Quiltmaking is a craft skill usually identified as women’s work and pleasure. The practice of quiltmaking—stitching layers of fabric and fiber into a textile sandwich—developed in antiquity. In America, quiltmaking bears the stamp of both mass culture (national trends) and folk ways (localized tradition). Many West Virginia quilts resemble those made by women of similar circumstances anywhere in the nation. Quiltmaking practices are rarely confined to political boundaries such as state lines; popular culture and taste are national and regional in character. Folk ways occur wherever particular patterns or construction methods are followed by those living in the area, maintaining the traditional way of doing things. On a regional basis, antique quilts from West Virginia are often similar to others made in the Southern Highlands, the Appalachian Mountain region south of the Mason-Dixon line. This chapter concludes with an attempt to answer the question, what is a West Virginia quilt?

Many of the quilts brought to the West Virginia Heritage Quilt Search had never before been displayed to the public. Preserved from one generation to the next, with accompanying family lineage and anecdotes, the quilts provide a way to touch the past. Much information remains to be uncovered. Any number of quilts featured in this book would benefit from further research, opening new avenues of appreciation for history wrought in stitches. This book is a starting place for those who look to quilts for messages about West Virginia’s past.

Every quilt tells a story. Learning to “read” these stories involves analyzing known facts about patchwork style and construction, fabrics, and quilting patterns. Quilt study invites discovery of quilts as records of social and economic currents in American life. On a personal level, family quilts are valuable and significant possessions. Quilts radiate emotional comfort and evoke appreciation for the time and talent invested in their creation. At one time, quilts provided necessary protection from cold weather, piled high on the bed to provide wintertime warmth when the household fires were banked low for the night. With today’s heated bedrooms and insulated dwellings, patchwork quilts often fulfill a more symbolic than utilitarian role, adding a homey atmosphere to the modern environment.

Quilts present a variety of viewpoints for study, provoking intellectual attention as textile documents produced almost exclusively by women, and inspiring aesthetic recognition for visual appeal and tactile sensibility. Almost instinctively upon viewing a quilt, the beholder yearns to touch the fabric, captivated by sensual attraction. Notwithstanding their appeal, quilts might be overlooked as significant historical documents because of their overt function as household bedding, produced and used within a domestic setting. Therein lies the value, however, as each quilt is a record of the household in which it was created. With study, it is possible to read the stitches, decipher the fabrics, and understand the bed quilt as a textile text. In her quilt, the quiltmaker preserved a material record of her world, including available technology, type of economy, communication with style centers, and cultural heritage.

Technology has an important role in quilt history, with developments in the textile industry determining what materials were available to the quiltmaker. American textile mills devoted to manufacture of cotton fabric were gaining a foothold in the industry in the 1820s, but it was decades before their output contributed significantly to the marketplace. Before that time, fabric for quiltmaking was an expensive, imported commodity. The considerable amount of time and materials required to construct a quilt limited the practice of quiltmaking. During the decades before the Civil War, quiltmakers from prosperous
families stitched luxury fabrics from England and France into decorative finery for the bed, displaying their cultivated taste and freedom to spend time in ornamental needlework. West Virginia quilts from this era are similar to ones made in Maryland, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and eastern Virginia. Floral appliqué and repeating pieced blocks on a white background with consistent fabrics (that is, not with an assortment of sewing scraps) are typical. Results from the West Virginia Heritage Quilt Search indicate that the state’s quiltmakers followed national trends, producing stylish quilts that rival any quilts produced elsewhere. For example, repeating-block pieced signature quilts of the 1840s are often associated with New England and the Mid-Atlantic region, but we find an elegant example made on Patterson Creek in Mineral County in 1848 by Rebecca Babb Johnson (20296). Another West Virginia quilt made by Harriette Boswell Alexander Caperton (60455) about the same time as Rebecca Johnson’s signature quilt illustrates a personal and commercial link between Monroe County and Baltimore, Maryland.

This appliqué Album quilt top from Monroe County was stitched in antebellum western Virginia, with stylistic inspiration from Baltimore City. Harriette Boswell Alexander Caperton (born 1820) cut and stitched fine calicos, using needle-turn appliqué, creating designs with bold vitality. Harriette’s work is distinguished from more cosmopolitan appliqué Album quilts by her extreme abstraction of figures, making it nearly impossible to identify some of her appliqué images. Other figures, such as classical red lyre, cornucopia/liberty cap, and flowers in a vessel, are clearly related to images on Baltimore Album quilts of the 1840s. Layered appliqué—a third piece of fabric inserted between the background and the appliqué overlay—denotes exposure to sophisticated Album quilts of the era. Harriette’s ingenuity is reflected in the unusual five-point stars cut into shapes created with four-part symmetry, featured in three blocks. None of the blocks are signed, and all except one appear to be from the same hand. This quilt top was discovered assembled, but with a block missing from the upper left corner, so a new block was made, and the top lined and bound by employees of Shelly Zegart, in Kentucky. The Harriette Boswell Alexander Caperton quilt top exhibits an arresting sensibility, combining complex fabric manipulation, resolute composition, and the kind of quirky imagination found in naïf folk art.

