

Displaying Heirloom Quilts

By Trail End State Historic Site Curator Nancy McClure; from *Trail End Notes*, November 2002

Over the past several months, Trail End's curatorial staff has been busy reorganizing the collections storage areas. As previously reported, we have installed new storage cabinets to accommodate the many artifacts not currently on exhibit. When complete, the reorganization, which includes preparation of a detailed inventory and location list, will facilitate staff access to stored collections. This not only will aid us in properly caring for and documenting the artifacts, but will also make it easy to rotate them out of storage and into exhibit areas so that visitors can see more of the treasures Trail End houses.



Heirloom Quilt, undated (TESHS Collection)

While reboxing a quilt during the reorganization, we were reminded of the beauty and workmanship that goes into these handcrafted textiles. It seems that many families have quilts in their possession, likely handed down by a grandparent. Such heirlooms need proper care to last the generations, but also should be shared as the works of art they are. We thought some tips on displaying quilts – while also looking out for their preservation – might interest our readers.

Before displaying a quilt, its condition should always be carefully assessed. A quilt with fabric in good condition, which has intact stitching both in the piecing and in the quilting, can safely be displayed with a few precautions. Some things to think about as you plan where and how to display your heirloom quilt include:

- **Lighting** Light is very damaging to textiles. When planning the location for your display, make sure that the quilt will not be hit with direct sunlight or flooded with artificial light (especially fluorescent) for long periods each day. Chose a room away from the main living areas and the highest traffic.

- **Cleaning** Soiling, including everyday dust, is also damaging to textiles, but don't overcompensate with vigorous cleaning. Although stable quilts can be wet-cleaned carefully with a small amount of mild soap, multiple rinsings, and air-drying flat, you probably can get by with simple vacuuming to rid the quilt of dust. Lay it flat, use low suction, and vacuum through a sheet of fiberglass screen with the edges of the screen carefully taped to prevent snagging. The screen assures that any loose pieces will not vanish into the vacuum cleaner.
- **Draping** While the simplest method of display for a quilt is simply to drape it over a bed, it may not be practical, unless you chose a bed in a guest room that is seldom used. A quilt on a bed in a family member's room, where the bed is slept in and remade every day, will suffer stress to fabric and stitching by frequent handling – not to mention wear and tear caused by pets or toys on the bed.
- **Hanging** An appealing alternative for display is to hang the quilt on a wall. This can only be done with quilts in good condition. Attach a fabric sleeve to the back upper part of the quilt by first doubling the fabric to form the sleeve, then stitching the sleeve to the quilt's backing with a double row of quarter-inch stitches. Thread a wooden dowel through the sleeve and hang the quilt by attaching the ends of the dowel, or a cord strung between them, to the wall. Your quilt will hang out of harm's way and add a piece of history to the room.
- **History** Remember to record the history of the quilt and why it is important to you. The quilt and its story will delight anyone you chose to share them with.
- **Resting** Finally, any historic textile should be rested from display periodically, so only allow any one quilt to hang for a few weeks a year. If you have more than one quilt in good condition, it's a great opportunity to rotate them, displaying each for a time before bringing out the next one.

If you have a quilt that is torn and threadbare, it's not a good candidate for display. Such a quilt, saved for sentimental reasons, can be stored according to museum standards (wrapped inside acid-free paper and rolled onto an acid-free core or placed into an acid-free box) to stave off further deterioration. While fewer people will see it, you will know that you are caring for it and can pass it on to the next generation.



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