

Stewart County Arts & Heritage Council

A STITCH IN TIME: NATIONAL CIVIL WAR QUILT TRAIL

“Those who sew with silken threads do shape the destiny of our lives . . .”—*Destine Moore Martin, Poet, quilter, and founder of the Stewart County Historical Society*

Vanishing Treasures & Untold Stories

Letitia Smith was probably excited and also a little scared. The daughter of Dr. James Washington Smith was helping Colonel Forrest's Cavalry ford Lick Creek in order to escape surrender to General Grant at Fort Donelson. She would be remembered for that daring episode in life by her family, but even more so for the quilts she made that would not only provide a legacy of her family's experience, but insight into life along the rivers during the Civil War in Middle Tennessee.

Letitia was a quilt artist who designed and made many quilts during her lifetime. Before the war, there was relative prosperity in this heart of Tennessee's Wilderness River Region. Letitia probably purchased fabrics imported from Europe. But during the hard times of war, she used scraps of fabric and home-dyed tobacco sacks. Patchwork became the Civil War era's greatest contribution to quilting. After the war, as a bride-to-be, she made the lovely Rose of Sharon appliqué quilt for her wedding to Edward Lewis Walter. The note pinned on the quilt is the documentary evidence.

Two of Letitia's quilts, the Rose of Sharon and her Four Star pattern inspired the design of the Medallion Sampler Quilt, which is the centerpiece of the National Civil War Quilt Trail.

Encoded in all the quilts are messages about our heritage. As an illustration, the name of the Medallion Sampler Quilt is: “With Love, From Letitia.” The composition of the design is encoded as a requiem created by her great granddaughter and artist, Carolyn Walter Darke.

The National Civil War Quilt Trail honors quilters everywhere and the memory of the nation's great and great-great Grandfathers and Grandmothers who experienced the times of the Civil War and those who came from the four winds to the Stewart County area, both before the war and after. May the experience of “A STITCH-IN-TIME”: National Civil War Quilt Trail bless all their descendants and set them free so that they may be free indeed.

Vanishing Treasures

Today, quilts of the Civil War era (1830s – 1880) are vanishing treasures. Considered antiques, they are rare. It is especially hard to find a Confederate quilt. However, the Stewart County Arts and Heritage Quilt Project has located several in the family collections of Stewart Countians. Some were discovered in a cupboard in a basement; one was found in a large wooden crate, another in an old moving box which had not been opened in 80 years.

When Americans today think of quilts in the Civil War era, they probably think of rural women sewing bed quilts for their homes or as gifts for friends and family. What they may not think

about is the important national contribution that quilts were during the years of conflict; they served as bandages, bedrolls, saddle blankets, top coats, hospital bedding covers, and signals on the underground railroad. Fallen soldiers were even wrapped or rolled in quilts for burials.

It is estimated that women in the North made over 250,000 quilts and comforters for Union soldiers in encampments and hospitals. Providing quilts for the Confederate soldiers in the field became a challenge for southern women since their ports were blockaded and fabric had become scarce.

Quilt Pattern Sources

“Their clothing was thin and ragged, gray and butternut predominating, but all the colors of Joseph's Coat were to be seen. For blankets, they carried square pieces of carpet, comforters and coverlets, from many a home. Some who were destitute of them carried feather beds on their backs.”—*U.S. Colonel Whittlesey as he surveyed the surrendering Confederate soldiers at Fort Donelson*

Quilting is one of the oldest forms of American folk art. The names of all quilt patterns have meaning to the quilt artist or to the viewer. Often, one pattern will be known by different names depending upon the region of the nation.

In addition to necessity, inspiration for the creative endeavors of the 19th century quilt artist came from

many sources. Some sources & examples are:
Life experiences before, during, & after the war: *Underground Railroad*
Depicting political preferences: *Whig Rose*
Meditating on religious faith or religion in America: *Tree of Life*
Reflecting on rivers or other geographical features: *Lost Ships*
Beauty of the natural world: *Flying Geese*
Replicating traditional patterns passed down from family & friends: *Nine Patch*
Everyday Life: *Churn Dash*
Remembering the dead: *Memory Blocks*
Commemorating major events in their life and culture: *Wedding Quilt*
Showing quilting skills: *Feathered Star*

Untold Stories

Along the National Civil War Quilt Trail you will find displays of heritage quilt blocks from Civil War era patterns or variations of early traditional quilt patterns on barns and buildings which reflect the political, social, and religious thinking of the times.

