934, lived until 1942 in a foursquare, spacious house built by her father about 1929 on a 200-acre farm in south central Kansas, near Moundridge. Her parents, born of Swiss-Russian Mennonite immigrants, hired a local contractor to build the house, but her father did much of the interior finish work. Kathryn lived there with her parents, Henry and Mary Goering; two brothers; a teenage sister; and, in summers only, a married sister and her son. The house had a basement; a first floor with four rooms plus a plant room/foyer and telephone niche; and a second floor with five bedrooms. The house was upscale in that it had two bathrooms, central heat, a laundry chute, and extensive oak cabinetry. Henry was a farmer and carpenter. Mary did what was often considered to be men's work, such as shocking, pitching hay, and cleaning the chicken coop, as well as the usual farmwife chores of gardening, canning, feeding chickens, and making soap and horseradish. Family members spent most of their time in the kitchen and dining room, the only rooms heated in winter. Mary sewed only in the dining room, mainly in winter when she had less outdoor work. "She'd get up early in the morning to do the chores and get the laundry out, and then it was her treat to be able to go sit down and work quietly at the sewing machine for a while." The kitchen was too busy and prone to food-stains, the parlor too neat, and the master bedroom too small. Also, the parlor and master bedroom were not heated in winter, and the dining room had the best light, a major consideration because of Mary's eye problems. The family ate in the dining room only occasionally. Henry's desk was there, and the family played games there in the evening. Mary laid out fabric and set boxes of patches on the table, the floor, and a long window-seat. When she was ready to assemble a quilt top, she pushed the table to the wall and moved the sewing machine next to it, facing three south windows. When she was ready to quilt a top, she put the sewing machine back against the wall and set the frame up in front of the windows. She would push the frame to the side of the room when work on a quilt was interrupted, rolling the quilt up on the boards and standing them in a corner. Mary stored fabric in her bedroom and in dining room cabinets. She often showed just-finished quilts to visitors, and family members touched them only with clean hands. "Everybody loved the quilts and were proud of it." Female relatives and friends from neighboring farms dropped by for informal visits and often quilted for awhile. Like the Goerings, many belonged to nearby Eden Mennonite Church and attended a weekly sewing circle there. Mary's two older daughters, Ada and Martha, sometimes helped sew. Henry sized pattern templates, read aloud while Mary sewed, and built two cedar chests for her quilts. Mary made everyday pieced quilts for family beds as well as fancy ones for important family occasions. The fancy ones often were appliquéd or wholecloth (a quilt genre in which the top is one large piece or a few large pieces of fabric sewed together and stitched with decorative quilting designs). "We often had input, what colors did we want and what pattern." With the church group, Mary made scrap quilts for refugees and Indian reservations, and fancier ones for church fund-raisers. She used old clothes, sewing scraps, and feed-sacks, and bought some fabric and batting. "She would just get all excited when somebody brought her a couple of boxes. . . . If someone would give her a lot of material,

she would make a quilt for them.” Her patterns, acquired from friends and possibly from *Capper’s Weekly* farm magazine, included Bowtie (EPQP 2533), Flower Garden (traditional, EPQP 160j, k, l), Sunbonnet Sue or Dutch Girl (EA 47.12 to 47.14), Broken Star (EPQP 4007.5), Log Cabin (traditional, EPQP 2573 to 2576), Trip Around the World (traditional, EPQP 2286b), Irish Chain (traditional, EPQP 1606a), Churn Dash, also called Hole in the Barn Door, Monkey Wrench or Double Wrench (EPQP 1646a), Nine-Patch (traditional, EPQP 1601a), Drunkard’s Path (traditional, EPQP 1461a), Aster, also called Sunflower, Dresden Plate or Friendship Ring (EPQP 3488 or EA 27.12-27.15), and Boston Commons (EPQP 3978, 3979). Kathryn has several, including a 1951 turquoise-and-yellow sateen wholecloth that was her high school graduation present.



