

The Quilt Detective: Clues in the Needlework

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I began a digital subscription newsletter in 2005 as an update to my book *Clues in the Calico*. This first document published in March, 2005, discussed quilting and how clues in this technique can provide clues to date. The information on dating quilts was based on the database of nearly 1,000 dated quilts that I collected for *Clues in the Calico*, data collected in the Kansas Quilt Project, information from quilt history sources and years of quilt observation.



Coxcombs & Currants or *Flowering Almond* quilt, 1840-1865, showing double line quilting.

Week 1) Fancy Quilting

Quilting (the stitches connecting the top, batting and backing) is a technique that can indicate date. The quality of American quilting has risen and fallen over the past 225 years, dependent upon technology and trends in fashion. Quality is characterized by several things, including the size and regularity of the stitches, the closeness of the quilting lines and the complexity and sophistication of design. High quality or fancy quilting tends to have been most popular in three periods: from 1800 to 1880; from 1925 to 1950 and most recently from about 1980 to the present.

Stitch Size. Size of the stitches is dependent on the quilter's skill as well as on the thickness of her batting. In the Kansas Quilt Project, we measured stitches on the top side of the quilt in 12,862 quilts and found that only 445 hand-quilted quilts had better than ten stitches to an inch and only six had better than fifteen. The closest stitches can be obtained only with very thin batts or when no batting is used, as in stuffed and

corded quilting. The number of stitches per inch (averaging 7 to 8) cannot be correlated to a specific time. Since there was a trend at the end of the nineteenth century to thicker batting, the presence of large quilting stitches is a very weak clue to origins after 1880.

Line Space. Closeness of quilting lines is a good clue to age. A general rule: Quilts that have very close quilting, even if quilted only in lines or grids, are more likely to be pre-Civil War. Close quilting, lines less than 3/4 of an inch apart, is generally 1840 to 1880. Note an exception in Joseph Allen's quilt below.

Design Motifs in Block Quilts. Using quilt motifs, the independent designs such as leaves or wreaths, to determine age is rather subjective, based more on observation than a database of dated examples. Quilters were likely during three eras to use fancy motifs in their quilts: 1800-1880, 1925-1950, after 1980.

One strong clue to a mid-nineteenth-century quilt is a sampler of quilting motifs. If each block is quilted in a different design, the quilt is likely to be 1840-1865. Even a variety of quilting designs in the blocks, such as three different leaf motifs scattered throughout the blocks, indicates a mid-nineteenth-century date. Another good clue is double-line quilting around the motifs. Many nineteenth-century quilters outlined their floral motifs with two lines, as in the photo, and sometimes three. In general, double or triple outlines indicate a pre-1880 date. This outlining is not what we call echo quilting today (multiple outlines to the edge of the block), but rather two close outlines surrounded by empty space or filler quilting. Echo quilting is common during many periods and, thus, not a clue to date.

The motifs themselves seem to have little relationship to date. A quilter looking for a fancy design in 1940 was as likely to choose a feather wreath as a quilter in 1840. Some designs do indicate general trends in taste. A simple five-lobed flower is a popular twentieth-century design while a fanciful cockscomb-like bloom, a Jacobean style, is more typical of the nineteenth.

Border Patterns. Certain border patterns can be indicators of date. Feathers or plumes are typical of best quilts in the nineteenth-century. Cables, especially single cables of one link, are an indicator of a twentieth-century quilt, popular after 1925 in borders and sashing. Complex cables, interlacing curved lines of three, four or five cables are typically seen after 1850 and seem to have been most popular in Pennsylvania with many different ethnic groups. As Amish and Mennonite quilters moved to other states in the early twentieth-century the complex cable patterns became more widespread. (An exception to this rule is in early Quaker silk quilts)

Clues You Can Count On

1. Close quilting, lines less than 3/4 of an inch apart, is generally before 1880.
2. A sampler of quilting motifs, each block quilted in a different design, is likely to be 1840-1865.
3. Double or triple outlines around motifs indicate a pre-1880 date.
4. Single cables (1 link) in borders & sashing indicate a date after 1925 or so.

Week 2) Filler Quilting & Cotton Thread

Filler Quilting. The classic American quilting design features a motif such as a floral or a feather backed by filler quilting, for example, parallel lines or grids. Less common filler patterns include meandering lines that curve randomly or stippling (close random stitches.) Filler quilting is part of the look of fancy quilting most popular in the nineteenth century before 1880 and again from 1925 to 1950. The major difference in the two periods is the closeness of the filler quilting. Lines less than 3/4 of an inch apart, indicate a nineteenth-century quilt, generally 1840 to 1880, while wider spaced lines are more typical of the twentieth. There are exceptions, of course. The photo shows a quilt dated 1882 with filler quilting of a grid of lines spaced 1/4" apart. Nineteenth-century quilters often used double or triple parallel lines as filler quilting, a style that is a good clue to a pre-1900 quilt.

