

Martha Erskine Ricks – 19th Century Quiltmaker
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Martha Ricks, a simple farmer's widow, made her way slowly off the morning train from London. She was a petit, seventy-six year old woman. She wore her finest Sunday suit and lace bonnet. She carried in her arms a bundle wrapped in brown paper and tied neatly with string. She gazed at the gathering crowd and inhaled deeply, savoring the moment. She spent fifty years anticipating and preparing for these next few hours. A tall, dark-skinned man in formal attire cupped his hand under her elbow to assist her to the awaiting transportation. They walked several feet before she had to step up into the ornate, open-top carriage. One of the footmen held her precious package while she sat down comfortably. The rest of those accompanying her settled in the second carriage. Curious villagers, who had waited for the woman newspapers called an elderly *Negress*, applauded and shouted well wishes to her. Within moments, the team of horses started a dignified gait up the winding road leading to the large stone house on the distant hilltop. The locals called the residence Windsor Castle. Mrs. Ricks, hugging her bundle, called the house and its royal mistress the answers to her prayers.

The goals of this essay are to:

- introduce you to Mrs. Martha Erskine Ricks, a 19th century African American quiltmaker, needlewoman, and former slave, whose work was heralded on three continents
- demonstrate how African Americans transferred their sewing and quilting skills from America to West Africa
- highlight two national Liberian events that celebrated hand-stitched articles, and
- place the “exquisite” work of Mrs. Ricks in the context of early American quilt history.

Early Childhood

Martha Erskine was born a slave about 1817 on an Eastern Tennessee plantation. The exact date of her birth remains a secret of the past. Her father, George M. Erskine, was also a slave and born about 1779. Not much is known about his life as a slave except two facts: 1) He loved his family enough to work years to purchase them out of slavery, and 2) He impressed others with his love of God. George Erskine had at least seven children by his wife, Hagar, who was also a slave. The children were Jane (b. 1800?), Wallace (b. 1809?), Mary (b. 1813?), Weir (b. 1815?), Martha (b. 1817?), Hopkins (b. 1820?), and Sarah (b. 1823?).

Dr. Isaac Anderson (1780 - 1857), an opponent of slavery, and Abel Person, one of his theology students, purchased George Erskine out of slavery in 1815 to allow George to also study religion. At the time, Dr. Anderson was the pastor of [New Providence Presbyterian Church](#) in Maryville, Tennessee.¹ The church membership was composed of both white and black members. The black members, some who were slaves, sat in the back pews. George must have learned to read and write while a slave because he commenced his religious study as soon he was free, according to Presbyterian records. George was licensed to be a Presbyterian minister in 1818, when he was about 39 years old. He spent the next twelve years preaching within and outside Tennessee to both white and black congregations. Often special collections were taken up for the purpose of purchasing his family out of slavery. During his travels, George learned of the American Colonization Society.

The [American Colonization Society](#)² (ACS) was founded in 1817 as the “American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Color of the United States.” The organization’s mission was to return former slaves back to Africa. Later the ACS assisted blacks specifically freed for the purpose of repatriation as well as Africans previously captured for slavery to return to Africa. There were many auxiliary branches of the ACS, which funded voyages to Liberia. The ACS “proceeded and succeeded between 1822 and 1867 in assisting the repatriation to Liberia of 19,000 black people, among them 4,540 freeborn, 7,000 manumitted slaves and more than 5,700 recaptured from slaving vessels.”³

In 1830, after securing his family from slavery, George moved his family, including 13-year-old Martha, to Liberia with the assistance of the ACS. George was to be an agent for the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions.

Needleart Skills Transfer to Liberia

The Erskine family, consisting of George, his wife, children and mother, sailed across the Atlantic Ocean from Hampton Roads, Virginia to Liberia on January 15, 1830 on the brig *Liberia*. Besides the Erskine family, [forty-eight other free and former slaves, from Virginia, Tennessee and Pennsylvania, also sailed.](#)⁴ They all arrived in Monrovia forty-two days later. The American Colonization Society provided at least five acres of land in the settlement of Caldwell to the Erskine family to build a home and cultivate food.

