

Tobacco Quilts: A Brief Addiction in Quilting History

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ABSTRACT

Between 1910 and 1916, a craze of sorts swept across the United States in the form of quilting. Known as Tobacco Quilts, these quilts were made from the flannel inserts that accompanied the products of several tobacco companies. Advertised as free with purchase or redeemable with coupons collected with the purchase of their tobacco, this tactic was used to drum up increased sales of their products by luring people to buy tobacco in return for small pieces of flannel. These flannel pieces were decorated with the images of flags, butterflies, sports, and more, and many women eagerly collected them to make quilts and other textiles like pillows and draperies.

Keywords: quilting, Tobaccocana, consumerism, women's history, advertising, Americana, Vexillology, textiles

It was a hot Sunday afternoon, and the Augusta Coin show was nearing an end. Knowing that coming near the end meant that my chances of finding a new short snorter, which are banks notes signed by service member during WWII, to add to my collection were slim to none. Yet I still ventured in, in hopes of discovering some sort of treasure for my collection. Many booths were starting to close up as I wandered up and down the aisles, but lo and behold the most wonderful sight caught my eye. Laying across a table in the back of a booth was a brightly colored, early 20th-century quilt. Stopping dead in

my tracks, I let out a gasp at the sight of such a gorgeous piece of American history. The vendor saw me stop and asked me if I knew what I was looking at to which I responded that in fact, I did. It was a Tobacco Flannel quilt, something I had recently learned about while writing my thesis on the quilters of World War One.

While I was speaking with the vendor, he mentioned he was thinking of cutting it up and turning it into a nice coat and the look of horror that crossed my face must have been enough for the man to declare that he was kidding and if I was interested, he would sell it to me

for a really good price. I was wary at first because I wasn't exactly sure of the value of said quilt and what would actually be a good price, especially because he was also going to throw in 18 extra flannel flags with it. So, I told him to tell me his best price and I would think it over. When he did, I nearly fainted, for this wonderful man was offering to sell me a stunning representation of quilt history along with some very rare flannel flags for just \$100. I knew I couldn't pass it up so I ran quickly to the ATM, and became the new owner of a very colorful representation of the history of quilting, tobaccocana, and consumerism.

In the United States, tobacco companies began to insert these flannels into their products sometime after 1910. Advertisements from companies such as Cairo Tobacco, Sovereign Tobacco, Omar Tobacco, and Tuxedo Tobacco ran throughout newspapers across the U.S. in 1913 and 1914 advertising free flannels, or blankets as they were called then, with the purchase of their products. As Sovereign Cigarettes put in their ads, the hope was that "this remarkable free offer is made to get still more smokers acquainted with the new standard of quality these famous cigarettes have established."¹ Tuxedo Tobacco claimed that these flannels were "offered to induce you to try Tuxedo,"² while Sovereign Tobacco wanted to "induce more smokers to become acquainted with the QUALITY of Sovereign Cigarettes."³ Cairo Tobacco, which offered two free blankets with purchase, was interested in getting people "acquainted with the marvelous new value in cigarettes."⁴

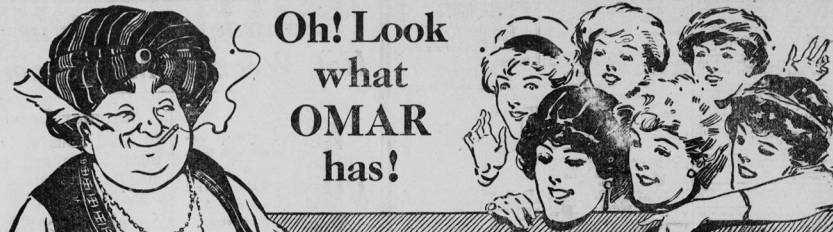
In one Omar Tobacco ad, found in the July 12, 1913, issue of *The Bennington Evening Banner*, the full-page ad, done to show the true size of the flannels, encourages women to make beautiful things with their flannels, claiming:

"With these Navajo Blankets ladies can make [the] most beautiful Couch Covers, Den Draperies, Patch Work, Table Covers, Pillow Tops, Navajo Sashes, Fancy Costumes, Dress Trimmings, Doll Blankets, and an endless variety of other useful and ornamental articles."⁵

