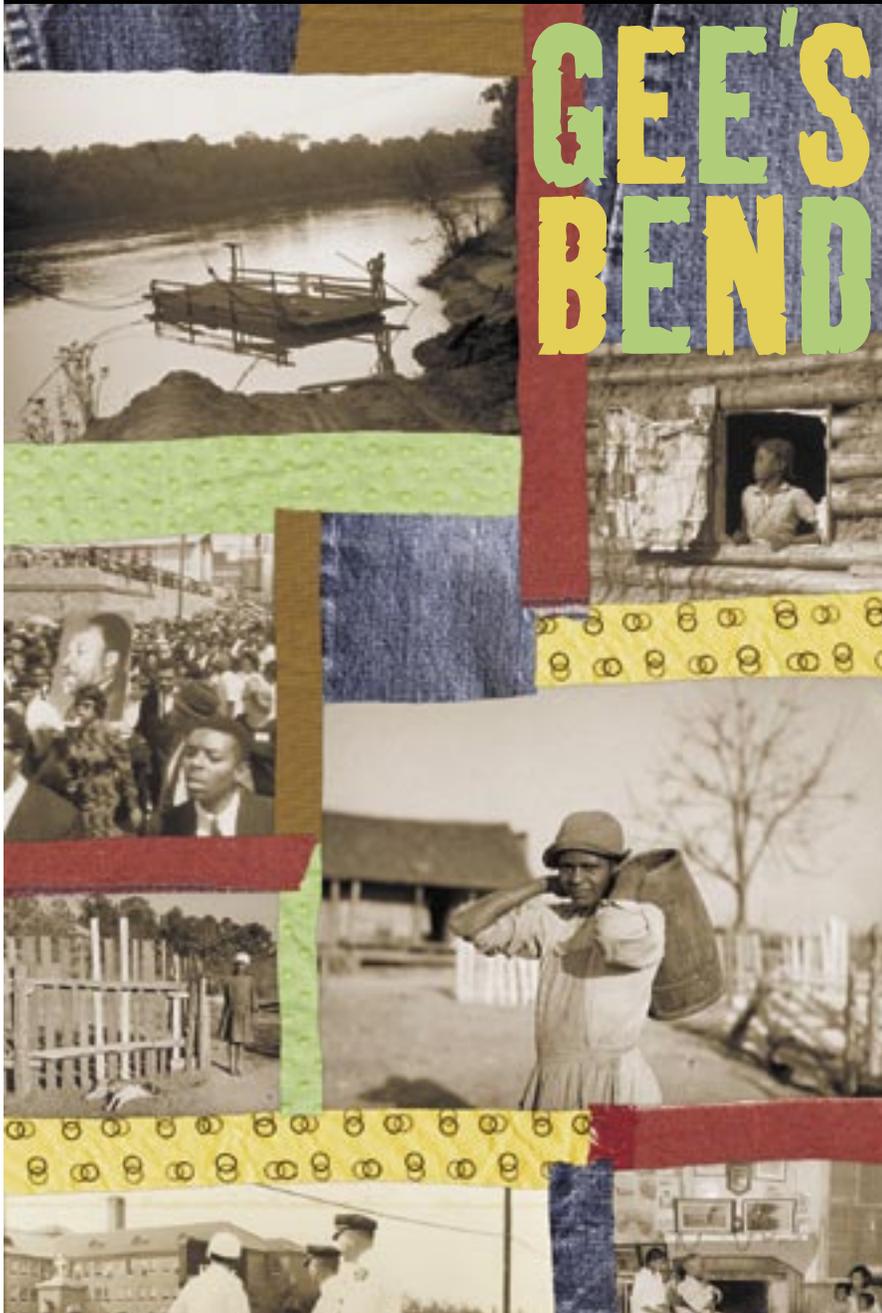


Inside OUT

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Kent Thompson, Artistic Director

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By Elizabeth Gregory Wilder
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Synopsis

G*ee's Bend* is about the life of Sadie Pettway in Gee's Bend, Alabama. The three-part play offers glimpses of her family life in 1939, 1965 and 2002.

Sadie is baptized in the Alabama River at age 15 in 1939. Her mother Alice teaches her to quilt and tells her to stay away from 25-year-old Macon Pettway, about whom Sadie's sister Nella teases her. Macon has bought some land from the government and promises Sadie he'll build her a house when they're married.

In 1965 Martin Luther King, Jr., is coming to Gee's Bend and Sadie convinces her ailing husband Macon to let her go hear him speak, and her sister Nella joins her. Sadie is inspired by King's words and actions, although Nella is wary. Macon thinks Sadie's causing trouble when she decides to march for civil rights, but she stands her ground despite the beatings she receives from her husband and the police.

By 2002 Nella's mental health is waning and Sadie's adult daughter Asia is considering selling the land she inherited when her father died.

Some of Sadie's quilts are featured in the museum exhibit *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*.

Elyzabeth Gregory Wilder's Gee's Bend

Elyzabeth Gregory Wilder's other plays include *The First Day of Hunting Season*, *Fresh Kills*, *Jubilee*, *Tales of an Adolescent Fruit Fly* and *The Theory of Relativity*; she also wrote for the television series "Love Monkey." Her plays have been produced in New York and London. The Alabama Shakespeare Festival's Southern Writers Project commissioned Wilder, who is from Mobile, Alabama, to write a new play about Gee's Bend. The play had its first reading at the 2006 Southern Writers Project Festival of New Plays. Gee's Bend quiltmaker Mary Lee Bendolph told Wilder simply, "Just write it honest."¹ A sold-out production by the Alabama Shakespeare Festival then toured the state in early 2007, performing at Auburn University and in Birmingham, Camden, Fairhope, Gee's Bend, Marion and Selma.