Thread. Historian Rachel Maines has noted that close filler quilting, such as stippling, is thread-intensive and unlikely to have been used before "manufactured cotton thread began to be marketed on a national scale about 1820." She classifies quilting techniques as dependent on either scarcity or abundance, and close quilting is only possible with an abundance of machine-made, relatively inexpensive thread, which she defines as a "fine, hard-finish product of plied yarns twisted tightly in the plying process against the original direction of spinning." Thus, one would not expect to see fancy quilting in cotton quilts made between 1770 and 1820. The highest expression of quilting in those years would be quilts of silk or wool fabrics quilted with spun wool or linen threads or twisted silk.

For an American Quilt Study Group paper, textile curator Jenny Yearous analyzed the thread in dated quilts and reviewed the literature on thread history, summarizing the origins of manufactured cotton thread, which is generally attributed to one of two sources. James and Patrick (or Peter) Clark of Paisley, Scotland, manufactured the imitation Kashmir shawls known as Paisley shawls. Forced to do without silk heddle string for their looms because of a French trade embargo during the Napoleonic wars, the Clarks substituted cotton in 1806, and, impressed with its versatility, opened a factory for manufacturing cotton thread for hand sewing in 1812. Competition arrived when James Coats began a second mill, in 1815, eventually named J&P Coats as sons James and Peter took over.

To serve the large American market both the Coats and the Clarks sent family members here as sales representatives. In 1864, the third generation of Clarks, James and William, opened a manufacturing company in Newark. In 1869, the Coats opened a mill in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. In 1896, the two companies merged, although two separate identities continued with the Coats name and the Clark name appearing on various lines of thread sold by the same company.

The alternate tale of the origins of manufactured cotton sewing thread attributes the invention to American Hannah Slater, wife of Pawtucket, Rhode Island, mill owner

Samuel Slater in the mid-1790s. The story appears in Slater's biography in the early 1830s, but Yearous notes, "There will always remain some doubt as to its authenticity." Whether it was Mrs. Slater who saw the possibilities in cotton yarns, there is much evidence that Americans had access to manufactured cotton before the Clark's 1812 factory. In 1807, Maryland immigrant Rosalie Stier Calvert wrote a letter to her sister still in Europe, enclosed with a box of gifts including "cotton for embroidery or sewing. We hardly ever use any other thread here; the cotton is so much better for sewing muslin [cotton] and even linen." Stier's gift might have been twisted by hand at her Maryland plantation, but Yearous noted several examples of American manufacturing. Almy & Brown, former partners of Slater, advertised sewing thread in 1809 and several other American mills sold it.

Whether the Slaters began manufacturing thread in the late 1790s or the Clarks in 1812, the presence of cotton thread in the quilting (where it is most apparent) is, in general, a clue to a quilt made in the nineteenth century or later.

Clues You Can Count On

1. Close filler quilting, lines less than 3/4 of an inch apart, is generally between 1820 and 1880.
2. Double or triple parallel lines as filler quilting, whether widely or narrowly spaced, are a good clue to a pre-1900 quilt.
3. Cotton thread as the quilting medium is a good clue to a post-1800 quilt.



A grid with lines a bit less than 1/4 of an inch fills the background behind the feather wreaths in this pieced quilt that has a quilted inscription reading: "JOSEPH. D ALLENS QUILT PRESENTED BY HIS MOTHER 1882"---a bit late for such fancy quilting.

Week 3) Stuffed and Corded Quilting

Terminology. Quilting is a three-dimensional design defined visually by light and shadow. Most quilting involves stitching three layers, relying on the thickness of the middle layer, the batting, to add loft that shows off the quilting. Stuffed and corded quilting, in which the quilting motifs are raised with additional padding, is a rather uncommon technique most popular from about 1800 through the Civil War. The techniques appear in both whole-cloth and patchwork quilts.

Raised quilting has a number of names: it is a form of white work, a category of white on white design for bedcoverings that includes embroidery and candlewicking. Margaret Vincent calls it a version of muslin work, another name for white work. Corded quilting is also called Italian quilting, probably because the earliest surviving quilted textiles, three Sicilian quilts from fourteenth-century, feature the technique.

