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## Women's History Through Quilting

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# Women's History Through Quilting

by

Tricia J. Lea, M.Ed.

A Social Studies/Service Learning Teaching Unit  
for Middle and High School Grades

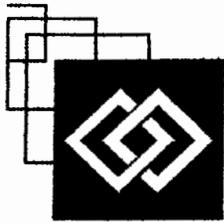
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and  
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### PREFACE

*Women's History Through Quilting* by Tricia J. Lea is the second in a series of exemplary curriculum units on social studies and service learning developed by public school teachers and compiled by the Eastern Regional Information Center, School of Education, University of Massachusetts Amherst.

The idea for a series of curriculum units came from the National Service Learning Cooperative and the K-12 Learn and Serve America Clearinghouse who are affiliated with the ERIC Clearinghouse on Social Studies and Social Science Education. Both organizations wanted to showcase models of integrating service learning into history and social studies classes in elementary and secondary schools. We at the Eastern Regional Information Center have worked with teachers to make their ideas and plans available to other practitioners.

Tricia Lea teaches her quilt unit at South Hadley High School in Massachusetts where she teaches eighth grade U. S. History. As part of a unit on women's history, students explore the many ways that history has been recorded, including through quilting. Students learn how women used quilts as their pens to record issues of their time. Students then connect this to their own lives by expressing contemporary issues through a quilt square. Students volunteer to sew quilt squares together in order to provide a community quilt, which is then donated to a community center for display, or to provide a very special housewarming gift for a woman moving from a shelter to her own home.

We hope you find this unit useful. Please contact us at the Regional Information Center with any questions or comments.

Beth Wohlleb  
Series Editor

Robert W. Maloy  
Project Director

# Women's History Through Quilting

## I. Unit Overview and Rationale

A. To fully understand history, students must have the opportunity of learning about all members of society. However, most history books do not include a complete or accurate account of every group.

B. Women have often been ignored or absent from student history texts. Due to their lack of formal education, women were unable to keep written records on the same scale as men. Yet education came in another form that was deemed more acceptable for a young woman: sewing. Before the onslaught of technology, women were primarily responsible for making clothes and blankets for family use. Sewing was an accepted and expected skill. This medium was used for quilting, gift giving and decoration. Quilting in particular was used for more than keeping children warm at night. It was a way to express social concerns, record personal accounts and make political statements.

C. To help students understand the importance and process of quilting, this unit enables students to be the quilt makers. Students will have the opportunity to weave their own messages into fabric much like the women who came before them.

D. Quilting has been a part of my American history/civics curriculum for three years. Every year students have thoroughly enjoyed sewing, even the boys! Initially they may show some hesitation or unwillingness to participate, but with patience and guidance they will come around. To prepare yourself and students for this project, here are some tips for success:

1. Before beginning the quilting unit, you might want to spend a week or so studying women in history. Familiarize kids with notable women in various fields such as science, history, social justice, aviation, and music.
2. Take out a quilting book from the local library. Find some excellent photos of beautiful quilts that kids can look at.
3. While searching for quilting books at the library, find some information about historical quilts, the quilting process and photos of quilts with political messages.
4. If you can, find someone who quilts and set up a lunch date with them. If you have never quilted before, don't worry. This person will show you the basics. You don't have to be an expert quilter to lead this activity.
- \*\*5. In September begin asking students to bring in fabric for this unit. If you have an open house night when parents visit the school, ask for fabric then. If you start in September, you should have enough fabric for the unit.

E. Community service. What do you do with a finished quilt? There are many possibilities. There's always room for a quilt in your spare bedroom, right? Quilting is an art in many ways. Not only does it take an artful eye but a giving heart. A quilting project would not be complete without this component. At some point the question will be asked, what are you going to do with the quilt? I suggest donating it to a home that really needs it--homeless shelter, battered women's home, senior centers, museums, historical societies, the local library, just to name a few. This can be a formal occasion or a field trip, whatever your resources allow you to do. I allow students who assemble the quilt squares to decide the fate of the quilt. They must familiarize themselves with local community services in order to make this decision. This makes them feel like they have an investment too.

## **II. Unit Content**

A. This unit introduces students to the role of quilting in understanding women's history. In the 1800's most women could sew, when relatively few women could write. Therefore, women's needles became their pens.

B. The practicality of quilts went far beyond decorations and bed coverings. Women used their needlework for social change, suffrage and missionary work. For example, women largely financed the anti-slavery (or abolitionist movement) with fund raising activities. Women sold their needlework at fairs and bazaars for this cause.

C. It is important that students are introduced to the role of quilting before they quilt. They need purpose for this activity, or else it will become tedious and meaningless. I have provided an outline of important points that I found necessary for students to understand.

D. Once the role of quilting has been introduced, the quilting process can begin (see below for lesson plans). However, as the unit unfolds, you will see something else start to happen. First, I found that the willingness of children to help each other extraordinary during this unit. When they see someone struggling, they offer guidance with no hesitation. Most important is the conversation that starts to develop. Since there is no television, no music or other activities occupying their thoughts, they devote their attention to each other, they communicate, they begin to bond with one another. In the outline accompanying this curriculum, I mentioned that women developed deep ties of friendship with each other. They saw themselves as a distinct group. Groups would meet on a regular basis to discuss their concerns about children, husbands and the world at large. This idea can be mentioned in your outline, but it will also happen in your classroom. Smaller classrooms will boast more connection with each other, but even in larger classrooms, this bonding process is present. It would be best to point this out after the quilting project is over. In a society where children are inundated with television and multimedia

computers, the quilting project takes them backwards in time to a place where communication with others was the only entertainment.