A Brief History of Gee's Bend

The community of Gee's Bend, Alabama, is located in Wilcox County and is surrounded on three sides by a dramatic U-turn in the Alabama River. The approximately 700 residents are almost all descendents of the slaves of the original Gee's Bend plantation. This geographic isolation and unusual stability of community created a unique enclave for the women's art community: quilting.

Having lost the Red Creek War to General Andrew Jackson's troops in 1814, the Creek Indians were forced to leave the area and a white man named Joseph Gee (the community's namesake) soon purchased the land. In 1845, debts caused his descendants to forfeit the property and all of his 101 slaves to a relative, Mark H. Pettway, then living in Halifax County, North Carolina.

Pettway moved to Gee's Bend in the winter of 1845, and his approximately one hundred slaves were compelled to walk the entire distance from North Carolina. Pettway declared that a young slave named Saul Johnson was too young to survive the journey and should be left behind, but the boy's mother "stole him. . . . Sewed him up in a bed ticking. That's how she slipped him on the train and got him here," revealed Saul Johnson's grandson Clint Pettway.² The slaves from North Carolina were merged with those already in Gee's

Bend, and eventually all took the name of their new owner Pettway. Loretta Pettway Bennett recently explained: "Because so many people in Gee's Bend have the name Pettway, people get middle names that let others know who their fathers are, so nobody marries a close cousin by mistake. My father and his father carry the middle initial O. for Ottoway, a name that goes back to an original Pettway slave called Ottoway."³

Following the Civil War, these slaves received nominal freedom, but most continued to live in Gee's Bend and work the surrounding land as tenant farmers. In 1890 they were subjected to a new landowner, Adrian Van de Graaff of Tuscaloosa, whose intention (never realized) was to replace the former slaves with white farmers.

In the 1920s, the price of cotton dropped from ninety cents a pound to a nickel. The black sharecroppers of Gee's Bend had been advanced money by the Camden merchant E. O. Rentz to pay their rent to their Van de Graaff landlords; they expected to repay Rentz when the cotton price rose. However, Rentz died in 1932 and his widow foreclosed on these informal loans by sending agents into Gee's Bend to take away any possession, farming equipment or livestock that was not nailed down. The Gee's Benders survived that winter by hunting and gathering.

The 1930s brought Gee's Bend to national attention. In 1934 Reverend Renwick Kennedy, a white pastor in nearby Camden, wrote in *Christian Century*: "Gee's Bend is an Alabama Africa. There is no more concentrated and racially exclusive Negro population in any rural community in the South than in Gee's Bend."⁴

President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal program, the Resettlement Administration (later the Farm Administration), identified Wilcox County as the poorest county in America and chose the Gee's Bend community as their poster child. Nearly 10,000 acres of land were purchased by the government and sold to the former sharecroppers. The government also built 95 new homes, called "Roosevelt" homes, and offered the residents low-interest mortgages, which most soon paid off in full. A series of before-and-after photographs by the Resettlement Administration's Arthur Rothstein revealed Gee's Bend to the nation.

Electricity reached Gee's Bend in the mid-1960s; indoor plumbing and telephone lines followed in the 1970s. However, the damming of the Alabama River in 1968 drowned the Bend's best lowland cotton farming.

Martin Luther King, Jr., preached in Gee's Bend in March 1965 and many women (men usually stayed home to work the fields) who joined his marches and demanded their right to vote ended up in Camden jail for their efforts. At this time, the Alabama River ferry service, which connected Gee's Bend to the county seat in Camden and the world, was discontinued. It was not resumed until 2006.

Also in the 1960s, the quilts of Gee's Bend caught the attention of outsiders. The Episcopal priest Father Francis X. Walter purchased several quilts to be sold at auction in New York City for the financial benefit of the women of Gee's Bend. The founding of the Freedom Quilting Bee in the Gee's Bend neighborhood of Rehoboth occurred in 1966. The Bee originally created standardized quilts for national department store chains, as well as smaller craft items such as aprons and potholders. From 1972 through the mid-1980s, the Freedom Quilting Bee produced more than 100,000 corduroy pillow covers sold through the Sears Roebuck catalog.

On September 8, 2002, Houston's Museum of Fine Arts premiered an exhibit *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*. This small Alabama community and its quilts had again come to the nation's attention.

Quilting in Gee's Bend

“Ought not two quilts ever be the same. You might use exactly the same material, but you would do it different. A lot of people make quilts just for your bed for to keep you warm. But a quilt is more. It represents safekeeping, it represents beauty, and you could say it represents family history.”

—Mensie Lee Pettway, Gee's Bend quiltmaker⁵

The quilting tradition in Gee's Bend goes back several generations. A girl's first quilt was something of a coming-of-age ritual inducting her into womanhood. Quiltmaking skills and ideas were passed from mother to daughter, aunt to niece, mother-in-law to daughter-in-law.

Leola Pettway was proud that her two daughters Joanna and Plummer T. both took up quilting: “All my daughters could quilt, every one of them. I learned them all how.”⁶

Lucy P. Witherspoon revealed: “Me and my sister Gloria, we learned quilting from my mama, Linda Pettway. We do it wrong she hit us with her hand, sometimes with a belt. She kept us straight.”⁷

Pattie L. Irby reminisced about quilting with her family: “I liked doing the things my parents did, and it was a time when we could talk about all sorts of things: family, future, past, or present. My grandmother taught me to use a needle and thimble. To me, quilting means a bonding between family and friends and community, and sometimes competing to see who will have the prettiest stitches in the end. It's the joy of seeing artwork being finished.”⁸

Art historian William Arnett, who developed a special interest in the quilts and quiltmakers of Gee's Bend and who was instrumental in bringing their work to the attention of the art world, explained: “The number of quilts required of a woman can be high: on the coldest nights as many as six or seven quilts might be layered on a bed. A woman with ten or more children (not uncommon), sleeping three or four to a bed (also not uncommon), had to be prolific.”⁹ In fact, Loretta Pettway didn't take up quilting until after

her marriage. When she needed quilts for her growing family, no one would give her any, so she learned to make her own.

