



The February Newsletter: The February Meeting will be Tuesday, February 27, 2024, in the Meeting Room of the McMillan Museum on the Brewton College Campus.



**Clintina
Pettway**

The Program: The Gee's Bend Quilts

We have two guest speakers for the February Program, Clintina (Tina) Pettway, who is a Human Resource Specialist at the Bay Minette Campus of Coastal Alabama Community College and her aunt, Stella Pettway, who is one of the leading quilters today in Gee's Bend. Examples of Stella's beautiful quilts are on display in the museum.



**Stella Mae
Pettway**

(Continued on page 2)

Table of Contents	
News and Announcements	3
Gee's Bend	4
Slate of Officers	5
Trivia	5
The Amazing Life of Will Adams	6
Gee's Ben: The Most Famous Quilts in America	7



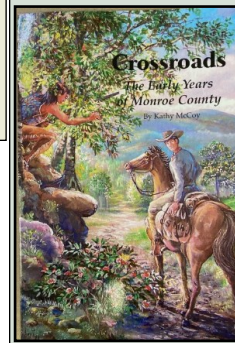
**Quilts on a
Clothes Line
And Books about
Gee's Bend.**

Refreshments at February Meeting

If you choose, bring your favorite finger food for refreshments after the program. The Society will provide drinks.

A Vote

There will be a vote on ECHS Officers for the next two years at the February Meeting. The slate of officers is on page 5 of this newsletter.



The March Program

Cathy McCoy, Author of Crossroads: The Early Years of Monroe County, will be the guest speaker.

Book's cover shown at left.



**Roman Stripes Variation
Local Name,
"Crazy" Quilt.
By Loretta Pettway.**

**Volume 51 No. 2
February, 2024.**

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The Program

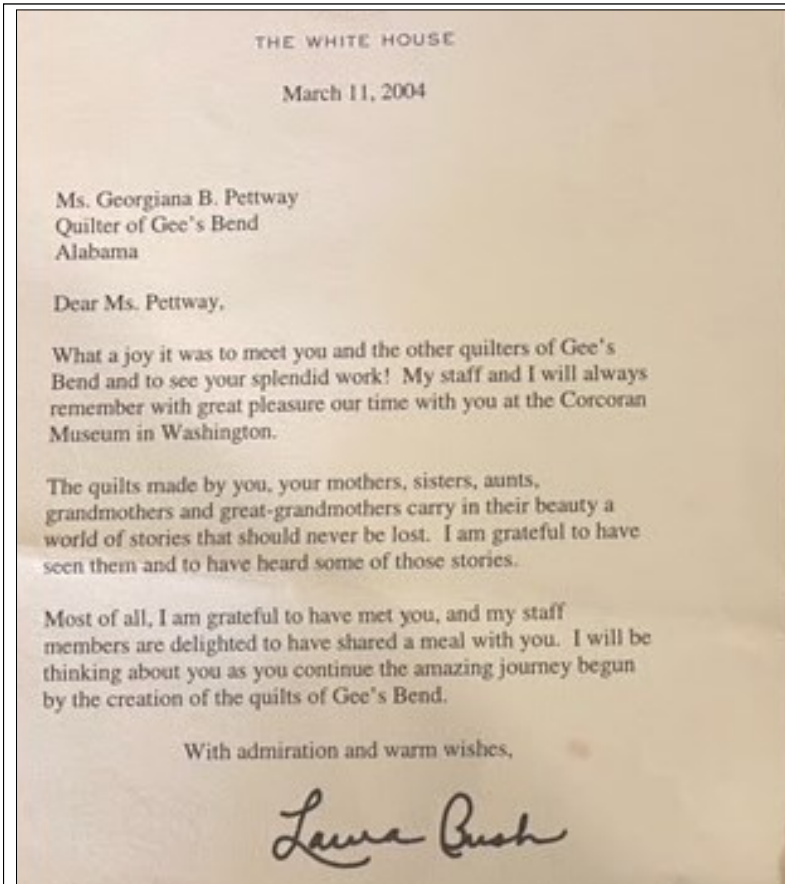
(Continued from page 1)

Tina wished to honor her aunt in this program, not only for her art but also her contributions to her community. One of her contributions is that she makes quilts to have on hand to give to people who need them as well as those she sells in her shop and online.

Stella, who is a third generation quilter in her family, is the owner of a gift shop in Gee's Bend, Georgie'sWayQuilts, named in honor of her mother,

Georgianna Pettway. Stella says of learning how to quilt, "My mother, Georgianna Pettway or Georgie, taught me how to quilt. I would work on the corner of her quilts because I couldn't sew good. She would say, 'Stella, stay off!' But I liked it, so I kept at it."

Tina Pettway has a Bachelor and Masters of Business Administration degrees from Faulkner University of Montgomery. She has been at Coastal Alabama, Bay Minette, since November of 2022.



