

KIRTLEY JARVIS

..... dotted line

Elgin County Museum
September 20, 2009 – February 28, 2010

LIST OF WORKS

1934 - BESS MCDERMAND: FIRST FEMALE SUPERINTENDENT OF WOMEN'S INSTITUTES OF ONTARIO

The hand-written text is a montage of three hand-written farewell messages to Bess McDermand when she gave up her Department of Agriculture appointment after four years, at the time of her marriage.

Embroidered linen, 16.5" w x 22.5" h x 2" d, 2009

TALBOT KIRKPATRICK STANDING IN FRONT OF HIS GARAGE

Talbot Kirkpatrick owned a gas station and a motel at the main intersection in New Glasgow. The hand-written text reproduced here is the description written on the back of his photograph.

Embroidered linen, 9.5" w x 11.5" h x 1.5" d, 2009

1929 - ST. THOMAS M.C.R. ROUND HOUSE

A fragment of an insurance plan map that Charles E. Goad rented out to insurance agents in order to assess risk related to insuring specific properties. The Michigan Central Railway Round House was the largest and most complete of the three locomotive round houses in St. Thomas.

Embroidered linen, 16.5" w x 22.5" h x 2" d, 2009

1950 - PICNIC PRIZES

The embroidered inventory of prizes for a school picnic is from the archives of the School Section #10 (Southwold) Country Club, dated September 20, 1950.

Embroidered linen in a laundry wringer from the museum's collection, 6.25" w x 16" h, 2009

1936 - ALDBOROUGH BOYS' CORN CLUB

The Aldborough Boys' Corn Club was organized in 1932 for junior members of the Agricultural Society by F. S. Thomas, Agricultural Representative for Elgin County. There were also calf, grain and poultry clubs.

Embroidered linen in a mangle from the museum's collection, 36" w x 16" h, 2009

BESSEMER NO. 3

A collage of embroidered and printed text represent a St. Thomas family's personal connection to the sinking of the Marquette and Bessemer No. 2 one hundred years ago.

Embroidered raw silk life jacket, upholstery foam, printed voile on a 1909 mannequin from the museum's collection, 14" w x 28" h x 6" d, 2009

ANDERSON'S

The front and back of fabric labels custom designed for Anderson's store form a traditional pieced quilt pattern. R.M. Anderson's signature from an ad printed on Thursday, April 23, 1931 saluting the company's 35th Anniversary is incorporated into the pattern.

Pigmented inks printed on plastic paper, 36" w x 49" h, 2009

WHO IS KEITH KELLY?

Keith Kelly is a descendant of an original Talbot Settlement family and collector and recorder of the county's history. Elgin County family names such as McKillop, Schneckenburger and Schleihau can be found in the yellowing fragments of The Rodney Mercury and the West Lorne Sun newspapers c. 1950 which form the pattern of a traditional quilt border on an image of a paper bag once used to deliver the newspapers.

Pigmented inks printed on polyester banner material, 35" w x 49" h, 2009

ELGIN COUNTY SIGNATURE QUILT

A layered and fragmented patchwork of printed photographs form the pattern taken from one of the wooden doors that line the east wall at the Elgin County Railway Museum in St. Thomas. The text in these images was found on rusting railway cars in the railway museum yard as well as on deteriorating Coke and Pepsi signs produced by the St. Thomas Metal Sign Company pre-WWII which clad a farm building on Highbury Avenue and Webber Bourne.

Pigmented inks printed on polyester banner material, 70" w x 90" h, 2009

The artist wishes to thank:

Mike Baker, Curator, Elgin County Museum
Georgia Sifton, Museum Assistant

Stephen Francom & Gina Coady, Elgin County Archives
Herman Goodden, Joseph Hubbard, Maggie Jarvis,
William Kuryluk, Ruthann LaBlance, Dale Lackey,
Iain MacGregor, Brian Masschaele, Mike Menear,
Marie Nancarrow, Jennifer Nelson, Bob Osthoff,
Carol Robson, Jan Rowe, Ian and Flora Tripp,
and the Middlemarch Women's Institute for inviting me to participate in embroidering their Signature Quilt

Michael Baker curated *Kirtley Jarvis: dotted line* and *Signature Quilts: Community Patterns*, two concurrent exhibitions which complement each other.

