

# Clues in the Quilting

by GILDA V. BRYANT

If you're interested in genealogy, an old signature quilt might provide clues to cracking a family mystery,



Linda Bourn has learned a lot about her family history by researching names on this quilt.



This 1930s Signature Quilt is owned by Linda Bourn of Canyon, Texas.

if you know what to look for and where to look.

Signature quilts, also known as autograph or friendship quilts, were created with great gusto by quilters who copied the 1800s autograph-album fad.

Presented as gifts to brides and special community members, or made in memory of loved ones, these quilts often included signatures of church members or entire families.

Before 1900, they were usually given to people moving west. Friendship quilts served as precious reminders of friends and family left behind, which may explain why so many have survived.

## The Clues

Signature quilts, signed with permanent ink or embroidered signatures, often included dates, drawings or verses. Sometimes signature stencils



This signature on Linda Bourn's quilt is a good example of an embroidered signature using a stencil.

were used, but usually participants wrote freehand.

To detect genealogy clues, check labels or handwritten notes for information. You may discover why a quilt was made, for whom, and its completion date. Be aware that some modest quiltmakers concealed their names in embroidery or quilting stitches, making the hunt even more challenging.

Materials used in quilt construction provide hints. Quilts with cotton batts will have dense quilting to prevent bearding or migration. Wool batting was more common in colder, northern climates. Quilts with a cornhusk batting might have originated in Iowa, Illinois, Nebraska or Indiana. Spanish-moss batting points to the south for its creation.

Examine the stitches on your mystery quilt. Are they uneven or inexact throughout? Either an older woman with poor eyesight or a young, inexperienced person in a hurry quilted it. One skillful quilter will produce even, consistent stitches, while several styles of confident quilting stitches indicate two or three quilters.

Compare the signatures on your friendship quilt. If they're different, each person signed his or her own block. Matching quilt autographs to signatures on deeds, marriage licenses, or other legal documents

is exciting; however, nothing worthwhile is easy—usually the woman with the best penmanship wrote the names.



The signatures on this quilt are all different, indicating that each person signed her own name.

### Where to Look

If you know where your quilt originated, check the following for information: local historical societies; Ancestry.com; cemetery records; census records; and old newspapers.

To determine approximate timelines, search birth, marriage or death records; probate records and wills; family Bibles; and diaries.

Examine old plat maps in the county courthouse or local historical society to determine where people lived. Women and men who signed quilts were often friends, cousins or neighbors who lived nearby.

Look at the quilt block itself.

### Making Invisible Signatures Come to Life

With the passage of time, signature-quilt inks will fade or become corrosive, actually dissolving cotton and other natural fibers over the years.

If you have faded signatures, take a close-up digital photo without the flash. Using Adobe PhotoShop or Microsoft Photo Editor, manipulate the photo allowing the signature to appear.

Once the signature is clear, make a transparency to compare with other signatures on the quilt, or with legal documents.

### Helpful Books

*Clues in the Calico: A Guide to Identifying and Dating Antique Quilts* by Barbara Brackman (1989).

*America's Printed Fabrics 1770–1890* by Barbara Brackman (2004).

*Dating Fabrics: A Color Guide 1800–1960* by Eileen Trestain (1998).

*The Hidden Half of the Family: A Sourcebook for Women's Genealogy* by Christina Kassabian Schaefer (1999).

Books are available to help family-history buffs determine when a block pattern was first introduced to quilters.

### Fabrics Tell a Story

Have an expert appraiser study fabric colors, patterns, textures and weaves to determine approximately when they were made. That information will help you determine the approximate age of the quilt and its makers.

Fabrics also reveal the quilter's wealth. Cotton, shirtings, feed sacks, or homespun fabrics indicate ladies of modest means. Finer materials, such as satin, velvet or silks, were often unavailable to rural areas. Cosmopolitan women, with more disposable income, used more expensive fabrics.