Harriette’s biography includes Monroe County’s early settlers. She is descended from Alexanders, Erskines, and Capertons who claimed vast tracts in fertile limestone valleys, raising livestock and building plantations. In 1843 Harriette married William Gaston Caperton, a second cousin. Harriette’s parents were Henry Alexander and Elizabeth Lourie Cathrae, her paternal grandparents, James Alexander and Isabella Erskine. The Alexanders and Erskines were displaced from Scotland in the eighteenth century, immigrating to the mountains of colonial Virginia and settling in Monroe County about 1770, when the area was still a frontier. The Caperton family roots trace to northern France, from whence John Capbritton emigrated in 1725.

Family lineage illuminates the Baltimore connection, with Erskine relatives living in Maryland, and Alexanders engaged as merchants in both Baltimore and Monroe County. It appears likely that Harriette may have visited family in Maryland and come into contact with the stylish quilts of the 1840s and 1850s. In her appliqué Album, the rose wreaths and crossed stems are the most conventionalized motifs, yet they exhibit a curious touch that sets them apart from mainstream renditions, while the shapes fill space in an exuberant manner. The tiny yellow ovoid underlays are a particularly piquant touch.

In addition to her appliqué Album top, Harriette’s memory is preserved in a series of letters she wrote from Monroe County between 1860 and 1866 to her son John (deceased 1867) during his service to the Confederate States of America, which reside in the collection of the Virginia Historical Society Archives.
WVHQS 60455
Harriette Caperton Appliqué Album
Union, Monroe Co.
Harriet Boswell Alexander Caperton (1820–1899)
c. 1845
After the Civil War, industrial development brought affordable cotton cloth and thread, and sewing machines, into the homes of working-class women. The “scrap” quilt made its appearance, displaying the wide variety of printed cotton fabrics now available in the marketplace. Pieced block patterns published in newspapers and other periodicals brought contemporary trends into the homes of many West Virginians beginning in the late nineteenth century.

By the turn of the century, a confluence of factors in West Virginia led to the development of a particularly tenacious quilt style: the utility Crazy quilt. During the 1880s and Gay Nineties, fancy Crazy quilts made with velvet and satin fabrics were a national fad; their rich, eclectic look suited Victorian taste. Because Crazy quilts are constructed with odd and random pieces of fabric, rather than precisely cut shapes required for other patchwork, this ease of preparation might have appealed to West Virginia women with little or no previous quiltmaking experience—such as wives of immigrant laborers in the coal industry or rural women who lacked exposure to the needlecraft artistry of precise patchwork. In West Virginia, the Crazy quilt flourished long after fading from the national scene. Mountain State quilters continued to stitch Crazy quilts made from pieces of recycled garments, printed feed sacks, and polyester double knits. West Virginia quilters’ fondness for Crazy quilts led to the creation of a hybrid quilt style, combining features from Crazy quilts with Log Cabin construction.

Both Log Cabin and Crazy patchwork became part of the quilter’s lexicon at about the same time, during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Both are based on a foundation piecing method, wherein patches are sewn onto, and eventually cover, a square of lighter-weight foundation fabric to make a block. Thirty-six Log Cabin blocks, all identical in color scheme, were crafted by Sally Goshia Gum Sheets (1870–1938) at Huntersville, in Pocahontas County, their seam lines covered with embroidery in identical colors and stitches throughout. Sally appears at the center in a photograph taken about 1915, with her husband and children.

Perhaps because her quilt was clearly the product of considerable labor, and perhaps because the wool fabrics used for patchwork did not lend themselves to laundry, Sally’s quilt has been preserved from exposure to soap and water. This is a great blessing in terms of fabric preservation. The quilt is lined with a black cotton fabric printed in neon-bright colors, characteristic of the late 1800s, which would have vanished in a laundry tub. Sally’s embroidery stitches are carried through the lining to the back of the quilt, and function as “quilting.” There is no filling. In the quilt top, the red and black fabrics are garment-weight wools; the beige is eccentric twill upholstery fabric.
Crazy quilt traditions—eclectic fabric combinations and decorative embroidery—blend with Log Cabin patchwork in this quilt made by Ida Jane McClung Walkup (1871–1942) in Greenbrier County. Ida McClung and Sally Gum were born within a year of each other, and lived their married lives in adjoining counties, their homes about seventy miles distant. While nothing is known of any connection between the two women, their quilts spring from the same stylistic vocabulary. The Log Cabin–Crazy quilt hybrid is not recognized as a national style trend, but seems to have found fruitful soil in West Virginia.

