

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

Belfast women sewed a patriotic legacy in 1864



Light in the Forest Photography

In early summer 1864, Belfast women made a flag bed quilt and shipped it to a Washington, D.C. military hospital. Written in ink on the quilt were the women's names and phrases and puns relating to the Civil War. The quilt vanished until turning up in a Montana closet earlier this year; the Belfast Historical Society received the quilt on March 11, 2011, almost 147 years after it left Belfast.

By Brian Swartz, BDN Staff

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If cloth could only talk, what a tale Belfast's last surviving Civil War veteran could tell.

Patriotic fervor swept through Belfast after Fort Sumter fell to Confederate troops. Local men joined such outfits as the 4th Maine Infantry Regiment. Local women "enlisted," too. On Saturday, April 27, 1861, "the Ladies of this city met at Peirce's Hall" to "form ourselves into a society by the name of 'The Ladies' Volunteer Aid Society,'" noted the 1913 "Footnotes of Belfast History."

The LVAS would assist "the men of our city and vicinity who volunteer to defend our country in this hour of her greatest peril," society members resolved by unanimous vote.

Among the women soon sewing “blue denim pants” and “colored handkerchiefs” for local soldiers was “Mrs. P. (Susanna Haraden) Quimby,” married to Dr. Phineas Parkhurst Quimby. Belfast women clamored to join the LVAS and help sew soldiers’ clothing, but not listed among the 78 women joining the society on Saturday, May 4 was the Quimbys’ only daughter, Augusta.

Born in Belfast on March 26, 1833, Augusta “was widely known for her beautiful character, bright mind and happy disposition,” according to the April 19, 1928 Republican Journal. Raised with three brothers — John, George and William — she “was a natural chum and favorite of her father and often attended him while he was conducting offices in Portland for the mind cure treatment.”

Among the patients treated by Phineas and assisted by Augusta was Mary Baker Eddy, who later founded Christian Science.

If based only on her future involvement with an LVAS project that would span three centuries, historical evidence suggests that Augusta soon plunked down the society’s 50-cent membership fee. Belfast women cranked out the clothing — by May 24 the LVAS “forwarded to Rockland 327 shirts (flannel) for our Soldiers there encamped,” the 1913 “Footnotes” reported.

Belfast women kept sewing as Antietam, Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, Spotsylvania Courthouse and Cold Harbor passed into history. Turning 31 in March 1864 and still single, Augusta definitely belonged to the LVAS when the women renamed it the U.S.G. Society in June 1864. The cryptic letters likely stood for “Ulysses Simpson Grant.”

“As a diversion from real work it was proposed to make a Flag Bed Quilt for a [Union] hospital” in June 1864, Augusta wrote in her 1917 “Recollections of the Civil War.” “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.”

The 22 women who started the quilt on June 17 were Carrie Abbott, Emma Abbott, Mary Alden, Susan Bean, Mary Conner, Anny Faunce, Mary Field, Marianne Furber, Ellen Hazeltine, Maggie Hazeltine, Fannie Howard, Arbella Johnson, Sophia Jones, Mary Palfrey, Rebecca Palfrey, Augusta Quimby, Eliza Ritchie, Emma Washburn, Ella Wheeler, Carrie White, Isa White and Cary Williamson. They worked industriously.

Measuring 62½ inches by 92½ inches, the quilt incorporated a 39½-by-69-inch flag, four corner flag blocks and three rows of alternating red, white and blue squares. The top material was cotton and the quilt had a cotton-batting lining and a calico backing.

The women completed the quilt at the Nehemiah Abbott House on July 7. “The quilt was finished during the afternoon, and was displayed in the dining room and was much admired,” Augusta remembered. “A picnic supper was served, to which the young men were invited.”

Did those male guests include James Frederick, a widower seven years older than Augusta? She never did identify “the young men” who danced late into the night with the quilters.

A week later the USGS members shipped the Belfast Civil War Soldiers’ Quilt to Ward 26, Armory Square Hospital in Washington, D.C. A Miss McClellan penned a thank-you letter to the USGS after the quilt’s Aug. 12 arrival in Washington.

“The quilt has been exhibited to each one in the ward, and many have been the expressions of surprise and admiration which it has called forth, as it has been spread before the eyes of those who are suffering from this devotion to the flag which it represents,” she wrote.

The Belfast Civil War Soldiers’ Quilt vanished in 1865. Augusta married James Frederick that year. They never had children, but she became a doting mother to her stepson, Charles Frederick, and after his father died on June 5, 1897, he cared for Augusta as only a loving son would.

On Friday, March 11, 2011, a package arrived at the Belfast Historical Society & Museum, located at 10 Market St., Belfast. Megan Pinette, BHS president and museum curator, and George Squibb, the museum archivist, carefully opened the package and spread out its contents.

“We started getting goose bumps, and the hairs stood up on the backs of our heads,” Pinette said. Stretched out on a museum table was the Belfast Civil War Soldiers’ Quilt, 147 years late returning home from the Civil War.

A few weeks earlier, a Montana woman had called Pinette to report finding a tightly rolled flag quilt in her late mother’s house. Discovering the phrase “Belfast, Maine, June 17, 1864” printed on a white stripe, the woman contacted the Belfast Historical Society.

According to Pinette, after the Armory Square Hospital closed in 1865, the Belfast quilt “was most likely given to Dr. D.W. Bliss, surgeon in charge.” The quilt passed through several generations of Blisses until being saved from a burn barrel 18 years ago and stored in the Montana house.

The quilt’s miraculous survival and return make for a wonderful story that could be never-ending. According to Pinette, the quilt “keeps telling you a different story every time you talk to it,” Pinette said.

In her 1917 account, Augusta indicated that “the names of all the members (quilters) 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.”

Names, puns and patriotic phrases appear on the white stripes, white blocks and around the four corner flags. Written in a neat hand by Augusta’s sister-in-law, Annie Haraden Quimby, the words are faint, the ink partially faded, but the patriotic passion and humor expressed by the Belfast women leap from the cloth:

- A tribute to a Maine officer: “Good Maine ham, well-cured and smoked in many battles. Gen. [Hiram] Burnham.”
- A pun: “If the rebs won’t pay, we’ll ‘charge ’em.”
- A patriotic phrase that played on a popular Southern song: “Hurrah! Hurrah! For Northern rights hurrah! Hurrah for the dear old flag, With every stripe and star!”

Annie Quimby’s penmanship predominates on the quilt, except on the upper-left-corner flag. There a different hand posted a poetic tribute to Maine’s brave soldiers:

“Here’s success to the boys, whoever they are

“That have shouldered their muskets and gone to war

“Victorious they’ll be, defeated they can’t

“While they are led into battle by U.S. Grant.”

The poetess identified herself as “A.S.Q.” The only USGS quilter with those initials was Augusta S. Quimby — although she died on Monday, April 16, 1928, Augusta still lives today through the 1864 Belfast Civil War Soldiers’ Quilt.

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