At Left, a Letter from First Lady Laura Bush to Stella Pettway after a visit to Gee's Bend. Above, a Picture of Laura Bush with Stella Pettway who is on the Right.



Quilt by Stella Pettway shown at the Penobscot Marine Museum in Searsport, MA.

Below, Stella Pettway. At the Right, One of Her Quilts



News and Anoucements



For Information on registration costs, hotels, meeting schedules, tours, go to <<https://ww.alabamahistory.net/meetings>>.

The Annual Meeting of the Alabama Historical Association Will Be in Huntsville, Wednesday, April 10 - Friday, April 12



The 2024 Alabama Historical Commission Calendar of Alabama Historic Doors is Now Available.

Civil War Living History & Skirmish Saturday, April 20 at 9 am– 4pm



Confederate Memorial Park, a historic property of the Alabama Historical Commission, will host a special living history event on Saturday, April 20, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Using authentically reconstructed Civil War barracks, living historians will present outdoor demonstrations on a variety of topics including weapons, flags, civilian life, cooking, and veterans' life at the Alabama Confederate Soldiers' Home. An afternoon skirmish between Union and Confederate reenactors will also be included.

Admission during the living history day is \$2 per person and admission to the museum is an additional \$2. For additional information, call the museum at 205-755-1990. Visitors are encouraged to bring a picnic.

Confederate Memorial Park is located at 437 County Road 63, Marbury, AL 36051.

The new accordion style calendars, highlighting the Preservation Month photo contest winners from last May are currently being distributed to some Historical Commission sites. The Commission's social media channels will announce availability and details. The online address for the Commission is <<https://ahc.alabama.gov>>.



ECHS Member Brett Chancery, Shown with the 2024 Winter issue of Alabama Heritage which features his article on Brewton Native and Beetlejuice Screenwriter, Michael McDowell.

Brett, who recently received his PH.D in Humanities from Faulkner University in Montgomery wrote his dissertation on McDowell's life and works from which Brett drew the material for the article in the magazine "Familiar Nightmares: Michael McDowell's Alabama Influences."

Brett has successfully worked with ECHS President Don Sales to establish and develop a student Historical Society at Coastal Alabama, Brewton Campus. The college's online news site notes, "As a full-time history instructor at Coastal Alabama Community College, Chancery not only imparts knowledge to his students but also actively engages in the exploration of local and state history, making him a fitting scholar to unravel the layers of McDowell's Alabama influences" (<https://www.coastalalabama.edu/news/>).

Gee's Bend



The following article is from the online [Encyclopedia of Alabama](https://encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/gees-bend/) at <<https://encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/gees-bend/>>.

Known officially since 1949 as the town of Boykin, the community of Gee's Bend is situated in Wilcox County in the west Alabama Black Belt. Today, mostly descendants of enslaved African Americans live in the community on the banks of the Alabama River.

Although beset by the same poverty and economic underdevelopment that characterize other sections of west Alabama, Gee's Bend has demonstrated a persistent cultural wealth in the vibrant folk art of its quilt makers, whose work has gained national attention and critical acclaim.

Early inhabitants of Alabama tended to create communities along the many waterways of the state, and thus Gee's Bend's location is typical of many Alabama settlements. Joseph Gee, a large landowner from Halifax County in North Carolina, settled in 1816 on the north side of a large bend in the Alabama River near what would become the northeastern border of Wilcox County.

He brought 18 enslaved Black people with him and established a cotton plantation. When he died, he left 47 slaves and his estate to two of his nephews, Sterling and Charles Gee. In 1845, the Gee brothers sold the plantation to a relative, Mark H. Pettway, and the Pettway family name remains prominent in Wilcox County.

After emancipation, freed Blacks who stayed on at the plantation



Gee's Bend Quilt Mural Trail
The Gee's Bend Quilt Mural Trail was created in 2007 to highlight the world-renowned quilts produced by the artisans of the Gee's Bend community in Wilcox County. The trail features ten large murals depicting some of the more notable quilt designs. This one is entitled Bars and String-Pieced Columns and was created by Jessie T. Pettway.



Gee's Bend During the Great Depression
In 1937, in response to the economic hardships brought on by the Great Depression, the federal government established a cooperative land program in which Gee's Bend residents were given the opportunity to purchase and control the land they farmed for the first time.

worked as sharecroppers and tenant farmers. The Pettway family held the land until 1895, when they sold it to Adrian Sebastian Van de Graaff, an attorney from Tuscaloosa who operated the plantation as an absentee land owner, who was also the father of famed inventor and physicist Robert Jemison Van de Graaff.

In the later years of the Great Depression, the advent of widespread use of mechanization in agriculture brought additional hardships to small farmers and caused the first major exodus from Gee's Bend. Many residents, however, stayed on their land because it belonged to them.