Mary Gocring, age 44, with her husband, Henry, on their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, with children Kathryn and Ralph (front) and Oswald “Ozzie,” Ada, Martha, and Ellis (back), Moundridge, Kansas, 1936. Courtesy of Kathryn News.

Mary made quilts to feel that she was doing something useful and to beautify her home; to affirm bonds with family, neighbors, and church; and to feel that she was doing some good in the world beyond her home. She sewed in the room most associated with mental activity and the world outside the farm, where the radio reported stock prices, family members played dominos and chess, and her husband did crosswords, paid bills, studied Sunday school books, wrote poems, and read newspapers. As an assertive homemaker with a supportive family and a spacious house in a like community, with a fashionable, social view of quilting, she focused sewing activities in a room that was more sheltered from daily humdrum activity than was the kitchen, but that invited family interaction more than did the parlor or the master bedroom. Like Mary Brown and Viola Tremble, she gave quiltmaker visitors special insider-guest status by hosting them in the second most refined room in the house, where she sewed on the machine but dignified its utility with a doily when not using it.

Analysis

The variety of spatial arrangements described above reflects each quiltmaker's response to particular conditions. These fall into three categories: (1) physical, comprising the condition of house spaciousness as well as lighting and temperature issues; (2) psychological, including conditions of homemaker assertiveness and her preference for social or solitary quilting; and (3) social, including conditions of family supportiveness, a fancy or utilitarian view of quilting, and relations with neighbors.

Each spatial configuration also represents a homemaker's use of quilting as part of the process of constructing a domestic space that maximizes her experience of well-being, or pleasantness. In Gans's terminology, she used quilting as part of the project of turning a "potential" environment into an "effective" one. Gans's approach to spatial construction is agency- and use-oriented like Glassie's, but does not consider gender roles. In a context of urban planning, he conceives of a bounded space as neutral until purposeful human activities give it meaning. As noted above, a human-made physical environment is "potential" if unused, but becomes "effective" when people attach meanings to it through use (Gans 1968:5-6).

To evaluate how quilting contributed to creation of an effective environment in households studied here, I draw from Pennartz's study (1999) of how people experience "pleasantness" in the home. He discerned five pleasantness "themes" in surveys of public housing residents in the Netherlands. Two emphasize camaraderie: when people are "communicating with each other," and when they are "accessible to each other" even if not actively communicating. One involves relaxation: "being relaxed after having finished work;" and two involve the personal fulfillment that comes from performing an activity that is perceived as enjoyable rather than as work: "being able to do what one wants to do," and "being occupied" as opposed to bored (Pennartz 1999:106). These factors in the experience of a pleasant environment are simplified here under the headings of camaraderie, relaxation, and personal fulfillment. Quiltmakers' space-use decisions can be understood in terms of their efforts to produce one or more of these factors. Women

emphasized different factors depending on their circumstances, as discussed below.

Pleasantness Factors

Camaraderie. Women who emphasized “camaraderie” in creation of a pleasant domestic interior, as indicated by their decision to center quilting activities in common-use family rooms, were Fannie Greenwade, Viola Tremble, Mary Goering, and Lydia Redding (after she moved her frame from her bedroom to the living room). In each case, their room choices correlate with homemaker assertiveness, family supportiveness, and social, fashionable views of quilting. These room choices do not stem just from lack of alternative space, as three of the four had spacious houses where they could have had more privacy by choosing, for instance, the master bedroom (although bedrooms may have been colder in winter since stoves often were in common family areas). The choice of common-use areas did have some correlation with the presence of like neighbors, as three of the four had like neighbors. This suggests that a woman who felt comfortable with her neighbors would be more likely to work on quilts in open areas of the house than would a woman with unlike neighbors. The exception was Viola Tremble, who chose a common-use room (the kitchen) although she lived in an unlike neighborhood. However, in her case, the common-use area was more sheltered from the unlike neighborhood than was the dining room, since the front door opened into the dining room. Also, consultant Cathy Rogers says that her mother had another reason for putting the quilt frame in the kitchen: she needed the dining room to serve a formal dinner to her quilt-group guests.

