

**Title:****A Quilt Mystery! Abigail Adams and the Mystery of the *Broiderie Perse* Quilt****Author:**

Amanda Grace Sikarskie

**Keywords:**

quilts, American history, historical investigation, historical inquiry, Abigail Adams

**Time Required:**

Three 50-minute class periods (one for the formulation of the research question, one for a session in which students gather their information, and one for oral and visual presentations on their historical investigations)

**Learning Statement:**

Examining artifacts of American material culture, such as quilts, provides a great starting point for teaching students skills in historical inquiry, such as weighing historical facts and finding primary sources.

The MSU Museum acquired this *Broiderie Perse* medallion quilt from the Chamberlain Memorial Museum of Three Oaks, Michigan in 1952. The story that accompanied the quilt attributed its making to Abigail Smith Adams, the wife of the second President of the United States, John Adams. Research is continuing at the MSU Museum on this mysterious quilt. Meanwhile, this unsolved quilt mystery sets the stage for a historical investigation in your classroom!



Students will learn to use methods of social science investigation to answer a historical question about the provenance of the *Broiderie Perse* quilt allegedly made by First Lady Abigail Adams. Students will conduct their investigations by formulating a clear statement of a research question, creating a useful research agenda, gathering and organizing information from a variety of sources, analyzing and interpreting information, and reporting results orally, visually and in writing. (These objectives are highly aligned to State of Michigan Social Studies Content Standard V: Inquiry.)

**Connecting to the Quilt Index:**

In this lesson (see Process below), students will use the Quilt Index, <http://www.quiltindex.org>, to conduct a historical investigation about early American quilting. With images and historical data for over 20,000 quilts, the Quilt Index is one of the best resources in the world for the study of American quilt history.

**MDE Benchmarks and Standards met:**

Social Studies Content Standards:

Strand I: Historical Perspective: I.1 Time and Chronology, I.2 Comprehending the Past, I.3 Analyzing and Interpreting the Past

Strand V: Inquiry: V.1 Information Processing, V.2 Conducting Investigations

**Grade Level:**

6-8\_\_x\_\_ 9-12\_\_x\_\_

**Geographic Region:**

United States\_\_x\_\_ New England\_\_x\_\_ Great Lakes\_\_x\_\_

**Content Areas:**

Arts\_\_x\_\_ textiles\_\_x\_\_

Citizenship / Democratic Values\_\_x\_\_

History (U.S.)\_\_x\_\_ Pre-1799\_\_x\_\_ 1800-1849\_\_x\_\_ Women's History\_\_x\_\_

Presidential History\_\_x\_\_

**Materials:**

Students will need access to books and computers, if possible, to gather information and conduct their investigations. To complete the visual presentations, students will need access at home to either markers/paints and poster board or a computer with a color printer.

**Prerequisites for learning:**

Students should have a basic knowledge of early American history before beginning this lesson. While this lesson *reinforces* knowledge about early American history, women's history, and material culture, it *teaches* historical inquiry skills.

**Pre-Lesson Activities for Students to Complete at Home:**

Students should read the Great Lakes Quilt Center page on the Broderie Perse quilt and two short biographies of Abigail Adams (see 'Links & Additional Resources' below).

**Process:**

Decide whether students will work individually, in pairs or in groups of three, and introduce the lesson accordingly. Once students have completed the pre-lesson reading (above), proceed with step one.

- 1. Formulate a clear statement of a research question.**
2. Begin by summarizing the provenance of the *Broderie Perse* quilt and reiterating why this is such a compelling historical mystery. Check the students' knowledge of Abigail Adams' biography as presented in the readings, either orally or with a brief quiz.
  - a. After the basis for the investigation has been established, invite students to think of a clear and concise research question for the project. What do they want to learn about the quilt? Have a class brainstorming session and write ideas on the board. Discuss patterns that you find in their responses and the strengths and weaknesses of these early research questions.
3. Have students draft their research questions on their own, in pairs or in groups of three.

4. **Create a useful research agenda.** Once students have their research question, they should create a research agenda which includes:
  - a. Steps that they will take to answer the research question (such as what kinds of information they will have to find, and where they might be able to find it), and
  - b. What related questions they might ask to help them find the answer to their main research question. Examples of related questions include "Could the quilt have been made in the eighteenth century, or is it likely nineteenth century quilt?" and "Was Blanche Smith Chapman an ancestor of Mrs. E. K. Warren, or did Mrs. Warren's family acquire the quilt in some other way?" The written research agenda will become a part of their class presentation.
  - c. Remember that it is highly unlikely that students will be able to definitively prove or disprove that Abigail Adams was the maker of the quilt within the space of this lesson. However, students can create effective research agendas that lead them closer to the provenance and allow them to come to an informed, educated guess about the provenance of the quilt.
5. In preparation for the next step, in which students actually begin to gather and organize their information, have a class discussion about the differences between primary and secondary sources, Internet research skills, and which types of online sources can be trusted.
6. **Gather and organize information from a variety of sources.** Ideally, this class session should be conducted in your school's library with the assistance of the school media specialist and should focus on ways to find information in the four areas that will help students in this investigation: textile science, quilt history, biography, and genealogy. If this is not possible, a classroom with computers with access to the Internet is the next best thing. If your school or district bars access to the Internet in the classroom, this stage of the lesson can still be conducted very effectively by bringing appropriate books into the classroom, either on your own, or by having students check books out at your local library and bring them to class. See the 'Links & Additional Resources' below for some suggestions to get you started.
  - a. Textile Science. Introduce students to the idea that textiles can be dated based upon factors such as the types of fabrics and dyes that were used, and help them find resources in this area. Eileen Jahnke Trestain's book *Dating Fabrics* (see 'Links & Additional Resources' below) might be a good place to start.
  - b. Quilt History. Introduce students to the idea that historians can tell a lot about quilts based upon stylistic factors such as quilting designs and techniques, and also by the choice of fabric used. These factors give clues to the date of the quilt, the location in which the quilt was made, and the wealth and status of the quiltmaker. Help students find resources in quilt history. The Quilt Index, [www.quiltindex.org](http://www.quiltindex.org), is one of the best places to start for quilt history. There, students can search a database of 20,000 historic quilts. The Quilt Index also features online exhibits and other tools, such as a quilt scavenger hunt, to help introduce students to quilt history. The books listed in the 'Links & Additional Resources' section below are also very useful.