### **III. Objectives for Quilting Unit**

- A. Introduce the role of quilting in American history (Revolutionary Times -Industrial Age)
- B. List the uses of quilts
- C. Define terms such as quilting bees, suffrage, women's sphere, temperence, and abolitionist movement
- D. Understand how each term listed above relates to quilting
- E. Complete a quilt square block, hand-stitched.

### **IV. Lesson Plans**

#### Day 1 and Day 2

##### Objectives

- Introduce the role of quilting in American history
- list uses of quilts
- define terms such as quilting bees, suffrage, women's sphere, temperence and abolitionist movement
- Understand how each term relates to quilting

##### Lesson Activities

1. Show students a finished quilt. Share observations.
2. Questions. Do you know anyone who quilts? Do you have a quilt? What do you know about quilting?
3. Using reference materials, provide introductory information on quilts. Include information about Women's History month, written records vs. other forms of recording history, a typical day in the life of a mid 19th century women, quilting bees, quilts as albums and diaries, and quilting for political purposes.

##### List of Materials

1. Reference materials
2. Overhead projector
3. A quilt

(Prior to day three, gather a group of helpful students to cut out 12" x 12" pieces of fabric, preferably non-patterned, for students to use. Each student will choose one piece of block of fabric. This will be their quilt square. All designs in this unit are applied onto this quilt square.)

## **Day 3**

### Objectives

1. Review information given in yesterday's lesson
2. Explain format for quilting

### Lesson Activities

1. Brainstorm a list of issues that concerned women during the 19th century (or any time you choose)
2. Brainstorm list of issues that concern adolescents today. List them on the board. Have students write them in their notebook.
3. After list is complete, ask students to choose one issue for the list in their notebook to use in the quilt square.
4. Like women before them, students will express this issue using fabric, shapes, thread and a needle. No glue, no words.
5. Students should draw this image on a piece of scrap paper first before using fabric.

### Homework

Quilt square drawing due tomorrow. Keep shapes simple. Students will get frustrated if their drawing is too complex.

## **Day 4 and 5**

Objective- Begin quilting process

### Lesson Activities

**\*\* Important\*\***

1. Start off class by showing students how to do a running stitch, how to thread a needles and how to tie a knot at the other end. Assure weary students that help will be available for them during class.
2. Once drawings are complete, students may choose a 12" x 12" piece of fabric (the one's previously cut for quilt square blocks) as their quilt square block.
3. Students can begin searching for colored fabric that suits their needs. Let them work independently on this process.
4. Designate clean up people at the beginning of class.

### List of materials needed

sharp scissors  
fabric  
thread  
needles

## **Day 6-10**

### Objectives

1. Begin sewing process
2. Show students how to fold fabric around the edges to hide frayed fabric
3. Establish due date

### Lesson Activities

1. At the beginning each day: a) remind them of due date for project b) hand out quilt squares c) hand out needles d) discuss evaluation process
2. After the ten day quilting period is over, let students take home their squares to show to their family. After ten days, some students will have completed their project but most of them will need some additional time. Allow them one more week before collecting each square.
2. I found it easier to keep their quilt squares in school until the last quilting class. Too frequently do students forget their materials at home. Also some may finish days before others. It is better to keep them at a similar pace until the class activity is over.

### Making the Quilt

After all the squares are complete, I collect them for evaluation. At this time, I send around a sign up sheet for all interested candidates who would like to sew the quilt squares together. This part of the quilting project is not included in class time. If you choose this method and you have three dedicated volunteers, allow three months to assemble the quilt. You will also need: backing for the quilt and batting. The best and most efficient way to connect these three layers is the tying method. Almost every quilting book explains this method. All you need is embroidery thread to tie the three layers together.

## V. Evaluation of Quilting Project

A. Since this project introduces a new skill to many students, grading should be lenient so not to discourage students from further quilting endeavors. This project allows students to work independently for several days. They enjoy knowing what will happen in class before they get there. They become eager to start their work. It is important that you observe their work carefully so you can evaluate them fairly. Observe while you are helping, invite parents to come in and help, let them interact with the students while you take notes on each student's performance. I do not advise an out of classroom quilting assignment because it is difficult to evaluate students' progress. It becomes unfair when students have mothers or fathers who do the sewing for them or they have a sewing machine at their fingertips. In the classroom, these inequalities are not options.

B. Most of their grade depends on their effort and attitude during the project. Be strict about this. Let them know complaining about the project will be penalized. However, creativity, level of difficulty and neatness should also be rewarded. Using this evaluative strategy, it is equally difficult to fail as it is to receive an A. There will be students who produce painfully ugly quilt squares filled with signs of effort and there will be those who produce miniature masterpieces ready to be admired by all. Both deserve recognition for different reasons. Below is a breakdown of the evaluation process I have used for quilt squares.

### Quilt evaluation

This project is primarily based on in class effort and attitude. If you have consistently shown substantial class effort and demonstrated a positive attitude, your grade will not drop below a C. The rest of your grade is broken down as follows:

50% ----- effort/attitude  
20% ----- creativity/originality  
20% ----- difficulty (i.e. the more difficult the higher the grade)  
10% ----- neatness (no frayed edges)