Lesson Plan: Quilting in North Carolina

Historical Overview

The history of quilt making in North Carolina spans four centuries and has been shaped by Tar Heels of nearly every ethnic group and social class. At its simplest, quilting involves stitching or tying a layer of batting between two pieces of fabric. But makers' differing resources, styles, and intentions have resulted in a vast diversity of expressions over the course of North Carolina's history. Upper-class European settlers initially brought quilt making to the American colonies in the 17th and 18th centuries. Imported fabric cost dearly, and only women of means could afford the large pieces of silk and chintz used to create popular styles. Rather, most families used blankets or coverlets for warmth. Relative to other colonies, North Carolina did not develop a particularly rich quilting tradition during this early period. The region's challenging geography slowed in-migration and did little to foster the growth of a large moneyed class. Even after statehood and through the antebellum period, the tenuous infrastructure, poor transportation, and overwhelming ruralness that contributed to North Carolina's reputation as the "Rip Van Winkle State" also resulted in the creation of fewer quilts of exceptional artistry than in other parts of the young nation. Further, the South's humid climate and abundant pests limited the survival rates of early textiles from that region, leaving scholars fewer examples to study and analyze.

9-Patch Quilt Square Decoration

The 9-patch quilt square is a common pattern often used by beginning quilters. Each block is made up of 9 smaller squares. This pattern would allow North Carolina quilters to use small pieces of fabric scraps, ensuring that nothing was wasted. The blocks could then be sewn together to create a larger quilt cover.

North Carolina Quilt Squares Coloring Sheet

Throughout history, quilting has been used for bedding, clothing, shelter, decoration, and as a means of personal expression and community-service efforts. In the early American home, quilts were an essential. The American Revolution (1776–1781) yielded a growing American textile industry, consequently resulting in distinct American quilting styles. Elaborate and orderly patchwork designs exemplify those new American traditions.

Time

One 45-minute session

Materials

- Copies of "Quilting in North Carolina," by Diana Bell-Kite
- Copies of 9-Patch Quilt Square Decoration and/or North Carolina Quilt Squares Coloring Sheet
- Colored pencils

Procedure

- Read aloud or have students read "Quilting in North Carolina."
- Facilitate a class discussion, asking:
  - What surprised you about the story of quilting in our state?
  - Which quilt did you like best, and why?
  - Do you have a quilt in your home? Who made it? When?
- Hand out one of the craft sheets and coloring pencils, and have students complete the drawings.

Extension

- Create a class quilt, with individual or groups of students completing squares which are combined, using cloth or paper.
- Explore math through quilts—measuring, area, geometry and tessellations! check out http://makedu.weebly.com/uploads/3/9/3/0/39300727/quilts_montessori_math.pdf.

In the past, quilting bees—like this gathering in Northhampton County—brought women together to socialize as they shared in the work of hand-stitching a beautiful but useful quilt.

"Northampton County Quilters, 1939" in the Charles Anderson Farrell Photographic Collection (P0024), North Carolina Collection Photographic Archives, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

QuiltSpeak:

Uncovering Women's Voices through Quilts

by Diana Bell-Kite

Do you have any handmade quilts in your home? Have you seen one at your grandparent's house—or at a museum? Maybe they just seem like nice blankets to you. But did you know that quilts can SPEAK?

A young visitor practices quiltmaking techniques at a quilt event at the NC Museum of History in 2019. *Image courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.*

Quilts speak. They reveal voices from the past—specifically women's voices. Some of these voices have long been silenced by illiteracy, racial oppression, gender inequity, and exhaustion.

But if we know how to listen, we can understand what the quilts are saying. They speak of skill and power. They speak of economy and ingenuity. They speak of memory and forgetting. They reveal the experiences of women whose lives skirted the edges of written history.

What can quilts tell us about their makers? What can they tell us about the history of women in North Carolina? What can they tell us about ourselves?

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Lone Star, 1902–1903

For her 1902 quilt project, Wake County's 16-year-old Eula Mae Bagwell (1886–1969) chose a pattern—Lone Star—that had been popular for a century. But the fabrics were very modern for the times. A farm woman would not have been able to afford these rich indigo prints a generation prior. But the development of inexpensive synthetic indigo dye in the mid-1800s made the blue fabrics widely available by the turn of the century.

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I Control: Speaking of Skill and Power

For upper-class white women of the slaveholding South, quilts meant more than warmth. They communicated status and power. These makers had money for needlework education and pricey imported fabrics. They could spend time stitching showpieces rather than farming or doing housework.

Those with little power made quilts, too. Enslaved women quilted, whether for their enslavers or for their own families.

Quilting as a social marker declined after the Civil War. The end of slavery and the rise of industrialization—including North Carolina's textile mills—transformed society. Now women of all backgrounds began to practice the formerly elite craft.