Mary Brown is the exceptional case of a quilter who emphasized camaraderie but centered quilting in private rather than common-use areas. A possible explanation is that she practiced an exclusive gendered form of camaraderie. Her choice of the master bedroom and the girls’ bedroom next to it promoted female camaraderie by drawing quilter friends into a relatively private space, and also sheltered quilts in their final stage of construction (on the frame) from traffic that ran from the front door of the living room/parlor through the dining room to the kitchen. This gendered arrangement seemed acceptable to the men, who hunted and chopped wood while the women sewed.

Personal fulfillment. This quality of household pleasantness was emphasized by the three women who centered quilting in relatively private and peripheral rooms: Ida Chambers, Annie Wade, and Mable Drake. Their circumstances suggest that this choice in some cases was a way of coping with certain constraints. Ida’s practice of putting her frame in the combination living room/master bedroom for only part of the year, when the woodstove was removed, reflects her nonspacious house and her male family members’ view of quilting as utilitarian, a “need” rather than a “want.” Even with these constraints, however, she achieved a degree of personal fulfillment by making fashionable, challenging patterns such as Double Wedding Ring and by displaying newly finished quilts on the bed in the room where visitors entered the house. Her grandson’s observation that she never quilted with relatives or neighbors, even though they were “like” (of similar status and lifestyle) and also made quilts, suggests that solitary quilting was not just imposed on Ida Chambers but was her preference.

In centering quilting activity in a children's bedroom at the back of the house, and in having no quilt frame, Annie Wade contended with constraints of an unsupportive husband, unlike neighbors who saw quilting as utilitarian, and a nonspacious house (five rooms, no dining room). But her daughter's comment that she "was in heaven" when she was sewing indicates that quilting was a source of personal fulfillment. Given her circumstances, pleasure and relaxation demanded privacy.

Mable Drake's practice of quilting also was geared toward personal fulfillment rather than camaraderie, as evidenced by her concern with perfection and by her having entered a quilt in a contest. This was expressed by her preference for sewing alone, without friends and when other family members were out of the house, and also through her centering of quilting in areas of the house not frequented by children: the master bedroom and adjacent dining room. Her choice of rooms also reflects constraints of the perceived need for a pristine parlor, related to the family's high status and unlike neighbors. Unlike Ida Chambers and Annie Wade, however, Mable Drake had a strongly supportive family. An unusual aspect of the personal fulfillment factor in her case was her use of quilting to create a legacy due to her serious illness.

Relaxation. Nearly all of the homemakers, with Mable Drake perhaps the only exception, used quilting as a form of Pennartz's relaxation-after-work theme. Consultants' comments indicate that it was often a welcome respite from chores. Ernestine Winters said of Mary Brown, "It was something that she enjoyed. You might call it a hobby." Carrie Lee Bing said of Annie Wade, "When she was sewing, she was in heaven." Cathy Rogers said of Viola Tremble's quilt group, "They would just laugh and chuckle. It was very social." Kathryn News said of Mary Goering, "She'd get up early in the morning to do the chores and get the laundry out, and then it was her treat to be able to go sit down and work quietly at the sewing machine for a while." Ethel Clemons said that Fannie Greenwade and her daughters quilted "because they wanted to do it and enjoyed doing it, and if they didn't do it, what would they be doing out there on the farm?" According to their children and grandchildren, these women looked on quilting as a pleasure, not just an obligation.

Although few scholars have considered the role of household space in quilting, two studies that give some attention to the issue (but in relatively contemporary households) find that quilting space arrangements sometimes express household frictions as well as pleasantness. In one study, based on fieldwork with black and white quilters in northern Louisiana, Roach found that quilting "figures prominently in women's lives by taking up important space in their crowded homes as well as crowded schedules." Most families seemed comfortable with these space demands (1986:122). For instance, many women sewed while watching television with their families, thus achieving camaraderie (1986:169). But in one case, a woman emphasized personal fulfillment apparently because her husband's dislike of her quilting excluded the possibility of camaraderie. She put her frame in a spare bedroom rather than the living room to avoid bothering her husband (1986:170).

