



AIDS Quilt Records Get Digitized

The archive is reunited with digitized Quilt panels.

February 10, 2025 By LOC.gov

The Library of Congress (LOC) has released an online collection of the National AIDS Memorial Quilt Records, making one of the most poignant symbols of the AIDS epidemic in the United States available to a global audience. As the largest communal art project in the world, the AIDS Memorial Quilt honors the lives of Americans who have died of AIDS since 1981, when the disease was first identified.

Released to coincide with World AIDS Day 2024 commemorations, the newly digitized collection offers a unique window into the deeply personal stories behind the 55-ton quilt and its panels. The digitized collection, totaling more than 125,000 items, includes letters, diaries, photographs and other materials documenting the lives of those represented in the Quilt.

The digitized archive is now reunited online with the communal folk art of the quilt panels. Together, these digitized collections will be a boon for researchers, families of those lost to AIDS, policymakers and more. While the Quilt itself is housed at the National AIDS Memorial in San Francisco, its voluminous records have been entrusted to the American Folklife Center at LOC since 2019.

Roses laid on the Quilt in Washington, D.C. AIDS Memorial Quilt Records/Library of Congress

“The digitized AIDS Memorial Quilt Records collection is a major milestone not only in our preservation efforts but also in ensuring that the stories, lives and collective memory of those lost to the AIDS epidemic remain accessible to future generations around the world,” said Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden.

The Quilt, first created by community volunteers in San Francisco in 1987, has not only been a testament to the lives lost to AIDS but also a tool for advocacy and a reminder of the impact of the epidemic on a local, national and global scale.

“The National AIDS Memorial is so appreciative of this historic partnership with the Library of Congress and the American Folklife Center for stewarding the AIDS Memorial Quilt collection forward and completing its digitization,” said John B. Cunningham, chief executive officer of the National AIDS Memorial. “Through this project, the power of the collection will now be available to all through the digital platform and can now be reunited with the Quilt panels to which they were originally connected. This collection keeps the stories of the lives cut short alive and allows society to learn from them.”

LGBTQ activist Cleve Jones created the Quilt's first panel in honor of his friend Marvin Feldman, a 33-year-old actor who died of AIDS-related illness in 1986.

"There's a promise in a quilt. It's not a shroud or a tombstone," Jones said, reflecting on the Quilt's significance. "I don't want to stop remembering Marvin Feldman and all the other friends of mine who have gone."

Sewing machine used by volunteers to stitch Quilt panels AIDS Memorial Quilt Records/Library of Congress

Similarly, Judy Soons, a mother who lost two of her six children, Sydney and Jim, to AIDS, crafted a shared panel to commemorate the closeness of her sons. Soons channeled her grief into supporting others, drawing strength from the community formed through the Quilt.

One Quilt panel honors the late Sylvester James, a gay, African-American disco star, who became a symbol of the fight for LGBTQ equality. Known for his bold and unapologetic embrace of his identity, James rose to international fame with his anthem "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" serving as a soundtrack for sexual and gender liberation movements. His life and legacy continue to inspire generations, celebrating resilience, self-expression and joy in the face of adversity.

Digitization of the archive was made possible by the generous support of the Ford Foundation, which provided core funding for LOC's "For the People: Fund for Powering Knowledge," designed to connect Americans with important social movements and showcase how they shape the fabric of American life and government.

The AIDS Memorial Quilt Records, totaling over 200,000 items, offer an intimate look at artifacts such as photos, manuscript letters, diaries, greeting cards, notebooks, tributes, obituaries, epitaphs, pamphlets, fabric swatches and original artwork. More than half the collection has now been digitized, allowing the public to engage with and reflect on this important piece of history.

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