

# Lancaster Farming *Antiques Center*

## Rare Antique Quilts Stitched By 'White-Topper' Amish Express Striking Simplicity In Bold Colors

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In 1790, a group of Amish from southeastern Pennsylvania traveled northwestward to settle on the rich limestone soil of the Kishacoquillas Valley in Mifflin County. They farmed and prospered.

But along with prosperity came pressures to change their lifestyle, issues that challenged their ways of farming, style of dress, color, and construction of their buggies and homes, and their use of newer and more advanced tools and farm implements. In 1840, Amish Bishop Yost B. Yoder returned to Pennsylvania from Nebraska to settle a dispute among the Amish, possibly about buggy construction. When efforts to keep the church united failed, members of the most conservative sect continued to maintain their lifestyle by keeping to themselves and have become what is now called the Nebraskans, Old Schoolers, or white-toppers in reference to the color of their buggy.

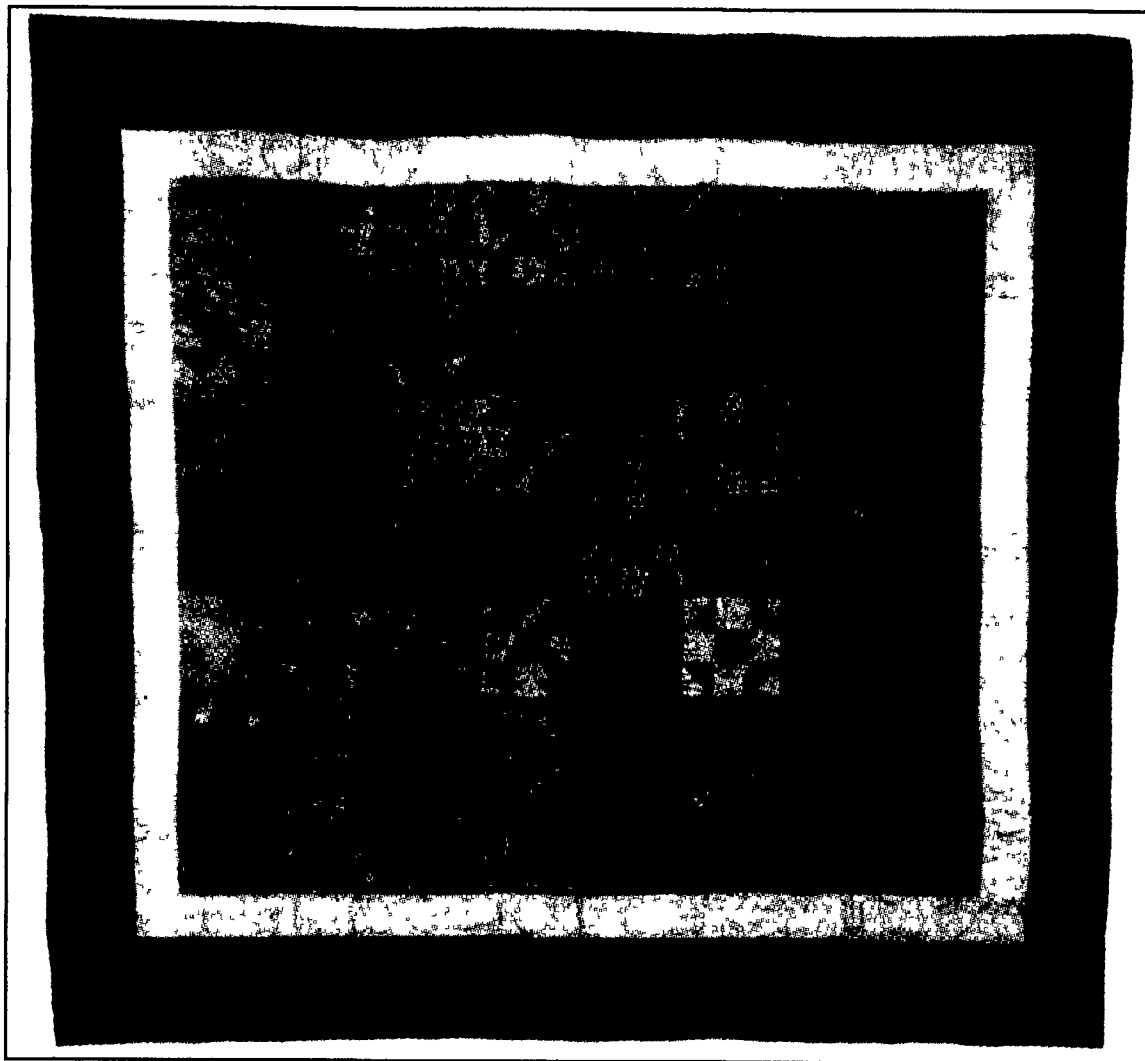
This sect has most successfully resisted the onslaught of modernization over the past 200 years. They live in only one area of Mifflin County, till the land with horses, let their barns unpainted, and, except for the men's white shirts, dress in the darkest shades of brown, purple, plum, and blue. Understandably, both current and antique quilts made by the Nebraskan Amish feature dark colors. They adhere to minor variations of a nine-patch configuration and show only subtle signs of originality. All of this pieces together to form quilts of striking simplicity.