As may have been the case in this latter household, space- and time-taking qualities of quilting in contemporary households studied by Stalp (2006) often expressed or

contributed to tensions rather than pleasantness. Citing one case of a husband who called his wife's fabric collection "a space-hogging stockpile," she says: "American women's serious leisure quilting experiences demonstrate women's resistance to pre-existing familial constraints, such as adequate time and space in the home for leisure" (2006:124, 105). This shift in perspective probably stems from Stalp having interviewed quiltmakers in the period after the 1970s rise of the art quilt and women's liberation movements. It aligns with the representation of quilting in the lives of her subjects, who were mostly middle and upper class, as "a serious leisure activity" that gratifies personal needs of the maker rather than as a project that involves and benefits the whole family. Since "quilts are no longer necessary household goods," Stalp says, "[q]uiling is more like any other modern leisure activity that takes time, attention, money, and space away from the family routine and toward one's individual routine" (2006:105). In her discussion, a major issue is whether women have household space that is permanently dedicated to quilting. This notion of a studio supports the "artist" representation of quiltmaker, which in the Depression-era households studied here was subsumed into the homemaker role. Even in this scenario that emphasizes personal fulfillment in a form that threatens to exclude camaraderie, Stalp recognizes the temporal and spatial flexibility of the quilting process as qualities that her subjects use to advantage in integrating quilting with family demands. For instance, they sew while attending their children's ballgames or while watching television with their families (2006:120–22).

Ethnicity

Ethnicity did not obviously influence space-use decisions. In fact, the two white homemakers resembled certain black homemakers more than each other in their quilting practices. Mary Goering (white) and Viola Tremble (black) both quilted with church friends in a common-use area (dining room or kitchen) and had supportive families. Ida Chambers (white) and Annie Wade (black) both had unsupportive (or uninterested) husbands and significant space limitations, and chose to sew alone. The presence of different-race neighbors in itself did not obviously influence space use. The four quiltmakers in that situation, all of them African American, each sewed in different parts of the house. What was reflected in space use, rather than ethnicity in itself, was whether the quiltmaker was at ease with her neighbors and had a similar lifestyle.

Conclusion

I argue here that an important but little recognized factor in the enduring popularity of quilting has been women's ability to use it to create a pleasant home environment and to bolster their status as homemakers. Key to its effectiveness for these purposes is its free-floating quality. For the Depression-era women discussed here, the allocation of substantial household space for quilting was an expression of their authority in the domestic realm. Other family members not only accepted their judgment on this issue that affected the whole household, but in many cases offered support and cooperation. Quilting was

a form of housewifely muscle-flexing, by which homemakers exercised their rights as well as met their responsibilities.

For those on farms (Greenwade, Chambers, Redding, Goering), where the division of labor was often less gendered than in urban areas, and for those who worked outside of the home (Greenwade, Wade, Redding, Drake, Brown), quilting was a means both of claiming a genteel feminine identity and of meeting Protestant-ethic expectations of productivity. For the eight women studied here, all of whom were marginalized to some extent by rural, immigrant, and/or African American status, quilting was a means of participation in middle-class femininity. Often apparent in comments from consultants is a separate-spheres consciousness that assumes women are in charge of the home interior and childcare while men are the primary breadwinners and house repairers.