Courthouse Steps, a variation of Log Cabin, is the name given to this patchwork pattern. Silk, wool, and cotton fabrics are included in Ida’s version. Chrome orange cotton, more often found in quilts created years before Ida’s birth, combines with cotton morning (or mourning) prints produced at least a decade after her birth. The combination of fibers and types of fabrics is typical of Crazy quilts, but not common in Log Cabin construction.

Ida was born at Blue Sulphur Springs in southwestern Greenbrier County, which is also the birthplace of Robert E. Lee’s horse, Traveler. Ida’s mother was Rebecca Ann Crane. When she was twenty-three, Ida married seventy-six-year-old Marshall Washington Walkup (1818–1918), a native of Virginia. They made their home in Dean Hollow, near Smoot. Marshall, who had not married previously, operated a sawmill and farmed. Ida and Marshall raised seven children. Ida is seen with three daughters in the family photo. Marshall lived to be one hundred years old. Ida’s quilt descended to a daughter, Delta Sarah Walkup Shortridge, and thence to her granddaughter, Helen Shortridge Brackenrich, who cared for her grandmother in Ida’s declining years. The quilt remained all the while in southwestern Greenbrier Country.

WVHQS 60588
Embroidered Log Cabin
Dean Hollow, Greenbrier Co.
Ida Jane McClung Walkup (1871–1942)
c. 1890

Ida Walkup with daughters, 1905
Quiltmaking practices associated with cultural ancestry were identified during the West Virginia Heritage Quilt Search. For example, in areas settled primarily by Scotch-Irish, quiltmakers were more apt to use an allover quilting design known as the fans, made by tracing rows of concentric arcs across the surface of the quilt. In areas of German settlement, quilts often have emphatic borders defining the quilt perimeter (absent in Scotch-Irish quilts). German American quiltmakers are more likely to use different quilting designs for each section of the quilt top, that is, one design in the border, another in the pieced blocks, and a third in the plain blocks. With regard to fabric arrangements, German American quiltmakers prefer mirror symmetry, creating a strict balance (A-B-A), while Scotch-Irish quiltmakers tend to arrange fabrics sequentially (A-B, A-B) and eschew symmetrical balance.

West Virginia quiltmakers retain old ways of doing things by hemming a quilt (folding the lining to the front) rather than applying a binding to the edge, and by using the pattern name “Dutch Girl” for an appliqué figure known elsewhere as “Sunbonnet Sue.” (The name “Dutch Girl” is found in the southeastern United States, while “Sunbonnet Sue” is associated with the Midwest; the latter gained national currency.) Quiltmakers in southern West Virginia may join their blocks in a zigzag manner, a setting known as Fencerow, uncommon elsewhere and possibly Welsh in origin. Some West Virginia quilts carry material evidence of the diversified farmstead, once the predominant lifestyle in the Mountain State, with fillings made from batts of hand-carded sheep wool from the family flock.

From interviews with quiltmakers as well as from the historical record, we know that quiltmaking often afforded the homemaker a degree of leisure. After all, sewing is done sitting down, offering respite from more onerous chores. Some of the routine labor required of homemakers in earlier days is described by Jane J. Siers of the West Virginia Humanities Council in her essay, “Home: The Traditional Workplace”:

West Virginia women for generations tended their homes and cared for their families as their primary responsibility. . . . While the Progressive Era (1890–1920) saw more innovations in domestic science than any other before it, the work of the homemaker of this period was still physically hard and heavy. Yet this work should not be dismissed as mindless drudgery, for it required skills passed from mother to daughter, and without this work families could not have survived. The preparation of one simple meal began hours ahead—sometimes days or months in advance with the preservation of fruits and vegetables and the salting or smoking of meat. And whether the meal was breakfast, dinner, or supper (the three distinctions on the rural menu), fire in some form was required to cook the food. This heat in the kitchen was welcome in winter as sometimes the only source of heat in the home, but made for suffocating work during the hot summer months. . . . Fuel had to be carried into the home several times a day. While cutting wood or hauling coal to the house was almost always the work of the men or boys in the family, the women of the home were most often responsible for hauling the fuel into the kitchen and stoking the fire. On baking or laundry days, this was a continual process, as well as a dirty and tiring one. . . . The designation of a particular day as washday, most often Monday, was not merely product of some arbitrary rules system, for washing was, quite literally, ‘an all day job.’ Monday was often chosen because Sunday, the Sabbath, was the day when most families exchanged their soiled clothing for clean. In all but the most strictly religious homes, the dirtiest laundry was put to soak on Sunday night in preparation for the Monday washday. . . . [Laundry] required the entire day for carrying, boiling, and emptying gallons of water. . . . Since few rural West Virginia homes had water inside the house even in the 1920s, this precious commodity had to be hauled from the well or pump, then lifted up onto the stove for heating, lifted back down, carried to the laundry site (usually a porch or yard), and then hauled away to the place where it was emptied for disposal.¹

