The Stories Behind the Artifacts

By Jamie Eves • May 23, 2019

I love artifacts because they tell stories. The things themselves are interesting, to be sure. And many of them, like most of the quilts in the Mill Museum's new exhibit, *Under Cover Stories,* are breathtaking works of art. But it is stories behind the artifacts that I find compelling – stories of the women, children, and men who created and used them. Here are the stories behind some of the artifacts in *Under Cover Stories*. To see more – and to actually see the artifacts themselves – stop by the Mill Museum, 411 Main Street, Willimantic, CT, 06226, open Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m. The exhibit is up through July 28.

A Woven Woolen Blanket from the Market Revolution

This woolen blanket was spun and woven by hand by Mary Hobart Spear, who was an adult during the first half of the 19th century. (Two of her children were born in 1805 and 1814.) Typical of such blankets, it is constructed of two long pieces of cloth stitched together. A woman's loom could not be wider than her wingspan, as she had to throw the shuttle with one hand and catch it with the other, which limited the width of a piece of homemade woven cloth. Mary Hobart Spear lived in the vicinity of Quincy, Massachusetts. Her husband, John Spear, owned a ship, and was probably fairly affluent.

The story told by this blanket is the story of the Market Revolution in New England during the Early Republic. Following the American Revolution (1763-1783), the newly independent United States commenced a second revolution, the Market Revolution, well known to historians but not so much to the general public. It was at this time – the late 1700s and early 1800s, not during the earlier colonial era — that most of Connecticut's villages formed, with their neat greens, steepled churches, white clapboard houses, general stores, shops, and inns. Taking advantage of the new nation's sudden freedom from British mercantilism, Yankee traders launched into the global marketplace. Village storekeepers bought up handmade woven textiles from farm women (many of them teenagers) and resold them to shippers in New England's bustling ports for international trade. As part of this new trade, New England women wove blankets like this one on hand looms, either for home use or to barter for produce at the general store. The monograph indicates that Spear likely intended to use her blanket at home. But plenty of women wove blankets and other cloth for the burgeoning new trade. Picking up a new way to contribute to the family economy, women strengthened their economic positions, within their families and their communities. The Market Revolution was not the only factor that contributed to a new women's rights movement in the early 1800s, but it was one of them.



Mary Spear's hand spun, hand woven woolen blanket, c. early 1800s. It is two pieces of cloth, stitched together. Hand looms could be no wider than the weaver's wingspan.

Each Patch a Story: Mary Pollard "Polly" Leopold's Patchwork Quilt

This patchwork quilt was made by Mary Pollard "Polly" Leopold (1882-1941) of Lisbon, CT, and was obviously well used. It tells multiple stories: of the Industrial Revolution, of traditional women's needle work, and the stories behind each patch itself.

Patchwork quilts became common in the early 19th century. Colonial Era quilts were often constructed from single pieces of (usually) white cloth and were not pieced. In the 19th century, however, families became more likely to save leftover pieces of cloth — the remnants of clothing and other manufactured textiles — that could be cut up and pieced together. Patchwork quilts gave ordinary women and girls the opportunity to practice and show off their skill with a needle. A patchwork quilt could become part of a woman's trousseau, a treasured family heirloom placed on the bed only when company was over. The individual pieces served as memories, recalling the former uses of each of them. Although intended to be used as bed covers, patchwork quilts added to the artistry of women's quilt making. They actually gained popularity throughout the 19th century, as home sewing machines became more common and the quilts became easier to make.

As it turns out, patchwork quilts also inspired an actual story in an early 1800s magazine. One of the first descriptions of patchwork quilts in American literature is the short story "The Patchwork Quilt," published in 1845 in *The Lowell Offering,* a newspaper/magazine published by the "mill girls" — young, unmarried female mill operatives — at the giant textile mills in Lowell, MA. The story's author wrote under the pseudonym "Annette," but she was either Harriet Farley or Rebecca Thompson, both Lowell mill girls. Although the story is a work of sentimental fiction, its description of the fabric and labor that went into producing a patchwork quilt is instructive and worth reading — a good account of traditional women's needlework at the opening of the Industrial Revolution. Interestingly, the quilt in the story, although intended as a bed cover, ends up as an "art quilt" hanging on the creator's wall. I found a complete copy of "The Patchwork Quilt" and transcribed it. We will put it on the Museum's website.



Mary Pollard "Polly" Leopold's quilt: each patch a story.



Harriet Farley, the Lowell mill girl who founded and edited the Lowell Offering, and possibly wrote "The Patchwork Quilt."