In 1949, a U.S. post office was established in Gee's Bend, and the federal government imposed the name Boykin on the community, against the wishes of most of the residents. Then in 1962, a dam was constructed on the Alabama River, flooding thousands of acres of the most fertile land in the Gee's Bend community.

During the civil rights era, Wilcox County officials terminated ferry service across the Alabama River, necessitating a two-hour drive to Camden, the county seat. At the time, not a single black person was registered to vote in Wilcox County, and the cessation of ferry service was one of many efforts to prevent them from doing so.

Since the 1960s, Gee's Bend has gained significant national attention from the quilts produced by women in the community, as well as those produced by the Freedom Quilting

(Continued on page 5)

The Program

(Continued from page 4)

Bee in neighboring Alberta. Photographer John Reese and writer and storyteller Kathryn Tucker Windham visited Gee's Bend in 1980-81 as part of a National Endowment for the Humanities project to document the community.

In the late 1990s, William Arnett, a folk-art collector from Atlanta, Georgia, came to the area and bought hundreds of quilts after seeing a photograph by Roland Freeman of a quilt draped over a woodpile. The pieces have been heralded as brilliant pieces of modern art.

A collection of quilts from Gee's Bend was shown at the Houston Museum of Art before traveling to the Whitney Museum in New York City, where it again received high acclaim. The exhibit also proved to be controversial, however, and initiated serious academic discussions on the definition of



Gee's Bend Ferry in Camden

The Gee's Bend Ferry runs between Gee's Bend and Camden, the county seat of Wilcox County. In the 1960s ferry service was discontinued to keep African Americans from reaching Camden to register to vote. The ferry service was reactivated in 2006.

art and concerns about the exploitation of the quilters. In 2003, the quilters established the Gee's Bend Quilters Collective to market and promote their quilts and community, and in 2007 the community installed a series of murals of quilt designs on the main road in the town.



Gee's Bend Quilters

Gee's Bend quilters Lucy Marie Mingo, Nancy Pettway, and Arlonzia Pettway (from left) work to attach the top piece of a quilt to the batting at Boykin Nutrition Center in this 2006 photo.

Slate of Officers Recommended by the ECHS Board

ECHS Officers

President -- Dr. Jimmy W. Adkisson

Vice-President – Don Sales

Secretary - Open Treasurer - John Angel

Echoes Editor - Ranella Merritt

Librarian - Open

Publicity - Clay Lisenby and John Angel

Historian/Curator - Tom McMillan

Appointed Officers

Chaplain - Rev. Patrick J. Madden

ECHS Poet Laureate and Military Historian - Robert Smiley

Archivist - Charlie Ware

Trivia

A Bit of Fun From Charlie Ware, who comments, "If you were born before 1950, these questions may bring back some memories for you. If you were born after that time, you probably won't know what we're talking about."

1. What were Green Stamps?

S&H Green Stamps were trading stamps issued as part of a rewards program. Many stores gave out stamps corresponding to the amount of purchase.

The stamps were saved and pasted into little booklets which could be redeemed for products from a catalog.

2. Why did kids prefer to open cereal boxes from the bottom?

Most cereals came with a little toy or game packed inside which was always in the bottom of the box. By opening the box at the bottom, you got to the prize first.

The ECHS *Journal* Section

The Amazing Life of Will Adams

It was about 70 years ago. I was walking with my mother down Main Street in Atmore when she nudged me and pointed to a man walking toward us. "See that man" she said, "He is 104 years old, and he was once a slave."

The man she was referring to was a distinguished looking African-American with a fringe of snow white hair and a big white mustache. He stood as erect as a soldier and walked at a pace that suggested a man of 24 rather than 104. This man was Will Adams, and he would go on to live an additional 17 years, passing away in 1971 at the age of 121.

Will Adams was born into slavery in Virginia in 1850. This was the same year that California was admitted into the union. Millard Fillmore was president. While he was still a young child, Adams' family was sold to an Alabama plantation owner and was transported to Alabama by mule and wagon. He grew up in slavery, working in the cotton fields of central Alabama.

Shortly after the Civil War, Adams went to work for the L&N railroad where he stayed until reaching retirement age. In 1924, he came to Atmore to work for the Carney Mill Company, and later he became one of the first employees of the Swift-Hunter Lumber Company. He continued working full-time until he was 90 years old.

Adams enjoyed remarkably good health and was active and alert until the last few months of his life. At age 105, he was still traveling alone by bus to go out of town to visit relatives. He managed his own affairs and kept a close accounting of his money. Until he was 120, he went monthly to the bank to personally cash his pension checks. At age 111, he was slightly injured when he fell out of a pecan tree where he had been up shaking limbs. "That slowed me down a bit" he quipped.