Early emigrants to Liberia, former slaves and free blacks, brought a variety of skills to their new home. Seventy-eight occupations were listed in the 1843 census, including blacksmith, carpenter, druggist, farmer, housekeeper, laundress, merchant, millwright, missionary, nurse, physician, sail maker, schoolteacher, seaman, shoemaker, stonemason, wheelwright, and midwife.⁵ Needlecraft occupations included hatter/milliner, seamstress, tailor and weaver.

Martha Erskine probably learned to sew and quilt from her mother, Hagar, or her grandmother, Martha Gains. Dr. Gladys-Marie Fry’s landmark [Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Ante-Bellum South](#) describes quiltmaking of 19th century Black-American women. Fry asserts that slaves were required to make quilts for public (for the slave owners) using Euro-American quiltmaking traditions. For private use, however, slave quilters “found inventive ways to disguise within the quilt improvisational forms and elements of African cosmology and mythology.”⁶ The *Bible Quilts* of former slave Harriet Powers (1837 - 1911) are examples of universal symbols incorporated into privately used quilts. Fry investigated two types of quiltmaking by slave women: applique quilts (cloth is sewn on top of another piece of fabric) and patchwork quilts (cloth pieces are sewn side-by-side). She found that slaves learned quilt patterns from the plantation mistress and from each other. Quilt patterns for personal use included both learned patterns as well as original designs from the slave’s own imagination or observations of nature.⁷

The Americo-Liberian settlers brought quilting skills with them. The settlers made cloth from the cotton they grew on their new land. From one eyewitness account, quilts were common household possessions. Amanda Smith (1837 – 1915) was an African American who traveled in England, Ireland, Scotland, India, Sierra Leone and Liberia as an evangelist and religious singer. In 1893, Smith published her autobiography. She wrote of her eight-year observations in Liberia:

Cotton grows nicely, with but little care. They could grow acres of it; but I never saw a dozen plants or bushes anywhere. The most I did see at any one place was four nice, large bushes which grew in the yard at old Sister S.'s, at Sinoe. They use a good deal of this for quilts. Everybody has quilts. They don't put as much in them as they do in quilts' at home; they do not need to be as heavy; yet they don't raise a sufficient quantity of cotton to supply all the people who would use it.⁸

The Liberian Flag, Women's Work

In the summer of 1847, the citizens of Liberia sent representatives from each county to Monrovia to develop a national constitution and declaration of independence from the American Colonization Society. The men of the Constitutional Convention were emigrants from the United States. [Governor Joseph J. Roberts](#) (1809 - 1876), who would become the first black President of Liberia, invited several prominent women to the State House in Monrovia⁹. He had a special, historical task for them. Governor Roberts appointed the women to make a flag that would symbolize the hope of this new African nation. The black women, all American-born, included:¹⁰

1. Mrs. Susannah Waring Lewis, Committee Chairwoman, 32 years old, mother of five
2. Sarah Draper
3. Mrs. Mary Hunter
4. Mrs. Rachel Johnson, 49 years old, mother of six
5. Mrs. J. B. Russwurm
6. Mrs. Matilda Spencer Newport, 52 years old
7. Mrs. Collinette Teage

Historians argue whether the story of Betsy Ross (1752 – 1836) making the first American flag is true or not. The popular account is that twenty-four year old Betsy Ross received three visitors to her Philadelphia upholstery shop one afternoon in 1776.¹¹ The visitors were Continental Army General George Washington and Congressional representatives Robert Morris, a wealthy landowner, and George Ross, the uncle of Betsy's late husband John Ross. The men had a sketch of the flag they wanted to represent the nation. Betsy Ross is said to have reviewed the sketch and suggested a five-pointed star instead of the six-pointed one in the drawing. The men asked Ross to keep the flag-making venture a secret until it was known whether the Congress would in fact declare independence from England. Ross kept the secret and worked alone on the flag, made of bunting, a coarse, loose-weave fabric.