I Provide: Speaking of Economy and Ingenuity

By the late 1800s, the southern textile industry was growing. Women of all backgrounds could now find affordable fabric for quilting. They used the bedcovers they made to provide their families with warmth. Women also used other products—feed sacks, tobacco giveaways, and factory seconds—in their creations. Their reuse of such consumer products influenced manufacturers' marketing and production.

Racial tensions grew during this period, and some of the quilts that women made speak to the complicated and unequal relationships of the Jim Crow era.

I Remember: Speaking of Memory and Forgetting

Some quilts hold meaning beyond the need to keep warm or display status; they teach us what their makers wanted remembered.

Memory quilters frequently used their bedcovers to mark life's milestones. For other makers, their bedcovers' meanings changed over time—new generations attached significance to quilts never intended to be memory objects. Still other quilters sought to tell personal and community stories through their creations, often interpreting the past in selective and intriguing ways.

Who Makes History?

Voices can be heard in many ways—if you know how to listen. In the past, we have prioritized voices expressed through the written word—voices of those who were literate and free, and often white, male, and financially comfortable. The voices we heard shaped our notions of the past and our beliefs about who made history. In recent decades, historians have begun to look for new ways to listen. As a result, new voices have emerged, complicating and enriching our understanding of the past.

Who makes history? Is it just famous people? Or do the "ordinary" people also have a voice in the story? And what can we do—as historians—to find and listen to voices that are not always heard?

Whose voices will endure to inform forthcoming generations' impressions of our times? How will *your* voice be heard?

Diana Bell-Kite is curator of cultural history at the North Carolina Museum of History. She was also the curator of the museum's exhibit QuiltSpeak: Uncovering Women's Voices Through Quilts *(2019) and the accompanying catalog.*

Images of quilts and quiltmakers courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History unless otherwise noted.

Letter H, 1955

As a teenager, Edith Smith (1903–1983) became a domestic servant in Rowland and Lenoir Williams's household, and she assumed an especially important role in their two children's lives after Lenoir died young. Edith married in 1939 and later adopted her niece Clyde, whom she raised and sent to college at Shaw University. Smith eventually also adopted her great-niece and great-nephew after their mother's sudden death. Smith made this quilt as a wedding gift for one of the white children she helped raise. Did the letter *H* hold meaning for her or the recipient? Why did she include the peculiar lone *O*?

Edith Faison (Smith) in a ca. 1920 painting by Mary Lyde Hicks Williams. Williams's family owned the plantation where Edith Smith grew up.

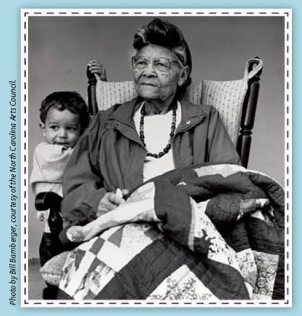


Photo by Bill Bamberger, courtesy of the North Carolina Arts Council.

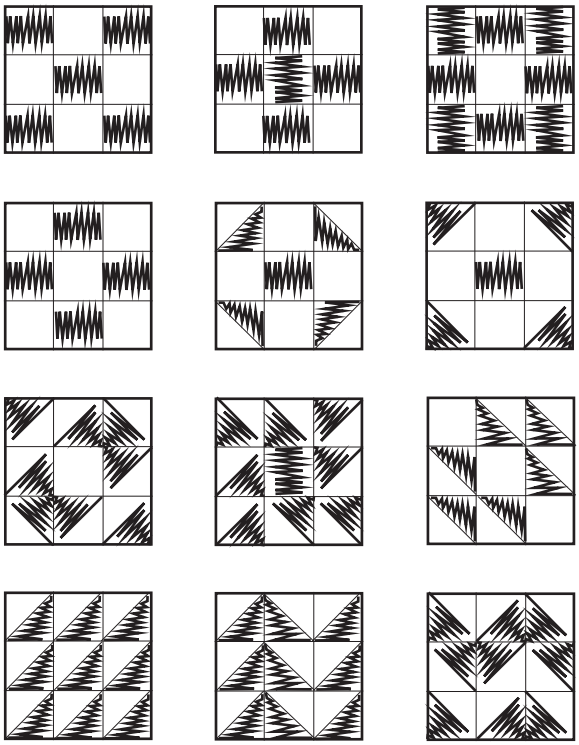
"I reckon it was born in me to love to quilt," Lee Jacobs (1909–2000) said late in life. Raised in the Waccamaw Siouan community of Buckhead, Columbus County, Jacobs learned to quilt from her grandmother, who would give her tiny bits of fabric to play with. Lee sewed throughout her life. She made quilts to give to family and friends and to support tribal charities. She stitched this bedcover as a wedding gift for her daughter, Vonnie.

