

Pieced, appliquéd, and reverse appliquéd bed cover, original pattern by Eliza Sumner (1802-1856) of Spencer, 1848.

Glazed and plain cotton, linen, silk, and porcelain and brass buttons.

92" x 104"

Private Collection

MQ #4100

This bed cover was made not only to warm the Sumners of Spencer, but to document the birth and death of each family member. It is the unique vision of its maker, Eliza Sumner, the daughter of William and Lucena (Fletcher) Sumner, who married in 1799.

The first thing that strikes the viewer is the unusual color scheme of this 1848 quilt. The yellow, blue, and white combination at first appears unlikely for a mid-nineteenth-century quilt, but closer examination reveals that the glazed blue and white cottons used are the typical "cambric" lining fabrics found in women's dresses in this period. The yellow silk is likewise a common lining fabric of the period, called "sarsnet," while the yellow gingham was a popular fabric used for children's clothes and women's work aprons.¹ Eliza chose these fabrics carefully to execute her celestial design, with large medallions of "A Representation of the starry Heavens," "The Dipper," "The Seven Sisters," "The Sun and its Rays in their irregular order," and the moon at night. The knowledge of astronomy, along with the carefully planned geometry and calculated measurements of the various blocks, indicate that Eliza had advanced schooling, probably at a young ladies' academy.

Another unusual aspect of this bed cover is that it is constructed like a duvet cover, an envelope to accept a quilt or blanket inside. The back is detachable along each side, being stitched only at the corners, and is fastened underneath to a lip of the white cambric with small, white porcelain buttons and tape loops. The back is decorated with narrow white cotton tape laid out in a diamond grid pattern, with the tape twisted into small circles along each line. Small porcelain buttons, typically used on children's clothes and everyday clothes in this period, along with brass studs, create starburst patterns. Round patches of the white cambric edged with narrow strips of purple and yellow cotton are laid out in a symmetrical pattern of interlocking diamonds. The bed cover is edged along three sides with a scalloped ruffle trimmed with the narrow white tape and tiny thread buttons.

The unique and curious features of Eliza's bed cover do not end there. Perhaps most unusual are the linen patches that have been custom printed with religious verses and a family register in the center of the front. "The Title Diamond" at the top center of the front explains Eliza's motivation for making this bed cover:

¹Lynne Zacek Bassett, *Textiles for Regency Clothing, 1800-1850* (Arlington, VA: Q Graphics Production Co., 2001). See also: Ellen Rollins, *New England Bygones* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1883), 134. Rollins recalled in this memoir that in 1830s New Hampshire, women wore yellow and white gingham aprons in the summer.

TO
REMAIN
IN THE FAMILY
OF MRS. WILLIAM SUMNER,
AND HANDED DOWN TO
FUTURE GENERATIONS,
By line of descent, in Remembrance of
Their Ancestors.
Names of the descendants to be added. Those
in nearest connection to be placed upon the
REGISTER.
Wrought by Eliza Sumner.
Daughter of Dea. Wm. Sumner.
Spencer, Ms.
1848.

Above the Title Diamond is Eliza's "Dedicatory to 'Album Quilt,'" in which she offers herself and her quilt to the Lord's work: "...it is my reasonable duty to devote my time, talent, and all for Thy service from time and eternity. Great God, help me thus to do, and prepare me for all Thy will while on earth I live."

Scattered throughout the bed cover, front and back, are short and often rather awkward verses of religious devotion, probably composed by Eliza herself: "Waiting to receive thy spirit / Lo the Saviour stands above / Shows the glory of His merit / Reaches out the crown of love." "Blessed by the tie, that binds / Our hearts in Christian love / The fellowship of kindred minds / Is like that above." These and other verses reflect the doctrine of salvation through faith that characterized The Second Great Awakening, a religious movement that was at its height in New England in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. (See the essay on Friendship Quilts.) Eliza was certainly primed to be receptive to the preaching of this religious revival, as she was raised in a religious family; her father was a deacon in the church.

In the center of the front is a large panel, printed at the top with "FAMILY RECORD" under which appears "NAMES," "MARRIAGES," and "DEATHS." Such family registers were extremely common in the period, though printed on paper, not cloth. Where did Eliza acquire this register and the unique linen patches printed with pious verses? A kit for letter press printing by amateurs at home, called a "novelty press," did not become available until 1867—too late for Eliza to have produced the patches for her "Album Quilt" herself.² She must have had them custom-made at a professional print shop. The closest print shop to Spencer belonged to one of rural New England's most successful printers, Ebenezer Merriam (1777-1858), in business from 1798 to 1848. He was located in the western section of Brookfield, the town located just

² The author wishes to thank Dennis R. Laurie of the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Mass., for this information.

to the west of Spencer.³ As the Sumner family lived at the western edge of Spencer, it was a ride or walk of about eight miles to place an order at the E. & L. Merriam print shop.⁴

The “Album Quilt” appears to have been a gift to Eliza’s mother, Lucena, as the dedication states that it was to remain in the family of “Mrs. Wm Sumner.” Eliza intended for the vital information about each family member to be written in the respective columns of the register. However, the register was never filled in—it is blank. Perhaps it was the sorrowful fact that Lucena outlived most of her family that kept her from filling out the register. Six of her eleven children were deceased by the time Eliza presented her with the quilt; William, also, was gone, having died of consumption in 1839. Eliza, too, would die five years before her mother, in 1856. The Album Quilt was kept safely folded up in a trunk for three more generations, passing eventually to Eliza’s only surviving brother, William, Jr., a piano teacher in Worcester, and down to his daughter and granddaughter. The contents of the Sumner house in Worcester were sold in the 1990s, and thus the present owner came into possession of this special textile, a unique item of American folk art.

LZB

1022 words

³ Donald Spencer Smith, “Printers and Related Tradesmen of Rural Worcester County (1790-1840); A Look at Them as Printers and as People,” unpublished research paper, 1989, Old Sturbridge Village research library, Sturbridge, MA. Ebenezer Merriam’s nephews, George and Charles Merriam, were also his apprentices. They became famous as the publishers of Noah Webster’s unabridged dictionary, and their company, Merriam-Webster, Inc., continues in business to this day.

⁴ Map of Worcester County (Boston: Wm. E. Baker & Co., 1857). Collection of Old Sturbridge Village research library.