Once in an interview, Adams credited his good health and longevity to "butter milk, corn bread and pot likker."

Adams did not marry until he was 50 years old. He married a woman who was half his age and they had two sons and two daughters. His wife preceded him in death, and he spent his final years living in the home of his daughter in Atmore.



Will Adams

Will Adams received much recognition and many awards as his age progressed. At the age of 116, he was honored as the oldest person in the state of Alabama and at age 120, he received an award from the Social Security Administration recognizing him as the second oldest person in the United States receiving a Social Security pension. His 120th birthday, August 20, 1970, was proclaimed Will Adams Day by Atmore mayor Tom Byrne and Alabama governor Albert Brewer. Adams was able to attend the ceremony in his honor and received several letters of recognition

from government officials and a framed copy of the proclamation honoring him for his longevity and citizenship.

Shortly after his 120th birthday, the years began to take their toll. Adams' health began to decline, and he was unable to attend a party planned for his 121st birthday. Will Adams passed away peacefully in his sleep on November 15, 1971. He was buried at Lucy Hill Cemetery in Atmore.

Imagine the events and changes that Will Adams would have witnessed in a lifetime of 121 years. He lived through the administration of 26 United States presidents. In 1850, much of what is now the United States was still a wild, unexplored frontier. Only half of the 50 states had joined the union. Alaska still belonged to Russia. World War II was 90 years in the future.

Adams was already 53 years old when the Wright brothers flew the world's first powered airplane, yet he lived to see space travel and men walking on the moon. He was 43 years old when Henry Ford's automobile first appeared and he was 73 years old in 1923 when the Lincoln Highway, the first coast to coast highway intended for automobile use, was dedicated, but he lived to see the completion of the first phase of the interstate highway system. More importantly, he was 13 years old when the Emancipation Proclamation, which ended slavery in the south, was signed. But Will Adams lived to see an African-American (Thurgood Marshall) appointed to the United States Supreme Court.

Historians do not agree on who the last surviving

(Continued on page 7)

The ECHS *Journal* Section

The Amazing Life of Will Adams

(Continued from page 6)

enslaved person in America was. Many sources, including USA Today, claim that it was a Sylvester Magee of Columbia, Mississippi. Magee died on October 15, 1971, but since Will Adams survived Magee by exactly one month, this would certainly give

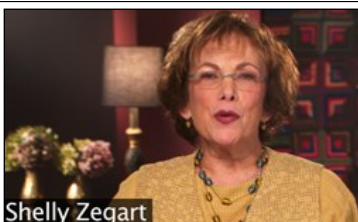


Grave of Will Adams

Adams a legitimate claim to being the last surviving American enslaved person. If not the last, he was definitely one of the last two or three.

As for me, I'm adding more butter milk, corn bread, and pot likker to my diet.

Gee's Bend: The Most Famous Quilts in America



Shelley Zegart

Shelley Zegart, Author, Curator, Collector and Lecturer, Louisville, Kentucky.

This article is part five of a nine part documentary series, Why Quilts Matter: History Art and Politics by Shelley Zegart. She is the narrator of the article.

Introduction

In 2002 the art world was rocked to its foundations by a group of unusual, abstract quilts made by African-American women from an obscure hamlet in southern Alabama. People lined up around the block to see them, and the critic from The New York Times gushed as, for the first time, the quilt became the subject of a museum blockbuster.

Join us as we trace the journey of the quilts of Gee's Bend from the clotheslines of the South to the exhibition walls of the country's greatest museums. We'll explore the aesthetic and social appeal of these quilts—and quilters—as well as the controversies

(Continued on page 8)



Gee's Bend, Early 20th Century.



Gee's Bend



**Sewing a Quilt,
Gee's Bend,
1937.**

**Photo by Arthur
Rothstein,
Library of
Congress**

**Ferry, Transportation between
Gee's Bend and
County Seat,
Camden.**



The ECHS *Journal* Section

Gee's Bend: The Most Famous Quilts in America

(Continued from page 7)

they engendered, and analyze their unique place in quilt history.

In the Middle of Nowhere

This tiny African-American community located in the southwestern part of the state was settled by descendants of local slaves. Its isolated location connected to the outside only by an unreliable ferry and a rough muddy road kept its inhabitants and their quilting traditions away from the rest of the world for many generations.

But this insularity bred magic. Using poor materials, salvaged shreds of worn clothing, the women of Gee's Bend created quilts of great aesthetic richness.

The first attempts to bring the quilts of Gee's Bend to national attention was not a sustained success. In 1966, a local episcopal priest saw some quilts on a clothes line and he realized their money-making potential. He sent quilts to New York department stores, where they become favorites of celebrities, like Vogue editor Diana Vreeland and interior designer Sister Parish, resulting in the creation of the Freedom Quilting Bee in Gee's Bend, a quilt-making

cooperative.