The creation of the Liberian national flag differed in significant ways from the creation of the United States flag. The Liberian flag was collaboratively constructed. The efforts by the seven black women must have seemed similar to a joyful quilting party for the construction of an important wedding or memorial quilt. The tasks would have been cooperatively executed under the leadership of Susannah Lewis. One or two of the women would have secured the flag fabric. One or two women would have expertly cut the fabrics. All would have participated in the sewing. The women were appointed in public from the State House. The making of the Liberian flag was a public honor. Neither settler women nor indigenous Liberian women were able to vote in 1847. However, these seven

women used their sewing skills to participate in this nation-building process. One can image how filled with self-pride the women were to be selected.

The Liberian flag was made of silk instead of bunting, according to one who saw the first flag.¹² The women hand-stitched the new red, white, and blue flag. The three colors symbolized the three original Liberian counties of Grand Bassa, Montserrado, and Sinoe. Eleven stripes represented each of the signers of the Liberian Declaration of Independence. The red strips symbolized valor and bravery of the founding settlers. The white strips represented purity. The dark blue canton in the upper left corner stood for fidelity and the continent of Africa. A five-pointed star inside the blue background represented Liberia itself, the first independent country on the continent of Africa.

FIGURE 1 – THE LIBERIAN FLAG

On Tuesday morning, August 24, 1847, a day of national celebration, the new flag was presented.¹³ All businesses were closed in Monrovia and surrounding settlements. Men, women, and children lined the streets and cheered as military units paraded by. Governor Joseph J. Roberts and his wife Jane waited outside the entrance of the State House for representatives of the flag committee to arrive.

At the appointed hour Susannah Lewis, Mary Hunter, Rachel Johnson, Collinette Teage, Mrs. C. Hazel, Mrs. C. Ellis, and Mrs. W. N. Yates slowly proceeded to the State House. As the group reached the staging area, Mrs. Lewis handed the flag to one of the ladies and continued to the podium. She greeted the crowd, spoke about the sewing women on the Flag Committee and gave “a neat patriotic speech.” Mrs. Lewis then presented the national flag to Governor Roberts as the crowd cheered wildly. Governor Roberts accepted the flag and passed it along to the standard bearer, who hoisted the flag up a thirty foot high staff. The new flag was replicated and sent to various settlements throughout Liberia.¹⁴ Presumably another advantage of a collaborative Flag Committee was to produce multiple copies of the national symbol.

The Liberia National Fairs – Needleart Prizes

Ten years after Independence, the Liberian Congress appropriated \$500 to be spent towards the hosting of a national fair. President Stephen Allen Benson (1816 – 1865), a farmer who was born free in Dorchester County, Maryland, suggested a fair to encourage agriculture, “home industry” and stimulate interest in cotton farming. Congress passed an Act providing that items of “Agriculture, Manufacture, or Art, showing forth the skill, industry and ingenuity of the citizens of this Republic, or the aborigines of the country, and animal or animals raised, may be exhibited and sold at the said National Fair.”¹⁵

All, settlers and indigenous citizens, were invited to participate in the Fair. This contrasted with fair participation in the United States where African Americans were either prohibited from attending, allowed to only attend specific days, or restricted to separate display areas or buildings. At times, African Americans held fairs especially designed for black participation.¹⁶

More than ninety-one monetary awards were granted at the Fair. Besides the farming and manufacturing prizes, visual and needlearts were highlighted. The Official Report of the Fair emphasized the participation of both adult and young women, especially for their skill with needle and thread:

The works of the lady contributors to the National Fair are also worthy of a more special notice and commendation. Of fancy articles of needle work, there was, as there should have been, a tasteful display of good execution and finish. ... But these fancy articles were interesting as the contribution of young girls to a good extent. They evinced a degree of taste and ability to work which it is hoped will keep pace with the increase of years.¹⁷

The Fair demonstrated that settler mothers transferred sewing skills to daughters. For example, twenty-three year old, Miss. Annette Lewis (eldest daughter of Flag Committee Chairwoman Susannah Lewis) won \$1.00 first prize for her tidies, covers for the arms and backs of chairs. Twenty-year old Miss. Sarah F. Roberts won a 75 cents fourth prize for her handcrafted bonnet. Her mother, Mrs. Elizabeth H. Roberts, won \$3.00 first prize in the same bonnet category.

