

Gee's Bend Quilts - Quilting and Singing Our Lives

Jamaica Plain, September 25, 2005, Rev. Terry Burke

"How can this be America?" We read and heard this response over and over again in news discussions of the New Orleans refugees created by Hurricane Katrina. The hurricane revealed the great race and class divide in America, and showed on television screens the poor and Black people usually well hidden, virtually invisible in America. This Jamaica Plain Open Studios weekend, I'm speaking about some of the usually invisible Americans, poor Black rural women of Gee's Bend, Alabama, whose remarkable art was recently featured at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Several hundred women lived in the Gee's Bend area during the 20th century; over 150, an astonishing number, were documented quilt makers of exceptional ability.

Several times the small community of Gee's Bend has come to the notice of history, only to be forgotten later. Gee's Bend is surrounded on three sides by the Alabama River in south central Alabama - not far from Selma. Wilcox County, where it is located, is not eligible for FEMA emergency aid for the effects of Hurricane Katrina. Gee's Bend is very isolated,, almost like an island, with a homogenous, more traditional Black culture. Other Blacks referred to the area as "Alabama Africa." Gee's Bend didn't have a paved road until 1967. When whites shut down the river ferry to town in the mid-sixties, residents had to drive an hour to town for supplies, encouraging self-reliance. They struggled under the oppression of intense racism; First Church member Frank Jones, describing growing up in nearby Mississippi in the 30's and 40's compared it to South Africa under the rule of apartheid.

Gee's Bend's recorded history began in 1845, when a planter force marched 100 slaves from North Carolina to Alabama. In the 1930's the area was regarded as the poorest in the country. The tenant farms of Gee's Benders were especially devastated when the cotton market bottomed out in the Great Depression. In 1932, the owner of the store extending credit to most of the farmers died. His estate sought to liquidate all outstanding debts, and

virtually everything of value, including livestock and home goods, was taken from 60 families. In 1935 the average area family's net worth was only \$28. Their dire poverty brought some aid under Roosevelt's New Deal. Federal photographers documented their terrible poverty for congress, almost "miraculously" capturing images of many of the noted older Gee's Bend quilters.

In 1941 the feds came back to record the music of the spirituals of Gee's Bend. We've heard several in our worship service today that were transcribed from a CD by Ellen McGuire. Gee's Benders were ardent supporters of the Civil Rights movement. As a result, the ferry to the county seat of Camden stopped. As the county sheriff said, 'Not because the people were black, but because they forgot they were Black.' Dr. Martin Luther King preached there almost exactly 40 years ago, just before the Selma march that began on October 30th 1965. King was inspired by the numbers and enthusiasm of these very poor people. Many of the men lost their jobs because of their involvement in the Civil Rights Movement.

In 1966, an Episcopal minister came up with the idea of marketing the Gee's Bend quilts up north. Residents set up the "Freedom Quilting Bee;" 30% of the women were involved with it. Gee's Bend quilts were featured in Vogue and Life magazines. During the late 1960's, Gee's Bend quilts were briefly sold at Bloomingdale's. Starting in 1972, the Freedom Quilting Bee made corduroy quilts for Sears, a "bread and butter" contract that would last for over 20 years.

In 1968, mules from Gee's Bend pulled the casket of Dr. Martin Luther King through the streets of Atlanta following his assassination. King had preached in 1965 at the local Pleasant Grove Baptist Church. Church and faith were central to the community. To join the church one had to experience a conversion experience. People would spend long periods of time by themselves in the woods praying for a vision. They would see visions of such things as climbing a ladder or a fountain. One of the quilters had a vision of herself climbing a mountain. All the bushes and foliage she tried to grab pulled out by the roots. Finally she dug down deep and found water.

Many of the quilters sang gospel music in the church choir. A film shown at the Museum of Fine Arts exhibition featured quilters attaching pieces together - singing, laughing, praying. As one of the Gee's Bend quilters said, "piece alone, stitch together." Individual effort needs to be part of a community. I was reminded by the film of when I was a chaplain at the Unitarian Universalist Doolittle Home in Foxboro in the early 1980's. After lunch, a half-dozen of the women, mostly in their 90's, would gather in the living room to quilt, crochet, and knit. They would occasionally speak, but largely worked together in silence; their spiritual practice seemed like a Friends' Meeting.

The strong women of Gee's Bend led hard lives. Loretta Pettway walked 50 miles a day doing farm field work. Another woman said she needed quilts as they only had heat in one room in her home. Some had seventh grade educations, others received no education. Some had unfaithful, abusive, or alcoholic husbands. One woman said of her childhood, 'if we had a flour biscuit, we broke it into four pieces' (to share).

The women worked in the fields all day, then had to feed their families. Thinking about a problem in their quilt while working during the day, they'd quilt at night, working to keep their families warm. 'Piece alone, stitch together,' they'd gather with other women to assemble the quilts and talk and sing. Patterns were passed from generation to generation in families. Grandmothers would have the little girls threat their needles. Different Gee's Bend neighborhoods such as Rehoboth and Sodom also had their own typical patterns.

Thank you to Ellen McGuire for bringing in this Gee's Bend style quilt that she made. One critic drew on a phrase of W.E.B. DuBois to describe their quality of "spiritual striving." Bold, often with geometric patterns, they have been called "physically robust." Patterns include "Housetop" with variations on concentric squares, or massed triangles or strips of fabric. It has been said that they have "colors like notes of music," reminiscent of the improvisation in the gospel songs of the quilters.