But by 1968, buyers were insisting that the new quilts be made to certain specifications, ultimately creating works that bore little resemblance to the originals. The experiment petered out and life in Gee's Bend went back to its sleepy state.

Then in 1968 came the Arnetts, dealers and advocates for Southern, African-American vernacular art. They recognized the greatness of the quilts of Gee's Bend and how they could be properly introduced to art lovers everywhere.

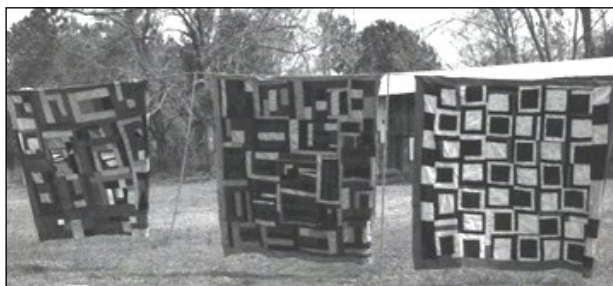
Working with the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, they organized the exhibit, "The Quilts of Gee's Bend" in 2002, which traveled to prestigious museums all over the country, including the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. The show attracted hundreds of thousands of viewers and rapturous reviews from the New York Times to Newsweek.

In 2006, this success led to a second exhibit, "Gee's Bend: the architecture of the Quilt," which traveled to seven additional major art museums. These are the quilts which more people have seen in museum settings than any others and you may also have seen them on U.S postage stamps.

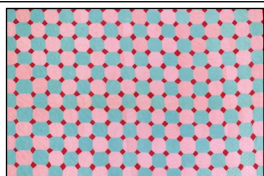
(Continued on page 9)



Examining Quilts. Gee's Bend's Quilts First "Discovered" in the 60's.



Gee's Bend Quilts Being Aired on a Clothes Line.



Traditional Quilt with repeated pattern. Gee's Bend Quilts very different.

Bill Arnett, Art Dealer, Collector, Scholar of Southern Vernacular Art. In the U.S., vernacular art – which can also be called folk art or outsider art – is dominated by the works of African American, Appalachian and working-class people. In many cases these artists took up making paintings, sculptures, quilts or textiles outside of a day job or later in life.



The ECHS *Journal* Section

Gee's Bend: The Most Famous Quilts in America

(Continued from page 8)

This literal rags to riches story has not been without its controversies. Some include dissension about the existence of a separate African-American quilting tradition, the debate whether or not these quilts are art, and envy from some quilt makers, who have not found the museum world as welcoming. But no one can deny their notoriety.

These quilts have emerged as artistic icons that hundreds of thousands of Americans have lined up around the block in city after city to see. For that feat alone their story needs to be told.

It was a life changing experience when I went to Gee's Bend for the first time in 2002 and I met the women in their homes and shared meals with them. I was overwhelmed by the power of their work, the stories of their lives, their optimism, and their boundless creativity in the face of such extreme poverty.

I found them doing what they have always done, making quilts out of bits of scraps of leftover fabric and cloth, a way of life that was passed from one generation to another. It was passed down from mother to daughter.



**Creola B. Pettway
Quiltmaker, Gee's
Bend**

“She put the quilt up, and she said, ‘Come on so y’all can learn how to

quilt. Quilt the corners at first, that’s how we learn how to quilt.”



**Arlonzia Pettway
Quiltmaker, Gee's
Bend**

“See,’ my mom used to tell me, ‘Come on Lonza, and help me get these pants legs and things straight and cut ’em out’ and I would sit down and rip ’em loose, you know, and cut the good part off, I mean, cause in those days you wasn’t able to go to the store and buy just quilt patterns, something to make quilts out of.



**Georgianna
Pettway,
Quiltmaker,
Gee's Bend.**

“You just had to get dress tails and pants legs and shirt sleeves to make quilts out of. Every rag you see, you pick it up. You see a piece of rag along the road, you pick it up and carry it home and wash it, make a quilt.”

(Continued on page 9)



The photo of a quilt on a wood pile which the Arnetts found in a book.



Gee's Bend.

The ECHS *Journal* Section

Gee's Bend: The Most Famous Quilts in America

(Continued from page 9)



James Grubola

James Grubola, Former Chair, Department of Fine arts, University of Louisville, KY

“They were doing this as a part of their social fabric, and their interaction between generations and passing down those kinds of traditions. Interesting, how they did it was really unique and transcended normal quilt making.”



William R. Ferris

Professor of History, University of North Carolina -Chapel Hill, Past Chair, National Endowment for the Humanities.

“Well, within the American South, you have sort of epicenters of culture. You have the Gullah communities, where African language and cultural traditions like basket weaving survive today. In Harlan County, Kentucky you have a very important epicenter of music and crafts. In Appalachia, in the Mississippi Delta, you have an epicenter of Blues.