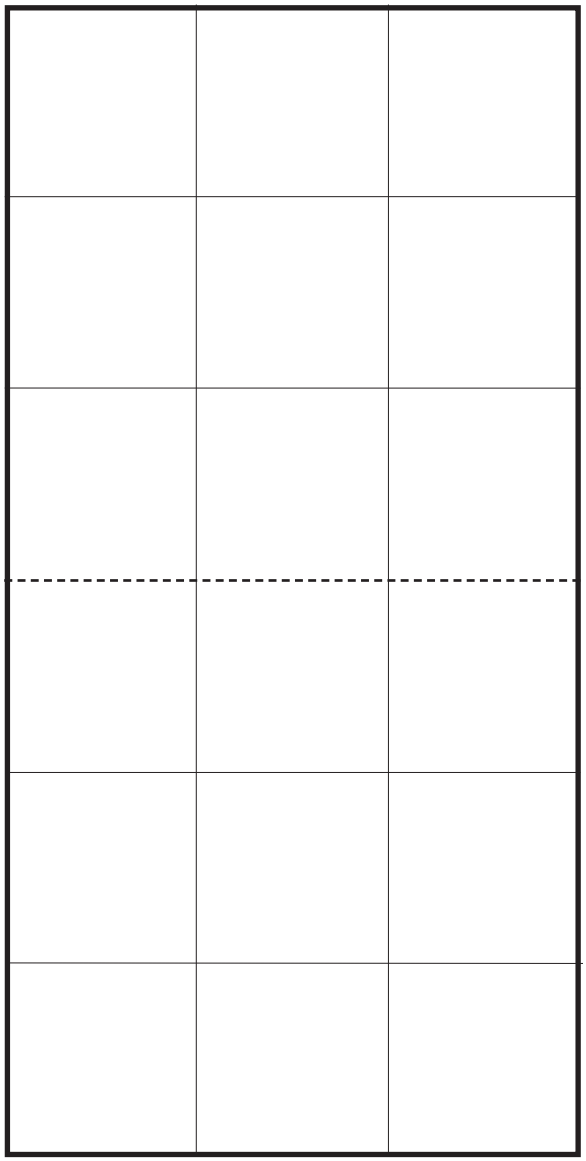
Eight-Pointed Star, 1963–1967

Nine-patch quilt square decoration

People have sewn quilts with nine-patch squares for a long time. The design looks simple, but you can make many different shapes using this pattern. Try some!

Supplies this craft sheet scissors construction paper in several colors
ruler pencil glue stick hole punch yarn or ribbon





1. Cut out the quilt square grid on the heavy line.

2. Choose a nine-patch pattern from the examples above. Recreate it on one half of the grid using 1x1-inch construction paper squares, scissors, and glue.

3. Create another nine-patch pattern on other half of grid. Fold decoration in half on dotted line, patterns on outside, and glue sides together. Punch hole in one corner, and add ribbon or yarn. Hang and enjoy!

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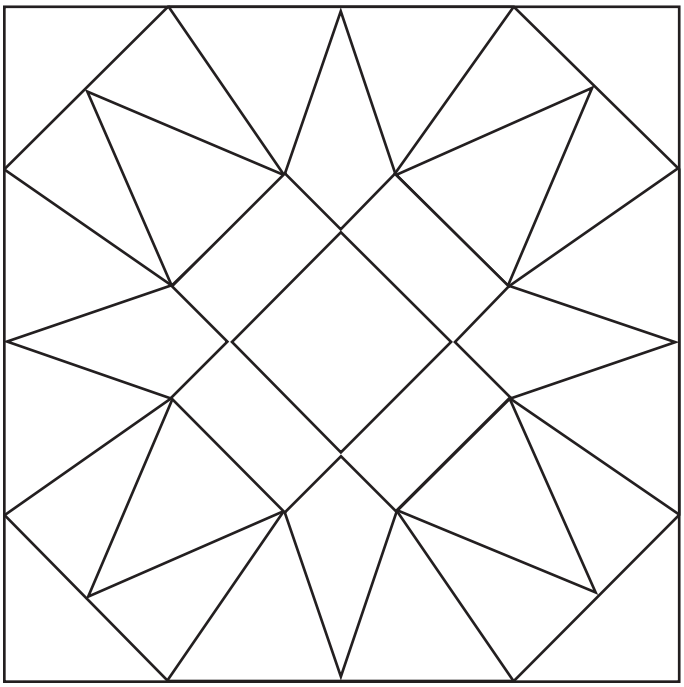
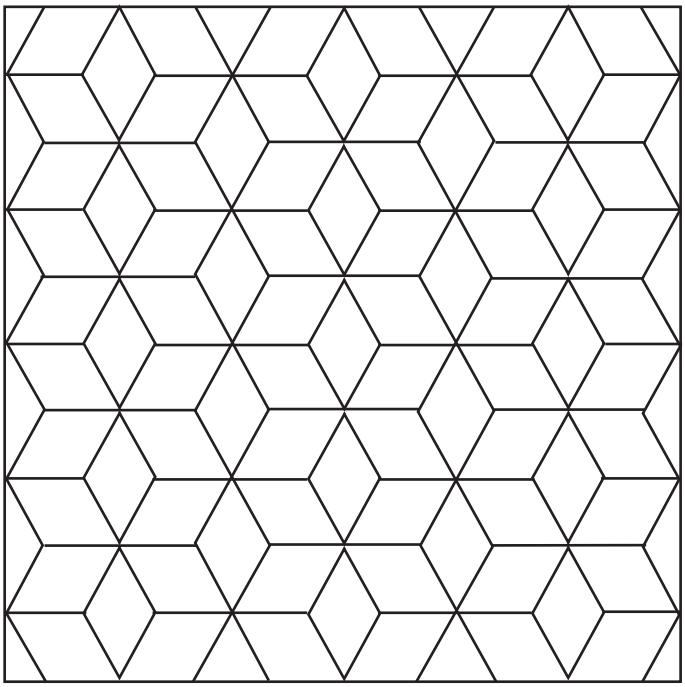
North Carolina Quilt Squares Coloring Sheet