Each sphere had its own skills and values, as expressed by Ernestine Winters' observation that the men chopped wood and hunted while the women worked on quilts, and in Ethel Clemons' assertion (echoed by Joe Dawson) that "[m]en didn't care anything about whether something was beautiful or not as long as it was warm." The mystified reaction of the two male consultants to the repetitive detail work of quilting also expresses the divide. John Drake said of his mother, "She was so meticulous. I couldn't understand how she would do work that would drive a person completely stone nuts." Likewise, Joe Dawson said of his grandmother's quilting, "It was a lot of work and problems with it, getting this kind of fabric and that kind of fabric to blend in. . . . Little old pieces, about an inch square, about a million of them all sewed together." Given that the former was black and the latter white, the similarity of their attitudes shows how quilting could tend to emphasize gender-based solidarity over race-related social boundaries. Lydia Redding's integrated quilt group also testifies to this capacity as do the gifts of material and patterns that Mable Drake received from her white employers.

The complementary perspective on gender roles expressed by consultants leads to the following generalizations:

- Women who chose to become quilters often were those who took pride in domesticity generally, reflecting the early 1900s trend toward professionalization of housekeeping (Robertson 1997:84–85). Thus, Fannie Greenwade "specialized in [sewing] aprons" and kept her "front yard cleaner than some people keep their house." Ida Chambers put up wall paper and was known for her apple pie. Annie Wade made kitchen curtains, "wore those nice print dresses," and raised children to be obedient, well dressed, and educated. Mable Drake's parlor was dusted several times a week. Mary Goering had ferns in the foyer and a doily on the sewing machine. Homemaker, for these women, was a title of distinction.
- Women who were quilters often engaged in additional agency-enhancing activities. Ethel Clemons' Aunt Archie played guitar. Ida Chambers delivered babies and played organ. Viola Tremble hosted formal dinners. Several women gardened and did "men's" work in the fields.
- Women who made quilts created a distinctly female culture through participation in quilt groups, exchange of patterns and gift quilts, cross-generational teaching of quilting, and gender separation related to quilting activities.

In spite of quilters' assertive use of family space, their children and grandchildren expressed not resentment but affection and pride in their accomplishments. Spotlighting

their agency, ingenuity, and high standards, Ethel Clemons said that her grandmother and aunts sewed “anywhere” in the house, sized quilts by laying blocks out on beds, and sewed quilts only by hand: “There didn’t no machine come in contact with that. It was all finger-work.” Carrie Lee Bing bragged that her mother “could make some beautiful quilts,” praised her competence in stating that “[i]f she had something she wanted to finish, she’d get it done,” and testified to her authority in explaining that the children left her work alone because “we didn’t want to get killed.” Emphasizing ingenuity, Ernestine Winters said of her grandmother’s use of a ceiling-mounted quilt frame (although men probably built it): “They were very clever to make full use of their space.” Highlighting managerial skills, she said of her mother and other quiltmakers, “They’d get it organized before they’d start sewing.” Showing the exclusiveness and solidarity of her mother’s quilt group, Cathy Rogers said: “It was sort of higher status to have quilts. When visitors would come, it was quite the thing to take them into various rooms, and they would talk about the quilts on the bed.” Deference was evident in Kathryn News’s comment that family members touched quilts-in-progress only with clean hands.

Consultants also showed their pride and affection by their willingness to talk to me at length, by their smiles and laughs, and by visual and oral memories that were potent after fifty, sixty, or seventy years. Carrie Lee Bing imitated the ticking sound of the sewing machine and described how her mother tied the quilt layers together: “She made little bows with strings.” Kathryn News explained how her mother rearranged the table, sewing machine, and quilt frame at each stage. Cathy Rogers imitated her mother holding up a just-laundered piece of worn clothing and saying, “We can get a good piece out of this.” Ernestine Winters mimicked the singsong rhythm of quilt group members saying to each other, “We’re gonna make one for Mary today, and we’ll make one tomorrow for Sally.” Possible explanations for these powerful positive associations with quilting are that:

