

More Instructions

What you should understand when undertaking the construction of a quilt is that it is comprised of spare time as well as excess material. Something left over from a homemade dress or a man's shirt or curtains for the kitchen window. It utilizes that which would normally be thrown out, "waste," and eliminates the extra, the scraps. And out of that which is left comes a new, useful object.

Take material from clothing that belongs to some family member or friend or lover (if you find yourself to be that sort of a girl). Bind them together carefully. Wonder at the disparity of your life. Finger the patches representing "lover" and meditate on the meaning of illicit love in early American society. Failing that, consider the meaning of the affair in today's time frame.

The Roanoke Island Company, founded by Sir Walter Raleigh in 1585, completely disappeared—all 117 men, women, and children—by 1590 with no one knowing exactly what took place during that five-year period, and a single word carved into a tree the only viable clue: CROATOAN. No historian has figured out what that means. This you will find as the genesis and recurring theme in America as founded by the English: that we are a people fraught with mysteries and clues; there are things that cannot be fathomed.

Do not forget that the Norse, Spanish, French, Italians, and god knows who else arrived before the English, relative latecomers to this place, and that the Indians stood on the shores, awaiting them all. These same Indians were exploited by the English, who were lazy and preferred to spend their time smoking tobacco on the banks of the James River rather than till the soil, expecting "someone else" to do it for them. Killing themselves by the end of the first winter because, as they emphatically told the Indians, *We are not farmers. We are explorers*, then demanded their provisions. Some say this is where the seeds of slavery were sown. An institution the English were not devious enough to come up with on their own, instead adopting it from the Spanish, who had been dealing in African flesh for a number of years. But that is another story.

Consider that women came across the Atlantic from the beginning and were not allowed to vote until 1920. A quick calculation leaves you wondering about those hundreds of years in between. You are curious about their power, their spheres of influence. Most historians agree that the first president voted in by the women was a washout, a different sort of man than Washington, Lincoln, Jefferson, and so on. Men can take credit for those presidents.

Recall that women who came to newly colonized America often outlived their husbands and that it was not uncommon, in those early Virginia days, for them to be widowed and inherit, remarry, be widowed and inherit, remarry, and so on. This, you would think; may have been a frightening cycle to a number of men in the area, never knowing when their number was up, so to speak. But with so few careers open to women at the time, they simply made the best with what they had to work with. Not unlike fashioning a quilt from scraps, if you think about it. And

there weren't that many of them, proportionally speaking. With that sort of social arrangement, you find yourself wondering if all these husband deaths were strictly due to natural causes; but to conjecture such a thought, without historical verification, would be to assume the worst about the early settlers. No reputable historian would suggest such a thing: duplicitous, untrustworthy, murderous women. Not just any women, but *wives*.

She used whatever material she had at hand and if she was too overburdened with work she could ask her husband, sweetly, with sugar in her voice, to please, please look into acquiring an indentured servant. England, experiencing a bit of an economic crisis, had a surplus of unemployed citizens it was not much interested in caring for, and Virginia, Tidewater, and Maryland took on the look of an acceptable repository. Ah, but that is to confuse convicts with indentures and, really, they are not the same. An indentured servant is more like a slave, whereas a convict is more like a caged man. Different. You see.

Later, a turn in England's financial fortunes led to a drop-off of people interested in coming to America as servants, what with renewed opportunity at home (and that unholy Atlantic crossing), and an attempt to fill the resulting American employment gap paved the way for African-American slavery. But that is another story.

The nineteenth century brought an explosion of ideas to the concept of the quilt, of a woman's political voice. Not to mention the domestic conflicts of the Revolutionary War, followed by the Civil War (with one or two small—by comparison—skirmishes in between). Ignore the fact that the Revolution still left some unequal and the Civil War had a rather specific definition of brother against brother, neglecting to include color or gender. That, too, is another story.

Your concern might be trying to reduce your chosen quilt topic to more manageable dimensions. For example, the Revolutionary War could be defined as a bloody betrayal. One can almost hear the voice of Mother England crying, "But you are mine. An extension of me. You promised to be faithful, to send back your riches and keep me in a style to which I have become accustomed." America's answer something like: "I need my space. It isn't that I am not fond of you. We can still maintain a friendly trading relationship."

There is the Civil War, which is a conflict of the blood tie. No one fights dirtier or more brutally than blood; only family knows its own weakness, the exact placement of the heart. The tragedy is that one can still love with the force of hatred. Feel infuriated that once you are born to another, that kinship lasts through life and death, immutable, unchanging, no matter how great the misdeed or betrayal. Blood cannot be denied, and perhaps that is why we fight tooth and claw, because we cannot, being only human, put asunder what God has joined together.

Women were witness to Abraham Lincoln's assassination. Find some quality silk and cotton in red, white, and blue. Cut white stars in the evening as you sit on your summer porch. Appliqué the letters that spell out your name, your country, your grief. Stitch across the quilt a flag held in the beak of a dove. Ponder the fact that you could not vote for the man but will defy any male citizen who will not allow you your measure of sorrow at the president's sudden death. Say something in cloth about the Union lasting, preserved. Listen to the men expound their personal

satisfaction in glory of the vote. Listen to them express surprise that you, too, would like to vote and be heard. They might say, *This is not your concern*, and conclude that perhaps you are too idle at home and should consider having another child.

Save your opinions for your quilt. Put your heart and voice into it. Cast your ballot; express your feelings regarding industrialization, emancipation, women's suffrage, your love of family.

Send away for silk ribbon printed with black-lined photolithographs. Try your hand at doing these ink drawings yourself. Experiment with the colors newly available from nineteenth-century factories: peacock blue, scarlet, jade green, eggplant, and amber. Save a scrap of velvet. For texture.

As the nineteenth century draws to a close, be sure to express your gratitude for the "improvements" in your life; you can drive your own buggy, attend college, or work in a textile factory in Lowell, Massachusetts. And do not forget the popular magazines like *Peterson's* or *Godey's Lady's Book*, which encourage the decorative quilt over the story quilt (the quilt with a voice), as it can safely be displayed outside the bedroom without offense. Place it in the parlor. Simply to work a pattern and color with no ulterior thought is the mark of a woman of leisure and reflects well on her husband.

You want to keep these things in mind: history and family. How they are often inseparable. In the twentieth century you may feel that all those things that went before have little to do with you, that you are made immune to the past by the present day: All those dead people and conflicts and ideas – why, they are only stories we tell one another. History and politics and conflict and rebellion and family and betrayal.

Think about it.

**Whitney Otto, How to Make an American Quilt,
1991, p 9-12**