Elgin County Museum

Elgin County Administration Building, 4th floor
450 Sunset Drive, St. Thomas, Ontario
Tuesday to Saturday 10 am - 4 pm

519-631-1460 ext. 160
www.elgin-county.on.ca

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CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO



KIRTLEY JARVIS

dotted line

History is slippery. As Artist-in-Residence at the Elgin County Museum over the past year I was more fascinated than troubled by the inconsistencies and vagaries and conventions that plague historians. *Mr. I. Treemere* sits beside *Mrs. I. Tremeer* on the Dutton Methodist Quilt. Generations are blurred by the tradition of naming the sons who took over the family farm after fathers or uncles or grandfathers or cousins. Which Duncan McKillop is that? Miss Fannie Backus vanishes from the public record when she becomes Mrs. Edward V. Docker. After embroidering *1936-Aldborough Boys' Corn Club*, I discovered the source for the photocopy I was working from in *Aldborough: The Township with a Past*, captioned with a different date and names spelled differently. Spellings, dates, places – correct or not – are fossilized in family photo albums, diaries and “official” accounts in newspaper articles and other archival records.

Unlike evanescent scribbled notes, digital images archived on computers are precise record keepers. On October 19, 2008 at 9:50:19 a.m., I shot the first of several hundred photographs of Elgin County which documented my process throughout the year, as well as provided source material for stitched and printed work to be exhibited along with the Signature Quilts from the museum's collection and the community.

Early in the project, a “signature” became for me a mark that defines the community. Lake, field and rail uniquely shaped Elgin County and all are integral elements in my work. The embroidered rail yard “full of tracks” and the patchwork of Rodney and West Lorne newspaper ads for feed and tractors reference those immediate and striking features of the county.

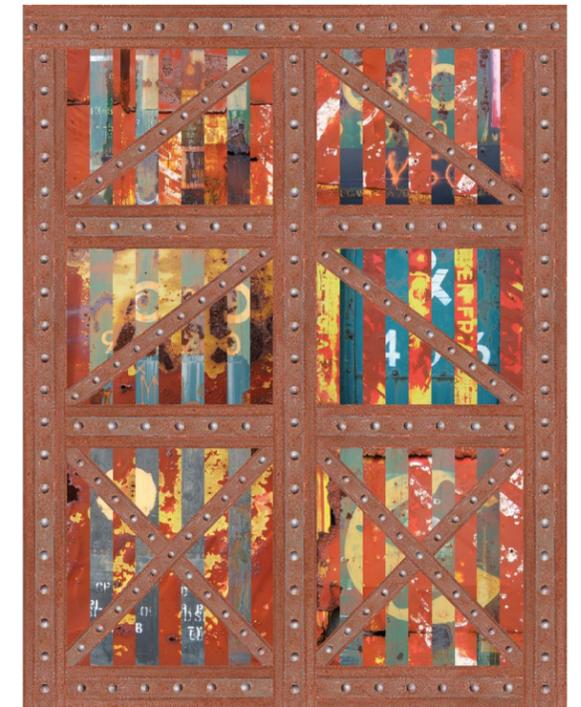
Even more valuable are the forgotten and uncelebrated marks of everyday life, for example, an inventory of prizes for a school picnic. These rich details sit in obscurity in boxes of Women's Institute minutes and Home and School archives but are beautifully represented here in the smallest stitch of each embroidered name on the Signature Quilts. As well as documenting fundraising for institutions and causes, the quilts are an enduring record of the altruistic, collaborative effort of Elgin County women to preserve what was important.

All of the quilts in the collection have been transcribed by museum assistants, donors and volunteers to form a database of thousands of names so that family members and friends can be easily found. I designed books to accompany seven of the quilts with their names listed, which were displayed this past summer in county libraries in the communities where they were made. Visitors were invited to write down in the books, as they are now during this exhibition, their recollections about the people and places on the quilts.

One of the unexpected pleasures of being Artist-in-Residence was meeting visitors at the museum, some in their 80s, who brought with them an intense interest, knowledge and vitality. It was particularly meaningful to become personally acquainted with some of the descendants of the first settlers whose names populate the quilts.

It is my hope that my work over the past year will in some way rescue from obscurity and secure at least some of the delible details evoked by the artefacts, hand-written documents and Signature Quilts of the Elgin County Museum I've had the privilege of exploring.

