



Got Up By Philaura B Stebbins

The line of writing, quilted over what looked to be the quilter's everyday handwriting, appeared to read: "got up by Philanin B Stebbins." This delightful but curious means of attribution, coupled with the quilter's exotic first name, compounded the mysteries of the unfamiliar quilting and odd pattern.

By ELI LEON

The many-pointed, red-and-white star-in-circle quilt shown on the next page first captured my eye at a California flea market in 1983. I'd never before seen a solitary star in a giant circle like this and unhesitatingly paid the twenty-eight-dollar asking price. I hadn't yet noticed the odd number of points in the star, the invisible signature line at the quilt's center, the maker's exotic first name, or her curious means of attribution, but I was nevertheless entranced.

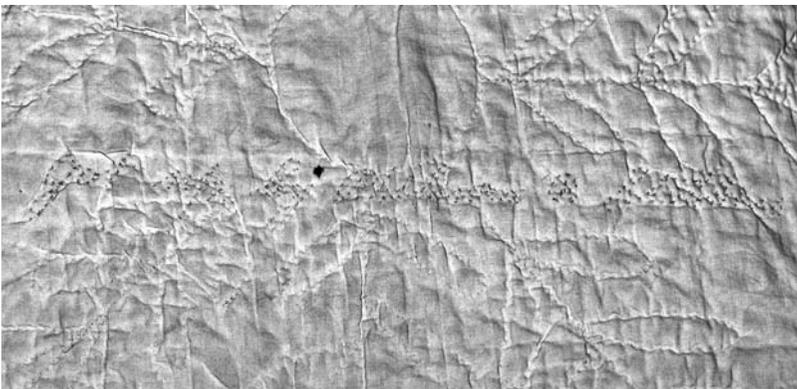
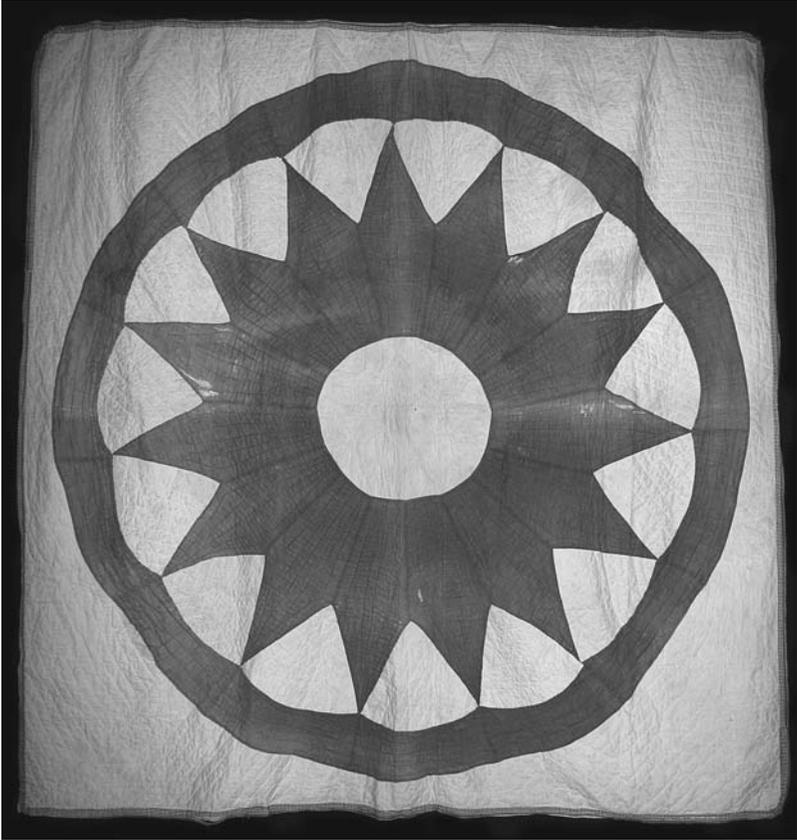
The woman selling this treasure claimed to have purchased it in the early 1970s at America Hurrah, an avant-garde antique store in New York City that has since gone out of business. Judging by what turned out to be the upside-down placement of the sleeve used to hang it, its sellers weren't aware of its signature line. Nor was I, until I got home and studied it more closely.