Mary Bowman's Prize-Winning Bedspread

In 1889 Mary Bowman of Willimantic, CT, won the "best bedspread" prize at that year's Willimantic Agricultural Fair. She was presented with a large certificate signed by E. S. Boss, the Willimantic Fair Association president and also the manager of the Willimantic Linen Company, a large thread mill. Agricultural fairs — even when they occurred in mill cities like Willimantic — were an opportunity for women to show off their skills in traditional crafts like sewing, spinning, weaving, crocheting, and embroidery. Bowman's crocheted bedspread featured a centennial pattern, with illustrations of every United States President. Bowman probably began the bedspread around the centennial year of 1876.

Mary Bowman was born Mary Whyte in 1845 in Aberdeen, Scotland. She married John Bowman, an Englishman, in London in 1866. Shortly after, the couple immigrated to the United States; their son William was born in New York in 1868. In 1869 they moved to Willimantic, where John operated a men's clothing store and Mary raised their family. Four of their six children died in infancy; perhaps crocheting an intricate bedspread helped distract her from her grief. The Bowmans resided at 39 Lebanon Avenue, now 95 Hayden Street. John died in 1905, Mary in 1922. The bedspread remained in the Bowman family, a treasured heirloom, and was left to the Mill Museum by the estate of Gladys Bowman, Mary's granddaughter, who passed away in 2004.

Mary Bowman's prize-winning bedspread tells at least two stories. The first is the story of how the Industrial Revolution transformed women's work. Bowman crocheted the bedspread at a time when the manufacture of bed covers was undergoing a major transformation. Women no longer made bed covers like this out of necessity, to keep their families warm in cold Connecticut winters. A new, factory-made bedspread could be purchased from Sears, Roebuck for less than a dollar. Nor were beds what they had been in the colonial era, when they were often the most expensive piece of furniture in a small house, and therefore on display to visitors. Mary Bowman's house was large, and the bedrooms were upstairs where most visitors would not have seen them. Handmade bedspreads had become transformed from necessary crafts to examples of women's art, shown off at fairs. The competitions offered by the fairs was important. When women's traditional crafts had been routinely on display to ordinary visitors, women's work had also been on display, and the women who created fine bedcovers could point to them with pride. Now, agricultural fairs gave women the same opportunity to demonstrate their skills and win praise – and even prizes — for their achievements. It is unlikely that Bowman's prize-winning bedspread spent much time on her bed.

But there is another story here, as well. As immigrants like Mary Bowman poured into the United States during the second half of the 19th century, they were often greeted with scorn and suspicion by native-born Americans. In the 1850s the nativist American Party – the so-called Know Nothings – had for a time won control of the Connecticut state government. By choosing a patriotic theme, Bowman could proclaim her own "Americanism," and declare herself a patriotic immigrant.



Mary Bowman's prize-winning bedspread, held by her great great granddaughter.

A Poor Milliner's Crazy Quilt

By the 1890s, factory-made quilts, coverlets, and bedspreads had become readily available at low prices. The 1897 Sears, Roebuck mail order catalog, for example, listed new bed quilts for sale for as little as 48 cents each. Handmade quilts, with all their time and labor, no longer made economic sense. Thus women made crazy quilts, which became popular during the Gilded Age (1877-96), not as utilitarian bed covers, but as ornamental couch throws for parlors, a way of demonstrating their creative skills to guests. Rather than regular blocks from set patterns, the pieces were shaped by the artistic sensibilities of the creator. Silk, satin, and velvet were the most common fabrics. Japanese motifs, like dragonflies, insects, spider webs, and flowers were often embroidered on them.

Elizabeth L. Ramsden, a Willimantic milliner, made this crazy quilt in 1892 with scraps left over from her millinery work. Miss Ramsden operated a small shop at 129 Valley Street, a tenement near downtown, where she also resided with John Ramsden, perhaps her father. One of the stories told by the quilt is the role of small female-owned businesses like Ramsden's. Milliners like Ramsden had no chance of becoming wealthy, but they did have a certain degree of independence.

By 1935, when women's hats had declined in popularity, Ramsden was no longer listed as a milliner in Willimantic city directories. She became impoverished and moved into a small cottage in the Methodist Willimantic Camp Meeting, where she resided until her death in 1944, at which time all of her belongings, including this quilt, were sold. That's another story told by the quilt. Small businesswomen like Ramsden were never very far from poverty. Their lives were not easy.

Come to the Mill Museum between now and July 28, 2019, and encounter these stories, and more.



Elizabeth L. Ramsden's crazy quilt.