

The Quilt Detective: Clues in Techniques

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Part 7) Inscriptions

Week 28) Cross-Stitched Inscriptions

The most helpful inscription in determining the age of a quilt is one with a date, so examine the quilt carefully, looking for an unobtrusive date. Quilted, inked and cross-stitched inscriptions are easily missed. If a quilt is signed or initialed but not dated, the inscription can still offer strong clues as to date, since quiltmakers during different eras were partial to different signature techniques.



Turkey red album block with cross-stitched signature reading H. H. Coursen. The stitches do not seem to be counted because the cotton yarns in the background are too fine. In other words, the cross stitches are technically a surface stitch, although they follow the counted cross-stitch style. The embroidery thread may very well be silk rather than cotton.

Cross-Stitched Inscriptions. In 1847, *Godey's Lady's Book* could look back a dozen years and ask with nostalgia: "What lady whose school days were anterior to the use of indelible ink, but remembers the working of her sampler? The ABC's were then the beginning of needlework education, and the accomplishment of the marking stitch was the proud aim of every school girl." Cross stitch, the marking stitch, was considered a basic part of the female curriculum as preparation for managing a house. The tradition of marking sheets and other household linens with a number and the owner's initials goes back to pre-Revolutionary days.

Cross stitch is a form of counted embroidery; the seamstress counts the threads of the background fabric and covers a certain number of warps and wefts with a diagonal stitch. After the advent of ink marking, skills in cross stitch were quickly forgotten. The practice of marking linens in any medium soon stopped, despite advice like that of Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe who in 1868 still advocated that “all bed linen should be marked and numbered, so that a bed can always be made properly and all missing articles be known.”

A mid-century needlework manual gave instructions for cross stitch. “Marking: It is of essential importance that clothes should be marked and numbered. This is often done with ink, but as some persons like to mark with silk, we shall describe the stitch. Two threads are to be taken each way of the cloth, and the needle must be passed three ways, in order that the stitch is complete. The first is a slant from the person, towards the right hand. The second is downward to you, and the third is the reverse of the first. That is, a slant from you toward the left. The needle is to be brought out at the corner of the stitch nearest to that you are about to make. The shapes of the letters or figures can be learned from inspection of any common sampler.”

Many early quilts were marked just like other bed linens, with numbers, initials and an occasional date. When album quilts became the fashion in the 1840s, seamstresses sometimes used the cross stitch to embroider their names, the dates and short sentiments. *Godey's* was accurate in noting the demise of the cross stitch, however. It disappeared as a quilt signature technique in the 1850s. Of 38 quilts dated with cross stitch in my database of date-inscribed quilts, 87% were made before 1855. Three cross-stitch dates were after the Civil War and two were in the twentieth century. Cross-stitch inscriptions are a strong clue to a pre-Civil War date.

Don't confuse cross-stitched inscriptions with cross-stitched decorative embroidery, discussed in Part 4. Quilts with cross-stitch as the major decorative element tend to date from after 1950.

Thread. I've assumed that the thread used for cross stitched inscriptions is cotton, but careful inspection might show that seamstresses used silk thread as indicated in the above embroidery directions.

Week 29) Inked Inscriptions



Two inked inscriptions, both of which show the ink bleeding into the background fabric. The block on the left is signed Miss Sarah Ann Garwood, May 23, 1855, Camden, New Jersey; the quilt behind it Miss Elizabeth A. ???, 1846. I'd always assumed the bleeding occurred when the signature was inked, but after reading Ordoñez's article I wonder if that happened much later.

Ink Chemistry. In an *Uncoverings* 1992 article, textile scientist Margaret Ordoñez gave quilt historians necessary insight into chemical processes in old inks. Before the mid - 19th century, most permanent inks for paper or fabric were made from ferrous sulfate and nutgalls (small growths in oak tree bark caused by gall wasps depositing their eggs) to which sulfuric acid and a plant gum were often added. The ink appeared pale brown when initially applied, but a chemical reaction, an oxidation, turned the ink black and permanent over time, usually just a few days. Varied recipes, particularly the proportions of nutgall and iron, could result in ink that changed again over time to a rusty brown. Ink on the 19th-century quilts she studied appeared to be shades of yellowish brown or reddish brown to black. The acids in these "iron gallotannate" inks and the continuing oxidation have a tendency to rot the cellulosic fabrics, linen and cotton, something Ordoñez noted with her microscope and that quilt collectors too often see with the naked eye.

