Making a Case for Suffrage

A TRAVELING PODIUM, MAKESHIFT NEWSSTAND, AND ROLLING BILLBOARD

The struggle to win voting rights for women developed over years of partnership as well as fracture, with rivalries, conflicting priorities, disagreements over tactics, and competing definitions of womanhood based on experiences of class and race.

Yet women fighting for change found allies in their quest for greater equality. By the mid-nineteenth century, women across the country were forming suffrage associations and reaching for voting rights, hoping that the ballot would be a powerful weapon in the fight for civil and cultural equality.

When the so-called "19th century triumvirate" of woman's suffrage and feminism Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Lucy Stone strongly disagreed over how to respond to the exclusion of women from post–Civil War voting rights amendments, they founded rival organizations. Stanton and Anthony blended suffrage with controversial reforms in women's rights, including changes in divorce law, and advocated a constitutional amendment enfranchising women. Stone focused on organizing statewide campaigns to win the vote. They would ultimately merge their associations and some of their tactics.

In the 1870's Stone used it still unpainted as a podium at speaking engagements and to distribute her newspaper, Woman's Journal. In 1913 suffragist and labor activist Elisabeth Freeman took it on a well-publicized trip from New York to Boston, hauling a hurdy-gurdy organ to draw crowds. It was still used for suffrage publicity, but by then it had been painted with slogans advertising equal pay, just labor laws, and the vote for women of all classes. ■ —*LKG*

First used in the 1870's, this suffrage wagon was last used in 1917 or 1918 based on its painted slogans. It was brought out of retirement in 1943, the twenty-third anniversary of the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, to be used at the dedication of the Women's Rights Collection at Radcliffe College. —LKG

Memorializing Suffrage

SHAPING HISTORY WITH A CAREFULLY CURATED DONATION

Declaration of Sentiments Table, 1848, NMA

Shortly after the women's suffrage amendment was passed by Congress in 1918 and sent to the states for ratification, leaders of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) approached the Smithsonian. To ensure that the suffrage story, "the greatest bloodless revolution ever known," would be represented at the Institution, they donated memorabilia of suffragist leader Susan B. Anthony and this mahogany table on which Elizabeth Cady Stanton drafted the Declaration of Sentiments. Presented at an 1848 women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York. The groundbreaking document recounted the many curbs to women's freedoms. Anthony's niece Lucy called the display at the Smithsonian "the crowning glory to everything."

NAWSA's version of suffrage history shaped the traditional account long taught in schools—that heroic, unified women won the vote. The Smithsonian is now reinterpreting and expanding its 100-year-old collection to reflect the actual diversity and complexity of the U.S. suffrage movement. ■ —*LKG*