One item sparked much interest. Mrs. Rebecca Williams, wife of carpenter Henry Williams, won \$10.00, the highest amount awarded to a woman at the Fair, for a cloth woven from African cotton. No other woven cloth sample received a prize. The cloth's colors and design descriptions appear to have been lost to history now. But, as we'll soon find, Rebecca Williams' woven cloth caused a stir.

Women won a total of twenty cash prizes for needlearts. The other winners included in the Official Report:

First Prizes

Miss. B. Harris – Fancy Work, Infant skirts, \$2.00
Mrs. Ann Jeffs – Quilt, \$3.00
Mrs. Wm. A. Johnson - Cushion, \$1.00
Mrs. Elizabeth H. Roberts – Bonnet, \$3.00
Miss. Patience Scott – Fringe, \$1.50
Mrs. Mary M. Washington – Bag Needle Work, \$1.50
Miss. Elvira Yancy – Victoria Quilt, \$2.00

Second Prizes

Miss. C. R. Curtis – Bonnet, \$1.50
Miss. Alice Douglass – Dresscoat, \$2.50, Pantaloon, \$1.00
Miss. L. Evans – Slippers, \$1.00
Mrs. Amy James – 2 pair Socks, African cotton, \$2.00
Mrs. Eliz Liles – Ladies' worked Collar, 75 cents
Mrs. A. W. Gardner – Skirt, 50 cents

Third Prizes

Mrs. Mary Anderson – Bonnet, \$1.00
Mrs. Mary Cooper – Fringe, African cotton, 75 cents
Mrs. McBeth – Coat, \$1.25
Mrs. Eliza Roe – Quilt, 75 cents

Fourth Prize

Miss. S. F. Roberts – 4th prize, Bonnet, 75 cents

Men were also awarded cash prizes for needle work. Mr. F. P. David won a \$5.00 first prize in the Coat and Pantaloon category. Mr. Gabelle Carter was awarded 75 cent third prize for socks made of African cotton. Both men hailed from Monrovia.

The organizers of the Second National Fair, in 1858, supported the same goals as the first fair. Monetary prizes were awarded in diverse categories. Women continued to win recognition at the fair. Articles on display included bonnets, capes, caps, collars, quilts, skirts, vests and “various minor articles of the toilet and paraphernalia of the ladies, skillfully embroidered, tastefully and elegantly wrought.”¹⁸ How delightful it must have been to walk between tables filled with delicately sewn clothing by the black women from settlements across the young country. Mrs. Rebecca Williams’ few yards of cloth woven from African cotton at last year’s Fair inspired others to enter similar pieces in the competition. At the Second Fair, several women entered lengths of woven cloth, each measuring twenty yards. Each woman was probably hoping to win a \$10 prize, too!

FIGURE 2 - MARTHA RICKS

Martha Erskine Ricks, now a forty-one year old married woman, also entered the Fair competition. Martha, her husband, Henry, and three stepsons, lived on a farm in Clay-Ashland where they grew coffee, cane sugar, ginger and cotton on the farm. The settlement was named in honor of U.S. Senator and ACS supporter Henry Clay (1777 – 1852) and was situated on the St. Paul’s River, about 20 miles northeast of Monrovia.

Martha entered a pair of silk cotton socks made from fibers of the [cotton silk tree](#) into the competition at the Second National Fair. The silk cotton tree grew wild in Liberia and reached heights of 80 to 100 feet.¹⁹ Pods from the silk cotton tree enclosed silky, odorless, waterproof fibers that were woven with cotton to make a fabric. The socks Martha made were so extraordinary that Fair Chairman Mr. A. P. Davis mentioned them in his official report of the Fair to President Stephen Benson.