- Children saw quilts as evidence of a mother’s love and commitment to her family;
- Quiltmakers were not overbearing but respected other family members’ space needs. For instance, Lydia Redding did not lay material on her father’s bed even though it was in the room where she often sewed, and women typically rolled quilts up on the boards of the frame and set them aside to make room for other activities;
- As a complex, sequential, visual, and sedate process with lasting results, quilting generated a sense of order and well-being, indicating that the family unit was running smoothly;
- In exercising authority and expecting concessions from other family members, quiltmakers ensured gender reciprocity that balanced patriarchal power. A woman in charge of such a complex endeavor enhanced the value of domestic space and elevated her status above that of mere support mechanism, complementing the father’s role of primary breadwinner and perhaps in some cases challenging him to meet her high standard of gender role performance. Whether there was camaraderie or competition between women and men in a household, quilting was a way for a woman to create family solidarity even as she demanded respect for herself.

Theoretical Framework

Using the example of a city park, Gans posits designers and users as potentially disconnected consciousnesses. “The planner’s perspective is that of a surveyor or

spectator. He sees an environment as it appears on the map or the blueprint. . . . But unless the environment is planned for the neighborhood in which he lives, he sees it only fleetingly and does not use it" (Gans 1968:7). Glassie, on the other hand, in a vernacular architecture context where designers, builders, and inhabitants are of the same community, posits contrasting and complementary relations between exterior and interior home builders. In many cultures, he says, "The house is often austere without and ornamented within, at once hard and soft, plain and fancy, restrained and expressive. The house presents a hard, clean, undecorated exterior to see and a cozy, ornamented interior to use" (2000:64, 66). Quiltmaking houses discussed here represent a variety of impersonal and personal builder-inhabitant relations, including: rural Southern family in Northern city apartment, rural Southern black family in home built for them by their white employers, and families in houses built by family members. Yet all of the consultants expressed pride in their childhood homes. Given this phenomenon, I propose the following theoretical framework to account for a family's creative capacity to build pleasantness into a home environment regardless of their relation to the exterior builder-designer.

This framework posits a three-part domestic realm composed of building structure, home interior, and grounds including yard, garden, and any outbuildings. Whereas the physical building remains basically fixed once it is built except for interludes of remodeling, the home interior and grounds are relatively plastic. Through ongoing "construction" of the malleable interior and grounds, using objects and activities, inhabitants maximize the pleasantness capacity of the relatively intractable building form. This capacity may vary according to what inhabitants can afford, to family and neighborhood social relations, and to how well the vision of the exterior designer-builder aligns with the lifestyle of the inhabitants. I argue that free-floating, space-intensive, multistage, socially interactive practices such as quiltmaking are a particularly effective means of facilitating pleasantness since inhabitants can distribute the associated objects and activities as needed to mesh physical capacities of the building with psychological and social needs. By thus improvising, inhabitants cast more or less hospitable buildings as components of creative homemaking.

Notes

I am grateful to my consultants and several of their family members who made this work a great pleasure: Carrie Lee Bing, Ethel Clemons, Joe Dawson, John Drake, Kathryn News, Cathy Rogers, Mary Cassie Terry, and Ernestine Winters; to Henry Glassie for teaching the American Home class that inspired it; and to Jason Baird Jackson, Karen Duffy, and an anonymous reviewer for productive comments. I also thank the Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin and quiltmaker Linda Kelsey for access to quilt history resources.

1. For African American women, quiltmaking was a color-blind skill referencing mainstream fashion and respectability to which they had access even in the Jim Crow era, when reports of "Negro" lynching were common (for example, see *Bloomington Daily Telephone* August 8, 1930:1; *Evening World* June 9, 1934:7).