“And in Gee’s bend that epicenter focused on quilts. There’s nothing quite like the Gee’s Bend

community and the quilts that they’ve made there. For generations, well over a century, many of the women have made quilts. They are extraordinarily beautiful and eccentric with imaginary use of color and design.”



Nettie Young

Nettie Young Quilt Maker, Gee’s Bend, AL

“You want to make ‘em in blocks. Or you could make the blocks and put the blocks together with stripping in between or whatever way you wanna put ‘em together.

“If you want to sew the quilt just round and you go it round, oh round and finish the quilt.

“You study over the thing. You think over it and it come in your mind, one thing after another, one thing after another. You get it all together. You say ‘mm-hmmm, I could do that.’

“And you could do it. That’s the way it was with me. That’s the way I learned.”



Kay Poison Grubola

Kay Poison Grubola, Artist & Independent Curator, Louisville, KY.

“When I was spending time in Gee’s Bend, all I had to do

(Continued on page 11)



Gullah Tradition of Basket Weaving.



Harlan County, Kentucky, Tradition of Music and Crafts.



Mississippi Delta Tradition of the Blues.



In Gee’s Bend a Tradition of Color and Design.

The ECHS *Journal* Section

Gee's Bend: The Most Famous Quilts in America

(Continued from page 10)

was look around to see where some of the influence came from. They were really secluded. It kept a sort of purity to their images, and their materials, which are pretty unique. They recognized that it was more than just unique. And I don't think other communities for the most part, do that. And I don't know why that happened there. But I do think that there was a different sensibility, that they did recognize that what they did was beautiful."

The Discovery



Shelly Zegart

"Over the decades, Gee's bend was discovered and re-discovered. But the women never hit the big time until Arnett, a serious art dealer,

collector, and scholar of southern vernacular art, and his sons came to town. They saw these quilts as great works of art that should be on museum walls everywhere."



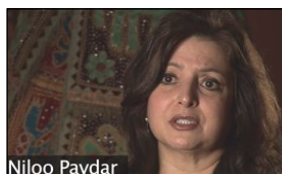
Matt Arnett

Matt Arnett, Tinwood Media; Co-Organizer, Gee Bend Quilt Projects; Atlanta, GA

"We made a very specific trip to Gee's Bend. We had been more carefully looking at quilts, and we had bought all the books that were available of American quilts. And in one of these books, we saw a photograph of a woman standing before a quilt that was on a pile of wood.

"We finally found the woman who was in the picture. And we knocked on her door. And by the time we found her, it was pretty late. We told her what we did, what we were looking for, and that we had seen this picture and we saw the quilt. We thought it was one of the most beautiful works of art we had ever seen. And did she still have it? And she said, I can't remember her exact words, but she said, 'I wish you had been here last week 'cause I just cleaned up my house and I took a lot of old quilts and burned them.' And we're like, ugh. And she's like, 'I think that might have been one of the quilts I burned up.'

"She eventually found that quilt back in the back bedroom under a mattress and she came running out with it. We just wouldn't have expected there would be so much still there. Yet at the same time, we estimate that maybe one percent of the body of work that was made in Gee's Bend in the 20th century still existed by the time we went there. My Dad and I went to Gee's Bend expecting to find genius. That's why we went there. We know there's genius. You just have to be looking for it. There was no question that we would find some kind of genius. It just so happened that genius we found was in quilt making."



Niloo Paydar

Niloo Paydar, Textile Curator, Indianapolis Museum of Art, IN

"What draws me to Gee's Bend quilts is their innovation and how these women came up with these extraordinary designs and just their imagination. They're not just copying and redoing the same pattern. They're just making it up as they go along, and I think that's what adds to their interest because they're so different and every single one is different."



Creola B. Pettway

"And a quilt would come in my mind. What I wanted to make. I could put it down on my bed and I didn't even have to have a pattern. It just, it just came right in my mind. And I said, 'I believe I can do this.' I just get me a shears and I just cut. And make any kind of quilt I want."



Shelly Zegart

"It wasn't just the quilts that dazzled the Arnetts. It was the women of Gee's Bend who captured their hearts and imagination. The Arnetts saw the importance of recording the rich history of their lives and sharing their stories through films, articles and books. But it was the Arnett's dream of seeing the quilts on the walls of museums that really drove them forward."

(Continued on page 12)

The ECHS *Journal* Section

Gee's Bend: The Most Famous Quilts in America

(Continued from page 11)

From the Clothesline to Museum Walls



Matt Arnett

“These quilts have been in smoke houses and under cars and in garages and some of them pulled out, literally, from underneath cars, where

people were using them to change oil, and in trash bins. So these things have had, most of these quilts have had a very, if they were people, you would say traumatic life. And our decision was there were far more benefits for Gee's Bend for the quilts to be up where people can see'em.”



