

*A masterwork worthy of reverent whispers:*

## **The Jane A. Stickle quilt: 'In War Time, 1863'**

*Pam Weeks*

When the request came to write an article about the Jane Stickle Quilt, I was at first excited, and then a bit concerned that I would regret my enthusiastic positive response. What new information could possibly be uncovered concerning this well-known quilt and its maker, already published in several places? Because of research on other quilts made by women who mostly lived below history's scrutiny, <sup>1</sup> I knew that little more might be discovered about the life of a Vermont farm wife whose memory is primarily preserved by a quilt.

In the 1990s Brenda Papadakis became obsessed with this remarkable quilt after seeing it in Richard Cleveland and Donna Bister's book *Plain and Fancy*,<sup>2</sup> the research results of the Vermont Quilt Search Project. Papadakis visited the Bennington Museum and examined the quilt made and signed by Jane A. Stickle of Shaftsbury, Vermont, in 1863. She drafted the patterns, started teaching her students how to piece them, and published a book in 1996 in which she romanticized the history of the quilt, titled *Dear Jane*.<sup>3</sup> Thousands of enthusiastic quilters made copies of the quilt from Papadakis's patterns, or quilts inspired by it. Quilters blog about the process of making a "Dear Jane" quilt, admiring her skill and originality. They despair at the difficulty of some of the blocks—some contain pieces smaller than one-quarter inch on any side. A Google search for "Dear Jane Quilt" results in of thousands of hits—it is arguably one of the most famous nineteenth-century quilts in any museum collection.

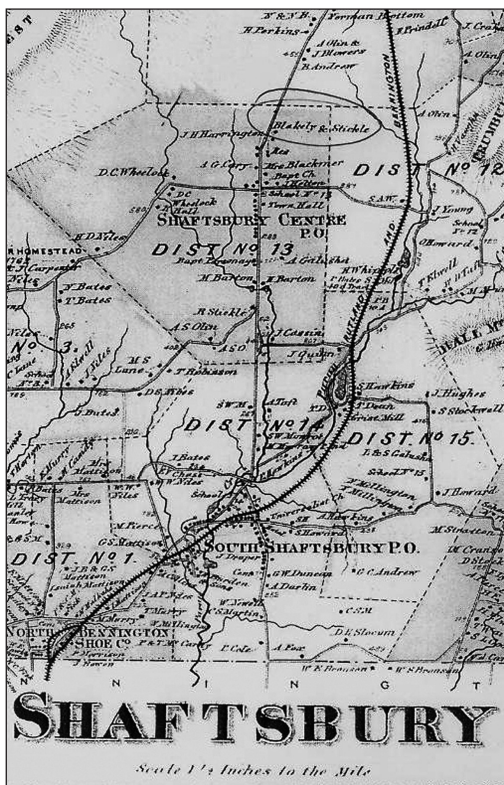
Several years ago I visited the Bennington Museum and spent two hours in the presence of the quilt. I describe the experience this way because the wonder of it draws one in. Visitors become quiet as they approach the quilt, laid flat on a large slant board, and they speak in reverent whispers as they stand and study it. It is a masterwork, and a visit to the Bennington Museum when it is on display is a pilgrimage. Hundreds of quilters make the trip year after year to view this iconic quilt.

The Stickle Quilt is very unusual in construction, design and format for a mid-nineteenth-century quilt. If there was an average block size for quilts of this period, it might be in the range of ten to twelve inches square. Jane