With respect to the laundering of quilts, it must be noted that West Virginia quiltmakers were often careful to protect their quilts from soil to eliminate the need for frequent laundering, which takes a severe toll on the life of any quilt. Many quiltmakers preferred to avoid washing their quilts; airing on the clothesline was usually cited as a good method for freshening quilts. In some households, the top cover on a bed was an easily laundered bedspread or sheet, to protect the quilts underneath. Some quiltmakers basted a removable panel over one end of the quilt to protect it from contact with the body. (Like washday, bathing was often a once-a-week activity, typically performed on Saturday night as preface to the Sunday donning of clean clothing.) Quilts and quiltmaking play an important role in West Virginia’s cultural identity. The concept of “making do” with materials at hand fits the character of the independent Mountaineer. Quiltmaking is celebrated with annual quilt shows in
communities around the state (see Appendix C). Even today, women’s groups not uncommonly turn to quiltmaking as a way to raise money for a worthy cause. During the 1970s federal War on Poverty, a number of West Virginia quiltmaking cooperatives were established.

In 1978, the only United States postage stamp to depict a patchwork quilt was issued as part of a series dedicated to the theme of American Folk Art. The stamp was designed by artist Christopher Pullman of Boston, based upon a pieced Baskets quilt (c. 1875) in the collection of American Hurrah Antiques of New York City. The first-day issue event took place in Charleston, West Virginia, at the behest of Senator Jennings Randolph, chair of the Postal and Civil Service Commission. At that time, the governor of West Virginia was John D. “Jay” Rockefeller IV; his wife, Sharon, was actively involved with the Mountain Artisans quiltmaking cooperative. For the ceremonial first-day issue cancellation, West Virginia quilt authority Holice Tumbow helped organize a quilt event for the Great Hall of the State Cultural Center. West Virginia quilters were asked to loan quilts in either of two categories, Baskets or Postage Stamp (constructed entirely of patches the size of a postage stamp). Forty-five quilts were displayed in the Great Hall, quilting demonstrations were staged, and the Rural Arts and Crafts Association of Parkersburg sold quilt blocks designed by Turnbow replicating the design of the new stamp.

Depicted clockwise from upper left: a block of quilt stamps; United States Senator Jennings Randolph with Norman Fagan, West Virginia Director of Culture and History; the first-day cachet produced by the Cultural Center; and West Virginia First Lady Sharon Rockefeller with a Baskets quilt.
Glossary of Quilt Components

Quiltmaking is a practical craft as well as an art. As with other crafts, a certain amount of “how to” must be mastered at the outset. The basic components of a quilt are defined here. Quilting is the stitching together of layers. A bed quilt consists of two layers of fabric with an insulating material sandwiched between. The top layer provides the visual focal point and the bottom layer, as lining, usually remains very simple. The insulating material may be wool or cotton fibers, polyester batting (after 1960), or sometimes a blanket or another quilt. Quilting stitches secure the filling and bind the layers together. Knotting or tying is an alternative to quilting.

Appliqué  Patchwork created by applying cutout shapes onto a background

Back  Quilt lining; the reverse side of a quilt

Binding  Edge finish

Block  Quilt top construction unit; also called a square

Border  Panels used to frame the quilt top

Cornerstones  Square patches used at the intersection of sashing strips

Fans  Common quilting pattern, consisting of rows of concentric arcs

Filling  Layer between the top and back, also called wadding or batting

Patchwork  Decorative device created with pieces of fabric

Pieced  Patchwork created by joining cutout shapes with seams

Quilting  Stitching layers together; may refer to the process or the result

Sashing  Strips separating blocks; also called strips or stripping

Setting blocks  Plain blocks separating patchwork blocks

Top  Decorative side of a quilt

The quilt top may be of two types: whole-cloth or patchwork. Whole-cloth quilt tops are “blank” in effect, made entirely of one fabric. Quilting designs provide the only decoration. Whole-cloth quilts dating back to the Middle Ages feature elaborate scenes illustrating historical legends. Whole-cloth quilts from panels of wool or wool-and-linen fabric were made in America during the colonial era; they are rare, found more often in the Northeast. About 1800, the whole-cloth style appears in white cotton in coincidence with neoclassical influence in the decorative arts. The Pricket family quilt (pp. 30–31) is an example of whole-cloth quiltmaking in the Federal or neoclassical style, with its cool formalism expressed in the simple white surface and calculated symmetry. Whole-cloth quilts made of cotton sateen were popular in the first half of the twentieth century (see pp. 202–4 for an example made in England), and the whole-cloth format is a mainstay of the simplest of quilts, also called comforts or comfortables (see pp. 66–67 for an example made in Wayne County of handwoven fabric).

