



Quilting in Loudoun: Historical and Modern Perspectives

By Priscilla B. Godfrey

In the late 17th and early 18th centuries, quilting was brought to North America by English and Dutch settlers as a practical and artistic community craft. In the 1730s, quilting came to Loudoun with Quakers who moved from Bucks County, PA, to Waterford. The Quakers highly valued women's sewing skills.

At the time, Quaker resident John Jay Janney said, "One of the common labors of women was quilting. They did not buy spreads at the store, but quilted them at home. They all had patchwork covers made of bits of calico cut into pieces sewed together and spread over a cotton sheet with raw cotton between them, then quilted in squares and sometimes intricate figures."

As time passed, quilt-making in Loudoun mirrored the development of the craft elsewhere in North America. Colonial quilts were decorative, displaying the needlework skills of the maker. This feature continued in the 19th century. For example, wealthy women in Baltimore who could afford chintz fabric from India and glazed cotton from England made showpieces called Baltimore Album Quilts. For such women, quilting with exotic materials was a solitary activity, reflecting their affluence and ample available time.

In contrast, women in less wealthy homes literally had their hands full and their time consumed with homemaking chores. However, with the arrival of the Industrial Revolution around 1840, quilting activity dramatically expanded to “ordinary” households, where women used ordinary fabrics for their quilt tops, including patches cut from used clothing. Mostly, they used the newly available inexpensive, manufactured textiles. In their houses, quilts assumed a practical use as bed covers.

The laborious, lengthy process of solitary hand-quilting was lightened with the advent of quilting bees. These functions, at which neighbors and friends would share the work and exchange news and gossip, became a mainstay social and communal activity of that era. Since then, quilters’ gatherings have been ubiquitous, even throughout the steady introduction of technological advances in quilt-making.

In 1856, the Singer company came out with the sewing machine. The first model cost \$100, a huge amount at the time, but they could be purchased in installments. The public loved the device, considering it a fine way to sew. Fifteen years later, sewing machines with rails to support the whole quilt and do the quilting stitching were developed. In 1984, “long-arm” quilting machines were marketed, and soon could be run by computers. This technology enabled machine-made quilts to be produced in large quantities. At the time, perhaps because of their greater numbers, machine-made quilts were regarded as less valuable than handmade ones, but today, well designed machine-made quilts are highly valued and widely admired.

Quilting maintained its popularity in Loudoun well into the 20th century, and its vitality was strengthened with the formation of quilting organizations. The Waterford Quilters Guild (waterfordquiltersguild.org) was founded by Anna Holland in 1979. Since then, Guild members have met monthly, and demonstrated annually at the Waterford Fair. During the past decade, several quilting groups were formed in Loudoun, each supporting charities with donated handmade quilted items. Countryside Quilters (countrysidequilters.wordpress.com) meets in Sterling; Station Stitchers (stationstitchers.org) meets in downtown Purcellville; and Joshua's Hands (joshuashands.org) sponsors quilt camps where hundreds of community volunteers gather to make gurney-size quilts for injured military personnel.

Loudoun is home to several professional quilt artists, and an online fabric business, WebFabrics, owned by Bev and Sydney McDonald ships fabric around the world. Quilts made by the author are on permanent display at the Purcellville Town Hall, and in Sterling at the Claude Moore Recreation Center. There are several major museums in the United States devoted exclusively to quilt exhibitions, including the Virginia Quilt Museum in Harrisonburg.

According to the Craft Industry Alliance, in 2020, the quilting industry generated about \$4.2 billion in consumer spending by 9 to 11 million quilters in North America.



*Honeycomb Mosaic of Hexagons, c. 1830.
Made by Maria Hester Monroe Gouverneur
(1803-1850) - James Monroe Museum
Collection, Fredericksburg, VA. Maria was the
younger daughter of President James
Monroe, the owner of Oak Hill Estate on Rt.
15 south of Leesburg. The design is made of
English Paper Pieced hexagons. The hexagons
are backed with stiff paper and fabric is sewn
over the paper pattern. The papers used were
recycled newspaper clippings, advertisements
and handwritten letters.*

These facts are important to the appreciation of quilting in Loudoun and elsewhere, but there is no substitute for just looking at them. They are visual stars, beautifully crafted works of art.

The quilts in this exhibition have been provided by members of the Waterford Quilters Guild.

Priscilla Godfrey, a resident of Philomont, is president of the Loudoun County League of Women Voters. She is a member of the Mason Dixon Quilt Professional Network and the Waterford Quilters Guild. Priscilla has also been a nationally certified quilt judge since 1986.



Crazy Quilt, c. 1880-1900. Quiltmaker unknown. This quilt was donated to the Loudoun Museum Collection in 1992 by the estate of Marian P. Simpson of Paeonian Springs. The crazy quilt style, popular at the turn of the century, used velvet and silk patches embroidered with motifs from nature. Many antique quilts were not signed, as "woman's work" was generally undervalued. Today, quilters make labels for their quilts with names, dates and locations recorded, making it easier for future historians and collectors.

World Full of Color, 2008. Made by the Waterford Quilters Guild - Priscilla Godfrey Collection. At the turn of the century in 2000, more quilters were turning their attention to making art quilts: quilts that use circles, spirals and other non-linear shapes, and quilts that depict faces and places, instead of rows of squares. The author supplied the block pattern and quilt members made four separate quadrants of the circle with solid, bold colors of orange, red and yellow.