Kirtley Jarvis
Artist-in-Residence, 2009



Kirtley Jarvis: Elgin County Signature Quilt, pigmented inks printed on polyester, 2009

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KIRTLEY JARVIS at the ELGIN COUNTY MUSEUM

Most artists in the last 50 years have worked text into at least a few of their creations, often experimentally or texturally. In doing so they often ascribe to an art making which constructs with words as an intellectual component nearly devoid of emotion, tedious and pretentious. The result has been a gradual desensitising of the public to empathetic subtlety. It now requires an extraordinary approach to work any magic on a viewer.

Against these odds, Kirtley Jarvis has developed an original technique and unique methodology not dependent on the conceptual abstraction or philosophic treatment of words within the art evolution previously described. Her mother's ambition was to design costumes for the theatre, and her father's romantic nature manifested itself in prospecting, photography, and poetry. These influences result in Jarvis's almost poetic or literary fusion of memories and reminders from unexceptional subjects located in unexceptional circumstances. She elects oracles for the universal condition by mirroring their own words. Using skills developed as a young artist, she couches wire and fibre stitching over an exact enlarged copy of original scripts. The inscriptions range from post-it notes and shopping lists to desperate, ineloquent pleas inscribed at some point in the past and often addressed to no one in particular. Jarvis courts the banal and milks the ironic in her choices of texts. For example, one of her series was based on the crudely scribbled begging signs of the homeless (*Will Work for Food*, etc.). She regresses beyond pervasive regional and local contexts to solitary utterances. Avoiding solipsism, she subjugates her own personality to the humble psyches of her subjects which are expressed with spare functionality, sincerity, wit, humour, compassion, and empathetic insight. Their simplest personal declarations become monumental and iconic as a result of her highly personalised approach, and their feelings and identities are laid bare.

Jarvis's preoccupation with the anti-hero marks her as a contemporary participant in one important aspect of the Romantic movement, continuing from the late 18th century. There is a huge literary precedent for Jarvis's approach, from Lord Byron of club foot, melancholia, unsavoury, anti-social behaviour and preposterous ambitions, Thackeray's *Barry Lyndon* and *Becky Sharp*, Arthur Miller's Willie Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Salinger's Holden Caulfield, Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*, and films such as *Taxi Driver*. The appeal for, and of, the obscure, flawed "little guy" is inescapable.

Kirtley Jarvis's approach to creating evocative pieces by using an ordinary mortal's words is comparable to Edgar Lee Master's re-constituting of lives lived in his masterpiece, *Spoon River Anthology*. One by one, his denizens rise from their graves in a cemetery along the Spoon River in Illinois to recite their own epitaphs and details of their lives, stripped of all pretensions. The interplay of his characters presents a microcosm of society and mirrors ourselves. Similarly, Jarvis has chosen characters and events from the history of Elgin County, including an area from St. Thomas, Ontario, south to Port Stanley on Lake Erie.

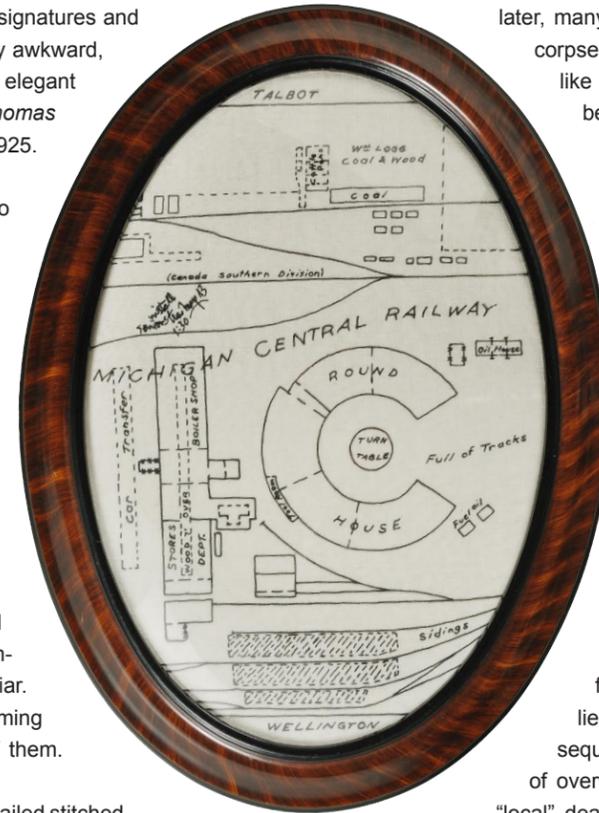
The cornerstone of this exhibition of work is the curatorial investigation of 17 signature quilts made between 1889 and 1969, and the production of seven museum quality presentation binders with high resolution reproductions and details with accompanying ephemera. Each was selected from a town or village in the region and consists of a quilt design incor-

