

## Antique Floorcloths and Barn Quilts / Kay Campbell



One of the earliest ways people covered bare floors was with floorcloths which were first produced and imported from England by the Smith and Baber factory of London prior to 1754.

These decorative rugs were used as a way to insulate floors against cold and windy winters and in summer when heavy wool rugs were taken up, to protect the wood from wear.

Itinerant stencilers created functional works of art for wealthy individuals, painting either solid colors, or fancy cloths with borders. The basic procedure for making a floorcloth has not changed down through the years. Heavy canvas is prepared and the weave is filled so that the cloth can receive the painted design. Paint is applied using block printing techniques, stenciling or hand painting. The paint is applied in layers and then sealed. The result is a carpet that is easily cleaned with a damp mop, tough

enough to withstand dogs, children and furniture and customizable in a wide variety of patterns ranging from historic to contemporary.

It is known that at least three United States presidents had floorcloths in their inventories. George Washington purchased one from Roberts and Company in 1796. Thomas Jefferson had at least two in the Presidential mansion; one in a small dining room and one in the great hall. He also had several more painted canvases at Monticello. When John Adams' term as President was completed, a White House inventory listed a floorcloth in his possession.

Kay Campbell, a Nelson County, Virginia resident from the small hamlet of Beech Grove, began to get interested in making floorcloths after she bought an oriental rug but soon found her cats were always clawing it and shedding on it, making it hard to clean. Her daughter-in-law confided that a friend of hers had cats and switched to floorcloths because of their durability. Kay had never heard of this type of rug so she went online and saw they were rather pricey to buy so she looked at several sites that offered step-by-step instructions on how to make your own. Kay

says, “I’m a DIYer (Do It Yourself) from way back and am a firm believer that if you have the right tools you can do anything.”

Kay began making floorcloths in the spring of 2016 and in June of the same year she retired after working 25 years at UVA. Suddenly she had extra time on her hands; the perfect time to undertake a new project. Not that she needed one. Kay and her husband, Carl are farm folks with plenty to keep them busy but Kay has always managed to self-entertain by doing all types of handwork such as quilting, cross stitch, crocheting, etc. In her research, Kay learned that floorcloths were originally made from sailcloth; repurposed from ship sails that were torn or damaged. Kay uses a #6 duck cloth canvas because sailcloth is not readily available anymore.

The first step in making a rug is to cut the cloth to size you want with a two-inch seam on the sides and ends by either sewing or gluing. Kay was recently given by a friend, a 1930s heavy-duty Singer sewing machine to do the stitching but up to this point she continues to use glue. It takes about 24 hours for the glue to set up and the entire process of making a floorcloth, regardless of size, takes about two weeks to complete. When the weather is warmer, Kay works in her outdoor studio but during the winter months she sets up tables in her basement to work on.

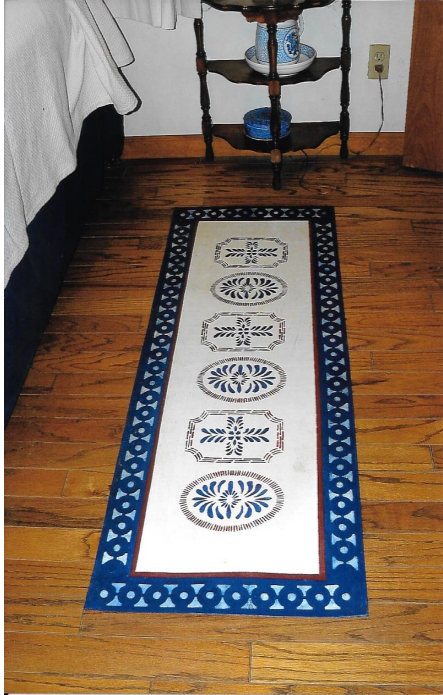
The next step is to put two coats of paint on the top and sides of the cloth. Kay explains the rug bottom needn’t be painted since the sailcloth is soft and waterproof. “I use tan or antique white as my basecoat but any color can be used. A roller can be used to apply the paint but I use a two-inch brush because I find I can work the paint into the cloth better. It takes 24 hours to dry each paint application so along with the gluing process, three days are invested in it already.”

Sometimes Kay adds a different color border on her basecoat and I was surprised to learn that she uses regular water-based indoor house paint and not acrylic on her floorcloths.

The different patterns on the rugs are made with stencils which are taped directly on the cloth and then painted onto its surface. Kay says the hardest part of the procedure is figuring how to lay the stencils out so they match all the way around. For pattern ideas Kay looks online and in magazines that feature early American and primitive décor, many of which sell those kinds of stencils. She has also begun to make her own which are easily cut out with a wood burning tool and can be used over and over. She says that depending on how many colors are used in the stenciling process, it can take another two or three days to complete.

When asked what she likes best about her hobby, Kay responds, “I like creating different patterns and blending all the colors together.” When all the painting and stenciling are done, Kay applies five coats of polyurethane with an overnight drying period between each coat. When finished, the final product is a thing of beauty as well as a functional addition to any home.