Honoring the area's rich oral tradition, discover Untold Stories and the Little Known Civil War heritage sites all along the Quilt Trail throughout Stewart County, Tennessee.

Like messages stitched in a quilt, quilt blocks displayed on barns and buildings will help you take covers off family secrets and histories found in letters, notes, diaries, and local folklore. As if you were treasure-hunting, discover the untold stories about the following topics:

- Underground Railroad
 - Waterway Connection
 - Lesser Known Battles
 - Heroes and Heroines
 - On the Home front: The Local Scene
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Underground Railroad

There is more to discover about the Underground Railroad history in this region. There were large slave holdings—not in agriculture—but in the Iron Industry. Slaves from the local iron furnace communities, as well as from other states, helped to construct the three forts.

Waterways were natural avenues of escapes for enslaved persons seeking freedom.

The Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers were likely used as escape routes for freedom-seeking slaves.

On the National Civil War Quilt Trail learn:

- Early freedmen (contraband) camps
 - Use of rivers as escape routes for runaway slaves
 - the legacy of African American communities
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Waterway Connection

Rolling out of the hills and through Stewart County's hollows are crystal clear spring-fed creeks which are tributaries to the ancient Cumberland River flowing past Fort Donelson and joins the Ohio in Smithland, Kentucky. The beautiful Tennessee River flows on the county's western border and past Forts Heiman and Henry. These two rivers were strategic waterways in the Western Theater of the Civil War.

There is more to discover about the Waterway Connection in this heart of Tennessee's Wilderness Region.

On the National Civil War Quilt Trail learn:

- Practice of hospitality for travelers
 - The role of the rivers and riverine warfare
 - Packets, steamboats, and the Mourner's Trail and more
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Lesser Known Battles

In addition to the well-known battles, there is even more to discover about the Lesser Known Battles of the region, which took place beyond the hallowed grounds of Fort Donelson National Battlefield.

On the National Civil War Quilt Trail learn:

- Consequences of the last Battle of Dover
 - About the young lad who watched the battle of the Cumberland Rolling Mill
 - Little known Civil War Heritage sites and the Iron Ore Industry settlements
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Heroes and Heroines

Well-known national heroes were plentiful in this area during the few days of battle in February 1862. It was here, at Fort Donelson, that Union General U.S. Grant got his nickname, "Unconditional Surrender," and gained national recognition. Union Flag Officer Andrew Foote and his fleet of ironclad gunboats became famous.

There is more to discover about the Heroes and Heroines in Historic Stewart County and the surrounding area.

On the National Civil War Quilt Trail learn:

- The 1860 presidential candidate who had a home in the Bear Spring community and died there
 - Battlefield nurses as heroines
 - The local who raised white flag of surrender at Ft. Donelson
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On the Homefront: The Local Scene

"... the ragged and beaten men returned home by train to rebuild ravaged homes and shattered lives." —*Thomas E. Weaks, Jr., Stewart County Tennessee, Volume I*

Stewart County and the surrounding area is probably one of the earliest battlefields to hold the distinction of being under Union occupation longer than any other region in the nation. Something else happened here that had not been done elsewhere—both the Confederate and Union forts were named Fort Donelson.

There is more to discover about On the Homefront: The Local Scene in Stewart County where Revolutionary War soldiers came to claim their land grant given to them for their service.

On the National Civil War Quilt Trail, learn:

- Farm life (before, during, & after the war)
 - How mothers protected their children
 - Unusual acts of kindness
 - Locals seeking an unified nation
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It is the hope of the Stewart County Arts & Heritage Council to warm your hearts with the heritage quilt blocks as you travel along A STITCH-IN-TIME: National Civil War Quilt Trail, while the messages of the Untold Stories are revealed through quilts: these Vanishing Treasures. This project was made possible by support and funding from: Fort Donelson National Battlefield (National Park Service), Stewart County Government (Arts & Heritage Council), Five Rivers Resource Conservation & Development Council, and the Lower Mississippi Delta Initiative (National Park Service). For more information, contact Fort Donelson National Battlefield at (931) 232-5706 or the Stewart County Public Library at (931) 232-3127.