porating patchwork repetition but more significantly, embroidered names of donors or subjects. These were executed by anonymous women who saw their production as an intrinsic element of the community, reinforcing social identity, rather than as an individual artistic act. It is notable that most of Jarvis's own previous work in this stitched genre was done utilising the actual handwriting of the subject as a starting point. With one exception, the handwriting reproduced in the Elgin County signature quilts is that of the women who constructed the quilts, not that of the subjects who are named. They are distinctly collaborative pieces, each having a visual "personality" and design dependent on a number of participants. The signatures and designs range from the poignantly awkward, diary-like *Fingal Quilt*, 1915, to the elegant and astonishingly subtle *St. Thomas First United Church Quilt*, c. 1925.

Jarvis's response to a 1936 photo of the Aldborough Boys' Corn Club is oddly engaging in its triviality, referencing a Depression-era focus that was centred between agriculture and church events. A million other similar fading black and white photos memorialising other clubs of the forgotten never attain even the first "minute" of Warhol's *15 minutes of fame* dictum. Each evokes a highly personal but claustrophobic and oppressive ambience, uncomfortably and inextricably familiar. Their innocence is sad and disarming and we wonder what became of them.

Her three small, extraordinarily detailed stitched oval pieces relate to recurring social concerns and the lives of individuals in Elgin County: (1) 1929 - *St. Thomas M.C.R. Round House*, an intricate aerial plan view of the railway yard augmented by a large printed "quilt" of a computer-modified image of a locomotive repair shop door (2) *Talbot Kirkpatrick Standing in Front of his Garage*, in which Jarvis eliminates the actual figure, but produces a stitched drawing using linear aspects of the garage behind Kirkpatrick; (3) 1934 - *Bess McDermand: First Female Superintendent of Women's Institutes of Ontario*. In Ontario, from 1897 on, each county endeavoured to have a number of Women's Institute branches devoted to elevating and celebrating the traditional skills of women within the home setting as a foundation for nation building. Bessie McDermand, through diligence and perseverance became the first female superintendent of the Women's Institute of Ontario in 1934 which benefited during the Depression from the support of Lady Tweedsmuir, wife of the Governor General of Canada. McDermand (who kept her surname) suffered the

Kirtley Jarvis: 1929 - St. Thomas M.C.R. Round House, embroidered linen, 2009
photo: William Kuryluk



indignity of written and verbal abuse from misogynistic critics in her efforts to support the accomplishments, creations, and ambitions of women in an extremely paternalistic period. It can be argued that WWII which followed shortly after was a creative force for gradual sexual and racial change, with the employment of women in the production of vital war matériel.

Bessemer #3 refers to a railcar ferry which sank in a vicious December, 1909 gale on Lake Erie with 32 dead. Like a miniature local version of the 1912 *Titanic* sinking three years later, many of the dead succumbed to hypothermia. Nine corpses were found frozen, floating in a lifeboat. Unlike the dead from the *Titanic* disaster who lie labelled and memorialised in the Fairview cemetery in Halifax, N.S., celebrated in books and films, the *Bessemer #2* victims dropped completely out of the memories and consciousness of the public except in the Port Stanley area. Locating details is difficult, and there will not be a massive and expensive international campaign to find the wreck. The incident will also never be the subject of a theatrical work of art like Theodore Géricault's monumental didactic shipwreck painting, *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1818.

Rather, like the sinking of the *Edmund Fitzgerald* ore carrier on Lake Superior in November, 1975 (the romance attached to it largely a result of the composing and recording of a popular sea shanty by Gordon Lightfoot), the *Bessemer's* appeal (*no* sea shanty) lies in personal realisations made about the inconsequential influence of a few individuals in the face of overwhelming external forces. The *Fitzgerald's* 29 "local" dead were never found. Superficially, the majority of small scale disasters and tragedies incorrectly ascribed as insignificant, are the incidental footnotes to history which Jarvis prefers. But the lives of her vulnerable and mute subjects are also more identifiable with the lives of her viewers. Her subjects are dead but she renders them immediately accessible, and somewhat disquieting, because as we look at their enlarged handwritten words the conclusion is inescapable: they are us.