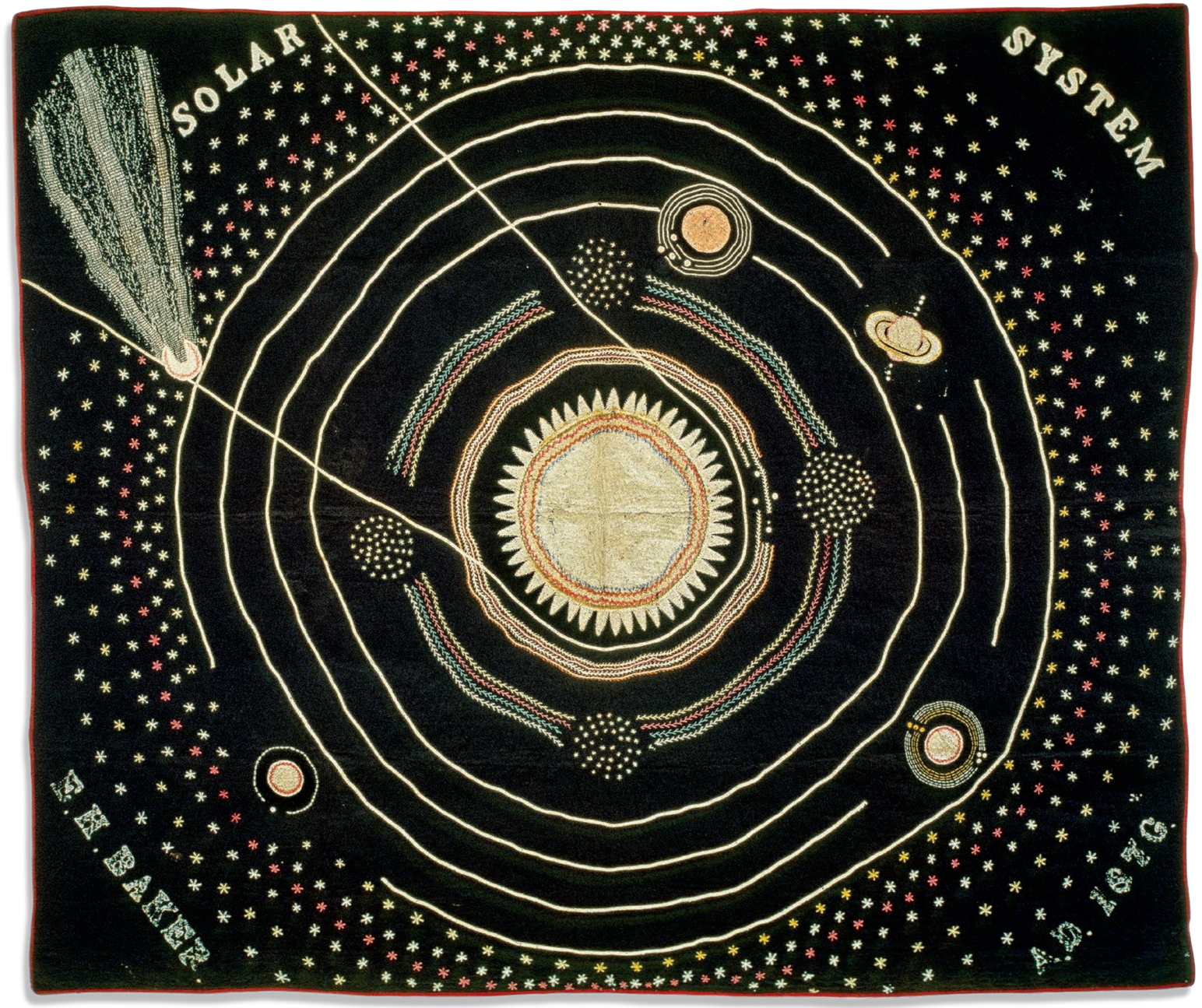
Learning Astronomy From a Quilt

A HANDS-ON WAY OF TEACHING SCIENCE

To create this remarkable quilt, Ellen Harding Baker (1867-1886) combined three acceptable activities for women in the nineteenth century: quilt making, the study of astronomy, and teaching. Its depiction of the solar system was unusual enough to merit a mention in the New York Times (September 22, 1883). An Iowa newspaper wrote that Baker had finished a quilt with the "the solar system worked in completely and accurately. The lady went to Chicago to view the comet and sun spots through the telescope that she might be very accurate. Then she devised a lecture in astronomy from it."

Baker started the quilt in 1876, but did not complete it for seven years. Raising a large family, it is not surprising that the painstaking work took some time. She may have been inspired by illustrations of the solar system found in several astronomy textbooks from the 1860s, as well as by her own viewing of the skies at the Dearborn Observatory in Chicago. She took seven years to complete the quilt, a wool-fabric appliqué, embellished with wool braid and wool and silk embroidery.

Baker used the quilt as a visual aid for lectures she gave on astronomy in the Iowa towns of West Branch, Moscow, and Lone Tree. Although we cannot be sure what caused Baker to add the study and teaching of astronomy to her domestic duties, her choice followed a path blazed by the famed astronomer Maria Mitchell. Through her intricately stitched creation, Baker blended home and career at a time when few women had both. ■ —*VE AND MS*



Quilt, 1876, NMAH

Left: Bessie Coleman enjoyed strong support from the African-American press in her fight for racial and gender equality. When rejecting a movie role, she said, "No Uncle Tom stuff for me."

Right: Harriet Quimby designed her own practical yet stunning purple satin flying suit, complete with a stylish hood and culottes that converted to a skirt, cognizant of the need to clamber in and out of a cockpit in view of the public and the press.

Flying Firsts In Triumph

TWO SPIRITED WOMEN—ONE BLACK, ONE WHITE—CHANGED AVIATION HISTORY

"I just wanted to be first . . . that's all," Harriet Quimby (life dates) explained after becoming the first American woman, and the thirty-seventh in the world, to receive a pilot license in August 1911. Bessie Coleman (life dates) didn't want to be a manicurist or a wife (though she was already both). She wanted to "amount to something." These two spirited women changed the twentieth-century social order when they became flying firsts in the fledgling world of aviation.

Already a popular theater critic and globe-trotting writer/photographer for Leslie's Illustrated Weekly, Quimby started flying lessons after witnessing the exhilarating 1910 Belmont Air Meet on New York's Long Island. Immediately after earning her license at thirty-five, she joined the Moisant flying team for exhibition shows in Mexico, becoming the first woman to fly there. After purchasing a Blériot XI monoplane—a distinct design departure from the biplanes of the day—she flew it solo twenty-two miles from Dover, England, to Hardelot, France, on the morning of April 14, 1912, becoming the first woman to fly a plane over the English Channel. She returned in triumph to the United States, eager to pursue and write about her new avocation. But she met with disaster in July, when she and a passenger were thrown to their deaths from her fragile plane over Boston Harbor.

Twenty-seven-year-old Bessie Coleman was at a personal crossroads in segregated Chicago when she was challenged about her future by her brother, a World War I veteran who taunted her with stories of French women flyers. She sassed back, "That's it. . . . You just called it for me!" But black men were not welcome in aviation, let alone black women. Unfazed, Bessie learned French and earned her pilot license in France—the first for an African-American woman. She learned aerobatics, performed for thousands of people, and lectured too, all in pursuit of opening an instruction school for African Americans. "We must have aviators," she said, "if we are to keep up with the times." But in a scenario eerily similar to Quimby's fate, she too fell out of her plane, a Curtiss Jenny, while flying over Jacksonville, Florida, in 1926. Following her untimely death, the African-American aviation community embraced her name and mission, establishing flying clubs in her name. ■ —*DSC*

CHAPTER FIVE

1968-2019

Rising Voices