For the four black women in this study who worked for white families (Mary Brown, Mable Drake, Fannie Greenwade, Annie Wade), the role of “quiltmaker” cast them not just as accessories to another woman’s refined domesticity but as model homemakers in their own right. The dilemma of such women is addressed by Noliwe M. Rooks in her critique of a late-1800s African American women’s magazine:

Ringwood’s Journal, for example, offered young working-class women and girls the vision of soul-deadening domestic work as the primary possibility for a modern relationship to domesticity. The connection between domesticity and domestic work was buttressed by a logic that privileged ‘home’ as the most desirable place for a woman; it mattered little if that home was her own, or that of her white employer. (Rooks 2004:90)

In general, African American women’s magazines published around 1900 “suggested that there was little difference between domestic work for pay and that performed within the confines of marriage and motherhood” (Rooks 2004:105–106). The potent symbolism of domesticity for African Americans in the postbellum period was expressed by Ella Wheeler Wilcox in *Colored American Magazine*, as follows: “The home . . . marks the progress of any race from the crude to the civilized state” (Wilcox 1905:387). Quiltmaking marked an African American household as civilized, one of those that kept the nation strong and “the family hearth flame bright” (Webster [1915]1990:xxii). By the 1920s, black women’s magazines, like mainstream magazines, focused on consumerism as an expression of domesticity (Rooks 2004:108). The presence of pianos, radios, and mail-order catalogues indicates that both black and white households studied here participated in that trend.

2. Although heterogeneous in many respects, the households discussed in this study had common cultural orientations that justify this group treatment. All eight of them: (1) had the common experience of serving as quiltmaking sites in the United States during a portion of the 1920s to 1940s; (2) were exposed to common cultural norms regarding quiltmaking and gender roles; and (3) made space-use decisions attributable to the interaction of the same five variables (listed in “Consultants” section). Logistically, the quiltmakers were linked for purposes of this study through the happenstance that they all had descendants in Bloomington or Bedford, Indiana, at the time of my fieldwork.

3. In a folkloristic essay on “Oral History,” Trevor Lummis recognizes that accounts recorded with this fieldwork method are subject to “omission, suppression, and selectivity that may favor a recall of memories of pleasant rather than unpleasant aspects of life” (1992:96). Also relevant to the current study is the problem of the “child’s-eye view,” meaning that consultants were possibly “unaware of the domestic worries, conflicts, and stresses that must have been experienced by adults of the period” (1992:96). Given these caveats, I argue that the oral histories used here offer reasonably accurate accounts of consultant households in that they are anchored in personal facts and details; are supported by photographs, newspaper articles, and datable quilts (based on fabrics and styles); and in a few cases are corroborated by other family members. Credibility is further enhanced by the fact that consultants do not present uniformly positive accounts of family life but occasionally reveal discord and stress. In a few cases contradictions have emerged that suggest a tendency to idealize the homemaker or family life, but these do not undermine the coherence of the narrative. For instance, whereas one consultant said the homemaker had hand-sewed all her quilts, there is some machine-sewing on quilts that she inherited (but they also date to a later period than the period she described); whereas one consultant said whites and blacks got along well locally, a cousin remembers Ku Klux Klan activity (but possibly from an earlier period); and whereas one consultant said all family members had been proud of the homemaker’s quiltmaking, one of her brothers said that as a boy he had paid little attention to it.

I agree with Lummis that “oral communication . . . is richer in communicative power” than a transcription can be, and regret that I did not audio-record the oral histories used here. However, I argue that my written notes substantially represent the words of my consultants, with a combination of paraphrase and exact quotation, in that they are underwritten by eight years of journalistic experience and, in the case of the household case studies above, were reviewed by consultants.

4. Quilt pattern names are listed here with the number assigned to them in the *Encyclopedia of Appliqué* (Brackman 1993a), designated as “EA,” or in the *Encyclopedia of Pieced Quilt Patterns* (Brackman 1993b), designated as “EPQP.” In many cases, consultants did not know pattern names. The word “traditional” in front

of a pattern citation indicates that the pattern predates the 1880s, when mass publication of patterns began to become widespread (Brackman 1993b:5). The word "unlisted" after a pattern name means that it is not in these encyclopedias.

5. Rayon was invented in 1885 and produced commercially starting about 1890. Acetate, a form of rayon that also was used in quilts, was produced commercially starting in 1919 (Brackman 1989:52–53).

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