Lucky is the quilter who happens to own a vintage signature quilt. With patience and the mind of a sleuth, you can discover new facts about your family history as you look for clues in the quilting. **QW**

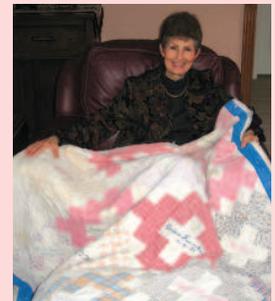
### Happy Quilt Reunion

Luanne Bailey, a Pennsylvania quilter, purchased a signature quilt on eBay and became curious about the women who signed it. She says, "I love old handmade quilts, especially those that have been signed and dated by the makers. I wonder who the people were who made them and why they were made. Was it for a wedding, a moving-away gift, or other special event?"

Curious and determined to trace the quilt's roots, Luanne searched the Internet for historical or genealogical societies in the Texas towns of Childress and Silverton, clues embroidered on the quilt. She was pleased to contact Mrs. Nadyne Lynn, who had posted a message on a genealogy Web site.



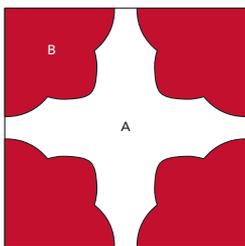
This block has a name and date, allowing a researcher to establish a timeline for the quilt and the person who signed the block.



Luanne Bailey's eBay find made its way home again.

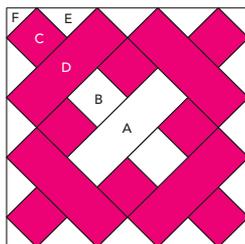
After several lengthy e-mails and phone conversations, Nadyne was delighted to purchase the multigenerational quilt. She knew or had heard of many of the people who signed this project, making it a special find.

She says, "I learned more about my Dudley side of the family." She thinks the quilt was made for one of her aunts. After her death, this heirloom was sold and found its way to eBay where Luanne snatched it up. Nadyne admits with a smile, "I'm thrilled to have this quilt back in the family again."



**Tulip Corners**  
12" x 12" Block

Try these two simple patterns if you would like to leave some clues for future generations by making a signature quilt of your own.



**Washington Sidewalk**  
12" x 12" Block

### TULIP CORNERS BLOCK

If you liked Linda Bourn's signature quilt, here is the pattern and instructions to complete one block.

### INSTRUCTIONS

#### Cutting for 1 Block

- 1-12½" light-color A square
- 4 dark-color B pieces using pattern given

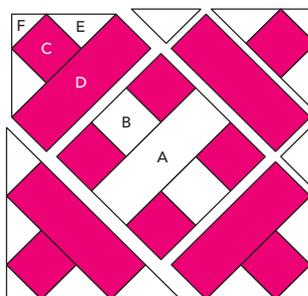
#### Completing the Block

**Step 1.** Prepare B pieces for machine or hand appliqué, as desired.

**Step 2.** Align the B pieces on the A square with corners aligned; stitch B in place by hand or machine.

### WASHINGTON SIDEWALK BLOCK

This signature block was used in the quilt that found its way home to Nadyne Lynn.



**Washington Sidewalk**  
Piecing Diagram

### INSTRUCTIONS

#### Cutting for 1 Block

Light fabrics

- 1-2½" x 6⅞" A rectangle
- 2-2⅝" B squares
- 3-4¼" E squares; cut on both diagonals to make 12 E triangles
- 2-2⅜" F squares; cut in half on 1 diagonal to make 4 F triangles

Dark fabrics

- 8-2⅝" C squares
- 4-2⅝" x 6⅞" D rectangles

#### Completing the Block

**Step 1.** Referring to the Piecing Diagram, sew B between two

C squares; press seams toward C. Repeat.

**Step 2.** Sew A between the B-C units; press seams toward B-C.

**Step 3.** Sew E to two opposite sides of C and add F to complete a C corner unit; press seams toward E and F. Repeat to make four C corner units.

**Step 4.** Sew a C corner unit to each D rectangle; press seams toward D.

**Step 5.** Sew a C-D unit to two opposite sides of the A-B-C unit; press seams toward the C-D units.

**Step 6.** Sew E to each end of D in the remaining C-D units; press seams toward E.

**Step 7.** Sew the C-D-E units to the remaining sides of A-B-C to complete the block. **QW**



# CLUES IN THE QUILTING TEMPLATE