For a decorative quilt top, patchwork is the predominant method, with patches cut from various fabrics arranged to form designs and patterns. The most common format for patchwork quilt tops is a collection of related blocks seamed together. Patchwork may be constructed by either of two different methods, identified as appliqué and pieced. Both are ancient methods used around the world by a variety of cultures to create decorative textiles.

Appliqué patchwork consists of cutout shapes laid upon a back-
Different styles of appliqué are associated with eras in quilt history. Chintz appliqué, cutouts of printed flowers and birds, was popular up to the mid-nineteenth century in the United States. The Gatewood quilt (60736) is an early example of chintz appliqué, dated 1795. By 1840, the fold-and-cut technique, as for children’s paper snowflakes, was a popular method for producing appliqué shapes, often made from red and green calico, stitched onto a white background. This style held sway to the end of the nineteenth century and furnished the design impetus for many lovely quilts, including the Caperton appliqué Album quilt (60455). During the early decades of the twentieth century a third appliqué style arose, with naturalistic images cut from pastel fabrics. Ann Thomas Pritchard’s quilt (60652), made in Bramwell in 1930, is typical of the lyrical arrangements of the era.

Pieced patchwork consists of geometric shapes that fit together to form a pattern. Pieced construction includes patches sewn onto foundation fabric or paper, as for Log Cabin, Crazy, or String quilts. Pieced block quilts are the most common American type, although general adoption of the repeating pieced block as a style does not appear till about 1840 on the national scene. (Previously, appliqué was the predominant method.) At the close of the nineteenth century, commercially printed patterns encouraged the practice of making pieced block quilts.

Many early commercial patterns were reproductions of traditional patchwork designs. It was not until the early twentieth century that new patchwork designs drafted by professional artists appeared on the market. The fact that a patchwork pattern was marketed commercially does not guarantee that the published example served as the quilter’s model. The patchwork block stitched by Lona Bell Frame Rexroad (1892–1978) of Braxton County is identified as “Live Oak Tree,” published by the Ladies Art Company as no. 222. However, the actual source for Lona’s pattern is unknown. She used printed fabric, rather than white, for the triangle at the base of the tree trunk, a departure from the Ladies Art pattern. Because family history relates that Lona made this quilt at age twelve, in 1904, it is unclear whether she copied an existing quilt or adapted the Ladies Art commercial pattern. It is likely that
Lona used sewing scraps collected by her mother or another older quiltmaker because many of the fabrics are characteristic of the 1880s—black on red prints, black-ground mourning/morning prints, handsome indigo prints; the lively double-pink calico was popular throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. The quilt lining is indigo calico, brought to the top for binding.

Before the advent of commercially printed patterns, patchwork designs were disseminated through personal contact. Little is known about the communication network for informal transmission of patterns. Presumably quilters saw examples of each others’ work on display at exhibitions or within the home, or exchanged drawings or sample patchwork blocks. Evidence that distinctive patterns were reproduced by unrelated women within specific geographic areas is found with the quadrant quilts from north-central West Virginia illustrated in chapter 3, and with the Farmer’s Delight/Fancy circular pieced-block pattern thought to have originated in the Shenandoah Valley (see Margaret Beckley 60223, Mae Long 60353, Margaret Ayres 60650).

Whatever the pattern source, and whichever method of patchwork is employed, without quilting there would be no quilts. While utilitarian in function, the quilting stitches also supply decoration with texture and line. Quilting stitches are measured on the top, counting stitches visible within one inch. Quilting stitches almost always follow lines, either straight or curved. The exception is stipple quilting, which consists of densely packed, randomly arranged stitches providing a dimpled texture. The arrangement of quilting lines into patterns and shapes resembles secret writing, appearing only with proper lighting conditions, as bas-relief. The relationship between patchwork construction and quilting design deserves ample consideration, and may provide indication of cultural traditions. For example, German American quilters are likely to distinguish construction components (block, border) with different quilting patterns, while quilters with a British Isles background are more likely to stitch a pattern that functions independently of patchwork construction units.

When the quilting is complete, the edge of a quilt can be finished in a variety of ways. Bringing the backing fabric over the edge and stitching it to the top is a simple method; alternatively, the edge may be bound with a narrow strip of fabric, either bias-cut or straight-cut. Some quilts made before 1850 are trimmed with fringe.

Evaluating a quilt for a variety of physical characteristics reveals information about the circumstances of the quiltmaker. Studying quilts in this way depends upon the tenets of material culture, described in chapter 2, “Stitched in Time.”
Although no photograph exists of Eliza F. Anderson Wright (born 1846) to preserve her likeness, her quilt (20317, p. 12) reveals aspects of her personality: a lively imagination, sophisticated taste, and a bold mind. Eliza signed and dated her work with a prominent inscription. It is presumed that “E.W.” is the signature of Eliza Wright, but the identity of “L.C.” is unknown, as is the significance of the date October 1902. This quilt was in Eliza’s possession at her death in 1918, stored in her trunk with another, similar quilt top. They remained undisturbed until 1934, when granddaughters Hazel McIlwee and her sister opened the trunk. Hazel was to receive the quilt as her marriage gift. The companion quilt top was used up by Hazel’s sister, but Hazel preserved this quilt as her maternal grandmother’s needlework legacy.