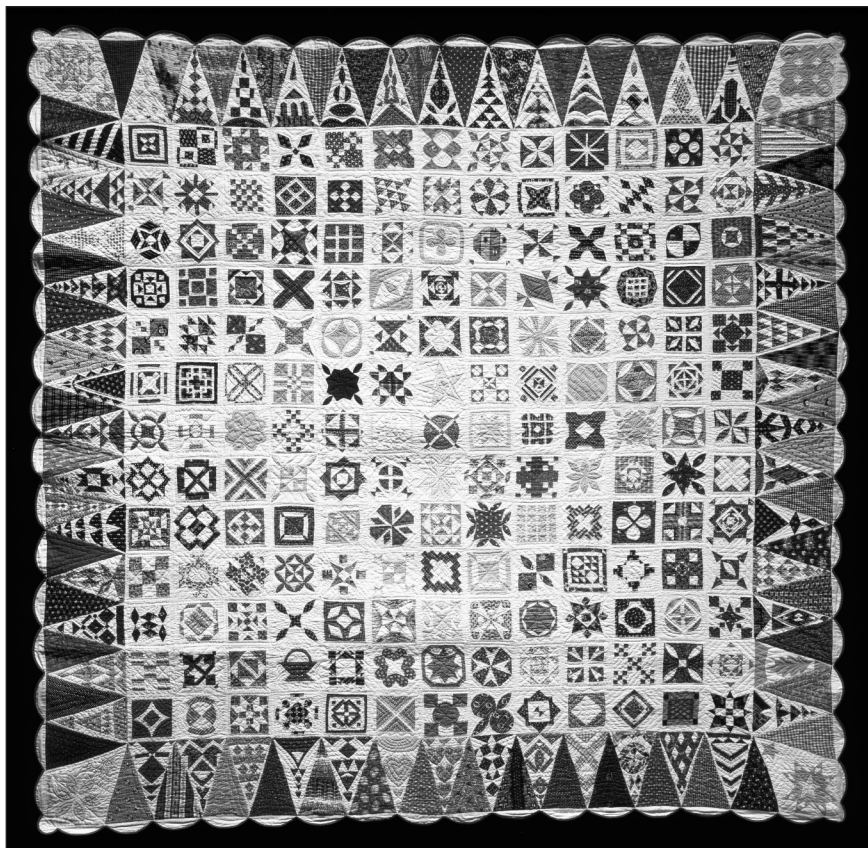
made 169 squares for the large central area of the quilt that differ in size from four to five inches—one half what might be considered a normal scale. Many of the blocks are intricately pieced, some are simple, and many are appliquéd. The pieces comprising the blocks range from less than a quarter inch to 2 inches, and some of the blocks have as many as thirty-five to forty pieces. Many of the block patterns are commonly seen in quilts from this era, but many more are unique, and drafted by a skilled needle worker with a mastery of geometry.<sup>4</sup>

Each block is pieced with just two fabrics, a printed calico or even-weave gingham and a white fabric. The calicos were carefully placed by color in the layout of the quilt. Jane placed a green block in the center, and chose this block carefully—the only other green blocks are in the outermost corners, placed there with the only blue block in the quilt. This center green block is surrounded by others pieced in yellow and those in turn by alternating concentric rounds of color including purple, pink, and reddish brown calicos. Many of the blocks that were once purple have faded to brown, a common occurrence in many early and mid-nineteenth century quilts. I did not find repeats of any print. Each block uses a unique fabric.

Less unusual is the fact that each block is of a different pattern. Sampler or variety quilts composed of blocks pieced in multiple patterns were part of the popular fad of inscribed friendship quilts that had its peak in the 1860s. Generally, however, a unique maker contributed each block and inscribed her name on it, often including messages or place names.<sup>5</sup>



*Jane Stickle's home in Shafsbury is indicated by the circled "Blakely & Stickle." It was located across the road (today's Route 7A) from the Governor Jonas Galusha home, now a museum, indicated on this 1869 Beers Atlas map as "J.H. Harrington."*



*The Jane Stickle quilt itself*

### **‘In War Time, 1863’**

Research has revealed only two other quilts at all similar in style and character made by one person. The New England Quilt Museum has in its collection a silk quilt, circa 1860. Each of the eight-inch blocks is different, and as in the Stickle quilt many are unusual patterns.<sup>6</sup> In “Quilting Traditions,” author and quilt historian Trish Herr identified a quilt made in Pennsylvania, signed and dated 1860. It is composed of 137 diamond-shaped blocks, many as intricately pieced as Jane Stickle’s quilt. No relationship has been found to link the three quilt makers, nor has a printed design source from the period been uncovered.

