

## “Then & Now,” March 2018

The History Center has much to offer people interested in local history of all kinds, including books on a broad array of topics. One favorite from our collection features an examination of history through the quilter’s art.

Patty Elwin Davis, Ithaca’s quilter extraordinaire, has lovingly compiled a survey of 29 of her best works into a beautiful book called *Twice-Told Tales – History, Literature, and Family Lore Retold in Narrative Quilts*. Devoting at least two pages to each quilt, Davis includes brief introductions telling the story behind each one. Some of them highlight special places

for Davis, including “Venezuela Farewell,” and “Happy 150th, Lone Star State” a tribute to Texas history. Many of them have historical themes, such as “Medieval Women at Work,” which illustrates the surprising diversity of occupations performed by women in medieval Europe in 16 appliqued scenes. Women’s history is a recurring theme throughout these quilts: there is a tribute to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, pioneer suffragist; a celebration of Sacagawea, the Shoshone Indian guide to the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1804; and a haunting tribute to Harriet Tubman, and the secret codes that were hidden in quilts to mark stops on the Underground Railroad leading slaves north to freedom. “Night Shift at Morse Chain, 1944” suggests an Art Deco motif, as it juxtaposes female World War II factory workers against the bulky, geometric shapes of a 20th century factory.



The illustrations in this slim book are exceptional, vivid and colorful, with full-page images of each quilt with close-ups of some sections highlighted to show the extraordinary detail of Davis’s work. While the narrative themes of Davis’s quilts are varied, the one common theme that is vivid through them all is, as Davis herself says, “the object always being to tell a good story.” She does this, and so much more.

*Twice-Told Tales – History, Literature, and Family Lore Retold in Narrative Quilts* is available for sale at The History Center in Tompkins County.

Donna Eschenbrenner is the archivist at The History Center in Tompkins County

Photo caption: Harriet Tubman is honored in this quilt of Patty Elwin Davis’ and can be seen in her book *Twice Told Tales – History, Literature, and Family Lore Retold in Narrative Quilts*