



ILLUSTRATION 1. *Map of the Western Reserve Including the Firelands of Ohio, 1826.* Collection of the Western Reserve Historical Society.

Introduction



FOR THOSE WHO LOVE QUILTS, OHIO IS A wonderful place to explore. One reason is that groups of people who settled in Ohio came from many diverse regions, and the women in these families made bed coverings, including quilts. Depending on where the settlers came from, they had their own favorite quilt styles, just as we do today. Early settlers migrated from western Virginia, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, New York, and Connecticut. Groups of immigrants also came from Germany, England, Wales, and Switzerland.

Another reason to study and enjoy Ohio's quilts is that many of them were made during a period of dynamic changes when enormous improvements were made, both in transportation and in textile technology. Communities had been fairly isolated until canals and the National Road opened, making transportation easier.

Improvements in textile technology made quilt-making more exciting and varied. As early as 1809, cotton mills had opened in New England. The following year Samuel Slater of Rhode Island began selling three-ply sewing thread. By 1820 the invention of cylinder printing was allowing factories to

print fabrics much more rapidly than had been possible in the past. The result of these technological improvements was that fabrics became more available and were cheap enough for most quiltmakers to buy.

Prior to these improvements, American fabrics—wool, linen, and some cotton—were made by hand, an extremely tedious and lengthy process, no matter what the fabric was. Linen, for example, involved twelve different activities taking a total of fourteen months, from sowing the flax seed to weaving the thread.¹

These rapid improvements in textile technology occurred nearly two hundred years ago. Is it possible to see cultural and regional differences in quilts made that long ago and also today? It certainly is.

Every family was a manufacturing establishment to a certain extent. We raised flax and made thread, and carded, spun, wove, colored, cut and made our own garments. Oak bark and the shucks of walnuts and butter-nuts served as coloring materials

—“Pioneer Incidents in the Life of Susan A. Wilbor, of Milan,” *Firelands Pioneer*, September 1, 1876

Printed Muslins, which now [1858] can be had for 6 cents, then [1811] cost 75 cents per yard.

—Mrs. B. Williams, “Memoir,” *Firelands Pioneer*, 1858

All the quilts in this book relate to Ohio’s Western Reserve, and most were made there. They were selected not because they are exceptionally beautiful, but because they have something to say about the Western Reserve. The earliest of these quilts were brought from New England to Ohio. Various kinds of community quilts are more recent; most were made after quilt patterns began to be published, and many are similar to quilts made in other parts of Ohio and beyond.

Military and presidential quilts relate specifically to the Western Reserve. The presidential quilts

Cotton, from its great abundance and comparative cheapness, as well as from the facility with which it may be wrought up by machinery has, to a considerable extent, superseded wool, silk, and linen as a material for many articles of dress, both useful and ornamental. . . . Muslins, having been very extensively adopted as an article of dress for ladies, have greatly diminished the consumption of those silk and linen fabrics to which the choice of female dress was formerly limited. It may be added that the more common manufacturers of cotton, after being dyed and printed, have supplied the middle ranks with a cheaper and more elegant material both for dress and furniture, than were in general use in former times.

—Thomas Webster and Mrs. Frances Parkes, *Encyclopedia of Domestic Economy*, 1848

honor two presidents who lived there; both were assassinated. Quilts dealing with social concerns are unique to the Western Reserve. Others reflect the cultural and geographical environment and include both a traditional Amish quilt and Rock and Roll Hall of Fame quilt, made two years and forty-two miles apart.

To identify specific quilt blocks, see the diagram in illustration 2.

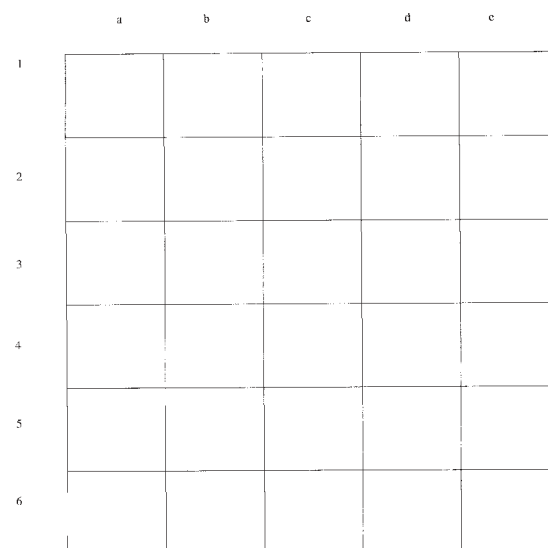


ILLUSTRATION 2. Diagram: How to identify quilt blocks

The Western Reserve



THE WESTERN RESERVE IN OHIO WAS ONCE part of Connecticut. When English settlers first arrived in New England in 1629 no one had any idea how far land extended beyond the eastern seaboard. The English crown made grants to various regions, including Connecticut, but the western boundaries were defined vaguely or not at all. Several territories overlapped, making lengthy negotiations necessary. Connecticut eventually yielded territories in New York and Pennsylvania, and in 1786 “reserved” a wide region beginning at Pennsylvania’s western border and going west 120 miles. This region was a continuation of Connecticut’s northern and southern borders, although the northern boundary actually runs through Lake Erie. This region was known as “New Connecticut,” the “Connecticut Reserve” and other names, and is now known in Ohio as the “Western Reserve.”²

Between 1777 and 1781, British troops burned and destroyed nine seacoast towns in Connecticut. The destruction was so severe that the Connecticut General Assembly set apart a half million acres of land at the western end of the Western Reserve as reparation lands for the sufferers. This region is

now called the “Firelands”; it includes Erie and Huron counties, a small portion of Ashland County to the south, and Danbury Township in Ottawa County.³

Joining American Indians and French Jesuits,⁴ the Western Reserve’s earliest settlers were almost all New Englanders, with the large majority from Connecticut. They brought with them their history and material culture, which is still visible in architecture, villages, cemeteries, and town names. Along some roads drivers can see one Greek Revival house after another, with their beautiful gable ends facing the road. Many roads are absolutely straight, intersecting every five miles with crossroads that are town centers. There is usually a church, a school, and a library in these town squares or greens. Many cemeteries in the Western Reserve have tombstones with arched lunettes flanked by right-angle shoulders, a New England style dating to the earliest times of Euro-American settlement. And many Western Reserve communities share names with those in Connecticut: New Haven, New London, Fairfield, Norwalk, Greenwich, Plymouth, Litchfield, and Danbury are only a few.