The border of Jane Stickle’s quilt is unique. On all four sides there are thirteen large cone-shaped triangles either pieced or appliquéd, alternating with triangles of the same shape cut from printed cottons. The four corners consist of larger triangles, each intricately pieced, and in one, Jane inked her name, the number of pieces in the quilt (5,602) and “In War Time, 1863.”

Instead of leaving a straight edge as we find on the majority of quilts of this period, Jane added a scalloped border—the curve of each one starts and ends at the end of the base of its triangle.

It appears that much of the scalloped border was cut from long strips of fabric, applied to the edges of the top of the quilt, and then shaped. I assumed before closely examining the quilt that the curved slices of cotton that form the border were cut individually and sewn to the bases of the large triangles, but this is not the case. I did not find seams between the curved portions. I conclude that the quilt top was completed, layered with batting (filling) basted to the backing, then quilted, cut to the lovely curved shape, and bound with straight-of-the-grain blue-green cotton.

Jane recycled a linen sheet for the majority of the backing of the quilt. The sheet is made of two panels joined by a center seam that is butted and hand sewn. Letters were found embroidered at the bottom portion of the sheet that makes up the reverse of one of the scallops. “S B” is embroidered in tiny cross-stitches less than one-quarter inch tall. These are her mother’s initials, and represent Sarah (also called Sally) Blakley.

Jane’s father died in 1831 and the inventory of his estate included two sets of linen sheets.<sup>8</sup> It was customary in the early nineteenth century for a homemaker to mark her household linens with her initials and an inventory number, either in ink or with embroidery. The initials identified the owner, and the inventory number assured proper rotation of the sheets in household use.<sup>9</sup> I have seen several quilts from this period and earlier with recycled sheets for backings. A quilt in the collection of the New England Quilt Museum made by Thankful Hall Miller was constructed by joining two sheets with distinct inventory numbers. The seams joining the linen panels are butted and hand sewn just as in Jane’s quilt.

## **Jane A. Blakley Stickle**

Jane A. Blakley was born in Shaftsbury, Vermont, on April 8, 1817. She died on March 2, 1896, as stated on her grave marker. Little can be found beyond the census records and the records of Bennington County and town of Shaftsbury, but we can use those few details to sketch a picture of her life. (There are multiple variations in the spellings of both “Blakley” and “Stickle,” which made research into both families difficult. I use the spellings as I found them in varying sources.)

Her father, Erastus Blakley, prepared a will in late 1830 and died in January of 1831 when Jane was 13. The probate records give us a glimpse of a wealthy farmer-craftsman’s household. Listed is a barn full of tools, raw materials, and finished parts for assembling wagons and sulkies. The house-



hold inventory included tables, sets of chairs, five beds, and several sets of linen and cotton sheets; curtains; blankets and quilts. There are many sets of dishes and “plate” tablespoons, teaspoons, and forks. Jane is mentioned twice: her father directs that proceeds from his estate be used to educate Jane and her brother Erastus (1820-1878) and that Erastus is to receive one-half the value of his father’s personal estate, Jane one-fourth, but each of their two sisters, only one-eighth.<sup>10</sup>

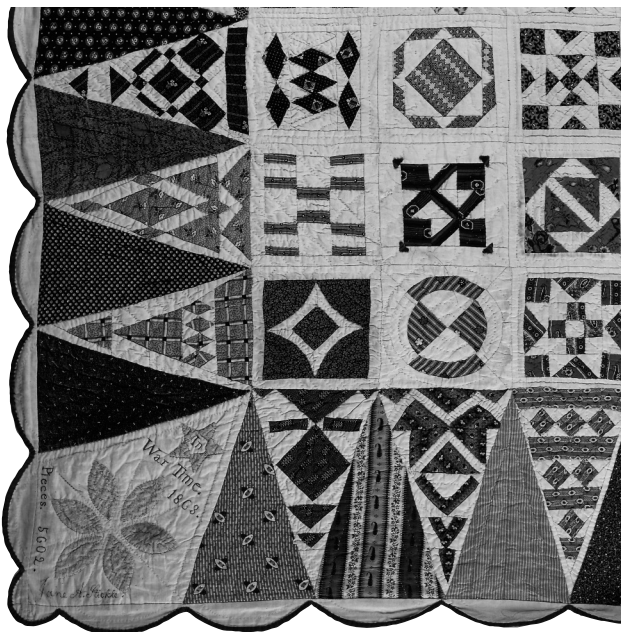
That Jane A. Blakley was well educated is proved by both the quilt, which required great needlework skill and a thorough knowledge of geometry; and a watercolor painting, also in the collection of the Bennington Museum. The painting is very like the theorem works stenciled on velvet frequently made during this part of the nineteenth century, and the schools where it was taught advertised the teaching of this technique. In the painting, stylized flowers are formally arranged in a vase, very likely traced from a pattern or copied from a master design. It does show some refinement in execution and choice of colors.