Research, though unable to reveal the meaning of the quilt inscription, did provide information about Eliza Wright, her forebears, and her descendants. Eliza married in 1866, at age twenty, to forty-six-year-old David Wright, a farmer and widower with five children. They lived on David’s farm near Augusta, about twelve miles as the crow flies from Eliza’s homeplace on Timber Ridge. Eliza and David Wright begat nine children, the youngest of whom was Hazel McIlwee’s mother, Blanche, with whom Eliza made her home at the time of her demise. As for the date on the quilt, in 1902 Eliza was age fifty-four and had been widowed for two years; her youngest child was fifteen and her eldest twenty-seven. Because none of the family names and birth or marriage dates can be correlated to the inscription, and because the quilt remained in Eliza’s possession (rather than in that of the individual represented by the initials L.C.), it is tempting to speculate on Eliza’s intentions in affixing the inscription. Was the quilt perhaps intended to mark Eliza’s planned-for second marriage, to “L.C.” in “Oct. 1902”? There is no family history to substantiate this conjecture, but speculation that the quilt was created to celebrate a marriage is fueled by the symbolic imagery in Eliza’s appliqué motifs. In each corner is a design known as the Love Apple or Pomegranate, seen in Pennsylvania Dutch designs and folk art decorations. All of the other blocks contain a heart shape in one form or another. The heart symbolizes love, either divine or mortal.

From a quilt history perspective, the blocks in the center of the quilt with heart-shaped leaf-and-berry wreaths are particularly interesting. The leafy wreath in a heart shape is characteristic of Baltimore Album quilts of the 1840s and 1850s. This motif appeared in American quiltmaking in Baltimore, Maryland, about the time Eliza was born. Unlike the Caperton quilt, there are no direct family links between this quilter and Baltimore City. Eliza’s people were early settlers in Hampshire County. She was born at High View near the summit of Timber Ridge, a mountain peak now part of the state’s eastern boundary. Eliza’s parents were both Andersons; they raised ten children. Eliza’s mother was the daughter of Captain James Anderson (1797–1884), who had received one thousand acres of Hampshire County land as a benefit of military service. Captain James Anderson married a Hampshire County woman, Christina Spaht (or Spaid; 1797–1881), the daughter of a Hessian mercenary in the American Revolution. On her father’s side, Eliza’s paternal grandfather, Thomas Anderson II from Loudon County in northern Virginia,
WVHQS 20317
Eliza A. Wright Appliqué Album
Near Augusta, Hampshire Co.
Eliza F. Anderson Wright (1846–1918)
c. 1902
operated Anderson’s Tavern, the brick house on Dry Run at the base of Timber Ridge, not far from Capon Bridge, which crosses the Cacapon River before the road ascends North River Mountain. The tavern was a stopping place on the Romney Road, now Route 50, then a branch of the Northwest Trail, offering lodging and meals to travelers in the days when travel was accomplished on foot, horseback, stagecoach, or other horse-drawn conveyance. Today, this part of Hampshire County is a quiet mountain district, just north of the George Washington National Forest, but in earlier times the area bustled with activity as settlers moved toward the expansive and fertile lands known as the Northwest Territory—Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin. With the movement of people through the area, currents of culture and fashion, along with the latest news, must have flowed along the circuit as well. At this point, it is impossible to know when or where Eliza Anderson Wright saw one or more appliquéd Album quilts from the mid-nineteenth-century Baltimore area, or why Eliza created these distinctive leaf-and-berry heart-shaped wreath motifs for her quilt half a century after their Baltimore vogue. Perhaps Loudon County Andersons brought a Maryland quilt with them to Hampshire County, or Eliza herself visited the northern Virginia–Maryland area.

Time has taken its toll on the colors in Eliza’s quilt. Cotton fabrics once dyed red and green have faded to tan, a hallmark of the synthetic red and green dyes available at the time Eliza stitched her masterwork. Turkey red and chrome yellow have retained their hue, and were likely manufactured earlier in the nineteenth century.

With time, the details of Eliza’s story have also been lost, but her quilt remains as an echo of her fine needle artistry and exuberant design sensibility. Quilting at nine stitches to the inch outlines interior and exterior of appliqué shapes, with additional interior details in larger shapes. All stitching is done by hand; for edge finish, the muslin back is brought over to the front, turned about one-eighth inch.