It would appear that the nutgall and iron inks were generally homemade according to widely available recipes. Ordoñez also describes a second type of traditional ink, an India ink or permanent carbon ink. It appears that the carbon inks, made with lampblack and other soot, could also be formulated by an amateur chemist at home. Both types were manufactured for sale.

Ink and Inscription Trends. In *Clues in the Calico*, I dated the invention of a non-corrosive inks specifically for textiles to the mid-1830s, based on advertising claims made in the 1890s for Payson's Indelible Ink, marketed as "the oldest and best ink for 'marking linen, silk and cotton with a common pen without preparation. Payson's has been a household word for over 65 years.'" I went on to credit non-corrosive ink as contributing "to the fad for autograph quilts, which developed soon after Payson's was invented."

Ordoñez's research into ink composition indicates that there is no such clear -cut date for non-corrosive, commercial inks. She notes "the search for permanent inks that did not damage paper and fabric was ongoing throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century." She includes a reference as late as 1913 lauding a welcome new non-corrosive ink for laundries.

My whole cause-and-effect argument about a change in ink chemistry in the 1830s affecting the look of American quilts in the early 1840s seems very dubious in light of her evidence. In defense of that argument, however, I will note that Ordoñez found several patents for carbon inks issued in Britain in the late 1830s. It may be that non -corrosive carbon inks were increasingly available. It does seem, however, that many, many quiltmakers continued to use corrosive oxidizing inks though the 19th century. The development of the signature style appears to be due more to taste rather than technology.

Fashion for Ink Signatures. Whatever the cause, a style trend for ink inscriptions developed about 1840. In the 1820s, bound album books became a fad, as women perfected a verse and a signature. By the early 1840s, the fashion was extended to album or friendship quilts, on which signatures were inked or worked in cross stitch. In my database of 1,000 date-inscribed quilts I found a friendship quilt with blocks dated 1839 to 1843, the earliest recorded. There were three with blocks dated 1841 and twelve with blocks dated 1842, indicating that the idea of signing blocks for a group quilt was becoming increasingly popular. Many of the blocks in the early album quilts made between 1840 and 1860 featured elaborate ink signatures and small drawings and verses. By the time of the Civil War, album quilt inscriptions had become shorter and were more likely to include only the block maker's name, and perhaps his or her hometown or date. Signed friendship quilts continue to be a popular quilt style today.

Ink was used to sign and date quilts in other styles from the 1830s through the end of the century. In the database of 1,000 quilts, 127 group -made or single-maker quilts had inked dates. Three are dated before the mid-1830s. Two were dated in the twentieth century. Because 96% of the quilts with inked inscriptions were dated between 1830 and 1899, an inked signature is a strong clue to these years.

One caution with inked inscriptions: they may have been added to an early quilt at a later date. Descendents often inked a date on a family heirloom in an attempt to document an old quilt. People often inked a "laundry mark" on their textiles to identify

them at common laundries. I've seen quilts marked along the edge of the back with Chinese characters, a clue more likely to indicate the ethnic background of the cleaner rather than the maker.

Fraktur-Style Inscriptions. There is one style of inking that indicates both ethnicity and regionalism. In *Uncoverings 2004*, Lucinda R. Cawley described a group of Pennsylvania-German friendship quilts signed by professional scribes using the Germanic decorative lettering style known as fraktur. Many of the quilts, which were made in southeastern Pennsylvania between 1851 and 1870, have a dedication block with the words "*Ihr Teppich*," meaning literally "her carpet," or "her covering." The Gothic-style lettering was probably inked by the penmen who also did the fraktur drawings and paintings so important in Pennsylvania-German culture. The most popular patchwork pattern for these quilts is the Rolling Stone design (Brackman #1727). There is strong evidence that these quilts were signed by professionals. Quilt historians believe that many other friendship quilts were signed by neither the block maker nor the person whose name is on the block. Many blocks were probably signed by professionals paid for their handwork or amateurs whose graceful writing style was in demand.