She married Walter P. Stickle, a farmer, sometime before 1850, as they appear in the same household in 1850 census—Jane was thirty-three at the time of this census but no children are listed. W.P. Stickles is listed as head



*This watercolor is the only other work of art known to have been done by Jane Stickle.*

*Bennington Museum collection*



*A significant corner of the quilt shows that it was done  
"In War Time 1863"*

of the household, which includes her brother, listed as E. M. Blakely, with his occupation "Tailor;" her mother, Sarah Blakely; and two other adults with relationships unknown. Also listed in this census as living nearby is Walter's brother, John B. Stickles, with his wife and three young children.<sup>11</sup>

In the 1860 census Walter Stickles, and Sarah Blakely are living in a household that lists Erastus Blakely, now defined as a farmer, aged 44, as head of household with wife Harriet, twenty years his junior. In another part of town, Jane is listed as a farmer, living by herself. The quilt was made in this decade, and may have won a ribbon for Jane at the Bennington County Fair in late September 1863. The *Bennington Banner* lists the premiums awarded, including "Mrs. W. P. Stickles for Best Patched Quilt." The Stickles and Blakelys are also mentioned as winning premiums for the quality of their horses, but it is not entirely clear which families are referenced, as there are three Stickles listed as farmers in Shaftsbury in the 1860 census.

The inscription on Jane's quilt includes the phrase, "In War Time." Other authors have suggested that Jane may have pieced it to keep her mind from worrying about her many neighbors and nephews who served in the Civil War. Walter's sister, Charlotte Stickle, married David Galusha Cole, and of their seven sons who survived past childhood, six served in the Union Army. Another nephew, Austin Stickle, served for Vermont, and an eighth nephew, Grosvenor, the son of Walter's oldest brother William, was listed in New York's draft register but it is not clear that he served.

Walter and Jane Stickle are listed in the same household in the 1870 census, with the farm valued at \$6,000, and personal property at \$1,500. Erastus and family are listed on the farm next door. It is unclear what happened to the Stickles, but in the 1880 census they are boarders in the household of George and Evelyn Eddy. Walter is listed as afflicted with rheumatism. Also in 1880, the Shaftsbury town records show that Walter P. Stickles was given \$5 per week, totaling \$170, for his own keeping. He and Jane were wards of the town.<sup>12</sup>

The annual report by the town Overseer of the Poor continues listing the Stickles through the 1880s and 1890s. Walter died in 1883 while still boarding with the Eddys. From 1884 until Jane's death in 1896, the records show that David Buck was paid \$100 per year for "keeping Mrs. Walter Stickles." Little changes through these entries—there are usually one or two other people cared for by the town for various periods, all averaging \$5 per week. There is a subtle change in the attitude about Jane Stickle—at the beginning of her individual record, she is listed as Mrs. Walter Stickle, and is slowly downgraded to Mrs. Jane Stickle, and at the last, J. Stickle.<sup>13</sup> She is buried in the Center Shaftsbury Cemetery, sharing a headstone with Walter, near the Blakley gravestones.

A museum's catalog contains the records of donations to the museum, and often in the first half of the twentieth century, the typed catalog cards in many museums contain only partial information about the objects and their donors. The donation to the Bennington Museum by Louise Blakley Bump, Arlington, Vermont, of a watercolor painted by Jane A. Stickle, is recorded, but not the date. Because the cards are kept in chronological order, and the one recording the accession of Jane's quilt follows this card, it is safe to assume that the same donor delivered the quilt. Callie Stewart, collections manager, stated that the quilt was purchased. The donation and purchase happened in 1938 or 1939 based on dated cards found before and after these records.