Twentieth-century quilters often called stuffed quilting trapunto, an Italian word that means "stuffed" according to an Italian student I once taught. A second geographical allusion is in the name Marseilles Quilt, derived from the French port through which many seventeenth-century corded quilts passed on their way from the quiltmakers of Provence in France to traders in England. Marseilles Quilt came to mean any stuffed and corded quilt, and later any woven variation of a white work quilt. Stuffed quilting and corded quilting are probably the most descriptive terms as they describe the processes used to obtain the increased dimensionality in the quilting. Seamstresses stuffed shapes such as cherries and leaves and corded linear designs like vines and stems.



Stuffed & corded whitework pillow sham or table cover with initials MMc. Estimated date 1800-1860. Early nineteenth-century quilters stuffed numerous small items such as pillow cases, table mats and splashes (textiles pinned to the wall behind a wash stand.) This piece has fine cotton top and coarse cotton back I would guess it was rather early in that sixty-year period, the type of white work that, as Vincent writes, fell out of fashion about 1830. Stuffed, quilted bedcovers persisted for several decades.

Techniques. Quilters added dimensionality in two ways. The seamstress might add the extra padding before she began the regular quilting process or she could add the stuffing or cording as a last step.

To stuff the quilting in the first technique, the seamstress basted a piece of coarsely woven cotton directly to the back of her top and quilted these two layers together in a technique the British call flat quilting, permitting very small stitches. After enclosing a leaf or petal with quilting stitches she then worked small bits of cotton through the backing fabric. Some quilters snipped holes in the backing fabric; others carefully separated the coarse yarns, leaving little evidence of the spot where the stuffing occurred. To cord linear elements she threaded a needle with cotton yarn or cord and ran it through the tunnel created by quilting either side of the line.

Once stuffing and cording is completed, the quilter could add another layer of quilting by adding batting and another back (a fourth layer.) The quilter might quilt a filler pattern of parallel lines or stippling through all four layers. Most quilters seem to have trimmed away the initial backing fabric before they added the batt and the final backing so they would not have to go through four layers with their filler quilting. One way to determine stuffing technique is to hold the quilt up to the light. The extra backing is visible as a shadow around the stuffed work. Whole-cloth pieces without patchwork might be left as two layers with the roughly finished back exposed. The back of these two-layer quilts reveals the process.

In the second common padding technique, the quilter sandwiched top, batt and back together as with any other quilt, and stitched her quilting design through all three layers. When finished, she padded selected areas by working from the back, inserting batting through the backing fabric by prying apart the threads, or by snipping a small slash in the back. Evidence of the slashes are sometimes apparent on the backs of quilts stuffed in this manner. No correlation between date and style of stuffed work is apparent.

Stuffing and Cording as a Clue to Date. Historian Rachel Maines theorized that thread-intensive quilting styles were dependent on an inexpensive and plentiful supply of cotton thread, which came upon the market about 1810, a theory corroborated in my database of 37 date-inscribed stuffed or corded quilts. The earliest example is dated 1796. Thirty-three or 89% were made between 1800 and 1866, indicating that this technique is an excellent clue to a quilt made before the end of the Civil War. The dated quilts contradict an observation by Margaret Vincent who in her 1988 catalog *The Ladies' Work Table* included stuffed work as a needlework that "virtually disappeared" by 1830.

Regional and individual exceptions to the database include stuffed quilts made in Rhea County in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century, documented by the Quilts of Tennessee survey team and spectacular pieces made in the 1930s by artists reviving old fashioned elegance.

Clues You Can Count On

1. Stuffed work or cording, extra-dimensional quilting, indicates a date of 1800-1865.

Week 4. Plain Quilting



Capital T or *Double T* quilt, 1900-1925. This utilitarian quilt is quilted quite plainly with diagonal lines 1 1/2 inches apart across the blocks and a grid spaced 1 1/4 inches in the alternate plain blocks. There is some outline quilting about 1/4 inch away from the patchwork. This is the kind of quilting that was quite common at the turn of the last century, but it isn't distinctive enough to be a really good clue.

Quilts without fancy motifs are generally quilted in one of two fashions. One is utility quilting, a repetitive design such as fans or diagonal lines, quilted across the top with little reference to the patchwork. The other follows the patchwork, for example outlining each piece about 1/4 of an inch away from the seam lines, a very popular mid-twentieth-century technique. This last technique is termed self-quilting or quilting by the piece. Techniques are often combined in one quilt. The blocks may be quilted by the piece and the borders quilted across the patchwork in a utilitarian grid.

Plain quilting is of little use in dating quilts since many of the patterns and styles developed early and are still in use. A few, however, are rather distinctive to specific eras. Quilting in the ditch (right in the seam lines) has been very popular since 1970 and may indicate an old top quilted at a later date. It's rare in antique quilts.