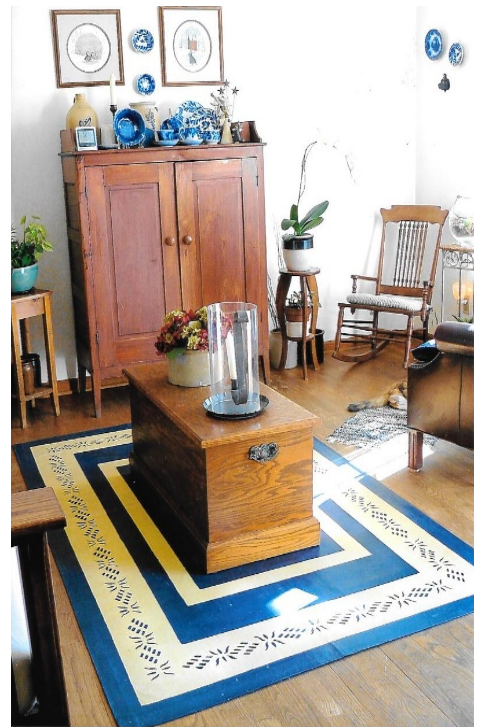




Floorcloths wear well and are easily cleaned with a damp cloth. People have reported they have had them in use for over ten years. Kay explains if one gets scuffed after a time, another coat of water-based polyurethane will bring back its luster. About the only thing that will mar the rugs is a bend or fold in the fabric which will make a permanent crease so one must be careful to keep it flat. Kay also recommends putting a piece of rug pad under the floorcloth to keep it in place and includes one with each purchase.

Kay's first piece was an ambitious 5'x7' rug which is still in use in her living room. There was an excess of sailcloth left over from the project so she made her daughter-in-law a

table runner for her birthday and a few other small rugs. A co-worker bought one, word spread and soon Kay found herself making more and more for other people. As what frequently happens, a hobby turned into a small business.



She enjoys doing craft shows and farmer's markets and in the future will be expanding to other events.

In addition to her rugs, Kay will be offering a variety of table runners, placemats, welcome signs, doll house rugs and coasters. Prices range from \$35.00 for a small floorcloth, on up to \$250 for a custom 5'x7' area rug which is quite modest considering how durable and long-lasting these rugs are.

Many thanks to Nelson County's Kay Campbell for reviving this beautiful and functional old-time craft which is sure to bring many years of pleasure to those purchasing them.



*A clothesline sampling of Kay's floorcloths*

In addition to mastering the beautiful art of painting floorcloths Kay switched to the newer venue of painting decorative barn quilts.

When early Swedish and German settlers first came to Pennsylvania in the 17<sup>th</sup> century they brought with them a rich cultural tradition of painting hex signs to display on the sides of barns. They could be symbols of good luck and happiness but mostly they were thought to ward off charms or evil spells.

In 2020 a new and colorful trend is catching on much like the old hex signs. Under the umbrella of "Barn Quilts," replicas of early quilt patterns are hand-painted on a wooden surface and hung not only on the sides of barns but outbuildings, homes, fences and interiors as well.

The movement was started by Donna Sue Groves when she and her mother bought a farm in Adams County, Ohio, in 1989. There was a plain tobacco barn on the property and she told her mother, a quilt maker, she was going to spruce it up by painting a quilt to hang on the front of it. Locals driving by loved looking at the quilt and soon Donna was painting them for others.

The painted quilts began attracting the attention of tourists and in 2001 turned into a tourism project implemented in Ohio. The result was the first "barn quilt trail," a series of painted quilt patterns installed along a certain route for people to follow and enjoy.

Currently, North America now has quilt trails in 43 states and three in Canada.

In our own locality, Green County boasts over 100 of the barn quilts and the Greene County Visitor Center gladly gives information and a map for people to follow. Monterey also has a quilt

trail but the barns are farther apart in distance. Other localities have colorful barn quilts on display randomly, with no particular route.

In February Kay decided to try her hand at painting barn quilts because they are very similar to the floorcloth application in that the patterns can be the same but cloths are painted on sailcloth whereas the quilts are painted on half-inch plyboard. She now sells both at local craft shows and the Farmer's Market at Rockfish.

Working in her basement studio, Kay first caulks around the edges of the plyboard and then seals it to keep out moisture. She then paints on the base coat and sketches the quilt design onto the board and paints the individual pieces, using painter's tap to keep the lines separated. She finishes by adding a waterproof sealer. For easier transporting to craft shows Kay is limiting her sizes to eighteen by eighteen and twenty-four by twenty-four inches but she will do larger pieces on commission. Although she can virtually paint any quilt pattern, some of her favorites are the Oklahoma Star, Sunflower, Star of Orient, Carpenter's Wheel, and the Carolina Lily.

Anyone wishing more information about purchasing one of Kay's custom floorcloths or her colorful barn quilts may email her at [kmc4ql@gmail.com](mailto:kmc4ql@gmail.com).



*Barn Quilts of every design and size*



*Kay Campbell showing a variety of colorful barn quilt paintings*