- c. Biography. Have students delve deeper into the biography of Abigail Adams using books and online sources to learn whether or not she was a quiltmaker and other key facts about the Second First Lady. An online archive of letters sent by Abigail Adams is available in the 'Links and Additional Resources' below.
  - d. Genealogy. Genealogical records in books and online databases (see 'Links' below) can be used by students to look for connections between the various historical figures at play in this mystery.
7. **Analyze and interpret information.** Students can do this step at home, or in class with your guidance (which increases the time required from 3 to 4 class sessions). In interpreting their information, make sure that students:
- a. Answer their research question definitively, or if they cannot, give concrete explanations as to why they cannot (i.e., what kinds of necessary information was inaccessible).
  - b. Take a firm stand and make an educated guess as to the provenance of the quilt. By the end of the investigation, students should have an opinion as to whether or not Abigail Adams was the maker of the *Broiderie Perse* quilt.
  - c. Answer (at least in the form of an educated guess) the other questions from their research agendas and justify their answers using their research.
  - d. Articulate which information they gathered is more helpful or more likely to be accurate and why.
8. **Report results orally, visually and in writing.** To be completed after the students have completed the post-lesson activities (below).
- a. Devote a class period to students' oral and visual presentations of their work, including their research question and agenda, discussion of the sources that they consulted and the ways in which they conducted their investigation, the results of their inquiry, and the meaning of their visuals.
  - b. One optional element that you might choose to add to enhance the oral presentations is having students give their oral presentations in character. For example, a student could give their presentation while playing a historical role such as Abigail Adams, John Adams, Blanche Smith Chapman, the Reverend Jedediah Chapman, Mary Chamberlain Warren, or E. K. Warren, or students could role-play as an MSU Museum curator during the oral presentation.

**Post-Lesson Activities for Students to Complete at Home:**

Students should create their visual presentations (poster, PowerPoint, etc) and written presentations at home. Allow at least two days between the assignment of the presentations and the presentation session in class. To minimize distractions, it is a good idea to end the in-class historical investigation and assign the presentations on a Friday, and have students give the presentations on a Monday.

**Follow-up activities:**

If, after the oral presentations, there is much debate amongst the students about whether or not the quilt was really sewn by Abigail Adams, or whether or not the quilt could even have been made in the 1700s, consider following up this lesson with an in-class debate in which students on each side of this provenance dispute argue their case using their research.

## Links & Additional Resources:

### Websites

- Great Lakes Quilt Center page on the Broderie Perse quilt:  
[http://museum.msu.edu/glqc/collections\\_11396CW.html](http://museum.msu.edu/glqc/collections_11396CW.html)
- The Quilt Index, <http://www.quiltindex.org>
- The Quilt Index record for the Broderie Perse quilt,  
<http://www.quiltindex.org/basicdisplay.php?pbd=MichiganMSUMuseum-a0a0i2-a>
- Quilt Index Scavenger Hunt,  
[http://www2.matrix.msu.edu/~quilti/wiki/index.php/Quilt\\_Index\\_Scavenger\\_Hunt](http://www2.matrix.msu.edu/~quilti/wiki/index.php/Quilt_Index_Scavenger_Hunt)
- PBS series *History Detectives* Educator's portal,  
<http://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/educators/index.html>
- Biographies of Abigail Adams,  
[http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/first\\_ladies/abigailadams/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/first_ladies/abigailadams/) and  
<http://www.firstladies.org/biographies/firstladies.aspx?biography=2>
- Adams Electronic Archive, the correspondence of John and Abigail Adams,  
<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/letter/>
- Family Search, a free online genealogy database,  
<http://www.familysearch.org>

### Books

- Brackman, Barbara. *Clues in the Calico*.
- Ferrero, Pat, Elaine Hedges, and Julie Silber. *Hearts and Hands: The Influences of Women and Quilts on American Society*.
- Kingery, David, ed. *Learning From Things: Method and Theory of Material Culture Studies*.
- Kiracofe, Rod. *The American Quilt*.
- Kiracofe, Rod. *Calico and Chintz*.
- Trestain, Eileen Janke. *Dating Fabrics: A Color Guide, 1800-1960*.
- Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher. *The Age of Homespun*.

### Glossary of quilt-related terms:

Appliqué: attaching individual pieces of fabric to a background to form a design, such as birds, baskets or flowers

*Broderie Perse*: a French term for "Persian embroidery," referring to a piece of printed cotton chintz, which was then appliquéd to a white cotton background

Medallion Quilt: a popular style in early American quilting, characterized by a central motif surrounded by a number of borders

Provenance: the history of the ownership of an object, especially when documented or authenticated

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The Quilt Index is a partnership of The Alliance for American Quilts, Michigan State University's MATRIX: The Center for Humane Arts, Letters and Social Sciences Online and the Michigan State University Museum.

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