Joseph Hubbard
August, 2009

Joseph Hubbard is a London, Ontario based artist whose exhibitions of mixed media interpretations expose and satirise the human condition and critical social issues.

Signature Quilts: Community Patterns

Elgin County Museum
September 20, 2009 – February 28, 2010

LIST OF WORKS

- Aylmer White on White Quilt, n.d., 85" w x 74" h. Loan, Aylmer & District Museum
 Crinan Argyle Presbyterian Church Quilt, c. 1940, 60" w x 78" h. Loan, Argyle Presbyterian
 Delaware Twp. Quilt, 1915, 66" w x 85" h, Loan, Deb Smith
 Dunboyne Minnie Williams Quilt, 1917, 80" w X 72" h. Loan, William's Family
 Dutton Methodist Church Quilt, 1890, 75" w x 67" h. ECM Collection
 Fingal Quilt, c. 1915, 54" w x 75" h. ECM Collection
 Frome United Church Quilt, 1969, 72" w X 88" h. ECM Collection
 Iona Station Quilt Blocks, n.d., 18" w x 18" h. Loan, Doris Molnar
 Iona Women's Institute Quilt, 1951, 62" w X 78" h. ECM Collection
 Kingsmill-Mapleton Women's Institute Quilt, 1927, 72" w x 87" h. Loan, Aylmer & District Museum
 New Sarum Baptist Church Quilt, 1889-1891, 55" w X 80" h. ECM Collection
 North Yarmouth Twp. St. James Presbyterian Church Quilt, 1937, 62" w x 77" h. Loan, Helen (Smith) Bradish
 Payne's Mills Quilt, 1906, 85" w X 69" h. ECM Collection
 Port Burwell Lighthouse and Museum Quilt, 1996, 56.5" w x 74" h. Loan, Port Burwell Historical Society
 Rodney Evangelical Church Quilt, c.1950, 61" w X 74" h. ECM Collection
 St. Thomas Centennial Floral Quilt, Trinity Church, 1967, 71" w x 99" h. Loan, Joan Watt
 St. Thomas Centennial Friendship Quilt, 1967, 89" w x 108" h. ECM Collection
 St. Thomas Central United Church Quilt, 1919, 58" w X 74" h. ECM Collection
 St. Thomas First United Church Quilt, c. 1925-1930, 72" w X 89" h. ECM Collection
 St. Thomas Wellington Street School Quilt, 1934, 66" w x 84" h. ECM Collection
 St. Thomas Women's Historical Society Quilt, 1919, 61" w x 81" h. ECM Collection
 South Yarmouth Twp. First Yarmouth (Plains) Baptist Church Quilt, 1931, 65" w x 81" h. Loan, Marilyn Smith
 Sparta Cartoon Quilt, 1961, 72" w x 81" h. Loan, Sally Martyn
 Talbotville United Church Quilt, 1916, 57" w x 74" h. Loan, Janice Fisher
 Talbotville Quilt, c.1941-1942, 72" w x 86" h. Loan, Don Cosens
 Wallacetown United Church Quilt, c.1930, 67" w x 79" h. Loan, Angela (Forman) Bobier
 West Lorne Church of Christ Quilt, 1930, 75" w x 75" h. ECM Collection
 West Lorne Methodist Church Quilt, 1890, 60" w x 90" h. ECM Collection
 Westminster Twp. Victoria Methodist Church Quilt, c. 1911, 69" w x 83" h. Loan, Betty Black
 Yarmouth Heights Mission Sunday School Quilt, c. 1926, 66" w X 80" h. ECM Collection

R. Robinson

J. W. EMERY.

PHOTOGRAPHY: WILLIAM KURYLUK

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Community Patterns

Signature Quilts:

The hundreds of names on the average signature quilt represent communal support for a group, be it a school, a church or an organization. As well as being utilitarian, the quilts display great artistry and technical skill on the part of their makers. This exhibition contains a small number of what must have been hundreds of signature quilts produced in Elgin County since the late 19th century. An enduring fundraising tool, they are still being made today though they were far more popular in the last century when more people had the skills and time to make them.