Traditionally, piecing the top of a quilt was done by an individual, usually in spring or summer; in the winter, groups of women would gather to create the cotton stuffing and to quilt the top to the lining. Joanna Pettway remembers the seasons of quilting: “This time of year the cotton opens up. We pick cotton and go to quilting. After you finish with the cotton, you go back to quilting. All the time, something to do all the time.”¹⁰

In the summer, old quilts were often burned to create lots of smoke to drive off the swampy riverbank's many mosquitoes.

“Quilts are rituals of life. Along with shelter, the quilt safeguards the human body during its greatest vulnerability, sleep. The complex ritual of the quilt was integral to rural and frontier American survival.”

—William Arnett and Paul Arnett in
*The Quilts of Gee's Bend*¹¹

Quilting Materials

The earliest surviving quilts from Gee's Bend, from the 1920s and 1930s, were made from old work clothes and found material. Sometimes called "britches quilts" or "ugly quilts" by their makers, work clothes quilts were pieced from the only materials available to the women. The quiltmakers of Gee's Bend made their quilts out of whatever scraps they could find: old clothes were ripped up, other materials were recycled from quilts past their best days. Even scraps of cloth found in the street could be cleaned up and incorporated into the quilts. The knees of jeans were worn out from cotton picking, but the backs of jeans became quilts, along with shirt sleeves and dress tails. Annie Mae Young declared of her quilts: "My daddy plowed the fields in those overalls, and I chopped cotton in that dress."¹² Estelle Witherspoon remembered: "We put everything in 'em – old dresses, old shirrtails, and old everything. We didn't care what color they were."¹³ Polly Bennett revealed, "I didn't care how they looked, I just put them together using old clothes mostly, and sometimes go down to Linden and get scraps they were throwing away in the clothes factory. The man over at the factory down there let folks go through the throwaway stuff. The dump truck going to come get it anyway."¹⁴

In the 1960s the Freedom Quilting Bee became a source of quilting material as unused scraps of fabric were given away or sold at low prices to the community women. The Sears Roebuck contract for corduroy pillow covers created a new genre of quilt in Gee's Bend as the leftover strips of fabric made their way into the quilts the women made at home. Irene Williams crafted many quilts using fabric printed with the word "Vote" during the Civil Rights era. According to William Arnett: "Fabric, especially in communities such as Gee's Bend, tells us when, almost to the year, a quilt was made, and imparts much information about conditions – for the quiltmaker and community – under which it came into being."¹⁵

Even after other materials became available to the quiltmakers of Gee's Bend, many women preferred to use old work clothes. Loretta P. Bennett, making quilts in the early 21st century, collects most of her quilting material from old clothes and thrift stores. Mary Lee Bendolph said: "I like to work with old clothes because it's got love in it. . . . Old clothes carry something with them. You can feel the presence of the person who used to wear them. It has a spirit in them."¹⁶

Sometimes quilts are made as memorials: Missouri Pettway declared after her husband Nathaniel's death: "I going to take his work clothes, shape them into a quilt to remember him, and cover up under it for love."¹⁷

Her daughter Arlonzia later did the same after her own husband's death.

Quilt Ideas and Inspiration

The women of Gee's Bend found ideas and inspiration for their quilts in their environment, in their imagination, and in the previous quilting of their families and community. Mary Lee Bendolph explained: "Most of my ideas come from looking at things. Quilts is in everything. ...I see the barn, and I get an idea to make a quilt. I can walk outside and look around in the yard and see ideas all around the front and the back of my house. Then, sitting down looking at a quilt, I get another idea from the quilt I already made."¹⁸ "I see other people's quilts like when the springs of the year come. The women would hang their quilts out, and we would just go from house to house looking at people's quilts. ...We didn't have no museum in Gee's Bend, but we would go from house to house looking at quilts and getting ideas about how I would like to lay mine out."¹⁹

Working in the fields and walking to and from work, Lucy T. "Lunky" Pettway pocketed a pencil and paper to record ideas for quilts.²⁰ A 2002 interview revealed her continuing compulsion to quilt: "I love to quilt. I love to piece on them. I love to wash them. I love to look at pretty quilts. I got to make me another one."²¹

Besides their environment, several quiltmakers take their ideas from their dreams and hopes. Loretta Pettway explained: "My husband, Walter, he worked at Henry Brick and he brought home two picture boards of bricks. I liked them and tried to copy them. I always did like a 'Bricklayer' [design]. It made me think about what I wanted. Always did want a brick house."²² Nancy Pettway revealed: "I lay down in my bed to sleep at night, and I might dream of a design I want to do."²³

Until the Freedom Quilting Bee in the 1960s, quilting patterns were mostly a foreign concept in Gee's Bend. Mensie Lee Pettway said of her mother America Irby: "Dresses, shirts, blouses, pants for mens – she made it all without a pattern. Didn't use patterns for quilts, neither. None of this family have used patterns. We got a tradition of old peoples' ways. They would call it 'string quilts'; everybody made their own design."²⁴

Similarly, Lola Saulsberry reminisced about her mother Deborah Pettway Young: "She made a lot of quilts, and she made dresses. And she did it without patterns. If she saw a dress somebody had on, on the TV, she could make it. The same was true of her quilting. I remember something she saw on TV, she made it into a quilt. I never dreamed that people would pay attention to her and [my sister] Arcola's quilts. They were just making them to keep warm."²⁵

Creola Pettway insisted: "My mother had the quilt in her head. She didn't use no pattern. She used her brains!"²⁶ Some quiltmakers worked entirely from the ideas in their head, while others worked from a found or a self-created inspiration. Loretta P. Bennett drew patterns out and colored them with crayon to design her own pattern. The 2002 museum exhibit of Gee's Bend quilts inspired Louisiana P. Bendolph to renew the quilting tradition; she sometimes works from her granddaughters' computer aided designs.