"As limited as these women were by their church laws, design, and color, they created some of the most expressive artistic and modern-looking quilts," says antique quilt expert Connie Hayes of Belleville.

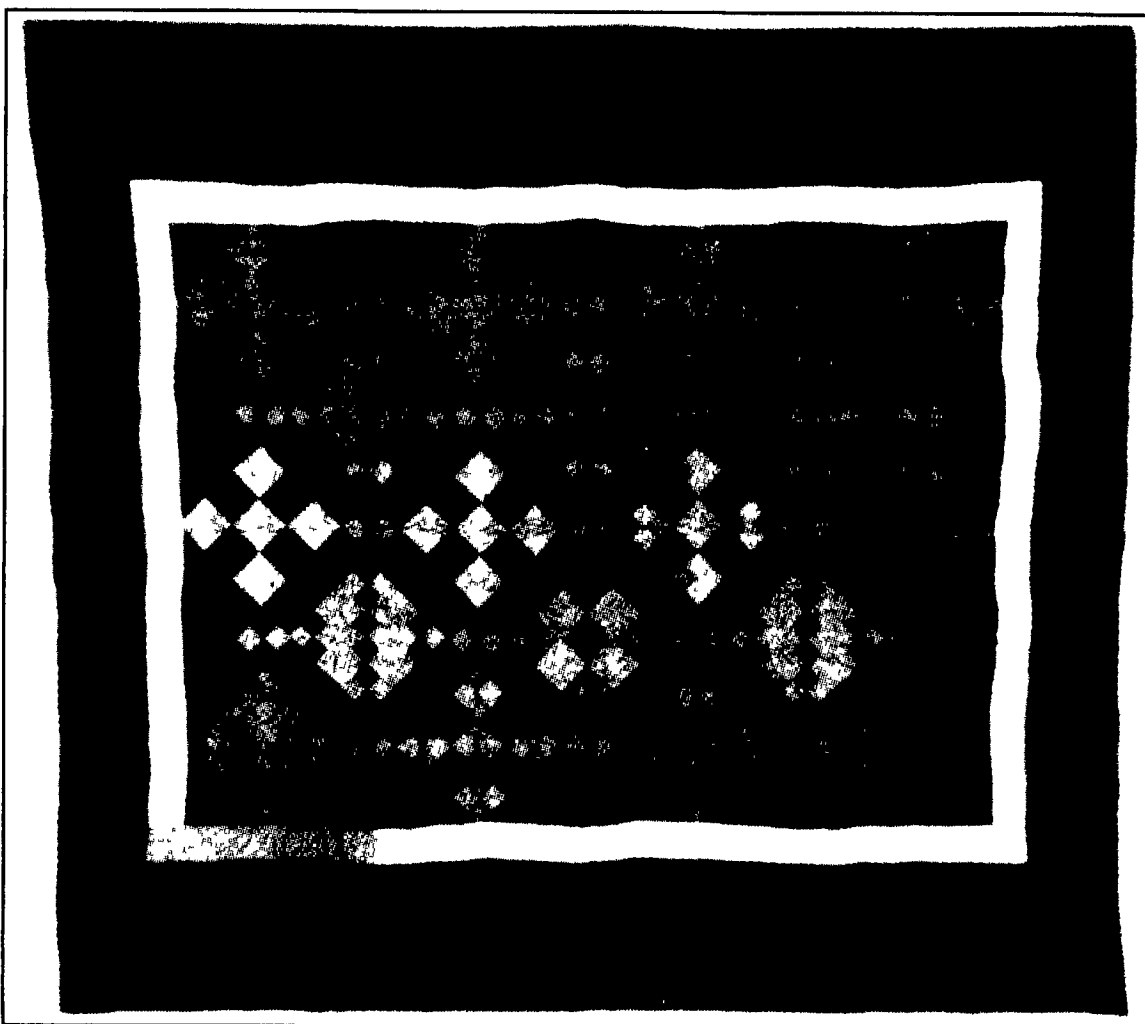
The Nebraskan women varied the nine-patch design by piecing the squares horizontally or on one of the square's corners. A chain of squares could run horizontally and vertically or diagonally.