The list of competition winners and prize amounts appears to be lost in history now. But, the Second National Fair, like the first one, was a success for the country. The Liberian government clearly supported needlecraft by its citizens.

Martha Ricks’ Quilt for a Queen

One can image Martha Ricks' delight to have her handmade silk cotton socks mentioned in the Official Record of the Second National Fair. In years to come, her handcrafted works would be noted in newspapers in Liberia, England, and the United States.

Martha Ricks deeply desired to see [Queen Victoria](#) (1819 - 1901) once in her lifetime. Mrs. Ricks read about Queen Victoria in the *Liberian Herald* when the young princess ascended the British throne in 1837. She thought highly of the monarch, who was just a year or two younger than herself. For years Mrs. Ricks could see British naval ships patrolling the West Coast of Africa to prevent slaver traders from capturing Africans and sending them to the West Indies or to the United States as slaves. As a result, Mrs. Ricks wanted to see for herself the woman she thought of as a good Christian and a "friend of the slave."

Mrs. Ricks married Henry Ricks in the mid-1850s. She worked with her husband on their farm. She also spun and wove cotton for clothing. Once the US Civil War started some American imports, such as cotton, became difficult to obtain. Mrs. Ricks noted in a letter to an American friend that the scarcity of cotton had encouraged her and other neighbors to weave more to decrease their dependence on scarce US goods."²⁰

Both Mrs. Ricks and Henry were active members of the local Baptist church in Clay-Ashland where Mrs. Ricks led one of the church's weekly prayer meetings. Mrs. Ricks was a faithful woman. She prayed to God for the opportunity to see Queen Victoria and believed that God would grant this extraordinary request.

Mrs. Ricks decided to take the queen a special gift. Quilts were popular home possessions in nineteenth century Liberia. And, after much consideration, Mrs. Ricks settled on making a quilt for the queen. She was inspired to design a quilt that reflected the beautiful land she saw daily. She designed the quilt featuring a coffee tree in full-bloom. Dr. Gladys Marie-Fry's research into slave-made quilts noted "some of the most ingenious original [quilt] patterns were those which slaves adopted from their environment. Leaves were a particular favorite."²¹ Black women emigrating from America to Liberia, like Mrs. Ricks, would have also brought their ability to create quilt patterns based on what was seen in nature.

Coffee was an important cash crop in Liberia. In fact, a particular coffee bean, the *Coffea Liberica*, was indigenous to the country. In the nineteenth century world market, Liberian coffee was as desired as twenty-first century Colombian coffee. The Liberian coffee tree grew about 10 – 20 feet high and bloomed with white flowers, followed by fruits containing the coffee seeds.

The *Coffee Tree Quilt* Mrs. Ricks designed had over 300 pointed green leaves with plump red coffee berries all delicately hand-appliquéd onto a white background. The quilt was composed of a center tree trunk extending the length of the quilt. Mrs. Ricks divided the background into four quadrants with a main branch in each quadrant attached to the center trunk. Dozens of leaves with coffee berries attached to minor branches in each of the quadrants. Scalloped appliquéd leaves and berries bordered the entire tree. She most likely spun, wove and dyed her own cloth using both cotton and fibers from the silk cotton tree. The size of the quilt was at least as large as our present-day queen-size quilts.

Mrs. Ricks' neighbors knew of her desire to see Queen Victoria. And, they laughed. Even her husband laughed. For decades Mrs. Ricks held fast to her dream to see the woman she believed actively worked for the freedom of black people in America and Africa. She saved her pennies for the future voyage to England and she

continued to hand-stitch her quilt. Sometime in the early 1890s, when Mrs. Ricks was in her 70s and widowed, Mrs. Jane Roberts (1819 – 1911), the widow of the first President of Liberia, Joseph Jenkins Roberts, called on her at the farm in Clay-Ashland. Mrs. Roberts wanted to see the quilt Mrs. Ricks had made for the queen. Upon seeing the *Coffee Tree Quilt*, Mrs. Roberts agreed to help Mrs. Ricks travel to England.