Quilts as African-American Art

“When I was a child growing up in Greenville, South Carolina, and Grandmomma could not afford a blanket, she didn’t complain, and we didn’t freeze. Instead, she took pieces of old cloth – patches – wool, silk, gabardine, croker sack – only patches, barely good enough to wipe your shoes off with. But they didn’t stay that way for long. With sturdy hands and a strong cord, she sewed them together in a quilt, a thing of beauty and power and culture.”

—Jesse Jackson at the Democratic National Convention in Atlanta in 1988²⁷

While unique in style, the quilts of Gee’s Bend did grow out of a larger tradition of African American art. In *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African American Quilts*, author Maude Southwell Wahlman posits that many elements of African American art were imported directly from Africa in traditions that slaves in America kept alive and passed down to their children. In Africa, textile production was generally undertaken by males; however, American slave-owners conformed to European divisions of labor and employed slave women for the making and handling of cloth.

Dr. Gladys Marie Fry’s book *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Ante-Bellum South* seeks to recover from lost history the many skilled slaves employed as seamstresses throughout the American South. Dr. Fry proclaims: “Slave women channeled their despair into patterns of which they could be proud, in which they found fulfillment and a sense of self-worth. ...Although slavery denied these women their physical freedom, it did not diminish their creative talent and artistic genius.”²⁸

Quilting continued in the African American community long after slavery. In her examination of Gee’s Bend “britches” quilts, Joanna Cubbs explained: “The use of found cloth in the making of work-clothes quilts belongs to a much larger tradition of salvage within African American

cultural history. In part, this tradition was a response to dire social and economic circumstances in which recycling became a primary means of survival.”²⁹

Of the quilts of Gee’s Bend as a whole, she proclaimed that they reveal “a view of creativity which is rooted in the improvisational practices of African American expressive culture and that favors visual drama over laborious technique, surprise over painstaking repetition, and originality over predictability.”³⁰

In *A Communion of the Spirits: African-American Quilters, Preservers, and Their Stories*, author and photodocumentarian Roland L. Freeman presents African American quilts and quiltmakers from across the United States. In fact, his photograph of Gee’s Bend quiltmaker Annie Mae Young with two of her quilts prompted William Arnett’s search for Mrs. Young and his discovery of the Gee’s Bend quilting tradition as a whole. Arnett explained: “Qualities such as multiple patterning and broken patterns, high-effect color contrasts, dissonant juxtapositions of prints or motifs, asymmetry, syncopation, irregular- or random-looking borders, and overall improvisation predominate in the black tradition,”³¹ and he assessed that “the quilts of Gee’s Bend communicate a distinctively African American panoply of preferences for asymmetry, strong contrast, affective color changes, syncopation, pattern breaks and an improvisational flair.”³²

Women's Lives in Gee's Bend

The women of Gee's Bend have long been hard workers. From childhood they worked in the fields alongside their fathers and brothers (later their husbands); they often helped raise younger siblings before having their own children. To accommodate cooking while farming, quiltmaker Annie E. Pettway would set up a pot of peas to cook at one end of the field in the morning and stir it each time she came around so supper would be ready by the end of the work day.

Cold winter nights made quilting as necessary as cooking. Women also used to serve as the community's only nurses; Mary Lee Bendolph describes her mother Aolar Mosely: "She was good at healing peoples. She was a lovely, caring person. She go down in the woods and pick some stuff – I missed out on that part, can't do none of that – and mix it up and give it to us, make us well. Only time we go to the doctor was with toothache – she couldn't pull teeth – or if something was broke."³³

Gee's Bend quiltmaker Irene Williams married at age seventeen; in 2002 she proclaimed: "My husband, Cornelius Williams, was the best man that ever walk on God's ground."³⁴ However, many Gee's Bend women were not so fortunate in their marriages. Loretta Pettway revealed: "I had an abusive husband. He was a drinker, he was a gambler, he was a smoker. He had a lot of habits. I didn't have no habits. Couldn't afford them. My husband was real jealous, beat me up if he see me talking to a man."³⁵

"Papa used to drink a lot, so she carried the family," Bettie Bendolph Seltzer said of her mother Annie Bendolph.³⁶ After her husband Lucious' death, Annie Mae Young said: "We didn't get along so good anyway. He treated me bad with other women."³⁷

Allie Pettway obeyed her husband: "I wanted to go up to Estelle Witherspoon, she had the quilting bee up in Rehoboth. My husband was trying to get under Social Security, and they didn't let me work much up there 'cause they say I couldn't work and he get the money from the government. Estelle still try to keep me and pay me undercover, but John say, 'No, it's best you don't go up there,' so I didn't."³⁸

Very few women were like Arlonzia Pettway's mother Missouri Pettway: "A lot of time, when you got married

you got to obey your husband, but my mama didn't do that, she just stand up to him when he was wrong."³⁹

The women of Gee's Bend often had many children and started having them very early in life. Mary Lee Bendolph, who had her first child soon after finishing sixth grade, admitted: "I was a fast breeder."⁴⁰ She said of her husband: "Rubin was the boss. He wanted babies, and I just had them. I didn't have no say-so, and I didn't know what to do to keep from having them. That's just the way life was back then. I asked him for me not to have the babies too close, but he wouldn't listen to me. He wasn't the one having them, but I had to obey."⁴¹