These patterns are taken from quilts in the North Carolina Museum of History collection.

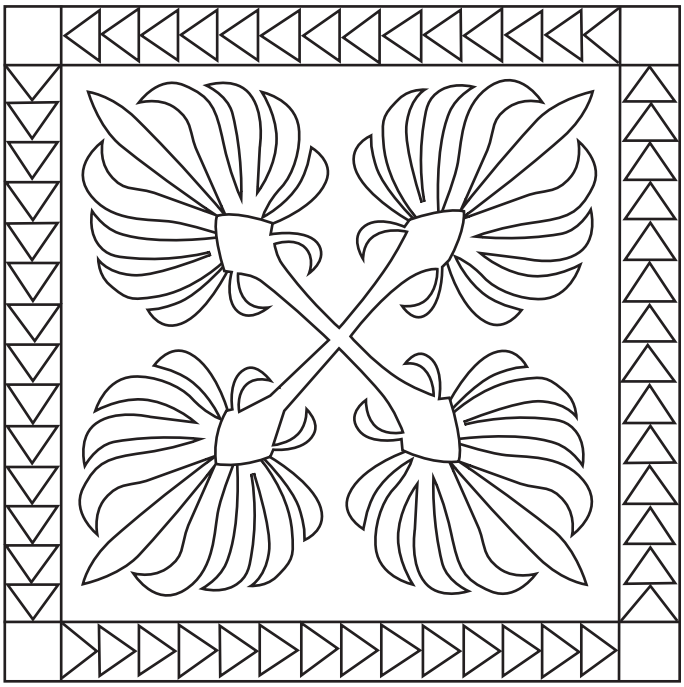
Supplies this craft sheet colored pencils or markers



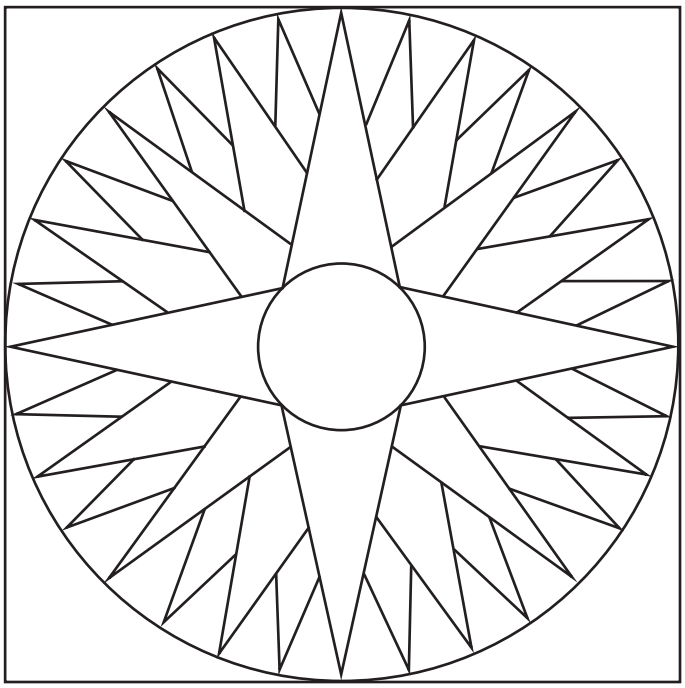
North Carolina Star



Tumbling Blocks



Cotton Boll



Mariner's Compass

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