

Pieced, appliquéd, and embroidered summer quilt, original pattern by Rebecca C. Ayers Mack Heywood (1798-1868) of Winchendon, c. 1850

Wool and cotton

78" x 71"

Private Collection

MQ #3564

Rebecca Cordelia Ayers was born in 1798, one of thirteen children of Deacon George and Hannah (True) Ayers of Goshen, New Hampshire. In 1805, the family moved to Plainfield, Vermont. Here, Rebecca grew up and in 1818 married Daniel Miner Mack, the son of David and Sarah (Rogers) Mack of Woodstock, Vermont. Daniel died in 1833, leaving Rebecca destitute and with no choice but to place her three young sons and two daughters with relatives in Vermont. She moved to Winchendon, in north central Massachusetts, to support herself by working in the recently established textile mills.

Winchendon, incorporated as a town in 1764, had a fulling mill for finishing locally produced woolen cloth by 1793. In the early nineteenth century, a mill for spinning and weaving wool was built, powered by the appropriately named Millers River. It prospered despite repeated setbacks from fires (a constant worry for the early textile mill owners). By 1849, the Winchendon Manufacturing Corporation employed “15 male and 13 female hands” and produced about 200,000 yards of twill flannels, valued at \$50,000.¹ The manufacturing of woolen goods continued under various proprietors until the mill burned down and was abandoned in 1859. By then, however, cotton dominated the town’s textile industry, having been established north of the town center at Winchendon Springs in 1831. In 1860, encouraged by the railroad which came to town in 1847, Winchendon produced \$300,000 worth of cotton fabrics.² Yet cotton was not even the primary industry of the town; it came in second to the production of woodenware—in fact, Winchendon was long called “Shingletown.”

Several years after moving to Winchendon, at age 38, Rebecca defied convention and married Lemuel Alfred Heywood, 16 years her junior. Rebecca gave birth in 1837 to a daughter, naming her Abigail Pearson after Lemuel’s mother. The 1840 federal census reveals that Rebecca’s children from her first marriage joined her in Winchendon: Laura (b. 1820), Rufus (b. 1823), Daniel (b. 1826), Cordelia (b. 1827), and George (b. ca. 1828). At least one daughter, Cordelia, went to work in the mills like her mother before her. Rebecca’s son, Daniel, who became a Methodist minister, eventually founded two orphanages, one in Franklin, New Hampshire, and one at Lake Dennison in Winchendon, undoubtedly hoping to relieve others of the emotional and financial suffering that his own family had experienced.³

¹ Ezra Hyde, *History of the Town of Winchendon* (Worcester, MA: Henry J. Howland, 1849), p. 62.

² Alfred Free, *Winchendon: A Retrospect of One Hundred and Fifty Years* (Winchendon, MA: 1914), p. 11.

³ Edgar Vinton Wilson, *Memorial: Frederic Almon Wilson (1822-1897), Cordelia Rebecca (Mack) Wilson (1827-1913)*, Athol, MA: privately printed, 1913, p. 17. The author wishes to thank Nellie Doty for providing this reference, along with the family genealogy, and photographs of Rebecca’s “best” quilt.

Rebecca took great pride in her quilts. Family history asserts that she was determined to make an “even better” quilt when her favorite was stolen in 1839. She embroidered multi-colored baskets and bouquets of flowers and fruit, sashed by floral garlands, on black wool broadcloth. The design was Rebecca’s own, marked out with tailor’s chalk directly onto the wool. Unfortunately, the location of this quilt is not known, but a photograph, revealing a 1954 Eastern States Exposition blue ribbon, documents its stunning beauty.

Rebecca’s great-great-granddaughter owns this similarly constructed but simpler quilt, made about 1850. This “everyday” quilt is pieced in a nine-patch design alternating with blocks appliquéd and embroidered in wool yarns with stylized floral bouquets. Satin stitch, outline stitch, chain stitch, and straight stitch are all employed to create the imaginative spriggy flowers, embellished circles, and quatrefoil designs. There is no batting, but the plain cotton backing is held in place with sparse quilting stitches following the pieced pattern. The quilt is finished with a knife edge.

In the 35 years that Rebecca lived in Winchendon, she witnessed tremendous changes in the town. In the early 1830s, industrialization was taking over the agricultural economy of New England, and scores of individuals and families moved to mill towns like Winchendon looking for employment. The population of Winchendon in 1840 was 1679; only six years later, it had grown by over twenty percent to 2020.⁴ That decade also brought to town a revolutionary method of transportation, the railroad, enabling the efficient movement of the town’s products to markets around the country. Industrialization fueled a growing disparity in income of New England’s inhabitants: Textile mill owner John White’s house, “Marchmont,” a massive castle complete with crenellated towers, stood in contrast to the wooden, crowded, multi-family dwellings of the mill workers in nineteenth-century Winchendon. Events outside of the town also affected Rebecca’s life: the Civil War drew away her son Daniel, who was a chaplain in a Massachusetts regiment. In 1867, Lemuel succumbed to the lung disease brought on by his vocation as a stonecutter. One year later, Rebecca passed away. They are buried beside each other in the Riverside Cemetery in Winchendon.

LZB
826 words

⁴ Hyde, p. 60.