And many women and girls took this to heart. In September 1914, newspaper columnist Marion Harland, whose column "Helping Hand Hints for the Home" in the *Birmingham Age-Herald*, received a letter from a fan asking for these flannels so she could make a quilted pillow top. Her letter read,

"I wonder if a small space can be found for a girl 14 years old? I am a daily reader of your Corner and enjoy it very much. I have always wanted some of the little rugs and blankets that come with the cigarettes, but have never gotten one. All my girl friends have enough for a pillow and I want some badly. Do you think some of the kind helpers could spare a few? Most young men have a lot of them, anyhow, and I would be more than overjoyed to get a few. - META R."

**Oh! Look
what
OMAR
has!**



**Wonderful
Navajo Blankets**
Size 5½ x 8½ inches

FREE

**One Blanket with Each Package of OMAR
Cigarettes—for a Limited Time**

The *biggest, most marvelous and ornamental* novelties ever designed! Entirely new, surprisingly different! These *immense size* miniature Navajo Blankets are a *gorgeous riot of colors* in the true Indian style, with the picturesque Indian sign-characters! They are *real little blankets*, soft to the touch, a *feast to the eye*! The ladies will go *wild with delight* over them! For a limited time, one of these Navajo Blankets will be given *free* with every package of OMAR Cigarettes.

A vast army of smokers have already discovered the new and higher standard of *quality* that these famous Turkish-blend cigarettes have introduced. The *unparalleled success* that Omar has met with everywhere is but a natural result.

OMAR
TURKISH BLEND
CIGARETTE
“The Joy of Life”

Their *superior quality* is so noticeable, so immediately apparent, that every smoker who tries OMAR realizes at once that he has found the *best* cigarette he ever smoked! This Free Offer is made as an inducement to more smokers to try OMAR—and be convinced!

20 for 15c
FREE

Go at once to any dealer displaying Free Offer sign in his window—get a package of OMAR and ask the dealer for a Navajo Blanket, FREE.



This shows the
**Exact
Size**
of these wonderful
**NAVAJO
BLANKETS**
5½ in. wide
by
8½ in. long
You get one of these
beautiful Oriental
Rugs in each pack-
age in addition to
the Navajo Blanket
the dealer
hands you.

With these Navajo
Blankets ladies can
make most beautiful

Couch Covers
Den Draperies
Patch Work
Table Covers
Pillow Tops
Navajo Sashes
Fancy Costumes
Dress Trimmings
Doll Blankets

and an endless variety of other
useful and ornamental articles.

Special Notice to Dealers

We want every dealer in Bennington to be supplied with these Navajo Blankets and to take advantage of this special offer. All dealers who have not already been supplied, may secure a special supply of the Navajo Blankets by applying at Omar Headquarters, Patience House, Mr. A. I. Zittman, Omar Cigarette Rep., between 6 and 8 P. M. this evening.

A full-page advertisement for Omar Tobacco on page 3 of the July 12, 1913 issue of *The Bennington Evening Banner*. (Bennington, VT). Image provided by the University of Vermont to the Library of Congress Chronicling America project. Image located at: <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn95066012/1913-07-12/ed-1/seq-3/>

Miss Harland's response to the letter was a rather odd one. Rather than helping her, she stated, "Our girl pleads her own cause so well that I refrain from enlarging upon her need." Then went on to say that "boys will not pass over her closing sentence" for the girl "is innocent of any covert meaning."⁶

Ten months later Miss Harland received another letter to her column, which had been renamed "Marion Harland's Helping Hand," about these flannel pieces. In this letter, the reader wrote:

"I wonder if you could help me out? A boy friend who is trying to fix up a den brought me satin flags, rugs, and tiny blankets, the kind that come with cigarettes, and wants me to make pillow tops of them. Never having seen one, I haven't the slightest idea how to go about it. Perhaps some reader who has made them can tell me how. - J.F.S."