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Fifteen-point star quilt by Philaura B Stebbins, ca. 1862–1896, with detail of signature line. Photos by Nita Stull, courtesy of the author. A full-color image is accessible at the Vermont Historical Society website: www.vermonthistory.org/quilt.

The fifteen-pointed star-in-circle has a second circle at its center surrounding the only elaborate quilting in the piece. The folksy quilting in this center circle consists of eight stick-figure stems—each with six leaves—emanating from a third, quilted circle and a quilted signature line (see figure detail). Stitched in pale pink on a white ground, this signature line is virtually impossible to read. The hanging sleeve, as stated above, was mounted at the bottom of the quilt, indicating that the centrally located but hard-to-spot attribution had apparently hung upside-down for the last decade or so. This, of course, would have made it even more unreadable.

By holding the quilt in front of a bright light, however, I was able to make the stitches on the back show through to the front, doubling the amount of visible stitchery. The line of writing, quilted over what looked to be the quilter's everyday handwriting, appeared to read: "got up by Philanin B Stebbins." This delightful but curious means of attribution, coupled with the quilter's exotic first name, compounded the mysteries of the unfamiliar quilting and odd pattern.

Despite the difficulty one has in reading the signature today, I don't believe its concealment was intentional. This woman placed her name at the quilt's center and arranged the fanciest quilting around it. Whereas the color of quilting thread over most of the quilt is white on white or pink on red, the signature line alone is pink on white. I'd guess that all of the pink thread was originally red, that nowhere but in the signature line was a red/white contrast set up, and that the quilter had done so because she intended her name to be seen.

Once I'd discovered the odd signature, the odd quilting, the odd pattern, and the odd form of attribution, I was even more determined to find the quilter. Idiosyncratic names can be a godsend to census research. To my dismay, however, "Philanin B Stebbins" did not show up in any U.S. census. "Stebbins" is a common-enough English and American surname, but "Philanin" appeared to be unknown in the part of North America (i.e., the United States) to which I had census access.

That, however, was 1983. Starting anew in 2007, with additional records available at my local Regional Family History Center, I found several Philanins in an 1852 Québec census. One had the last name of Bourdan. If Philanin Bourdan married a Stebbins (of which there were many in 1852 Québec), she might very well have gone by the name of Philanin B (for Bourdan) Stebbins. Might this indicate that the quilt was French Canadian? Might some of its other peculiarities have French-Canadian antecedents? Perhaps the America Hurrah folks had actually purchased the quilt in Canada? If so, maybe the trip was memorable. The quilt itself certainly was. With any luck, at least one of them would remember it.

Endless scrolling through reels of out-of-focus French-Canadian marriage records, however, yielded no sign of a Stebbins/Bourdan wedding. By now, furthermore, I had contacted the proprietors of the out-of-business America Hurrah, who were certain they'd never seen this quilt before and had never shopped for quilts in Canada. I'd also approached the curators of several Canadian museums, wanting to know if "got up by" might be a Canadian or French-Canadian usage, or if a fifteen-pointed star had any French, Canadian, or French-Canadian significance. None, I was told repeatedly, that anyone could think of.

Then the ground shifted. After being informed that the name *Philamine* was popular in nineteenth-century French Canada, I remembered that, back in 1983, when I held the quilt to the light to read the signature line, the final letters in the first name had been especially hard to make out. So I tried searching for Phila* B Stebbins (where the asterisk serves to include a spectrum of possibilities, an option I hadn't been aware of in 1983, and which was exactly what I needed). I found no *Philamine* but, in Newbury, Vermont, a *Philama* B Stebbins in 1870 and a *Philaura* Stebbins in 1880, listed as born one year apart, while a Surviving Civil War Widow's Schedule for 1890 Newbury included a *Philura* B (widow of Horatio N) Stebbins.