Bernie Herman

Bernie Herman, Professor of American Studies, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

“This then leads to an exhibition that is organized with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston that takes this extraordinarily brave position of putting quilts in a major fine arts museum, not as anonymous works, not as works in the context of American abstraction or American modernism but as a distinct genre with its own aesthetics, its own culture of production, and its own culture of evaluation.”



Shelly Zegart

“In 2002 the quilts opened at major museums around the country, and it was different than any quilt exhibit viewers had ever seen. And so was their reaction. It was very

apparent that this exhibit was quite a phenomenon.”



Matt Arnett

“When the show opened at the Whitney, they installed the quilts just like paintings, same way, same spacing, same kind of wall labels. It wasn't like a craft show

downstairs where they sell mugs, t-shirts. They did like the Whitney does.

“The response, the critical response, was fantastic and it was the New York Times that named the show

‘One of the year's ten best exhibitions,' one of the ten best exhibitions in the world.”



Maxwell L. Anderson

Maxwell Anderson, Director, Indianapolis Museum of Art, IN; Former Director, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY.

“Clearly the experience of the Gee's Bend quilts was spectacular for every museum that presented them. And there were various reasons for that. One was the relative antiquity of some of the quilts in relation to what we conceive of as modernism. And I think the experience for a visitor tends to be one of amazement that an Elsworth Kelly painting might have been anticipated by 15 to 20 years in diagrammatic, coloristic terms by a quilt maker from the south.”



Matt Arnett

“When the women go to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, there's 7,000 that show up the first day, the show opens and there's a line around the building.

And when they're in the Whitney on closing weekend, there's a line around the block to get in that goes all the way to Park Avenue. And when the women go to do a book signing at the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, there's 500 people in line.”



Maxwell L. Anderson

“I thought there'd be interest in it in a kind of clinical way, formalistically, but people lining up very interestingly with abstract expressionism

or Rob Rauschenberg or Jasper Johns or Elsworth Kelly. Never occurred to me that the New York public, which people like to paint as cynical, would be completely undone by the beauty, the transcendent quality, the opulence, visually and the brazen determination to make objects that were out of kilter with traditional quilt making patterns, that it was so successful.”

(Continued on page 13)

The ECHS *Journal* Section

Gee's Bend: The Most Famous Quilts in America

(Continued from page 12)



Douglas Dawson,
Owner, Douglas Dawson
Gallery, Chicago,
IL.

“They easily penetrated the art craft barrier in museums. And it was done through excellent marketing. It was done through excellent publications. But most importantly, it was done through the ability to articulate their relationship with 20th century aesthetics. Not to belabor that point but I think that it is really, really important.”

The Debate



Matt Arnett

“When the Gee’s Bend exhibition opened, obviously there was a lot of excitement and enthusiasm in lots of areas, Art lovers, museum goers were astonished and blown away by the work, but there was also a lot of push back. Gee’s Bend has controversy. There are a lot of people who dislike the quilts.”



Karen S. Musgrave

Karen Musgrave,
Quiltmaker, Teacher,
Independent Curator,
Naperville, IL

“They don’t think they’re art. They think they’re, no, yeah, people are very passionate, usually one way or the other, about the quilts of Gee’s Bend.”



Matt Arnett

“A lot of it (the criticism) was from quilters, quilting groups, But some of it was from the public too, who look and see that the stitches aren’t fine, it’s not fine stitch work. It’s not. Seams aren’t right angle, each piece isn’t, and there might be stains, blood stains, grass stains, and dirt stains and people saying, ‘How is this art? Were these quilts made of scraps of cloth really art that belonged on the walls of a museum?’”

“Were they representative of Africa-American quilts in the mainstream? Many African- American quilt makers thought not and were concerned about all African American quilts being pigeon holed with the Gee’s Bend phenomenon. But no matter how you feel about them, you can’t deny their recognition and popularity.”



Shelly Zegart



Bernie Herman

question? And this is where some debate has occurred.”

“Do the quilts of Gee’s Bend deserve the level of recognition they have received? Absolutely. How has that recognition been achieved is a different



Matt Arnett

“The museums would say that the Gee’s Bend quilts are folk art, they’re craft, they’re women’s domestic work. And the Museum of Fine Art, wherever it is, ‘We don’t show that. We show painting and sculpture, and things that are part of a dialogue, part of an art historical dialogue. We show artists who studied art, who went to school.’”



Shelly Zegart

“In many cases the quilts are not considered art, nor are the makers considered artists.”



Bernie Herman

“When it comes to the quilts of Gees Bend, people often talk about those quilts as being made by self-taught artists.”



Matt Arnett

“Wrong, they went to the greatest art schools that were available to them in rural America.”