In response, Miss Marland asked her readers to either send in instructions for making "this worthy object she has in view," or to ask for the address of the girl and help her out directly. As no more was mentioned in future issues, more than likely the latter was done and help went directly to the girl in need.⁷

The flannels came in various sizes, from 6" x 4" to upwards of 18" x 12."⁸ The ones that were packaged with the products were generally around 5.5" x 8.5," but customers could send away for larger pieces, or premiums as they were

called, with the coupons they collected which were also inserted in the product packaging, such as the two cash coupons valued ½ a cent each found in each package of Sovereign Cigarette.⁹ With Cairo Cigarettes, "in addition to the flag blanket, each package of Cairo cigarettes contains a coupon, 35 of which are redeemable for a large size American Flag Blanket."¹⁰ These coupons could also be used to purchase other products from tobacco companies as well, such as clothing, sporting goods, furniture, or other textiles.¹¹

The designs of these flannels were quite varied. While there are 50 known butterfly designs, each with four different colored backgrounds, none of the butterflies had a counterpart in nature. They were just pretty designs created in hopes of enticing more customers. Other themes used were sports. There were nine sports represented across 15 colleges, giving a sports lover more than 135 designs to choose from. Sports flags are harder to find today due to the nature of sports memorabilia collecting, but there are ninety different players representing baseball, with each in a combination of two different colors.¹² Interestingly, in an editorial printed in the sports section of the April 4, 1914 issue of *The Washington Times*, Louis Dougher wrote, "I'm willing to wager one unused match and a cigarette blanket that [my friend] Starr [Mathews] will be wishing he had stayed in the fold before the Fourth of July after he learns that kind of ball Jack Dunn's minor league team will pick up this season."¹³ So these blankets that depicted baseball players were also used to bet on baseball as well!

FREE
FOR A SHORT TIME ONLY
**A LARGE
National Flag Blanket**
8 1/4 x 5 1/2 in. with each purchase of TWO 5c packages of Sovereign Cigarettes

Two Valuable Coupons also in each 5c package. These coupons are of equal value in the redemption of these beautiful national flag blankets. In addition the Special Coupon has exceptional value for an extra large American or Confederate flag blanket size 12x8 1/2. Regular coupon is worth 1/2c cash.

**SOVEREIGN
CIGARETTES**

The unparalleled success of SOVEREIGN—puzzling to other cigarette manufacturers—was instantaneous throughout the South because—

“Quality Tells”

The Southern-grown, Old Belt Tobacco in SOVEREIGN is absolutely the best leaf ever put into a cigarette. SOVEREIGN is a new and higher QUALITY STANDARD.

CAUTION Be sure that your dealer gives you this wonderful flag blanket with each two 5c packages of SOVEREIGN Cigarettes. They are banded together with a red band. The flag folded between the packages as shown above.

THE AMERICAN TOBACCO COMPANY



Advertisement for the redemption of tobacco coupons for an extra large American or Confederate flag. The ad also features the flag of Liberia. Found in the January 6, 1914 issue of *The Daily Telegram* (Clarksburg, WV) on page 3. Image provided by West Virginia University to the Library of Congress Chronicling America project. Image located at: <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85059715/1914-01-06/ed-1/seq-3/>

There were also three-sets, of twenty-two, nineteen, and twelve respectively, that featured colleges and their seals only. Less common designs included pets, nursery rhymes, animals, college pennants, and soldiers.¹⁴ The most popular design was the flag design. As Tuxedo Tobaccos ad described them, “these flag blankets are ornamental and attractive, with flags of different nations in full colors (design on both sides).”¹⁵ Sovereign Cigarettes praised their flags by saying, “These extra large size Flag Blankets are not only very attractive and decorative, but also highly instructive. The ladies are delighted with them, because they make such beautiful couch covers, den draperies and ornaments.”¹⁶ There are at least 14 sets with 20 different border designs. There is even one set that has more than 700 designs and a small set of ten flags that came with a fancy fringe. The most common flag was the American, while the least common was the Confederate flag.¹⁷