Nineteenth-century census takers and the people they interviewed often lacked precise information, and both the informants' birth years and the spelling of their names might vary considerably. Uncommon names in particular might differ from census to census. It became evident (see below) that the name "Philaura" had repeatedly set off this spell-as-you-wish phenomenon, and that these three listings were simply variants of the same person's name. Hard as it was for me to believe, I had in all probability—after all these years—found the lady I was looking for.

Both *Philama* B. Stebbins, in 1870, and *Philaura* Stebbins, ten years later, lived a door or two down from sawmill owner Thomas Corliss and family. Given the rarity of the quiltmaker's name, it was extremely unlikely that this was a coincidence. Moreover, there was no *Philaura* or *Philura* Stebbins in 1870, no *Philama* or *Philura* in 1880, and no *Philama* or *Philaura* in 1890. Obviously, what looked like their simultaneous poppings in and out of the same house weren't conveying the true picture; the first two, at least, had to be the same person. Luckily, however, not even this smidgen of speculation was necessary. When I googled "Philaura B" from my home computer, I gained access to a 1902 *History of Newbury, Vermont*, which included a detailed write-up of the Corlisses.¹ This book, to my great surprise, had only been digitized and put on line a few months before I resumed my research. But

there she was, Philaura B. Corliss, one of Thomas's younger sisters. She'd married three times, first to John E. Smith, next to Daniel Lord, and finally—some time before she was found living alone next door to her oldest brother—to Horatio Nelson Stebbins.

Another book, *A Genealogical Record of the Corliss Family in America* (1875), outlines the tragic 1842 marriage of Phillandra B. Corliss and John E. Smith, both from Newbury, Vermont.² They (or maybe just John) lived in Lowell, Massachusetts. They'd had two children, Albert A., who died in 1845, and Mary J., who was "stolen" in 1847. But there was more. John, listed in the Massachusetts Vital Records as *single* and in the Federal Mortality Schedule as a laborer, died of consumption in 1850 at the age of thirty. Philaura had lost her entire immediate family. If John really was single in 1850, there must have been a divorce, for which no record has so far been uncovered. If they had informally broken up, though, John may have misled the authorities about his marital status.

So I now knew where the quilt had been "got up" and more than I ever expected to find out about its maker, including a host of ways to represent her name. Revisiting the actual signature, I saw that "Philaura" was indeed an excellent fit. Other information in the Corliss write-up and the Internet sites it led to added to my expanding quilt-maker image. Philaura had ten sisters and brothers. Her maternal grandfather was a German doctor. Her father was from a military family. But yet another tragedy: Atlanta Corliss, a sister older than Philaura by one year and most likely her closest sibling, died when Philaura was nineteen.

Not that there aren't a good number of loose ends: The symbolism behind the fifteen-pointed star, for example. A sixteen-pointed star would be relatively easy to construct, but how does one go about making one with fifteen points? If the maker had gone out of her way to achieve this particular number of points, I conjectured, she would most likely have had some reason to do so.

Was Vermont the fifteenth state to enter the Union? No, it was the fourteenth. Was Lincoln our fifteenth president? No, our sixteenth. Did Philaura come from a family of fifteen? Yes, in a special way of counting. Her two parents had eleven children and she had two of her own. If she were to stick to these closest blood relatives, fifteen would be the starring number! I'm inclined to believe that this is what the fifteen points stand for, but have no supporting evidence. If a New England tradition can be found of making the number of points in one's star quilt correspond to the number of people in one's family, however, the matter would be pretty much settled.

I did finally find a ten-pointed star-in-circle block pattern in Barbara Brackman's *An Encyclopedia of Pieced Quilt Patterns* (#3450) that shares several features of the Stebbins pattern (outer circle, petal-shaped points, central circle).³ Philaura might very well have been adapting this pattern, or a related one, to a larger, "pointier" star, and could conceivably have ended up with fifteen points by accident. In my experience with discarded quilt sections, however, when the points in a star fail to meet properly, they won't add up to a different whole number than originally intended but will overlap (or underlap) considerably. Furthermore, although Philaura's star sections do incorporate some minor variability, there's no indication of adjustments made to get the points to fit.