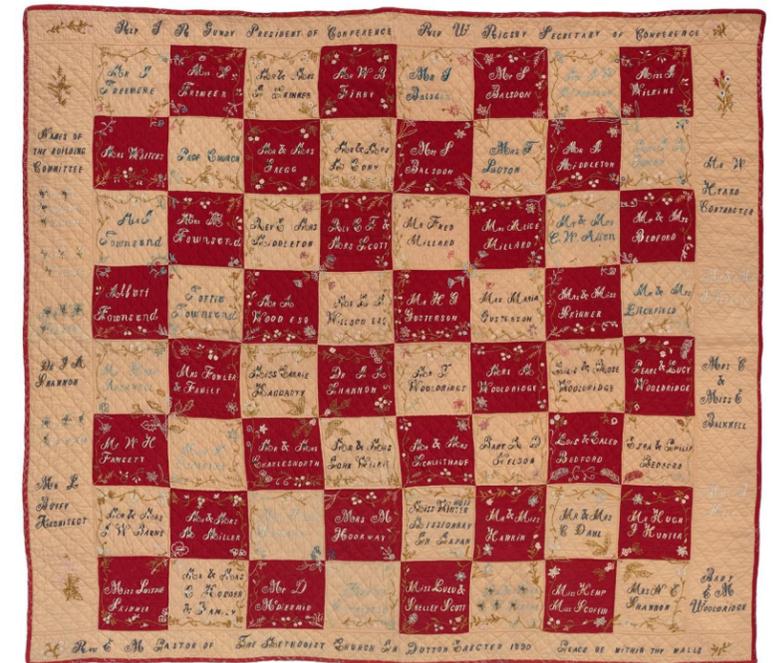
Even these few reflect and document the work and people of a wide range of organizations and institutions. Usually the reason for the making of a signature quilt – the aim of the fundraising or the person or event being commemorated – is evident on the quilt itself. And the names provide a snap-shot of who was involved with the organization at a given time and of those in the community who supported their cause.

One of the reasons for mounting this exhibition was to learn more about the people whose names are preserved on the quilts. Museum staff and volunteers transcribed over 8000 names found on the seventeen quilts. The names from seven of the quilts were reproduced in a series of books designed by Elgin County Museum Artist-in-Residence Kirtley Jarvis. Visitors who recognize a name

are invited to enter a note about that person in the book, such as their relationship to the individual, where they lived or what they did.

Reading the signature quilts is like opening a book at one page in the history of a church or a one-room school house. An increasing number of the community organizations that made these quilts are disappearing. In fact, in many cases these quilts are the only remnant of now vanished churches, congregations, schools and community groups.

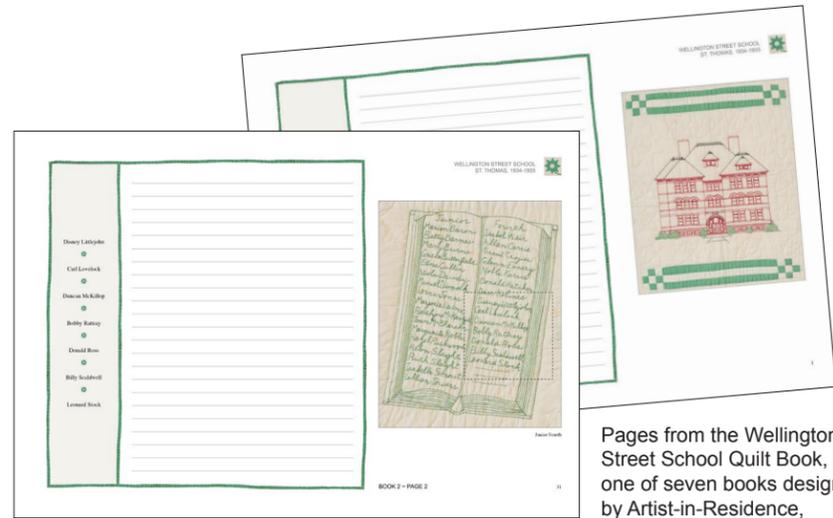
Michael Baker
Curator, Elgin County Museum



DUTTON METHODIST CHURCH QUILT, 1890

When the Methodist Church in Dutton burned down in 1890, the congregation immediately started a rebuilding campaign. This quilt was made by the Ladies' Aid to help fund the new church, which still stands at the corner of Mary and Nancy Streets in Dutton. It is remarkable for recording the names of the architect, contractor and building committee in its colourful design. ECM Collection

Signature Quilts: Community Patterns



Pages from the Wellington Street School Quilt Book, one of seven books designed by Artist-in-Residence, Kirtley Jarvis.