Providing staccato visual rhythm, leaf and berry shapes are applied to strips four inches wide to frame the quilt as border on three sides and to join rows of blocks lengthwise. Narrower, but similar, appliqué strips run horizontally between the blocks. Presumably, the end of the quilt without a border was designed for the head of the bed. There, Eliza placed an unusual block. Four leaf shapes anchor the corners of the block, creating a diagonal axis. Two of the leaves are smooth ovals; two have irregular outlines. The latter pair appear naturalistic, as though they were traced from a real leaf (compared to the perfect symmetry associated with more conventional fold-and-cut shapes). Hearts are placed between each of the four leaves, and berries are scattered among them. The sun, or a flower, crowns the block, juggling berries among its eight rays, in an off-center position.

Along with the quilt made by Eliza Anderson Wright came a story about her maternal great-grandparents, Elizabeth Kale (or Cale) and George Nicholas Spaht (or Spaid). Quilts often serve as vehicles for family history, with the legacy recounted whenever the quilts are viewed. To preserve the story along with the quilt, the following rendition is offered:

George Nicholas Spaht was
kidnapped on his way to high school, in his native province of Hesse, by soldiers of Grand Duke Ferdinand II, and sold to King George III of England. Seventeen-year-old George was imprisoned in barracks and never again saw his parents (Michael and Cunegunda Spaht), or his brother and sister. Regarding George’s role in the American Revolution, Hazel McIlwee Adams relates: “History tells us that on Christmas Eve in 1776, the Hessians were keeping Village of Nativity in their customary manner at Trenton, New Jersey, when General Washington, with a handful of troops, crossed the Delaware River, surprising the Hessians, killing a few, and capturing more than a thousand, led back to Philadelphia. The prison camps for the Germans were established in German settlements. The chief camps being at Germantown, near Philadelphia, and at Winchester, Virginia.” George was sent to Virginia, and elected to remain in America after the war ended. Hazel McIlwee Adams continues, “There has always been a tradition that after the capture of George Spaht, he did not remain a prisoner of war long, but volunteered in the Continental Army, and fought under Washington until the end of the war.” In 1782, George married Elizabeth Kale (Cale) in Hampshire County. Elizabeth’s father, John, had served in the Eighth Virginia Regiment during the American Revolution. The Kale family lived on a farm at Kale’s Ford and Bubbling Spring, raised nine children, and moved to Ohio in 1808.

While much information may be gleaned from material culture analysis, certain aspects about an individual quilt can remain elusively mysterious. Such is the case for the Eliza Anderson Wright quilt from Hampshire County. Eliza incorporated a date and two sets of initials into her quilt, providing specifics that allow us to pinpoint the place and general circumstances of the quilt’s creation, based upon details from family history. Eliza’s quilt is richly endowed with identifiable images that may be deciphered for their historic and symbolic meanings and for geographic point of origin. These images shed light on Eliza’s cultural contacts, her exposure to design models. The tan-color fabrics in Eliza’s quilt are distinctive as to era of manufacture. And, as with so many West Virginia quilts, Eliza’s carries an intact provenance of family ownership. Yet despite all these facts, questions remain with regard to key elements in the quilt’s history. Questions surrounding why the quilt was made prove provoke curiosity and speculation. Questions such as those raised by Eliza’s quilt often fuel interest in the biography of an individual quilter, as a textile artist and a West Virginia woman. Quilts invite a personal intimacy, a desire not only to touch the cloth but also to establish contact with the quilter by learning about her life and times.

Eliza Wright’s quilt embodies what might be called country charm. From an aesthetic viewpoint, the treatment of design elements illustrates cultural remove, indicating the artist lived and worked at some distance from urbane influence. Rather than a cultivated metropolitan approach, the rural quilt artist interprets popular imagery in a vigorous simplified manner. The same aesthetic applies to Harriette Caperton’s quilt top (60455) and to quilts made by Harriet Small (50081), Mary McDonald (40036), Emeline Spiry (40094), and Della Carter (10339). These women are accomplished needleworkers, apparently lacking formal artistic training yet displaying compelling artistic vision and confident execution.
What Is a West Virginia Quilt?

Do quilts from West Virginia distinguish themselves with characteristic features? Data collected by the West Virginia Heritage Quilt Search provide a sketch of quilts found in West Virginia.

Quilts found in West Virginia tend to have been made nearby, not far from their present location. West Virginia quilts tend to stay put, cared for in families rooted in the Mountain State. Among quilts surveyed with a known place of origin, only 15 percent were made outside the state. For West Virginia quilts, there is also a good possibility that some information about the quiltmaker remains attached to the quilt; four out of five quilts brought to the survey were identified as the handiwork of a particular individual or group. While there are quilt collectors in West Virginia who purchase quilts as decorative textiles, the predominant number of quilt owners in the state possess quilts made by family members.