Tinnie Dell Pettway, niece of quiltmaker Mary Elizabeth Kennedy, explained: "But the women didn't get to plan the children. The man was in charge – no planned parenthood. I can tell you that if the woman was in charge you wouldn't find no family with twenty or thirty children. If a man's wife didn't have children at least every two years, he was the joke of the community. He wasn't no good. It was a macho time. They'd have taken a sperm count, but back then they didn't know nothing about sperm."⁴²

Daniel Nicholson described his wife's day care system: "Addie spread the quilts out, lay them children on the quilts while we worked the field. We come take a break to eat, children be right as we left them. Come back after we finish working, they right there. We had this old hound dog stay and guard the children, safe as you want them to be."⁴³

Nell Hall Williams's report concurred: "When you born, you went to the fields. You growed up in the fields. Soon as your mama, she'd just wrap the baby in a old quilt and make the wooden box, put the baby in. Sometimes you have a dog you put to watch the babies. He wouldn't be going to leave – somebody come up and you at the other end of the field, that dog bark to let you know."⁴⁴ Tinnie Dell Pettway revealed: "It was customary to give a woman six weeks after childbirth, if she didn't have complications, to get back to the field. [. . .] It didn't help to have a baby in the winter because you going to be off anyway."⁴⁵

Spiritual Life

“When I make a quilt, I be praying and asking the Lord to help me do the work I do.”

—Mary Lee Bendolph, Gee’s Bend quiltmaker⁴⁶

Spiritual life has historically been very important to the residents of Gee’s Bend. The community boasts several churches, including four of the Southern Baptist denomination: Friendship Baptist Church, Ye Shall Know the Truth Baptist Church, Pleasant Grove Missionary Baptist Church (Gee’s Bend’s largest congregation) and Oak Grove Baptist Church. Carolyn Mazloomi explained: “The political history of African Americans has also been closely tied to religion. From Emancipation to the mid-20th century, churches were the only institutions that were our very own, places where African Americans could meet freely and exercise leadership. [. . .] Over time our churches increasingly became political spaces. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s was born in churches.”⁴⁷

Religious visions and a conversion experience were once required of candidates for church membership, and Gee’s Bend residents would often go to the woods or the swamp to talk to God and seek such a vision or understanding.

Indiana Bendolph Pettway explained: “You had to go out in the woods and pray. Pray hard, too. [. . .] Sometimes I walk down in the swamp. Sometimes I walk around and get me a praying ground out there back of the house in the woods. Sometimes it be nighttime. I just come outdoors and sit on the hill and pray. That’s where I got the religion.”⁴⁸

Bernard L. Herman explained: “Gee’s Bend quiltmakers experience spiritual ‘praise space’ while they create. Praise spaces can be both individual and social. Working alone, a quiltmaker may ‘moan’ or sing, reflecting on her relationship with God. Working in groups, quiltmakers also sing hymns and testify, bearing witness for each other as their needles pierce cloth.”⁴⁹

Singing is very important to the residents of Gee’s Bend, and the community boasts several gospel groups. Four quiltmakers comprise the White Rose Quartet: Georgianna Pettway, Arlonzia Pettway, Creola Pettway, Leola Pettway. Mary Lee Bendolph described her neighbor Sweet T. Pettway: “She be talking about the Lord, what he done for her, how he answered her prayers. She’ll sing, she’ll sing on her porch, sing on my porch with me. Mostly she don’t sing the song but do the moaning. Lots of time I hear her over there just a-moaning.”⁵⁰

Quiltmaker Loretta Pettway expressed her thanks to God: “I used to work all day and when night come I was sick all night. I couldn’t sleep and didn’t have no appetite to eat, but I can thank the Lord now and say that he has reached way down and picked me up, made my life better. I have food, money, a roof over my head, my health and strength. If I leave today, he have fulfilled the dreams I ask him for down through the years. And my last days will be my best days.”⁵¹

*“When I sit down to quilt, I say, ‘Lord, be with me.’
When I finish a quilt, I say, ‘Thank you, Jesus, for
enabling me to get this quilt out.’”*

—Leola Pettway, Gee’s Bend quiltmaker⁵²

Mrs. Rentz's Repossession in 1932

The Great Depression hit hard in the community of Gee's Bend. The residents were sharecropping at that time and trying to make ends meet as purely subsistence farmers. Quiltmaker Mensie Lee Pettway remembered: "The man that owned the land would advance them everything they need and the crop would pay against it. If there is something left over, you got that. Some of the years, you didn't make enough to pay out. You didn't get no money for clothes or shoes or stuff. They would call it 'a bad crop year.' They'd tell you, 'If you had a-made one more bale, you'd a-got out.' But you just had to take what they said and go on."⁵³ Ella Mae Irby, another quiltmaker, explained: "Time was hard. They called it 'advancing' back in those days. The Man wouldn't give you nothing but meat and meal, wouldn't give you no flour, sugar, or nothing else – you had to hustle for extra stuff. There was a store at White plantation for a while; you could get mule feed, flour, and sugar. They advance you stuff, and then when payday come you got to pay it down and work it off, and hire your children out to work for the store man."⁵⁴

In order to pay their rent to the Van de Graaff family who owned their land, many Gee's Bend residents took advances from the Camden merchant E. O. Rentz. Nathan Pettway, son of quiltmaker Martha Jane Pettway, recalled: "So, when Mr. Rentz died, his wife just say, 'I want it all back now.' And she sent them men over here, white ones, black ones, all kinds. Come over here with wagons, 'cross the ferry. We knowed they was coming. Some folks got some of their stuff out of the way where they couldn't find it. Some folks kilt the hogs before they could get them. Rentz men pull the wagon up to the barn, load up everything, and take it back to Camden. They take everything there was. They didn't take nothing from the house, but

they take everything there was outside."⁵⁵

Arlonzia Pettway remembers her mother Missouri Pettway when Rentz's agents went for the hen house: "My mama picked up a long hoe and she told me, 'I'm a good Christian, but I'll chop his damn brains out.' And the man got in his wagon and skid down the hill."⁵⁶ Quiltmaker Lutisha Pettway explained: "I remember when [Rentz's] agents come to take away everything we have. One of Papa's pigs go up under the barn and wouldn't come out for nothing. They didn't take us's chickens. Us could take the eggs to the store, trade for food. Nickel worth of cornmeal last you a week at that time. Had to. Little bitty piece of meat the size of your hand cost fifty cents. We didn't know nothing about candy."⁵⁷

Nathan Pettway futher explained: "When she sent those men, Van de Graaff didn't do nothing to protect us; but when Mrs. Rentz did that, he sued her and got all the money from her." Without their crops or livestock, they were left to survive the winter of 1932 by hunting and gathering wild berries.