Emily Wickert



WELLINGTON STREET SCHOOL QUILT, 1934
Wellington Street School, which closed in 2009, had remained largely unchanged from the time it opened in 1899. It is unknown why this quilt was created, however, it contains the name of every student attending the school in 1934-35, organized by class and grade, providing a rare snapshot of the life of a local school. *ECM Collection*



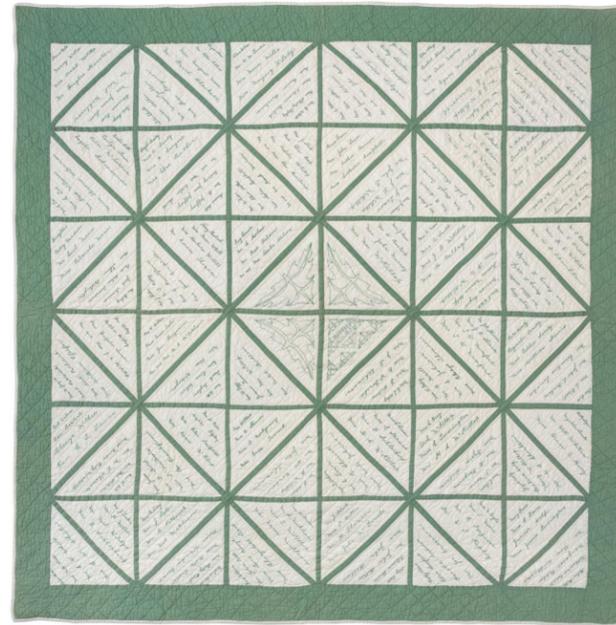
ST. THOMAS CENTRAL UNITED CHURCH QUILT, 1919
This quilt was presented to Rev. S.L. Toll upon his departure in 1919 from the Methodist Episcopal Church, now known as St. Thomas Central United Church. The congregation was originally composed mainly of railway workers, many of whom worked for the Canada Southern Railway, and of shopkeepers who had come to town following the beginning of the railway boom. *ECM Collection*

Mrs. A. Petherick



ST. THOMAS FIRST UNITED CHURCH QUILT, detail, 1925-30
Created between 1925-30, this quilt combines a series of patchwork blocks with embroidered blocks and does not seem to be related to a specific occasion or event. Among the recognizable names on the quilt is that of Ross Osgoode, a well-known St. Thomas painter who was active before World War II. *ECM Collection*

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WEST LORNE CHURCH OF CHRIST QUILT, 1930
This quilt was made in 1930 to raise funds to support the missions of the Church of Christ by a Sunday School class known as The Triangle Club. At ten cents a name, the 272 names raised \$27.20, plus another \$25.00 when it was sold to a class member. *ECM Collection*



WEST LORNE METHODIST CHURCH QUILT, 1890
Amasa Woods, a wealthy merchant who assisted many congregations in the County and built the first hospital in St. Thomas, had donated a new bell to the Wesleyan Methodist Church in West Lorne. This quilt was created in 1890 in order to raise funds for the building of a bell tower to house it. *ECM Collection*

Signature Quilts: Community Patterns



FROME UNITED CHURCH QUILT, 1969
This quilt was created in 1969 for the 150th anniversary of the founding of the first congregational church in Canada, formed in Southwold Township in 1819. Frome Church which joined the United Church of Canada in 1925, continues to draw strong support from the descendants of many of the 685 hand-lettered names inscribed on the quilt. *ECM Collection*

Mrs. R. Petherick



SHEDDEN WOMEN'S INSTITUTE QUILT BLOCK BOOK, 1958
This quilt block book made by the Shedden Women's Institute received 1st prize for the London and District area in 1958. The pages were originally covered by plastic garment bags donated by Red Circle Cleaners of London. The Autograph Quilt Block shown here was made by Mrs. Campbell Carroll, Shedden. *ECM Collection*