

Hexagons
Continuing Education
July 3rd, 2019
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In the January, 1835, *Godey's Lady's Book*, noted that there is "perhaps no patchwork that is prettier or more ingenious than the hexagon or six sided; this is also called honey-comb patch-work." This particular quote I found in the *Smithsonian Treasury American Quilts*, under a heading of *One Patch* patterns. A picture of a lovely hexagon quilt, double bordered in chintz, and finally fringe sets the stage for our discussion.

The article in *Godey's Ladies Book* also includes directions for making hexagons "properly." It has an example of a quilt made by a South Carolina woman who made a hexagon quilt with approximately 17,871 pieces, with the hexagons measuring 5/8" at their widest! I've made hexagons and perhaps some of you also have done so. However, as I'll show you later, mine are a bit bigger.

These "non-square" units, such as hexagons and diamonds are American elements, but they have roots in traditions of Europe. A wonderful book, *American Quilts in the Industrial Age, 1760-1870*, edited by Patricia Cox Crews and Carolyn Ducey, is part of a comprehensive catalog of the quilts in the *International Quilt Study Center and Museum Collection*. Incidentally, that is the site of the *American Quilt Study Seminar* this fall. I have been there numerous times on trips east and always find it enjoyable.

In the United Kingdom, hexagons would have been pieced over a paper template and then whip stitched together. Sometimes, if only a hexagon top is available, it's possible to see the paper used as a template, occasionally a newspaper. The newspaper is really fun if a piece with a date is discovered. The hexagon shape was particularly popular in both the United Kingdom and the United States at the end of the 18th century and beginning of the 19th century. For probably the past 10 years, making "hexies" has become popular again.

Likely one of the most popular quilts using hexagons made in the early 20th century is *Grandmother's Flower Garden*. I have one that my husband, Greg's, maternal grandmother, Carolyn Janet Blickman started in the 1930s, doing the top. His mother, Emalee Franklin, in 1963, had the ladies of her church hand quilt it. She gave it to us as a gift when we were first married. The size of the hexagons may vary greatly. In my quilt, they're quite large; in others, they are very small. For those of you who have helped with public documentations over the past six or seven years have likely seen many variations. Sometimes, they weren't in the typical layout. Occasionally, one may be found with applique borders or done as a diamond field.

In Robert Shaw's *American Quilts; The Democratic Art, 1780-2007*, he references a lovely medallion mosaic quilt, circa 1825-40. The quilt thought to have been made in

either Reading or Pittsburgh, now may be viewed in *Winterthur Museum*. Shaw notes that the designs may have been influenced by mosaic floors, tables, and other things that could be created from small pebbles, glass made in North Africa 2000 BC. The Moors brought the concept to Europe and it was easily transferred to fabric. Because of this, it became one of the earliest designs used by quilt makers in both the United States and in Europe.

In Jane Lury's book, *Meanderings of a Quilt Collector*, she notes that "hexagons are a classic feature of nineteenth century English quilts that long pre-date the 20th century American *Grandmother's Flower Garden*." I have an English crib quilt that I bought from Jane at an *American Quilt Study Seminar* several years ago. Later, I'll share it with you and its lovely hexagons. Whenever Jane sees me, she immediately knows I am looking for either crib or doll quilts!

Another favorite book in my collection is *Four Centuries of Quilts*, by Linda Baumgarten and Kimberly Smith Ivy. The quilts are in the Colonial Williamsburg collection and at varied times are on display at the *Abby Aldrich Museum* on the property. The authors illustrate the method of making mosaic patchwork or honeycomb, the latter referring to the hexagon shape. They also note that the survival of several dated quilts proves that English women were piecing over paper templates at least by the early 18th century. A silk patchwork is at the *Concord Museum* in Montreal and is dated 1726 and has paper templates.

Baumgarten and Ivy note that paper templates were used well into the 20th century. Little girls got into the act as well. They made fancy quilts for their dolls and sometimes even cradle quilts for their younger siblings.

The authors also picture a gorgeous hexagon pieced quilt top made by an ancestor of Tasha Tudor. The striped borders give the appearance of fringe around the quilt top; an innovative idea.

Hexagons, popular from the early 19th century and still popular today, represent a terrific example of a one patch pattern. If you haven't tried to do them, you may be surprised at how much fun they can be. Today, it's possible to buy the templates in varied sizes in most quilt shops. Enjoy a new type of quilt making!

Reference Books

- *American Quilts; The Democratic Art, 1780-2007*; Robert Shaw: (2009).
- *American Quilts in the Industrial Age, 1760-1870*; International Quilt Center and Study and Museum Collections; edited by Patricia Cox and Carolyn Ducey: (2018).
- *American Quilts; Smithsonian Treasury*; Doris M Bowman: (1991).
- *Four Centuries of Quilts; The Colonial Williamsburg Collection*; Linda Baumgarten and Kimberly Smith Ivy: (2014).

- *Meanderings of a Quilt Collector*; Jane Lury: (2016).