(Continued on page 14)

The ECHS *Journal* Section

Gee's Bend: The Most Famous Quilts in America

(Continued from page 13)



"In which generations are trained through, really, a kind of structured curriculum, although we would never think of it this way."



"They learned from other quilt makers who learned from other quilt makers. It's like a, it's six generations of educators teaching them this amazing art."



"They are taught design. They are taught making. There are basically critiques and charettes. All of this takes place within Gee's

Bend. (*Charette is often used to describe the final, intense work effort expended by art and architecture students to meet a project deadline.*)

After the Exhibitions



"Well the impact has been that, first of all, their quilts are worth a lot more. It's similar to what happened with Eskimo art, when it became very much en vogue. And with the Taxco Silver in Mexico when William Spratling popularized that. It becomes a highly visible collectible part of the community. And people in the community know that their quilts have great value, far more than they ever thought when they simply made them for friends and family on winter nights. Now they have people coming, like Bill Arnette, who will buy everything in the house. And will pay prices they never dreamed of. So, they have reevaluated the value of their quilts. And there is a heightened sense of this community as a national treasure."



Essie Bendolph Pettway, Quilter, Gee's Bend.

"It's sort of like part of our cultural legacy. And it's important that that legacy be respected and protected in the future. It gives a knowledge of the community, of where I came from and where I grew up. And what my fore parents did when they came out of the field."



"There's a practice in Gee's Bend of the seasonal display of quilts in the season of airing out in which people intentionally went on walks to

look at quilts and this culture of display. And so it makes you really question what is the role of the museum? And how big is the museum? And what happens when a lane of hedge rows and fences draped with quilts becomes a gallery."



"So if you listen to Bernie, Gee's Bend's quilts have always been on display, have always been in the spotlight in one kind of gallery or another. The quilts of Gee's Bend did

more than answer the critics' question about their right to the museum spotlight.

"But this is not all of the story. Over the years there have been those who felt there was some exploitation of the women by the Arnetts. Now, most people agree that without the passion and marketing of the Arnetts the quilts of Gee's Bend would never have reached the mass audiences and critical acclaim that they received in the art world."

(Continued on page 15)

The ECHS *Journal* Section

Gee's Bend: The Most Famous Quilts in America

(Continued from page 14)



Matt Arnett

“This romantic notion that it’s better to leave all this stuff where it was made and where it was created and not to interrupt the creative cycle and all of

that, that’s about the other people, not about the people who actually benefit from being discovered. Is it better to have let the Beatles play in underground clubs in Liverpool or is it better to say, ‘Wait, these guys are good.’ It’s better for everybody.”



Shelly Zegart

“Today, many of the Gee’s Bend women have become quite successful and are making good money, hiring accountants, fixing their houses, selling their designs to Pottery Barn, and other main line companies.

“There are also a handful of these women who have achieved the highest artistic recognition, and are selling prints of their work for \$2,500 to \$5,000 apiece. And selling quilts for as much as \$25, 000. Now that’s a far cry from selling out the back door for grocery money.”



Matt Arnett

“Gee’s Bend women have always parted from their quilts. They always parted with them. The only difference now is they’re getting significant money if they

want to part with them that way. But they’ve always made them to give as gifts to use until they wore out and then it’s gone. They’ve always flowed; it’s always been a cycle. Maybe the best quilt that’s ever made hasn’t been made in Gee’s Bend yet.”



Essie Bendolph Pettway

**Essie Bendolph,
Quiltmaker, Gee’s
Bend, AL**

“Sometimes when I get off work, I’ll come home sit down and make a quilt.

Either just sit down and think about how I wanted to design one. But I normally end up with a different design that I have in mind, like right now. I don’t know what I got in mind to do with this but it gonna turn out to be a pretty nice quilt when I finish.”

“I love my quilts when I make them. They be beautiful to me. I don’t know about to anybody else, but to me, and then when I quit’em. I get another breath of them. ”



Mary Lee Bendolph

**Mary Lee Bendolph,
Quiltmaker, Gee’s
Bend, AL.**

“She’ll come ask, say ‘Mama, is this the way it’s supposed to be?’ I say, ‘Yeh, that the way it supposed to go, just like that.’ I didn’t know too much about the way it supposed to go myself. I just tell her, ‘Yeah.’”



Essie Bendolph Pettway

“It’s a good thing to think I did some work that somebody thought it was good enough to put on a wall. They were just something I just were doing to get these clothes up and out the

house, to get rid of some of the stuff the children wasn’t wearing anymore and keep it from laying around. And I didn’t want to burn it up or throw it away. And it wasn’t good eGeenough to give to anybody to wear. So I just thought it was good enough to put it in a quilt. And it could go on a bed and keep somebody warm and comfortable.”

ECHOES
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