Mrs. Ricks used her pennies saved over decades to purchase passage on a ship leaving Monrovia, Liberia to England. *The London Times* quoted Martha Ricks as saying, “I want to go to London and see the Queen. I know that I cannot speak to her, but I hope to see her passing along, and then I will return to my farm in Liberia and die contented. The Lord told me I should see the Queen, and I know I will.”²² Friends in England, including [Liberian Ambassador Edward W. Blyden](#) (1832 – 1912), whom Mrs. Jane Roberts contacted, interceded with Palace officials on behalf of Martha Ricks. As God had promised Mrs. Ricks, she *would* see the queen.

Palace officials telegraphed an invitation to Mrs. Ricks to visit Windsor Castle. Mrs. Ricks, Ambassador Blyden, Mrs. Roberts and others took a train from London to Windsor Saturday morning July 16. The tall, handsomely dark-skinned Ambassador escorted the 76-year old Mrs. Ricks, who held the *Coffee Tree Quilt* tightly in her arms.

Mrs. Ricks and her company were given a tour of Windsor Castle and refreshments. Then, the moment Mrs. Ricks had prepared decades for arrived. She was presented to Her Majesty, Queen Victoria. Also present were Edward, the Prince of Wales, his wife Alexandra, and their three daughters, Louise, Victoria, and Maude. Queen Victoria and Mrs. Ricks spent moments together talking quietly. Mrs. Ricks would have thanked and blessed the monarch for her work in providing protection to slaves. The queen would have asked about Mrs. Ricks’ life in Liberia. The bundle Mrs. Ricks wrapped in brown paper and neatly tied with string was given to a lady-in-waiting. The package was untied. Two nearby pages unfurled the bundled *Coffee Tree Quilt* for the Royal Family to admire.

Queen Victoria was accomplished at knitting and embroidery. She therefore would have appreciated the expert craftsmanship Mrs. Ricks exhibited. How extraordinary the afternoon must have felt to Martha Ricks to see her beloved Queen study the hand-stitched quilt. The British newspapers reported that the meeting between Queen Victoria and Mrs. Martha Ricks was a great success. The queen thanked Mrs. Ricks for the heartfelt visit and quilt by sending her back to Liberia with gifts and a Royal Escort.²³

When Martha Ricks arrived back in Liberia in August 1892, many of her neighbors and family members who once laughed at her dreams of seeing Queen Victoria in person now greeted her as a heroine. According to one report, “a great concourse of people, men, women and children were at the wharf to greet ... Martha, while Sunday school scholars sang a song of welcome.”

Quilts in context of American Quilt History

Martha Ricks and her needleworks have yet to be properly acknowledged in the context of American quilt history. Mrs. Ricks is one of the few nineteenth century women, slave or free, black or white, to have her various needleworks documented on three different continents. Records in Africa first documented Mrs. Ricks’ stitches. Her silk cotton socks remain one of the few needlework items mentioned in the official record of the Second National Fair that took place in Monrovia, Liberia in 1858. Indeed, Mrs. Ricks was the only woman *named* in the

multi-page Official Report. Publications in Europe recorded for posterity Mrs. Ricks' stitches. The *Coffee Tree Quilt* gift to Queen Victoria was noted in various British newspapers. The quilt was shipped the following year to Chicago, Illinois for exhibit at the World's Columbian Exposition, which opened May 1, 1893.