The reason why the Confederate flag is so rare actually comes down to the fact that they did not begin to offer it until 1914. Sovereign Cigarettes, a Southern-based tobacco company, first offered the flag in an ad on January 6, 1914. With the purchase of two 5c packages of Sovereign Cigarettes, the purchaser could get a free 8 ¼ x 5 ½ inch National flag blanket and “two valuable coupons ... In addition the Special Coupon has exceptional value for an extra large American or Confederate flag blanket size 12x8 ½.”¹⁸ Interestingly, while it was advertised as the Confederate flag by the tobacco companies, what

they gave away was not the actual Confederate flag, but rather the Beauregard battle flag, or what is known as the Army of Northern Virginia (ANV) battle flag. Using that particular version of the flag over the real flag of the Confederacy made more sense because while the ANV flag was never formally adopted by the Confederate States of America, it was adopted as a symbol by the United Confederate Veterans and the Sons of the Confederate Veterans, who in turn used it in masses during their memorial ceremonies beginning in the 1880s.¹⁹ So the people of the South would have more than likely associated the ANV flag with the Confederacy rather than the actual Confederate flag, much as they do in modern times.

Speaking of modern associations, the flannels that depict Native American imagery are quite interesting because at first sight to modern lookers, they can be quite jarring. As described in the advertisement of Omar Tobacco, these Native American flannels were:

“... the biggest, most marvelous and ornamental novelties ever designed! Entirely new, surprisingly different. These immense size miniature Navajo Blankets are a gorgeous riot of colors in the true Indian style, with picturesque Indian sign-characters! They are real little blankets, soft to the touch, a feast to the eye! The ladies will go wild with delight over them!”²⁰

What makes them an interesting sight to modern viewers is the fact that a very common “picturesque Indian

sign-character” used on these flannels is the swastika and the suawastika, a swastika that runs counterclockwise. Due to the appropriation of the symbol by Hitler and his Nazi party, today the swastika, which in Sanskrit means “well-being,” brings feelings of unease or displeasure, rather than joy or good luck, to its modern viewers. But in the early 20th century, the symbol was widely used in marketing to the people in the United States. It could be found on anything from playing cards to beer bottles, Coca-Cola pendants to the name of the Girls’ Club of America magazine, *Swastika*. Even some American units during the first World War used the symbol. The symbol has been used for centuries by not just the Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains of India, but by the Ancient Greeks, Celts, Anglo-Saxons, and Native Americans.²¹ Though the symbol has been found in other parts of the United States, the Navajo Nation in the Southwest used the symbol most prominently among Native Americans. Representing the myth of the whirling log, a tale in which a man finds a place of friendship and abundance after being cast out of his tribe and sent down the river in a hollowed-out log, it went from strictly ceremonial use to commercial use in the late 1880s. More than 60,000 items with swastikas were sold to tourists between July 1905 and 1906 in New Mexico alone.²² So the use of the swastika on the “Navajo Blanket” flannels would not have caused anyone to bat an eye then, but rather would have encouraged them to want them more, actually.

The quilt I bought is 36” x 55” and consists of 36 squares. It is techni-

cally a quilt topper as it does not have a middle or back layer, nor is it bound. The squares are basted to a piece of baby blue baby flannel and have a gorgeous herringbone stitching in a light blue color to both decorate it and secure the pieces to each other and the baby flannel. Eleven of the squares depict the American Flag, nearly all with a different color background. One of these squares with the American flag also depicts with it the Panama flag (1903-present version), the flag of the United States of Venezuela (1905-1930 version), the flag of Paraguay (1812-1826 version), the flag of San Salvador (1898-1912 version), and the flag of Uruguay (1830- present version). There are nine flannel pieces with the representation of a butterfly; two flags have the same design, and nine more flannel pieces are represented by Native American designs, of which three have suawastikas. Lastly, there are seven flannels of international flags, including the war flag of the Japanese Imperial Army (1868-1945), the flag of Japan (1870-1999), the flag of Austria/Hungary (1869-1918 civil ensign version), the flag of Tunis (1827-present version), an inaccurate color rendering of the national and merchant flag of the Kingdom of Italy (1861-1946), the flag of Belgian Congo (1879-1960), and an incredibly inaccurate flag of Mexico, depicting not only the wrong colors but a center emblem that barely resembles any version on the flag. Such a flaw in the design contradicts the advertisements of companies like Sovereign Cigarettes, which claimed “they show the flag of all nations in correct designs and colors.”²³ Since tobacco flannel quilts have a histo-



36" x 55" Tobacco Quilt Top (1910-1916). 36 tobacco flannel pieces, consisting of flags, butterflies, and Native American imagery, attached to blue baby flannel with a herringbone stitch. Photographed by Aisha Manus.