Since the women didn't purchase material solely for quilt making, a Nebraskan Amish woman relied on the material scrap box, which contained material that had been stored for a lifetime. She kept her best material for her sons' wedding quilts and made everyday quilts from blue dress material and other available material. When one color ran out while making a quilt, another was substituted, often creating an asymmetrical but visually pleasing color scheme not found in quilts outside the Nebraskan sect.

As a collector of antique quilts and neighbor to many Nebraskan Amish, Connie has, through



All Nebraskan Amish quilts feature some variation of the nine-patch motif, as shown in this antique Amish quilt owned by antique quilt expert Connie Hayes of Belleville, Mifflin County.



Dark purples and blues readily identify the Nebraskan Amish quilt, as does the nine-patch variation. Very few antique Nebraskan Amish quilts are found today.

the years, purchased antique Nebraskan quilts at farm sales and from families. She showed a collection of 23 antique Nebraskan quilts in Denver, Colorado, sev-

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Antique Quilt Expert

eral years ago. The collection attracted the attention of William Wigton of New Jersey. Wigton offered to buy the collection, which now hangs in the Museum of American Folk Art in New York City. The quilt display has traveled to many U.S. cities and to countries abroad, sharing a history of the Nebraskan Amish through the quilts.

"I bought a Nebraskan Amish quilt several years ago at a sale," Connie said, "but I doubt that many older Nebraskan quilts are still in the hands of the Amish."

## Putting Your Quilt To Bed

For every quilt, a day usually comes when you want to put it away. Avoid folding, as the weight on the fold can break fibers and leave a dirty line in your quilt. If you need to fold it, make sure to fold it differently each time you put it away. You can pad the folds with scrunched up acid-free paper or well-washed muslin to create a kinder bend.

When storing your quilt in a wooden drawer or cupboard, apply a polyurethane finish over the wood to keep oils from the wood from staining your quilts. Loosely wrap your quilt in muslin or acid free paper rather than plastic wrap, so the quilt can breathe.

High humidity and temperature extremes, such as those that occur in an attic or basement, can wreak havoc on your quilt.

For more information on quilt conservation, contact the American Institute for Conservation, 1717 K St. NW, Suite 200, Washington, D.C. 20006. The AIC is the national membership organization of conservation professionals dedicated to preserving the art and historic artifacts of our cultural heritage. You can write or call AIC for a list of professional conservators in your area who will be able to give you an estimate and help conserve your quilt.