

I recently read this article about the history of log cabin quilts. Since this is our quilt challenge I thought that everyone might enjoy it.

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Log Cabin Quilts: The Building of an American Classic

Few traditional quilt patterns both represent the American frontier and lend themselves to modern interpretations like log cabin quilts. And for a pattern many associate with Honest Abe, few have as many stories and legends attached to their history.

BY BARBARA BRACKMAN



Silk Sanitary Commission Quilt, 1864. Collection: Ford's Theatre Museum, National Park Service.

Log cabin quilts first popped into print during the Civil War. The design of a square framed by rectangular “logs” became a late 19th-century fad, so popular that county fairs created categories just for log cabins. Written references go back to 1863 when a Cleveland quiltmaker won special commendation for a “log cabin quilt” at the fall Ohio State Fair. In December of that same year, a fundraising bazaar for Union soldiers in Cincinnati displayed at least three silk log cabins.

The name may be political, likely related to Abraham Lincoln's 1860 presidential campaign linking him to Kentucky rural roots. William Henry Harrison also campaigned as a log cabin candidate, and quilts remain with log cabin images from his 1840 presidency, but these earlier quilts feature appliquéd buildings rather than abstract design.

Few early log cabins with inked or embroidered dates survive to tell us what those Civil War-era quilts might have looked like. One notable exception is an 1864 quilt sold at a Philadelphia fair for soldiers' aid. President Lincoln, Clara Barton, and several generals signed white silk centers

framed by one layer of logs. Is this basic square-in-a-square design a log cabin? No pattern name is attached to the quilt, now in the collection of the National Park Service's Ford's Theatre Museum.



*1874 Log Cabin in the traditional Sunshine and Shadow pattern with diagonal shading.
Unknown maker. Collection: Smithsonian Institution*

The earliest date I've yet seen on a quilt we'd all call a log cabin is 1874, embroidered on a Sunshine and Shadow design in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Dark and light dress fabrics, silks, and wools came from someone's fashionable sewing scraps. Combination fabrics woven of silk, cotton, and wool yarns were in vogue through the middle of the 19th century, when cotton prints were not considered proper for visiting dress or street wear. Silk plus wool (challis) or wool plus cotton made material light enough to print with a pattern, soft enough for a flattering drape and cool enough for summer wear. Like much of fashion, these mixed fabrics were called by a French name, *mousseline de laine*, which means wool muslin. Most Americans simply called the wool/cotton material "delaine."



Log cabin in the shading pattern often called Courthouse Steps. Fashion for shirting prints with small figures inspired many cotton log cabins. The combination of brown calico and shirtings tends to date from about 1870 to 1900.

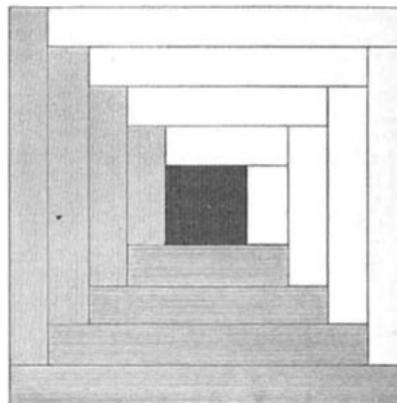
Log cabins made the most of scrapbags full of mixed fabrics. Cotton calico makes a neat seam for an Irish Chain or Mariner's Compass, but silk satins and delaines stretch, slip, and fray when pieced with a running stitch by hand or machine. The log cabin block was a successful experiment with the technique we call foundation piecing, in which blocks backed by foundation squares support flimsy material. In 1889, one could find published instructions for such a block. "An excellent way to use up delaine or merino [wool] dresses which are partly worn," they read.

Twentieth-century writing attaches a few myths to log cabin history. We hear the center was traditionally red to symbolize the cabin hearth. Many vintage quilts do have red centers, but black was more important in the early decades. An 1885 how-to said: "In the center baste a 2" square of black velvet, though this need not necessarily be black, as very pretty ones are made with this center piece in other colors."



1929 Christmas nostalgia portrayed a scene from the 1860s: Mother just finishing a log cabin quilt with red centers.

Stories also circulate that log cabins hung on clotheslines alerted runaway slaves to a safe house on the Underground Railroad. The design's wartime origins indicate the tale as fabrication rather than fact. By



The American Agriculturalist printed a sketch and instructions for a silk log cabin in 1878. "It adds very much to the effectiveness to make the center square...of black velvet."

1863—the date of the earliest-known written reference to log cabin quilts mentioned above—escapees typically walked to freedom into a Union Army camp identified by a Union flag.

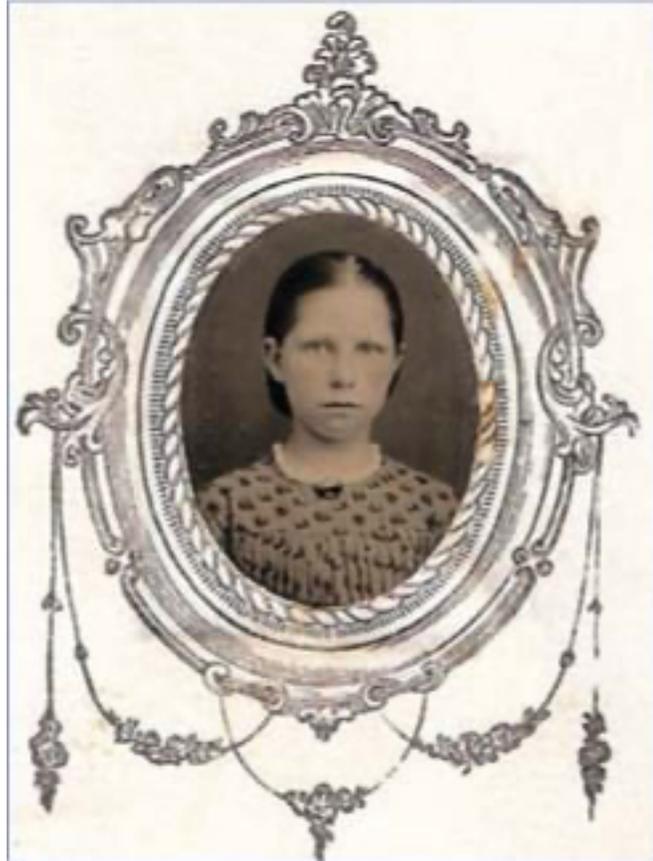


The block is Sunshine & Shadow shading; the overall set is called Barn Raising. About 1900. Collection: Smithsonian Institution. Gift of Iris and Jay Leonard and Kohler Foundation, Inc.

About 1875, a “calico craze” inspired a new fashion for cotton log cabins contrasting dark prints and light shirtings. Foundation backings were no longer necessary, and by the beginning of the 20th century, quiltmakers seamed logs with a conventional running stitch. Log cabin style kept pace as color and fabric fashions changed. Browns were the look in the 1870s and ‘80s, replaced by grays, blacks, and blues in the 1890-1910 decades. Modern pastels shook up trends about 1930; by then, log cabins were considered old-fashioned. Not many were made in the mid-20th century until interest in geometrical designs inspired a new generation in the 1970s.



A small unfinished log cabin pieced of mixed fabrics: wool, silk, and cotton. Combination fabrics tend to date log cabin quilts to 1865–1890.



Unknown girl wearing a printed dress of mixed fabrics, perhaps delaine (wool/cotton), 1860s.



Cotton logs hand-stitched over a brown foundation.



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