

Quilting in Pioneer Days



Pioneer quilts, similar to the one in the picture, had a particular design or pattern and each pattern had a name. As settlers moved westward, the names attached to the patterns changed. The Carolina Rose of the East Coast became the Prairie Rose of the Midwest. The biblical name Jacob's Ladder used in New England evolved to Stepping Stones in Virginia and Tail of Benjamin's Kite, after Benjamin Franklin's experiments, in Pennsylvania.

What didn't change from location to location was the lack of fabric in the early days of America. Calicos, cotton fabrics with small flowers printed on them, were imported from England and bolts of fabric were difficult to transport over the mountains to western settlements.

Money was tight and families needed to "make do" with whatever they had so women saved every possible scrap of fabric for reuse. After adult clothing was sized down for children, any remaining fabric or outgrown clothes were recycled into quilts. Pieced quilts of the era featured smaller and smaller pieces of fabric in the patchwork design. Thrifty women were able to decorate their homes with colorful and intricate quilts made from just the tiniest bits of fabric.



When steamboat and rail transportation reached the Mississippi River and beyond, fabrics could finally reach the new settlements. At the same time, the Industrial Revolution introduced textile mills to New England which processed cotton grown on plantations in the Southern states into cloth. Even though quilters could purchase material they continued to work with small pieces of fabric to make traditional quilt patterns.