Over the course of its six-month run, 2.5 million visitors attended the Fair. The *Coffee Tree Quilt* hung in the Liberian exhibit in the Building of Agriculture. Alfred B. King (1852 – 1901), who emigrated to Liberia from Augusta, Georgia and later served as a Liberian Senator, and William E. Rothery, Liberian consul at Philadelphia, were appointed commissioners for the Liberian exhibit. The exhibit consisted of native Liberian artifacts, agricultural products such as “coffee, cocoa, ginger, arrow-root, peanuts, palm oil, palm-kernel oil, vegetable butter, corn, rice, calabar beans, locust beans, annito-seeds, malabar pepper, alligator pepper” and more. Liberian flags, maps of Liberia, Monrovia, and Clay-Ashland, and displays of coins, currency, and postage stamps graced the exhibit area. The exhibit faced two main entrances of the Agriculture Building thus assuring much attention. In fact, daily attendance to the Liberian exhibit ranged from 1,000 – 12,000.²⁴ Many Americans and international visitors saw first-hand Mrs. Ricks' quilt for Queen Victoria in Chicago.

A second quilt by Mrs. Ricks would hang in Atlanta, Georgia exhibited to another large fair audience two years later. AME Bishop Henry McNeal Turner (1834 – 1915) became acquainted with Martha Ricks during one of his three mission trips (1891, 1893, and 1895) to Liberia. Bishop Turner, whom President Abraham Lincoln appointed as the first black army chaplain, encouraged American blacks to emigrate to Liberia. Mrs. Ricks may have met the Bishop at a Liberian church service. He may have even been invited to share a meal at her home. How the two Christians met is lost to history now. But, they did meet because Mrs. Ricks made a duplicate *Coffee Tree Quilt* for Bishop Turner. In 1895, Bishop Turner shipped several items he collected in his trip to Liberia to Georgia for display at the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition in the Negro Building. One of the items shipped was the duplicate *Coffee Tree Quilt*.

This Expo opened on September 18 for a three month run. Booker T. Washington (1856 – 1915), founder of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, gave his famous “Atlanta Compromise” speech encouraging Blacks to advance through education and industry rather than social or political means. After the Opening Day speeches, Mr. Washington surely would have walked the display aisles of the Negro Building. Mr. Washington would have taken a moment to admire a quilt display featuring a *Lord's Prayer Quilt*. He would have studied the pictorial *Bible Quilt* by a former slave named Harriet Powers. Powers created at least two Bible-themed quilts, which are now in the permanent collections of the Smithsonian Institution and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

FIGURE 3 - BIBLE QUILT BY HARRIET POWERS

Continuing to view the exhibition, Mr. Washington would have surely taken a moment to view Bishop Turner's duplicate *Coffee Tree Quilt*.

FIGURE 4 - COFFEE TREE QUILT BY MARTHA RICKS

So finally the third continent, North America, would host the exquisite needlework of Mrs. Martha Ricks. More than one million attended the Atlanta Cotton Exposition. If only ten percent of all visitors strolled through the Negro Building, than 100,000 visitors could have viewed Mrs. Ricks' hand-sewn *Coffee Tree Quilt*.