Roosevelt Houses and Land Ownership

During the Great Depression, most Gee's Bend residents were living in makeshift homes made of rough wooden planks. Some families stuffed mud between the planks to block out the wind; many used newspapers or magazine pages as wallpaper and insulation.

Daniel Nicholson revealed: "Used to have old rough lumber houses on that land. You could look through the floor and count how many chickens you have, if they was roosting under the house."⁵⁸

Quiltmaker Mary Lee Bendolph has a similar memory: "You could see the chickens and things, like up under the house. I was young. I see my mama spread the quilts over the floor to keep the air from coming in there."⁵⁹ Nancy Pettway revealed another use for quilts: "They patched the walls with quilts when they couldn't find no wallpaper or old magazines. They would just tack them up to keep the wind out. Of course, when summertime come, they would take them down to let the air come in."⁶⁰

Mary Lee Bendolph described the wallpapering process: "The old house had some of those long poles, and mud was stuck in between the logs, and there were planks that weren't so close together. We had paper plastered up in the house to help keep the wind out and also to help decorate the house. My mama, Aolar, and my oldest sister, Lillie Mae, did the papering. They would make some starch. They would heat the water in there with the flour they had made up, and then they let it cool. Then they put it on the paper and then lay it up on the wall. When they get it up on the wall, they get a rag and wipe across it so it won't have no lumps in it. Then you could see how pretty it is."⁶¹

Nell Hall Williams explained: "The house wasn't no good. When it get cold, I had to get boards and old tin and nails to cover up all the holes. We get old newspaper and magazines, and every Christmas we cover up all the walls. That was our decoration and it keep the cold out. Children lay up in the bed and read them things, and find words and spell words. Couldn't buy no toys; ain't had no money to buy toys with. Them newspaper pictures was the entertainment. Couldn't do no better."⁶²

Patty Irby recalled: "Our life was tough; we had to use wood-burning stoves, kerosene lamps to see by; we got electricity in the mid-60s. We used magazines and newspaper pasted to the walls for wallpaper. That was, you could say, our TV; we'd lay down in the bed and look up and see that magazine and fantasize about what life could be like."⁶³

As part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs in Gee's Bend in the late 1930s, the government built ninety-five houses and provided low-interest mortgages to the residents; soon many Gee's Benders owned their own homes. These houses were often called project homes, or Roosevelt homes. "Intended to replace the older log houses that had lean-to additions and separate kitchens, the new houses offered a federal version of 'improved' accommodations," Bernard L. Herman explained in *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt*. "The new houses, based on stripped-down Cape Cod-style cottages and erected by Gee's Bend builders, incorporated a front parlor and back kitchen with the parents' room to one side and a pair of children's rooms (one for boys and one for girls) to the other side."⁶⁴ Mary Lee Bendolph recalled: "We moved into our Roosevelt house in 1940. That felt good. We had to walk up the porch on planks – they had the porch there but not the steps. We moved in before they put the steps there. Tom O. [Pettway] put the locks on the door. I don't remember locks on the old house. Just close the door. Nobody ever broke in to no one's house before, as far as I can remember."⁶⁵ She also revealed: "When I first married and I locked up the doors, my husband say, 'We don't have to lock up things here.' We left the key in the truck all the time. Ain't nobody bothered it, year after year."⁶⁶

Interestingly, the most lasting effect of Roosevelt's New Deal programs in Gee's Bend involved the project houses. During the Civil Rights movement, many black Southerners were evicted from their rented land by white landlords as punishment for their participation in marches and voter registrations, but most Gee's Bend residents were protected from such a threat because they owned their homes and their land.

William and Paul Arnett explained: “Traditional African American ways of life in the Deep South have steadily declined since World War II and the dismantling of Jim Crow laws. With black people no longer bound to the land, urban migrations dissolved the rural communities.”⁶⁷ However, the Bend’s residents’ ownership of their land and their homes effected a stability of community: most of these Roosevelt homes are still inhabited by the same families who bought them in the 1930s. This continuity of community nurtured the Gee’s Bend families’ artistic lineage and allowed their quilting to develop generation after generation.

It is impossible to predict how long the quilting tradition will last in Gee’s Bend. Land ownership has prolonged many families’ residency, but some land has been sold. Several of the community’s young people have migrated, and many of its current residents are elderly widows.