Because the public responded generously to the Quilt Search survey, bringing family heirlooms for registration and photography, we are provided a wealth of information about West Virginia quilts and their makers. Without family history tracing through time to establish West Virginia origins, it is impossible to determine whether a quilt was made in the state by looks alone (except, of course, for those with an identifying inscription on the quilt itself, which is unfortunately rare). Many West Virginia quilts closely resemble quilts made in other areas at about the same time, indicating the widespread influence of popular fashion on quilt design. Further information from around the country will be required to compare West Virginia quilts with those from other states, but preliminary study indicates that trends in quilt style may be cultural and regional, influenced by economic and social factors.

Several intriguing patchwork designs linked to specific regions of the state were discovered during the Quilt Search. One of the patterns is an unusual and distinctive circular pieced block, known as Farmer’s Delight or Farmer’s Fancy. This folk pattern, never published commercially, probably came into West Virginia from the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Ten quilts in this pattern were registered; three are illustrated (60223, p. 117; 60650, p. 118; and 60353, p. 224). All of the Farmer’s Delight/Fancy quilts were made along or near West Virginia’s border with Virginia, providing an example of pattern dissemination in terms of geographic area. In north-central West Virginia, quadrant quilts (four large blocks) with a distinctive appliqué design appear and are the focus of chapter 3. While quadrant quilts are not unusual, quilts with nine or more blocks are far more typical. The West Virginia Heritage Quilt Search registered twenty-one quadrant quilts made during the nineteenth century, providing a substantial group of quilts which would benefit from further study. In southern West Virginia, twentieth-century quilters sometimes used half-square triangles to separate pieced blocks, forming a zigzag sashing. This method of setting blocks together is called Fencerow, calling to mind the zigzag formation of the split-rail fences (fences used to pen livestock, made by stacking hand-hewn rails without the use of hardware). The Fencerow setting is an uncommon arrangement (see diagram). Laurabelle Green set her appliquéd blocks in a Fencerow in 1934 in Monroe County (60421, p. 226). This method of setting blocks may have been influenced by quilts from the British Isles fashioned of lengthwise panels. A nineteenth-century Lewis County quilt with Fencerow setting was made by Angelina Davis, who was of Welsh heritage (40223, p. 87).
The West Virginia Heritage Quilt Search registered over four thousand items, including quilts, woven coverlets and blankets, quilt tops, and a few sets of blocks. The oldest West Virginia bedcover is the Rumsey crewel coverlet, made about 1790 at Berkeley Springs (pp. 70–71). The oldest date-inscribed quilt known to be made in West Virginia registered with the Quilt Search is Mary Dyer Herbert’s “No 11” dated April 30, 1839, made south of Webster Springs (60482). The oldest registered quilt is Jane Gatewood’s, made in Essex County, Virginia, dated 1795 (60736). Eighty percent of registered quilts were made in the twentieth century; two percent were made before 1860. Of those quilts with maker’s ancestry identified, almost three-quarters derive from the British Isles, and almost one-fifth from Germany.

Conclusions presented below are based upon the author’s analysis of 275 registered quilts known to be made in West Virginia before 1940, from a criterion set sample. Fran and Walter S. Kordek present a wider perspective on the West Virginia Heritage Quilt Search database results (see Appendix A).

Based upon the criterion set sample, the typical West Virginia quilt is made up of pieced blocks. Approximately 80 percent of quilts from both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are pieced construction (this includes foundation piecing). During the Quilt Search registration process, we sometimes felt overwhelmed with Crazy quilts. At least one in ten West Virginia quilts is constructed as a Crazy patch. About two-thirds of West Virginia quilts have borders, and about one-quarter have sashing strips between blocks. Pieced stars are the single most popular pattern; this is a national trend as well. After 1925, two pieced patterns, Double Wedding Ring and Grandmother’s Flower Garden (hexagon mosaic), are leading favorites.

With regard to quilting, about half the quilts are either tied or quilted all over with a single motif (typically parallel lines or the fans) and the other half are quilted with two or more motifs. Quilting at six to eight stitches per inch predominates in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, although nineteenth-century quilts are twice as likely to display ten or more stitches per inch.

Behind every quilt is a quiltmaker, and West Virginians are likely to be able to tell you just who made a particular quilt. The typical West Virginia quiltmaker stitching before 1940 was a farm wife or homemaker with a grade-school education. (In rural West Virginia before the advent of public transportation, attending high school often involved leaving home and boarding in town.) About 20 percent of quiltmakers were employed outside the home; of these, one-third were teachers. Employed women were much more likely to construct an appliqué quilt, as were nonemployed homemakers with husbands in white-collar occupations. Quilts were usually made after marriage, rather than before. Three quilts were reported with the name Pride of West Virginia; they were the only instances of the state name used in a quilt name (see pp. 237–43).

Information collected during the West Virginia Heritage Quilt Search is deposited in the State Archives, where future research will reveal further insight into the history of West Virginia quilts and quiltmakers.