Fan Quilting. Fan quilting, a form of utility quilting in which groups of concentric arcs are quilted across the patchwork, appears to be a good clue to a post-1875 date. Earlier quiltmakers used this design, but were more likely to use it in combination with other motifs, for example as the quilting in a border. Because utility quilts are unlikely to be date-inscribed I had few examples in the database. Of the 16 with fan quilting, 13 were dated after 1900, indicating that fan quilting is most likely to be from the end of the nineteenth century or later. Other names for the design include English terms wave or sea wave quilting, rainbow or double rainbow quilting in Texas and elbow quilting in Tennessee (because the quilter uses the natural arc of her elbow to guide her.) Over the past twenty years, the names Baptist fan or Methodist fan have been popular, probably because the pattern was a favorite with church groups who quilted to raise

money. This style of quilting, so common in the Midwest and South, seems unusual in antique New York and New England quilts.

Utility Quilting. Grids and parallel lines were the most popular form of nineteenth-century utility quilting and in general are no clue to date. Double and triple lines covering the top or a patchwork block, however, indicate a nineteenth-century piece, as the style is not common after 1900. Very close grids or lines, whether utility quilting or as filler behind fancy motifs, indicate a quilt from about 1800 to 1880. Nineteenth-century quilters often quilted parallel lines right over their appliqué blocks, a style that is rare after 1900, and surprises today's quilters who use quilting to emphasize the sculptural quality of the appliqué. The old-style utility quilting across the appliqué completely flattens the design.

Another popular mid-nineteenth-century style of plain quilting was chevrons or parallel lines laid out in angles, usually at ninety degrees. This style is still called elbow quilting in the South, but it is not often seen after 1900. A typical pieced quilt of 1850 might be quilted with lines about an inch apart, plotted to meet at right angles in the center of the block.

Echo quilting, in which the patchwork motif is ringed with concentric lines, is quite popular today. It was also popular in the nineteenth century. The general rule, the closer the quilting lines the more likely the quilt is to be 1800-1880, holds here. Other than that, echo quilting is not a clue to date. The name "echo quilting" is probably a contemporary term, something not used in the nineteenth or early twentieth century.

Rose Kretsinger in the 1935 book she co-wrote with Carrie Hall, *The Romance of the Patchwork Quilt*, gave names to a few of the utilitarian patterns. She showed right-angle elbow quilting but had no name for it. She called a diagonal grid the Square Diamond and a grid of double lines Plaid. She showed a pattern of curves that we usually call Clamshell today as the Shell. She also called a fan-quilted border a Shell design. Hanging Diamond was a grid in which one set of lines runs parallel to the edge of the quilt and the other crosses at a diagonal. The Hanging Diamond pattern across the entire quilt top was quite popular for plain quilts in the years 1890 to 1925.

Clues You Can Count On

1. Fan quilting across the top of the quilt is a good indicator of a post-1880 date.
2. "Quilting in the ditch," right in the seam lines of a pieced quilt, is a good indicator of a post-1970 date.
3. Utility quilting right over the appliqué is a good clue to a nineteenth-century date.

Week 5) Machine & Miscellaneous Quilting

Machine Quilting. From the invention of the sewing machine, quilting has been a feature. The original 1790 English patent for a machine mentioned quilting. Many early machines manufactured in the mid-nineteenth-century came with quilting attachments, which seamstresses were pleased to use.

Walter Hunt is credited with making the first practical American machine. His 1834 model featured a needle with an eye at the point. Another innovation was the interlocked stitch, locking two threads into a continuous seam. Hunt never manufactured his machine and ten years later Elias Howe re-invented it. In the 1850s, several manufacturers, among them Isaac Singer, marketed industrial machines, which individuals might purchase for home use. In 1859, Singer began manufacturing a light "family" machine for the household market. After decades of refinement, the machine began changing American life only right before the Civil War. Because machines were so rare before 1850, machine quilting would not likely have occurred before then, a good cut-off point for dating any machine stitching.

Although machine quilting was not common in the mid-nineteenth-century, several examples survive. Most interesting are a few white work machine-quilted pieces, possibly made as models by early sewing machine demonstrators. In the first decades of machine quilting, many women combined hand and machine quilting, perhaps quilting the edges of the quilt by machine and the middle by hand. This rather common combination technique probably occurred because it is difficult to manage the middle of the heavy quilts under the mechanism, whereas the edges might be more easily manipulated. Many children's quilts were machine-quilted, probably because they are easier to manage than full-sized quilts.