Damage to Ink Inscriptions. Ordoñez describes the damage to inscriptions in 19th-century quilts as "mute evidence of the presence of free acid in the inks used for signatures. Acids degrade cellulosic materials such as paper, cotton and linen by a chemical reaction called hydrolysis." The ink often rots the fabric. The inks also bleed into the background fabric over time causing a smear. Ordoñez found that the color of the ink did not correlate with the degree of damage. Interestingly enough, quilts that had been washed and used heavily did not show as much ink damage as less worn quilts.

We see both the damage the ink causes to the fabric and the damage that time does to the ink. In issue # 27, I sent a photo of a summer spread from about 1850 that had a faint but readable signature on the reverse when I bought it twenty years ago. Ten years ago I found that the inscription had faded to the point where it is no longer readable and looks more like a smudge. I now photocopy the inscriptions on my quilts so I have a full-size record in case the ink fades.

Check corners on the front and the back for possible ink inscriptions. I am always surprised how careful inspection can reveal an inscription that the quilt's owner never noticed. Closely examine smudges or streaks to see if they once might have been a date or a name.

Week 30) Miscellaneous Inscriptions

Stamped & Stenciled Inscriptions. Signature stamps and stencils were often used to sign album quilts during the prime decades of the album quilt craze, the 1840s and '50s. Indelible ink was forced through a small metal stencil featuring a signature surrounded by appropriate flourishes. A neat, personalized quilt block could also be obtained using a signature stamp of metal, and later of rubber.

In an 1862 issue of *Harper's Weekly*, T.N. Hickcox of New York advertised that he sold kits for cutting metal stencils for "Clothing, Cards, Books, &c." With Mr. Hickcox's kit of tools and one hundred brass plates, one could go into business cutting custom-made plates with names, figures, borders and scrolls. Many of the signatures on old album quilts were inked using these handmade brass stencil plates. Most of the stenciled and stamped signatures date from the same years as free-hand ink signatures, from the 1840s through the end of the nineteenth century.

Quilted Inscriptions. Quilted inscriptions often go unnoticed, as they are only subtle variations in the subtle designs of the quilting. Quilted signatures have little correlation with any particular era. The 92 examples in my database of date-inscribed quilts ranged from 1746 through 1948 with no real patterns of popularity apparent with one exception. Quilted signatures and dates were a favorite technique of Amish quiltmakers. If one eliminates the Amish quilts from the database, there are few twentieth-century examples. Without the Amish, who generally maintained higher standards for their quilting than mainstream quiltmakers during the first quarter of the twentieth century, one can conclude that quilted signatures are uncommon in that period. Therefore, a quilted signature by a non-Amish quiltmaker indicates a nineteenth-century quilt. Stuffed and corded signatures, like any stuffed and corded quilting, were uncommon after the Civil War, so a padded inscription is a good clue to a date before 1865.



Appliqued Inscriptions. Applique has been used as an inscription technique throughout the history of patchwork. Two of the earliest date-inscribed quilts, the McCord Quilt dated 1726 and Anna Tuel's Marriage Quilt dated 1785 are inscribed with

appliqué numerals. Examples from every era survive, but there is a tendency for appliqué inscriptions to be most popular in the years when conventional appliqué designs were also popular ---from about 1840 though 1900.

Pieced Inscriptions. Piecing a signature or date into a quilt seems to be more an indication of individual artistic vision than a style. At the end of the 19th century, the Ladies' Art Company of St. Louis published a set of pieced alphabet blocks. Several of the letters were also published in magazines at the turn of the last century. Familiarity with this published alphabet style may help one date quilts with pieced initials, words or alphabet blocks as "After 1890."