And then there's that "got up" phrase. While this was a broadly used nineteenth-century colloquialism for turning something out in a specific style (an outfit, for example), using it to sign a quilt appears to have been idiosyncratic. Not one of the quilt historians I've so far contacted can recall coming upon such an attribution on a quilt.

The outstanding material to surface about this quiltmaker, of course, is the procession of overwhelming tragedies that befell her. In addition to her sister's death when she was nineteen, losing the two children and husband from her first marriage, and losing her second husband, her final marriage was terminated by the Civil War. Horatio's first wife had died in 1861. He and Philaura, both in their forties at the time, were married January 30, 1862—nine months before he enlisted in the Union army. That next year, Private Stebbins died in Washington, D.C. Philaura had lost a third husband. No further details of her middle marriage have surfaced, but it probably came to an untimely end and was apparently childless. A Philusa (becomes Philura once the writing is scrutinized) Smith was living with an innkeeper couple in Wheelock, Vermont, in 1850, not too far from Newbury; and a Filma B. Lord was working as a housekeeper in nearby Topsham in 1860. Neither was living with any children, suggesting that Philaura did not have any more children and had lost her second husband by 1860. Basically, this woman's life was immeasurably grim.

The quilt, however, has a thoroughly cheerful quality. The overall design is bold and lively; both it and the signature line flow with great spontaneity. How can this be? Is it possible for such harrowing losses as Philaura sustained not to have left unsuppressible fault lines in her personality?

One pleasant possibility is that this quilt was made at the high point of her third marriage. Since she signed it with the last of her married names, we know it was completed after the 1862 wedding. Perhaps it was made in the period before Horatio's enlistment, which was quite pos-

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sibly the happiest time in Philaura's life. This is primarily wishful thinking, of course, but it's hard to imagine her making such an exuberant star after yet another husband's untimely death.

With any luck, further technological advances will open additional inroads. Bits of Philaura and Horatio's hair, or other DNA-retaining residua, might be lodged in the quilt's interior. Pinpointing the exact year in which an undated quilt was made over a century after the fact would ordinarily, of course, be too much to expect. If surviving traces of bodily secretions could be identified as Horatio's, however, this quilt might very well have been made in 1862. Before that, as noted above, Philaura's name was not Stebbins. After that, Horatio had disappeared into a hellacious battleground from which he was never to return.

Philaura, however, lived on. She didn't marry again but remained a Stebbins to the end (1896), living alone next door to her brother for most, perhaps all, of her remaining years. With no DNA evidence to the contrary, it is possible, of course, that she made this quilt late in life. Although red-and-white quilts, very common from the 1840s through the 1860s, may have decreased in popularity in the latter part of the century (quilt scholars are not in agreement on this point), examples from the 1890s can of course still be found. The quilt may not have been made for several decades after the Civil War. At the moment, there's no way of telling.

NOTES

¹Frederick P. Wells, *History of Newbury, Vermont From the Discovery of the Coös Country to Present Time* (St. Johnsbury, Vt.: The Caledonian Company, 1902). http://books.google.com/books?id=HAo1AAAAIAAJ&dq=history+of+newbury+vermont&printsec=frontcover&source=bl&ots=5NmSHojRzY&sig=uwmlXHYDoPvRQNK3b8HcdGiss2o&hl=en&ei=vZZGS6y7Ec_DlAfZgkN&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=3&ved=0CA4Q6AEwAg#v=onepage&q=&f=false

²Augustus W. Corliss, *A Genealogical Record of the Corliss Family in America* (Yarmouth, Me.: n.p., 1875). http://books.google.com/books?id=H3gtAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA202&lpg=PA202&dq=A+Genealogical+record+of+the+Corliss+Family+of+America&source=bl&ots=LT27DbeAuS&sig=3EZQDmkvIwy_agXPprTiBStelsc&hl=en&ei=k5dGS4bYI5TllQe2t9wN&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=4&ved=0CBIQ6AEwAw#v=onepage&q=&f=false

³Barbara Brackman, *Encyclopedia of Pieced Quilt Patterns* (Paducah, Ky.: American Quilter's Society, 1993).