One solution to the bulkiness of quilting was offered in 1888 by Mrs. J.C. who submitted a household hint to the *Housekeeper*, a Minnesota magazine:

"This is the way I do my quilting. I cut the top and lining in quarters. Then I lay the lining on the table, spread on the cotton, baste the top on smooth, and stitch on the machine any pattern I please. When the four pieces are done, I sew the right sides together and fell down the lining over the seams and bind the edges. The result is much prettier than handwork."

Machine quilting grew more common in the twentieth century as electrified machines came into use. Nineteenth-century quilts tend to be machine-stitched in straight lines, while designs with curves, such as regular wave patterns and spirals, are twentieth-century styles, done on special jigs that attach to the machine. The jigs, which support the quilt as it passes under the needle, appear in advertising in the teens. These regular, curved designs are thus a clue to a piece quilted after 1910.

In the past twenty years, machine quilting has changed dramatically with innovative designers and the development of long-arm quilting machines. Data from the Kansas

Quilt Project on 4,657 quilted pieces made from the 1840s through 1988 indicated that 11 percent were machine-quilted. Had we extended the project we would have found a much higher incidence.



Attachment: *Honeybee* or *Birds in the Air* quilt, estimated date: 1925-1950, quilted with repeating curlicues typical of 20th-century machine jigs. Today's machine quilters tend to emphasize the patchwork, a hand-guided type of machine quilting, as opposed to this look of rote machine work that developed early in the 20th century.

Marking. We don't often see the quilt marking on an antique quilt unless the marker used a very heavy hand. The most common marking still visible is lead pencil lines, which, if marked correctly, come off as the quilting thread goes through the marks. Washing usually removes heavier lines. Pencil lines are of no help in dating a quilt.

The other marking line still visible is a blue chalk or blue pencil, which, again, is not a clue since colored chalk has also been available for generations. Therese de Dillmont's late-nineteenth-century needlework book advised tracing a pattern with a homemade ink made of powdered indigo, water, sugar and gum Arabic, which may be the source of some blue lines. "The lines should be traced very lightly," she advised. "If the material is left for some time before the work is done, they will bite into the material and cannot then be removed..."

Another old marking technique, used for centuries, is a chalk line in which a piece of string is dipped in a powder (often blue) and snapped, leaving traces on the quilt. Pouncing, or sifting a chalky substance through a pattern with holes, is another old technique that leaves us no clue to a quilt's date.

One clue to date is kit marking. Applique kits frequently came with quilting lines marked on the white background fabric in blue printed (rather than hand marked) dots. In the best case scenario, the blue dots washed out, but we have all seen lingering dots on the background of well-washed quilts. These regularly-spaced, printed blue dots seems to indicate a date after 1925.

Long Stitch. In the Kansas Quilt Project, we saw a few examples of an unusual hand quilting stitch, almost a basting stitch, done with heavy cotton. We heard it called by several names. Some called it the Depression Stitch and said it was done in the 1930s with string recycled from feedsacks. Other names were the Saddle Stitch and the Jiffy Stitch. In Haysville, a quilt group was using it in the 1990s and calling it the Long Stitch. Our interviewee used it as a verb as in, "Let's long stitch it." Pennsylvania historians Nancy Roan and Ellen Gehret interviewed a woman from Lehigh County, who covered a worn quilt with "feed bags and used long stitches and quilted it and used it for a light cover." Quilters use crochet cotton or pearl cotton for this fast method. I heard pearl cotton referred to in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, as "ball cotton," where they told me the quilters in Scranton used it for quilting. The few traditional examples of the long stitch that I have seen date from the mid-twentieth century. It's making a minor comeback today.

Visible Knots. Many practical cotton quilts, often made with thick battings and haphazard piecing, are quilted with the knots showing on the top of the quilt. Most quilters pull a small knot on their quilting thread through the top's fabric so it rests invisibly in the batting between the layers, but numerous utilitarian quilts have exposed knots on the patchwork side. Rather than being evidence of a novice or a poor seamstress, the presence of knots on the top seems to be a style of plain quilting that developed after the Civil War, most typically in the South. It may be related to the size of the thread used for quilting, or the thickness of the batt, both of which might have made it difficult to hide the knot. Or it may have been an acceptable "quick and dirty" way to finish a quilt made for cover rather than show. Knots on the top is probably best thought of as a very weak clue to a date after 1870.

Clues You Can Count On

1. Machine quilting indicates that the piece was quilted after 1850.
2. Regular, curved quilting patterns made with jigs attached to the machine are a clue to a twentieth-century quilt.

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