

Quilting ranks among Ocracoke Island's traditional crafts. In times past most island homes included a quilting frame, and Ocracoke women spent many an evening in the parlor absorbed with their fabric, needle, and thread. More often than not, quilting was as much a meditative endeavor as a practical task.

My Aunt Tressie Howard, whom I remember well from my childhood, was an accomplished seamstress. She lived in the old house on School Road where "Natural Selections" is now located. Village Craftsmen is situated where her garden once grew. I can remember her tending her tomatoes and other vegetables wearing a home-made bonnet to protect her from the hot summer sun. She enjoyed sewing so much she even made quilts and bonnets for sale.

Tressie Howard Quilting, 1955 (Photo from "Special Collections: Photographic Archives University of Louisville")



As in many small communities, for generations Ocracoke women also got together now and then for "quilting bees." Often they gathered in private homes, sometimes working individually on quilts for their families, and other times working collectively on a quilt for an island family in need or for a benefit.

In later years the women sometimes sewed together in one of the island's public buildings, including the Methodist Church recreation hall, or the Preservation Society museum.

David Styron, in an article in Ocracoke School's 1978 Yearbook, "Wokokon," has this to say:

"Quilting is an important past time [sic] for the ladies of the community. Twice a week these ladies get together at someone's home and create beautiful hand made quilts. These women are all members of the United Methodist women, locally called the Ocracoke Women's society. The money they receive is given to the Methodist church. The women not only make quilts from scratch but also repair old ones, or complete unfinished ones."

Accompanying the article, "What do you do in the Winter?" is this photo of four island women working on a quilt (l. to r., Fannie Jones, Doris Garrish, Selma Spencer, Ruby Garrish.):



As the group changed (when older members died or were no longer able to sew, as some moved off the island, and others took their places) they would meet in different women's homes. By the 1980's the ladies were sewing at Selma Spencer's once a week. They would make one quilt to be raffled by the Ocracoke Preservation Society, and work on orders from individuals. Later on they met at Butsie Brown's home, then at the Preservation museum. In the winter when the museum was closed they sewed at Eleanor Garrish's or Sally Allen's home.

Although island ladies were very creative and produced any number of colorful traditional designs, Ocracoke quilts are best known for the distinctive "cracker" pattern.

"Cracker" Patterned Quilted Pillow



The cracker pattern consists of eight pieces per square. Four rectangular stripes form a smaller, center square. One of the two inside stripes is always red, either solid or a print. The corner triangles are always the same fabric, often pale pink, blue or yellow. Together, they make a larger square. Adjacent squares are turned at an angle to lend excitement to the overall quilt pattern.

For many years it was thought that this was an original Ocracoke pattern, but it was discovered to be from colonial times. During the documentation of quilts in North Carolina in the 1970's the cracker pattern was found only on Ocracoke Island. It was popular with the ladies here during the thirties and forties. There are a number of cracker quilts in family collections on the island.

My daughter, Amy, has begun attending the weekly island quilting bees, now held in Deepwater Theater on School Road. She is amazed at how time-consuming quilting can be. And she is duly impressed with the quality work(wo)manship of the ladies who are teaching

her their craft.

Several weeks ago I was unable to locate my car keys, and then learned that Amy had them. It was Monday evening and she was “at quilting” David told me. Hating to interrupt, I nevertheless strolled over to the theater. When I walked in I was pleasantly surprised to see fourteen ladies, both younger and older, sitting around three large tables, with spools of thread, boxes of needles & other supplies, and sections of a partially finished quilt spread out before them. They were all happily involved in their task, busily engaged with needle & thread, and obviously enjoying each other’s company. Smiles, enthusiasm, and light chatter abounded.

Ocracoke’s Quilting Circle:



I commented to Rosemary, Ocracoke’s current matriarch of quilting, that I was happy to see such a lively and sizeable group of women carrying on one of the island’s venerable traditions. Rosemary is a feisty veteran of the quilting circle, and she said to me, “You thought this quilting group was just three old ladies, didn’t you?”

Actually I had to admit that that was what I thought. I knew that attendance at quilting had declined after several of the old-timers had died or moved away from the island. Fannie, Doris, Selma, and Ruby were all gone. Butsie moved off the island after her husband died, Eleanor was unable to sew after she broke her shoulder, and Sally Allen wasn’t on the island year around. Even several of the more recent quilters had moved off the island for various reasons. I expected to see Amy sitting there, the only person under 70 years old.

How surprised I was to see a wide range of ages at the quilting table. Amy wasn’t even the youngest! Obviously the quilting circle was enjoying a revival of interest. Rosemary explained that circle attendance had declined precipitously in recent years so she “put the word out” to the younger women in the community and they began responding in the last 8 - 12 months. Apparently there is renewed interest in knitting & sewing, as well as quilting.

The quilting ladies are working on two “benefit” quilts, one for the Preservation museum, and one for the Ocracoke Folk Festival. They are also making two other quilts to fill orders from folks who know of their quality work.

As I walked around the table the women were proud to show me what they were doing. Right now they are putting together a traditional Ocracoke cracker quilt.

Rosemary points to her recent work:



Some of the younger women show how much they've learned:



Our Methodist preacher, Joyce Reynolds (right) & Beverly Meeker hold one of Joyce's "T-shirt quilts":



Next time you're on the island be sure to stop by the OPS museum to see examples of island quilts. Purchase a raffle ticket or two and you may even find yourself the proud owner of an original hand-made Ocracoke quilt.