William and Paul Arnett revealed: “The most beautiful area, however, is still in the hands of its longtime owners – Pettways, Moselys, Bendolphs, and others. They don’t want to sell it. They worked those fields as young people, sloshed around in the swamps, and bonded with that land as [if] with a childhood friend. They will keep it, they will enjoy the satisfaction of land ownership, and they will die with it. But their heirs, who now live in Mobile, Bridgeport, Brooklyn, Detroit, and beyond, will inquire about the price per acre the first day they own it. [. . .The land] soon will become the property of the first black owners’ great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren, who will command a fair price for their inheritance.”⁶⁸

Schooling in Gee’s Bend

As part of the New Deal projects in Gee’s Bend, a new school opened in 1938. The school initially had more than two hundred students – over one hundred of these were in the first grade – although their ages ranged from six to 22.⁶⁹ Schooling in Gee’s Bend was historically limited to the demands of farming and family life. Students attended school only between planting and harvest or on rainy days when field work was impossible. Quilting maker Lola Pettway said: “I stayed in the field more than I did at school. We stayed in the field from March until the last of June. Then we go back to pick in August. And gather the crop in December – millet, corn, potatoes.”⁷⁰ Loretta Pettway’s experience was similar: “I get to go to school a little bit, in October and November and December. Then we get ready to knock cotton stalks and break up the land for start the farming over.”⁷¹

Female students quit school entirely with their first pregnancy.

Mary Lee Bendolph explained: “One day, I got ready to go to school and Mama wouldn’t let me go. I ask her why I couldn’t go. She say, ‘You don’t want to go.’ I kept asking her why I don’t go. She say, ‘You big.’ That

meant I was with a baby. I cried and prayed all day for the Lord to take it away from me, but he didn’t.”⁷² She had completed only sixth grade. “I couldn’t go to school no more. I didn’t know the teachers had told her to keep me at home. They didn’t want me to influence the other kids.”⁷³

Lucy T. Pettway had her first child at age twenty; she revealed: “I stopped school at that time but was just in fifth grade. They had ones in the fifth grade older than I was, even.”⁷⁴

The educational careers of the Gee’s Bend quilting makers varies greatly. Creola Pettway went through 9th grade; Rita Mae Pettway only attended school on rainy days, but she persevered and graduated high school at age 19. Attending about four months a year (November-February), Mensie Lee Pettway graduated high school in 1960 at age 21. Lucy Mingo at age 13 went to Mobile’s Allen Institute; she graduated and married back home at age 17. Annie Bell Pettway attended school from November through January; from age six she worked the fields with her seven-year-old brother to support the family so their mother could stay home with their invalid father.

Ella Mae Irby explained: “We went to school till February, had to stop then and go to the field to cut brushes and knock cotton stalks.”⁷⁵ Her daughter Linda Diane Bennett, however, attended year round and graduated, later becoming deputy sheriff. Lucy P. Pettway graduated from ASU-Montgomery. Doris Pettway reveals that her mother Marie Pettway, who had 13 children, “was given the outstanding parent award after she died by Alabama State University in Montgomery for having the most children from any one family to graduate from the university.”⁷⁶

Martin Luther King, Jr.

The isolation provided by the Alabama River’s curve around Gee’s Bend wasn’t all bad. In Alvia Wardlaw’s words, “Living in a region that gave birth to the Klan, there was safety in being remote and detached from the rest of the countryside.”⁷⁷ Quiltmaker Martlene Perkins declared: “I been satisfied with my life. Never had much trouble. Never deal with white people much. Not many of them around here.”⁷⁸ Addie Pearl Nicholson and her husband Nathaniel moved into Gee’s Bend to buy government land; 40 years later a visitor asked her “How many white people have bothered you in the last 40 years?”

“Not any. The only white person we had to deal with was this government man, and he was looking out for us.”

“So how’s life been for 40 years, doing whatever you wanted with no white people to bother you?”

“Pretty good.”⁷⁹

Irene Williams, who created several quilts in the 1960s using fabric printed with the word “Vote,” explained in an interview: “I remember when Martin Luther King come down here, too. In a way, black people been treated pretty good, pretty fair. I don’t tell no lie. When I was growing up, white people didn’t bother me none. All the white peoples I know treated me nice, like you’re treating me today. I never did work for no white people. Didn’t do nothing but work in the fields.”⁸⁰

Martin Luther King, Jr., brought the Civil Rights Movement to Gee’s Bend in March 1965 when he spoke in the community’s largest church, the Pleasant Grove Baptist Church. He inspired many Gee’s Benders to march with him in Selma and also to cross the Alabama River ferry from Gee’s Bend to Camden to register to vote. (The 1960 election

had seen not a single black vote in Wilcox County.) Quiltmaker Amelia Bennett said: “I remember when Martin Luther King came to Camden. Lot of them went to see him, but I didn’t. I didn’t have no ride up there. But I hear the stories, and it make me feel very good, the path he cut for us. It was, you know, like you walk into a room and ain’t no light on, and you turn on a light in the darkness – that’s what Dr. King meant to us. He turned on the light for us.”⁸¹

Quiltmaker Mary Lee Bendolph described King’s visit to Gee’s Bend and Camden: “And what I dreamed came to pass: Martin Luther King came to that big old church here in Gee’s Bend, up on the hill, Pleasant Grove Baptist Church. [. . .] And when he went to Camden, I had to beg my husband to let me go – but I went. [. . .] I was in the group with Martin Luther King when he went up to drink the ‘white’ water. He wanted us to know that the water wasn’t no different and to let white people know that we could all drink the same water.⁸² I never saw a black person do a thing like that. I was so glad.⁸³

“So, I went up to drink me some of it, and Lillie Mae, my oldest sister, caught hold to my coat. I put my arms back behind me and let that coat be pulled right off. I was on my way to that fountain to drink. I was going to drink the white water. I got to it, but she pulled me away, so I didn’t get none of the white water that day. She thought they was going to hurt me. [. . .] When I finally did get to drink that white water, it wasn’t no different. I wondered what all the fussing was about. I couldn’t see why they wanted to keep us from that water, unless they just thought we was dirty.”⁸⁴

Nathan Pettway, son of quiltmaker Martha

Jane Pettway, spoke of the civil rights marches: “Them white folks was alarmed when we get in those marches, and the white folks try to get us to go away. I went on a couple marches. A lot of the people from down here marched. A lot of my family was big into the marches.”⁸⁵