Martha Ricks died in 1901 on her Clay-Ashland farm seven months after her beloved Queen Victoria passed away. Mrs. Ricks was born a slave in Eastern Tennessee. She most likely learned to sew from her slave mother, Hager. Mrs. Ricks transferred her needleart skills to her new home in Liberia, as did many other free and former US slaves. Mrs. Ricks was fortunate that this new country encouraged needlearts by its citizens. Remarkably, Mrs. Ricks needleart skills would be showcased on three continents and admired by British Royalty, by thousands who attended major expositions in the US, and by her family and neighbors, who once laughed at her. Mrs. Ricks is still remembered and celebrated one hundred years after she stitched her last quilt.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ New Providence Presbyterian Church was founded in 1786. The church still exists today at 703 West Broadway Avenue, Maryville, Tennessee 37801-4715. Dr. Isaac Anderson is buried in the nearby church cemetery. (www.NewProvidencePres.org accessed July 27, 2004.)
- ² Debra Newman Ham, editor. The African-American Mosaic: A Library of Congress Resource Guide for the Study of Black History and Culture. Web site, <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/african/intro.html>, accessed July 27, 2004.
- ³ D. Elwood Dunn, Amos J. Beyan, and Carl P. Burrowes, eds., Historical Dictionary of Liberia, 2nd Ed (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc. 2001), 19.
- ⁴ Roll of Emigrants – Brig Liberia. Christine's Genealogy Web site <http://www.ccharity.com/liberia/brigliberia1830.htm> accessed July 27, 2004.
- ⁵ Tom W. Shick, Behold the Promised Land: A History of Afro-American Settler Society in Nineteenth-Century Liberia (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 145.
- ⁶ Gladys-Marie Fry, Stitched From the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Ante-Bellum South (New York: Dutton Studio Books, 1990), 7.
- ⁷ Fry, Stitched From the Soul, 45 – 46.
- ⁸ Smith, Amanda, An Autobiography: The Story of The Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith, The Colored Evangelist (Chicago: Meyer & Brother, Publisher, 1893), 411.
- ⁹ Cassell, Dr. C. Abayomi, Liberia: History of the First African Republic (New York: Fountainhead Publishers, Inc., 1970), 140 – 141.
- ¹⁰ Henries, Doris Banks, The Liberian Nation: A Sort History (New York: Herman Jaffe, 1954), 198.
- ¹¹ Mayer, Jane, Betsy Ross and the Flag (New York: Random House, Inc., 1952), 104 – 112.
- ¹² "The Twenty-fourth," African Repository and Colonial Journal (1825 – 1849), January 1848, 15. This article also says the first flag included the national motto "The love of liberty" over the lone star and "brought us here" applied under it. This may have been a special flag made for the August twenty-fourth celebration, as the flag adopted by resolution July 29, 1847 at the Constitutional Convention did not have any text on it.
- ¹³ "The Twenty-fourth," African Repository and Colonial Journal (1825 – 1849), January 1848, 15.
- ¹⁴ Cassell, Liberia, 142.
- ¹⁵ The Report of the Committee of Adjudication, of the National Fair, of the Republic of Liberia (Monrovia, 1858), 5.

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- ¹⁶ “The Colored Fair is Open: A Grand Parade Preceded the Opening. Some Interesting Relics Shown,” *Dallas Daily Times Herald*, September 1, 1900, p.8. The Colored Fair and Cotton Exposition displays included “quilts and cushions and fancy doilies and what-not, all showing the colored people’s love for gay colors.” Zach Hughes displayed a homespun quilt made by his grandmother.
- ¹⁷ The Report of the Committee of Adjudication, of the National Fair, of the Republic of Liberia (Monrovia, 1858), 11.
- ¹⁸ Report of the Committee of Adjudication of the Second National Fair,” *African Repository* (1850 – 1892), November 1859, 341.
- ¹⁹ “Report of the Committee of Adjudication of the Second National Fair,” *African Repository* (1850 – 1892), November 1859, 339.
- ²⁰ “From Mrs. Martha A. Ricks,” *African Repository*, January 1866, 24.
- ²¹ Fry, *Stitched From the Soul*, 46.
- ²² *The London Times*, July 13, 1892.
- ²³ Hallie Q. Brown, ed., *Homespun Heroines and Other Women of Distinction* (Xenia, OH: The Aldine Publishing Company, 1926), 48.
- ²⁴ “The Liberian Exhibit at the World’s Columbian Exposition,” *Liberia, Bulletin No. 3*, November 1893, 66 – 69. See also the *Liberian Commissioners to World’s Columbian Exposition at Chicago, ILL., USA, 1893* booklet available at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1 – The Liberian Flag, approx. 26in. x 16in.

Figure 2 – Martha Ricks, ©2005 Anyone Can Fly Foundation, Inc.

Figure 3 – Harriet Powers’ *Bible Quilt*, appliquéd cotton

Figure 4 – Martha Ricks’ *Coffee Tree Quilt*, appliquéd cotton, ©2005 Anyone Can Fly Foundation, Inc.