8 ¼ x 5 ½ inch tobacco flannel with the flag of Liberia (1847-present), similar to the flannel featured in the Sovereign Cigarettes ad from January 6, 1914. Photographed by Aisha Manus.



8 ¼ x 5 ½ inch tobacco flannel depicting a completely made-up version of a Chinese flag. I could not find any record of a Chinese flag that looks like this, and I find it beautiful in its complete inaccuracy. Photographed by Aisha Manus.

ry that spans a very short time, shooting to popularity in the early 1910s before quickly declining in 1916 because of the First World War, the task of dating them is a relatively easy one compared to other quilts. So, I am able to confidently say that my quilt top was made sometime within those short six years.

The 18 individual flannels I have, which came in a small book, are a mixture of both common flags as well as rare ones. The first one in the book is an 8 ¼ x 5 ½ inch Confederate flag. The next one is a smaller 5 x 4 inch fringed rug featuring two Civil Flags of the Kingdom of Italy (1861-1946) and a loosely based depiction of the Coat of Arms. Then there is an 8 ¼ x 5 ½ inch flannel depicting the flag of the civil ensign of the United States of Columbia (1861-1886), though the star depicted is a six-point star instead of the proper eight-point star. The next two pages of the book have the state flag of Persia (1852-1907) from the Qajar dynasty, and an American flag, both 8 ¼ x 5 ½ inches. Following these flags is an 8 ¼ x 5 ½ inch flannel with the flag of Liberia (1847-Present), similar to the one featured in the Sovereign Cigarettes ad from January 6, 1914, and a 12 x 8 ½ inch flannel with the war flag of the Japanese Imperial Army (1868-1945). The next flag in the book is my favorite of the set because it is a completely made-up version of a Chinese flag. It is a yellow flag that depicts a lion with a ball. It looks nothing like any flag ever used by China up to that point. It does look very similar to the Tibetan Flag that was used from 1920-1925, but due to the fact that production of the flannels stopped

around 1916, this is not possible. Nonetheless, it is beautiful in its complete inaccuracy. Next is a 5 x 4 inch fringe rug featuring a harp and two flags of the United Irishmen (1642-present).

The second half of the book has two 5 x 4 inch fringe rugs of collegiate pennants. One features a blue pennant on a green background for Yale University, and the other a red pennant on a pink background for Cornell University. The next page has a 5 x 4 inch fringe rug featuring the coat of arms of the German Empire (1871-1918) and two North German Confederation/ German Empire flags (1867-1918). On the adjacent page is an 8 ¼ x 5 ½ inch flannel featuring the flag of the First Philippine Republic (1898-1901); however, the three stars are incorrectly colored blue and the sun is incorrectly highlighted in blue. On the next pages, there are two 8 ¼ x 5 ½ inch flannels featuring the flag of Holland (1575-Present) and the navel ensign flag of Greece (1863-1924, 1935-1973). The next flannel is a double of the 8 ¼ x 5 ½ inch flannel depicting the flag of the civil ensign of the United States of Columbia (1861-1886), but it has a blue edge instead of a brown edge like the first. Then there is an 8 ¼ x 5 ½ Navajo flannel in reds, blues, and yellows, with native imagery such as bows, arrows, animals, and canoes in black. This flannel does not depict any swastikas or suawastikas. The final flannel in the book is an 8 ¼ x 5 ½ piece featuring a purple and blue butterfly on a pink and white background.

I am not completely sure what I intend to do with this beautiful quilt

topper and the extra flannels. Due to the delicate nature and the unstable dyes that were used, I know I am not qualified to care for it. Most likely I will end up donating it to either a local museum or a museum that specializes in

quilt history or early twentieth-century history. Nonetheless, this quilt deserves a chance to be seen and appreciated and I am glad I saved her from her possible fate as a coat!

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