

So much has since we showed off the quilt for the first time on June 14, 2011. Volunteers at the Belfast Museum have been busy documenting and transcribing all the writings on the quilt, and researching the women who sewed the quilt. Quilt experts have begun the process of assessing its condition and restoration needs.

We've also pondered how such an item came to rest in Montana. In August 2011, that question was answered, when the Belfast Museum received a letter from Diana Brady of Montana giving additional information about her family's long history with the quilt. We now have "the rest of the story."

But, let's start at the beginning...

The Ladies Volunteer Aid Society, of First Church, Belfast, was formed in 1861 with 78 members for the purpose of "assisting the noble men of our city and vicinity who volunteer to defend our country in this hour of her greatest peril." They met regularly during the war at the Unitarian Parsonage on Church Street between Grove and Elm. At this time, the minister, Rev. Cazneau Palfrey, his wife and daughters lived in the parsonage.

During summer months, the Society sewed flannel shirts, blue denim pants, handkerchiefs and havelocks – the small pieces of cloth that attached to the soldier's caps to protect their necks from the sun. The Society also assembled little care packages that included sewing kits, combs, scissors, tea, soap, cloves for the care of their mouths – cloves were used to deaden the pain of tooth aches -- jellies, a great quantity of lint and many hundreds of yards of bandages. As winter set in, knitting needles and quilting frames were brought out and mittens and quilts were made. Most popular and appreciated by the soldiers were gifts from home that included dried apples.

The Society continued their sewing sessions through the winter of 1863. In June of 1864, at an organizational meeting, it was proposed to make a flag bed quilt to send to a hospital. They also renamed the Society using the letters U. S. G. – which we are assuming stand for Ulysses S. Grant.

The Ladies commenced work on the flag bed quilt on June 17th, 1864 and by July 7; the quilt was ready for finishing. The U. S. G. Society did the finishing work at the home of the Honorable Nehemiah Abbott, former U. S. Congressman from Belfast during the years 1857 through 1859. The house still stands at the corner of Main and Congress Streets – It's currently known as the Ambassador apartments.

The completed quilt was celebrated with a supper, and the sewing party and their invited guests danced until the small hours of the night. The finished quilt was shipped from Belfast the following week.

Much of the initial information we found regarding the quilt was garnered from the writings of Augusta Quimby Frederick, whose 1917 recollections of the Civil War detail the work of the U.S.G. Society.

In her own words,

Quote, as a diversion from real work it was proposed to make a Flag Bed Quilt for a hospital. Preparations were made at once, a committee was chosen to purchase the materials, and at a meeting at the Unitarian Parsonage the quilt was designed, cut and prepared for willing hands to finish. It was of good size, made like a flag with a red and white border. The names of all the members were written in the white stripes, appropriate mottoes were in every star and where some pun or play upon the Union Officers names could be made, it was quickly incorporated.

Augusta went on to give examples of some of the puns: Quote, The idea was like this: a hard resting place for the rebels – “General Pillow” A bus to the rebel progress, “General Gates”.

The quilt left Belfast and arrived in our capital on August 12, 1864. The Armory Square Hospital located on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.m became the quilt’s new home for the duration of the War,

A letter accompanied the quilt from the U.S.G. Society President, Miss Belle Johnson , only 19 years old at the time. A letter in response was sent in return from Miss McLellan, Armory Square Hospital, Ward 26, expressing thanks on behalf of the soldiers in the ward. Miss McLellan described how the quilt was carried from bed to bed so that each soldier might enjoy it: She reported back that quote, “many have been the expressions of surprise and admiration.”

Let’s take a closer look at what our soldier’s saw:

When you step back, the quilt is simply a large flag with a decorative border. It measures 62 ½ by 92 ½ inches, overall, with the flag itself measuring 39 ½ inches by 69 inches. It is made of cotton and wool and is hand stitched with the binding sewn by machine. The backing is striped cotton typical of the era When you look closely, one discovers that the individual stars, stripes, and miniature flags of the quilt each tell a story:

For instance, to inspire our boys, the flag includes exclamations such as:

- Hurrah for the Boys of the Pine Tree State
- Down With the Bars and up with the Stars
- Colors that never run! Red, white, and Blue

These cheers are hand written in ink that has survived, mostly clear and intact, for close to 150 years. Mrs. John H. Quimby is believed to have penned the names of the U.S.G. members on the quilt, but other, unidentified hands helped pen these lines.

Inspiration also was spiritual:

- The Large White Star in the Blue Field has the Lord's Prayer. Each of the five points of that star have a biblical verse inscribed drawn from both the old and new testaments.
- Small white stars surround the Large White Star – there were 34 originally but, due to damage to the quilt top, there are now 32. Each star represents a battle that the men of Belfast took part in. Men from Belfast served with Maine's 4th, 19th, 20th, and 26th regiments. The 26th fought in the Battle of New Orleans and also Port Hudson in Louisiana. This was a nine-month regiment that experienced heavy losses.

The border is made of three rows of small squares anchored by complete miniature flags. Each of these flags has 13 hand-embroidered stars on a blue field. Around each of these small flags are inspirational phrases exhorting our soldiers to fight for their country, God, and their Flag. Original poems by some of the women who worked on the quilt are there, as well. We like to imagine that each quilter who worked on these corners designed and chose the writings to emblazon their square.