Sarah Louise Blakley Seymour Bump was the third child of Jane's brother Erastus and his wife Harriet. She was born in 1868 and married first, Joseph Seymour, with whom she had two sons. She married second, Arus F. Bump, and she appears in the census records for Arlington, Vermont, from 1900 through 1940. She died in Shaftsbury in March of 1950, and is buried in the Evergreen Cemetery in Arlington.

## Unanswered questions

Jane A. Blakley Stickle's legacy is a masterwork of a quilt made in 1863. She signed it, noting in her inscription an overwhelmingly important current event, but also calling attention to the extraordinary feat of needlework

she accomplished—5,306 pieces. Each block is unique and uses different fabrics. Jane had access to an amazing wealth of material, and she had time to draft and execute the intricate blocks. She made it during a time in her life when she was enjoying some degree of wealth in both time and resources, which did not last.

Many questions remain unanswered. Uppermost in my mind is how Walter and Jane Stickle lost everything. Why were they boarded out, when, according to census records, two of his brothers continued to live on their farms in Shaftsbury and prosper, and many nieces and nephews lived in the area? Why did the quilt pass to one of those nieces? We may never know, but we are left with an incredible quilt to comfort us while we ponder.

### Endnotes:

- 1 Loretta B. Chase and Pamela Weeks Worthen, "A Blue Hills Quilt: To Miss Charlotte Hawkins," in *Uncoverings* 2004, ed. Kathryn Sullivan (Lincoln, Nebraska: American Quilt Study Group, 2004) 129-155.
  - 2 Donna Bister and Richard Cleveland, *Plain and Fancy: Vermont's People and Their Quilts As a Reflection of America.* (Gualala, CA: The Quilt Digest Press, 1991) 60-61
  - 3 Brenda Manges Papadakis, *Dear Jane: The Two Hundred Tent-Five Patterns from the 1863 Jane A. Stickle Quilt*, (West Warren, MA: Wrights, 1996)
  - 4 Examination of The Jane Stickle Quilt, Collection of the Bennington Museum, accession number 2064, March 15, 2013. Thanks to Callie Stewart, collections manager, for her assistance with all available resources.
  - 5 Barbara Brackman, "Signature Quilts, Nineteenth Century Trends," in *Uncoverings* 1989, ed. Laurel Horton (San Francisco, CA: American Quilt Study Group, 1990) 27-30
  - 6 New England Quilt Museum, accession number 2003.14. The quilt was made by Elizabeth Johnson White of Point Pleasant, PA, circa 1860. The center block is composed of what was once bright red, white and blue stars, and may be related to the Civil War.
  - 7 Patricia T. Herr, *Quilting Traditions: Pieces from the Past* (Altgen, PA: Schiffer Publishers, 2000) 157-158. A sampler quilt is attributed to Fanny S. Bucher, initialed FSB and dated 1860. It is 84 inches square, and composed of diamond-shaped blocks set in pink sashing with many blocks as complicated as those found in Jane Stickle's quilt. Thanks to Laura Lane, collections manager at the New England Quilt Museum, for this reference and for sharing her research results on this particular style of quilt.
  - 8 Vermont, Bennington County, Manchester District Estate Files 1779-1935, Images. *FamilySearch*. <http://Familysearch.org>: accessed 2013. Citing Probate Court, Supreme Court of Vermont, Montpelier: Box 3, images 692 to 742, Last Will and Testament of Erastus Blakley. The records include the probate inventory of his estate.
  - 9 By a Lady, *The Workwoman's Guide* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, and Co., 1838) 181 (reprinted by Piper Publishing, LLC, 2002)
  - 10 Last Will and Testament of Erastus Blakley.
  - 11 United States Census, 1830 through 1940, index and images accessed through Ancestry.com.
  - 12 Annual Reports of the town officers of Shaftsbury, Vermont, for the years 1884 to 1896, located at the office of the town clerk.
- Funding for the research and writing of this article came from an Implementation Grant from the Champlain Valley National Heritage Partnership.*