Pieced Sampler Alphabet. One exception to the rule that pieced alphabets tend to be one quiltmaker's individual expression is the use of the school girls' sampler alphabet. Winifred Reddall, writing in *Uncoverings* in 1980, noted seven 19th-century quilts inscribed with large letters pieced of squares and rectangles, the cross stitch alphabet adapted to pieced quilt design. The lettered quilts she found came from New York, Connecticut and New Jersey. Five more dated examples inscribed with similar pieced lettering have been found, four from New York and one from Connecticut. The earliest date-inscribed example is dated 1807, the latest 1877, and the latest date -attributed example is 1891. So it seems that a sampler style pieced letter inscription is a better indicator of place (New York, New Jersey and Connecticut) than of specific date. An 1833 example was pictured in a magazine in the 1920s with a pattern for the alphabet, but the pattern seems to have had little influence in the 20th century. The style is a clue to a 19th-century date and place.

Week 31) Surface Embroidery in Inscriptions



20th-century blocks with embroidered inscriptions. The pink says “Geraldine Gemes 1938” in a neat outline or stem stitch in which stitches are laid down almost parallel to each other; the blue, “F.M. Cotter 1911.” Her stitch is rather tortured and looks like the badly done chain stitch I learned as a child in the fifties. I see it on a lot of mid-20th-century friendship quilts. Maybe the chain is upside down or backwards. It’s a good thing we’re using ink again.

Although counted cross stitch was a popular embroidered inscription technique before the Civil War, mid-19th-century quilters might also use surface embroidery, such as the stem stitch and running stitch for inscriptions. After 1875, these free-hand stitches became the most common embroidery used for signatures, replacing ink by the end of the century. In my database of date-inscribed quilts I found 72 quilts with surface-stitched dates. Of those, 86% were dated after 1875. Seamstresses from all eras might use a surface stitch (there were three instances in quilts made before 1850) but a surface stitch signature is more likely to have been made after 1875.

In *Clues in the Calico* on pages 119 and 151, I used the term “chain stitch” in discussing inscriptions when I should have used the more generic word “surface stitch.” The surface stitch used most often for inscriptions is probably the stem or outline stitch, also called the Kensington stitch (see Part 4 for more about stitch names).

The change in technique corresponds to the vogue for outline embroidery used as a decorative technique. Seamstresses who spent their leisure time working outline-stitched pictures for redwork and crazy quilts developed a talent useful for inscriptions. Some translated this talent into a fundraising technique popular from about 1880 through the 1940s. Contributors paid a dime or a quarter to have their names embroidered on a quilt. The finished quilt might be given to a distinguished community member or additional money might be raised through auction or raffle. Some of these signature fundraisers are literally covered with names. In one common style the names are the only pattern on the quilt; embroidered words commonly form spokes in a wheel. As with decorative pictorial quilts, the most popular color combination between 1880 and 1920 was red on white, followed by blue and white.

Once colored embroidery cotton became available after 1910 or so, seamstresses commonly used embroidery floss or cotton twist (Pearl cotton) for their inscriptions. The Pearl cotton was probably a better choice because the floss has a tendency to wear away with washing and other abrasive use.



Quilt date from an online auction. A date of 1834 seems highly unlikely for a red and green applique quilt, because appliqued quilts in that style tend to date from after 1840. I am guessing the embroidered date was probably added after 1880 by a well-meaning family member guessing when the quilt was made.

Added Dates. Dates added later are a problem in appraising and identifying antique quilts. The best clue to an added date is an inscription technique that does not match the quilt's decorative style. A few general rules to alert you to added dates: Quilts made before 1835 or so should be dated in cross-stitch. Quilts made from about 1835 to 1880 or so should be inscribed in ink or cross-stitch for the earlier ones. Quilts made after 1875 are the ones most likely to be dated in an embroidered surface stitch. Quilts made after 1910 are the ones that should be inscribed in colored cotton embroidery floss or twist (aside from red or blue.) While there are always exceptions to any rule, exceptions should be red flags that alert us to a possible added date.

Clues You Can Count On:

- A cross-stitched inscription indicates a quilt made before 1860 or so.
- Album or friendship quilts with blocks signed by individuals date after 1840.
- Inked inscriptions tend to be from about 1830 to the end of the century.
- Surface stitches in an inscription tend to date from after 1875 or '80, with some exceptions.

References:

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