The three rows of small squares in the border alternate in color -- red, white, and blue. On each of the white squares, more writing appears, this time as puns, mocking remarks about Rebels, and patriotic quips about our own Yankee heroes. A few of our favorites are :

A bad Fence to get over, The Union Picket,
Our native berry, Gen. H.G. Berry
A northern gamecock, General Hancock
The right side, our side and Burnside
If the rebs won't pay, we will "Charge em"

We discover new "favorites" every day.

The white stripes complete the flag. Here, each woman who participated in making the quilt was named. For us, this is an added gift as we know who exactly crafted this very special quilt. (Photo: of signatures). Most of these women were young, unmarried, and daughters of leading Belfast families – the White, Johnson, Field, Hazeltine, Abbott, Faunce, Furber, and Bean families are just a few of those represented.

We have so much information to share that we are hard-pressed to include it today. But, at the very least, we need to tell you how the Quilt found its way home to Belfast.

And so began the long and great trans-continental journey of the quilt.

The Bliss and Milburn Family

Dath Willard Bliss, physician, of Washington, D.C., was born August 18, 1825 at Brutus, New York. He graduated from Cleveland Medical College in 1846 and attained great celebrity as a physician and surgeon. Dr. Bliss entered the Union Army during the Civil War and had the following service record: Surgeon in the 3rd Michigan Infantry (May 31, 1861); Major and Surgeon with the U. S. Volunteers (September 21, 1861); Surgeon in Charge of Armory Square Hospital at Washington (July 1862 - August 1865); Brevet Lieutenant Colonel with the U.S. Volunteers (March 13, 1865); mustered out December 8, 1865 and honorably discharged.

Armory Square Hospital was established in 1862, on the National Mall, the site is now the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. Dr. Bliss was placed in charge in July of 1862, and in his three year tenure, oversaw the laying out of the grounds of the hospital and the erection of more buildings. He is credited for his untiring devotion to the care and welfare of his patients. The 1,000-bed hospital complex consisted of twelve pavilions and overflow tents, spread across the Mall and included quarters for officers, service facilities, and a chapel. The wounded from battlefields of Virginia were brought here.

#When the hospital closed in summer of 1865, all inventory was turned over to the medical staff. According to Diana Milburn Brady, great- great-granddaughter Dr. Bliss opened his own practice in Washington D. C. after the Civil War, and continued to be a highly respected surgeon in that city. He was one of a group of doctors that tried to save President Lincoln when he was shot. He was an ardent advocate of recognizing real merit wherever found, and therefore of admitting well qualified physicians into the Medical Association of the District of Columbia regardless of the color of their skin. This, in a politically charged medical association that included ex-confederate surgeons, did not always sit well, and he was ripe for criticism when he tried working with an indigenous doctor from South America to try to find a cure for cancer.

"When President Garfield was shot on March 4, 1881, Dr. Bliss headed the group of doctors who were to care for him. His condition improved and worsened during the two and a half months before he died and there were those who criticized when the patient became worse. A clipping from a Washington paper at the time says this: 'There is something magnificent in Dr. Bliss's endurance, fidelity, courage and hope. The attempt to injure him in the estimation of the anxious people is followed by a reaction which makes him one of the most admired men of the day.'

When the hospital closed in summer of 1865, all inventory was turned over to the medical staff. According to Diana Milburn Brady, great- great-granddaughter of Dr. Bliss, it is possible his devoted staff presented the quilt to him.

The quilt was later given to Bliss's youngest child, Eugenie Prentiss Bliss. She married a young Yale educated lawyer, George R. Milburn, in 1875, in Washington, D.C. Milburn was appointed Special Indian Agent to the Dakota and Montana Territories in 1882. He moved his family to Miles City, Montana in 1885, when he was elected that area's first county attorney. In 1889, he was elected Judge of the seventh District Court of Montana, the first year of Montana's statehood. He and Eugenie had four children; the last was George R. Milburn II born in 1894. Then in 1901 the family moved to Helena, the new state capital. Eugenie died that year, followed by the death of her husband, Judge Milburn, in 1910. It is thought by the family the quilt was then kept by one of the older sons, the youngest being only seven at the time of his mothers' death.

George Milburn II had an interesting life, he went on to become a WWI pilot, then a respected rancher, establishing and managing a large ranch in central Montana, the N-Bar Ranch. After the older brother's deaths, George became the keeper of the quilt until his death in 1980 while living in Billings, Montana. At that time, his house was cleaned out, family treasures distributed among remaining family members and some treasures discarded. For whatever reason, the bed quilt, sewn in Belfast, Maine in 1864 went into a burn barrel. It was then that Matt Rickl, a family friend and neighbor, rescued it and brought it to his sister Mary's house, where it remained in storage for thirty one years. It was Mary C. Rickl, daughter of Mary, living in Lewistown, Montana, who first contacted the Belfast Museum about the quilt and then returned it to Belfast.

A few last words from the Bliss/ Milburn family, written in a letter to the BHS&M in August, 2011. "Our family has been the keeper of many treasures...historic, sentimental, as well as valuable, so it is ironic that this quilt was nearly lost while in our care. It is a lesson to all of us to write the story and attach it to our treasures so that the next generations can know and appreciate why it has been saved. This special quilt has ended up where it belongs...right where it started. What a story it could tell!