The quilts are an integral part of the Gee's Bend culture. As Ellen McGuire pointed out to me, some of the strip quilts look like the homes the quilters live in. Though the Gee's Bend quilts look like modern art, their creators were more inspired by the newspapers pasted to their walls. They also draw upon African styles and humor. Until the 1950's quilters made "britches quilts," that were made out of old clothing, sometimes remembering the deceased. The quilters took their limited material, including feed sacks, and responded with creativity. For example, after receiving the Sears contract for corduroy quilts, they experimented with the capabilities of that material.

The art of Gee's Bend is not self conscious. Again and again, a quilt will have a regular pattern, only to do something unexpected and surprising with it, say placing one color where you expect another. Quilters would say, 'I did that because I didn't have any more of that fabric,' but it happens continually in the style. While there is a clear Gee's Bend approach, quilters are distinct individuals. As one Gee's Bender put it, "you have to get yourself a mind of your own." Their quilts reflect complex lives lived on the edge. Before the Civil War, Black slaves in the South created Freedom quilts with coded messages about escape on the Underground Railroad. Though one of the Gee's Bend quilts contains the word "VOTE," their sewing has been more of a spiritual practice to survive oppression and adversity, while creating objects of utility and beauty.

The young have left Gee's Bend. A large group of former Gee's Benders live in Bridgeport, Connecticut. When a post office opened in the area it was named Boykin. Still, these vibrant quilts raise the question, 'Where else are there unacknowledged treasures like these?' Helen Hummel used to say in the Jamaica Plain Arts News, "We are all artists." The Gee's Bend quilters show that so-called "ordinary" people can create great art that is useful and beautiful.

One of the quilters said that her hope was that the "last days would be the best days." These strong women give us a model for living the "Long Haul" through trouble and adversity. They quilt out of a sense of community and an ultimate spiritual optimism. As a church, we too, need to provide opportunities for work that is real, creative work where

we can laugh, make music, and pray together. Piecing alone, stitching together our living holy vision; singing and quilting a community that is useful, justice loving, and as beautiful as the Gee's Bend quilts.

Derrick Jackson, "Strength in every stitch," Globe July 29, 2005

The quilts of Gee's Bend, Ala., at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts freeze you because know every stitch represents the strength of a people through slavery and segregation. Gee's Bend is surrounded on three sides by a river. During the civil rights movement, the white citizenry cut off the ferry to the county seat to keep the black residents from voting. Gee's Benders say the county sheriff said, " We didn't close the ferry because they were black. We closed it because they forgot they were black."

On of Gee' s Bend's quilters, Arlonzia Pettway, said in a book that accompanies the exhibit, "Some of the white people said it had nothing to do with the marching. But it sure did. After that we kept on marching. Only difference was we had to load up in trucks and drive al the way around."

The grit of the Gee's Benders so impressed Martin Luther King Jr. that he said in a sermon in 1965, "To come here to Gee's Bend and to see you out in large numbers gives me new courage and new determination."

The quilts, on display until Aug. 21, are part of a determination not to be beaten down, a tenacity passed down from mothers and grandmothers to daughters and granddaughters. The colors, the patterns, the intricacies of many of them would alone be enough. For me the most muted ones were the most riveting. These were the ones made from the denim of work clothes. In several cases, the quilts are from the clothes of deceased family members to keep memories of them alive.

They made me think of my own grandparents and cousins who toiled in cotton fields in Mississippi so that, ultimately, my generation would be the first to send boys to college. One of the most prolific of work clothes quilters, Loretta Pettway, had one of the hardest of lives. Her grandmother convinced her to quilt despite long days of field work, feeding hogs, and caring for a disabled bother. Her mother left her when she was 7 or 8. Her father was married to another woman. She had an abusive husband.

"I never had a child life, " she said in the book *Gee's Bend: The Women and Their Quilts*. Through the quilts, she could get to the point where she said, "God have brought me from a mighty long ways. I prayed to the Lord when I was growing up that it won't be this way always. I am looking for a brighter day, a better day... and he have fulfilled it."

Alvia Wardlaw, *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*

Indeed, the *Gee's Bend* aesthetic ...is as inventive as the town's social history is intricate...a totally unselfconscious approach to the act of making art prevails in *Gee's Bend*. This is an aesthetic of the here and now. An unabashed immediacy permits the women to make snap decisions about a quilt and move on, sharing their decision making with us. Theirs is an aesthetic of contemplation, but not hesitancy. The results are large-scale geometric permutations of pure color and form-bars and bands of color offered up in bold confidence, intricate triangles playing visual eye games like Eshu, the Yoruba trickster god.

Quilt makers, like all artists, respond to the art that they see- especially the work of their fellow artists- and they are inspired in turn. The family lineages of these automakers...live on emphatically in their surviving quilts...Quilt making is at once solitary and collaborative. Many women learned to piece quilts from mothers,

grandmothers, sisters, aunts, in-laws, and neighborhood women. However, a good quilt maker's mind was free of all preconceived notions of how a quilt should be created, even from an influence as close as one's mother...

Chance becomes choice. In the limited realm of "chance" - of what is available among worn family clothing, household textiles, and the infrequently acquired purchased cloth or quilting bee cloth or precious cloth brought back from the occasional trip to the county seat of Camden - a certain psychological demeanor arises from these quilts, showing genius emerging from want. Compelled to work with what is available, the limiting process becomes an exuberant exercise, a wonderful exhilarating challenge to the mind. One can work and move within the prescribed parameters of cloth, pattern, and tie, and emerge from the experience with room and time enough still for pure invention.

Such improvisation in the black community is an expected art... This sense, expressed in music and dance, resonated equally in these quilts, in their remarkable expression of a totally self-confident spirit in the artist - a self-confidence made all the more remarkable by the generally harsh experience of these women.