Quiltmaker Lucy Mingo and her family participated in several marches, including the march from Selma to Montgomery March 21-25, 1965. She declared: “No white man gonna tell me not to march. Only make me march harder.”⁸⁶ However, she did experience backlash from the surrounding white community: her son was jailed for a week for joining the marches, and her family was evicted from their home. She explained: “We was brought up on the white man Wilkinson’s

place [. . .] Wilkinson kicked us off in ’65. See, he didn’t want you to march, but I really wanted to be registered to vote. After Dr. King came down, we marched and went to Camden, and we became registered voters. And then things changed.”⁸⁷

Another quiltmaker, Jessie T. Pettway, did not see as much positive change: “Things don’t change too much – maybe a little, but I don’t see no great change. White folks get a little nicer, laughing with you now, but it’s phony. Don’t mean nothing. After the civil rights, we got treated a little better at the stores over in Camden. We do have a chance to buy more now.”⁸⁸

End Notes

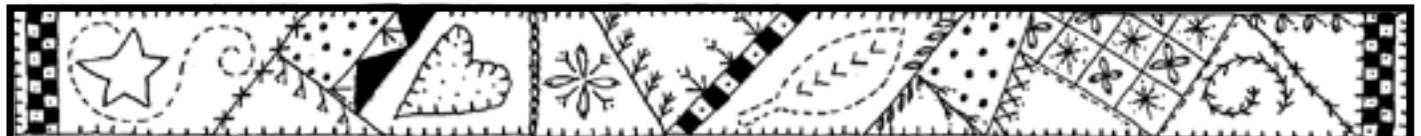
- 1) Leake 1.
- 2) Beardsley, Quilts 22.
- 3) Arnett 158.
- 4) Arnett 17.
- 5) Beardsley, Gee’s 384.
- 6) Wahlman 17.
- 7) Beardsley, Gee’s 266.
- 8) Freeman 335.
- 9) Beardsley, Quilts 42.
- 10) Wahlman 16.
- 11) Beardsley, Quilts 39.
- 12) Arnett 73.
- 13) Freeman 333.
- 14) Beardsley, Quilts 80.
- 15) Arnett 34.
- 16) Arnett 74.
- 17) Arnett 73.
- 18) Arnett 178.
- 19) Arnett 175-176.
- 20) Arnett 38.
- 21) Beardsley, Quilts 150.
- 22) Arnett 49.
- 23) Arnett 212.
- 24) Beardsley, Gee’s 384.
- 25) Beardsley, Quilts 134.
- 26) Arnett 212.
- 27) Arnett 75.
- 28) Fry 83.
- 29) Arnett 71.
- 30) Arnett 68.
- 31) Beardsley, Quilts 45.
- 32) Arnett 31.
- 33) Beardsley, Quilts 128.
- 34) Beardsley, Quilts 126.
- 35) Beardsley, Quilts 72.
- 36) Beardsley, Quilts 138.
- 37) Beardsley, Quilts 100.
- 38) Beardsley, Gee’s 272.
- 39) Arnett 146.
- 40) Beardsley, Quilts 39.
- 41) Arnett 177.
- 42) Beardsley, Quilts 118.
- 43) Beardsley, Gee’s 287.
- 44) Beardsley, Gee’s 406.
- 45) Beardsley, Gee’s 236.
- 46) Arnett 176.
- 47) Mazloomi 78.
- 48) Beardsley, Gee’s 226.
- 49) Arnett 214.
- 50) Beardsley, Gee’s 279.
- 51) Beardsley, Quilts 74.
- 52) Wahlman 16.
- 53) Beardsley, Gee’s 383.
- 54) Beardsley, Gee’s 336.
- 55) Beardsley, Quilts 38.
- 56) Arnett 146.
- 57) Beardsley, Quilts 68.
- 58) Beardsley, Gee’s 286.
- 59) Arnett 214.
- 60) Arnett 214.
- 61) Arnett 173.
- 62) Beardsley, Gee’s 406.
- 63) Beardsley, Gee’s 396.
- 64) Arnett 207.
- 65) Arnett 174.
- 66) Beardsley, Quilts 130.
- 67) Beardsley, Quilts 48.
- 68) Beardsley, Quilts 49.
- 69) Beardsley, Quilts 27.
- 70) Beardsley, Gee’s 278.
- 71) Beardsley, Quilts 72.
- 72) Beardsley, Quilts 130.
- 73) Arnett 177.
- 74) Beardsley, Quilts 150.
- 75) Beardsley, Gee’s 336.
- 76) Beardsley, Gee’s 288.
- 77) Beardsley, Quilts 12.
- 78) Beardsley, Gee’s 410.
- 79) Beardsley, Quilts 38.
- 80) Beardsley, Quilts 126.
- 81) Beardsley, Quilts 82.
- 82) Beardsley, Quilts 130.
- 83) Beardsley, Quilts 31.
- 84) Beardsley, Quilts 130.
- 85) Beardsley, Quilts 114.
- 86) Beardsley, Quilts 31.
- 87) Beardsley, Gee’s 280.
- 88) Beardsley, Quilts 88.

Stepping to Freedom by Julia Payne

On display in The Space lobby courtesy of the Rocky Mountain Wa Shonaji Quilt Guild and the Rocky Mountain Quilt Museum

Colorado fiber artist Julia Payne maintains creativity has always been a part of her life. Her entry into quilting arts has primarily been self taught, coupled with learning to sew from watching her mother as a child. She has made many traditional quilts, but tires of the duplication of designs, so she prefers to create art quilts such as *Stepping to Freedom*, which allows her a full expression of her own creativity. Her other artistic endeavors include painting, ceramics and doll making. She sees no difference between quilting and so-called "fine art." She views quilting as fiber art at its finest. Julia also designs and sews clothing, including wearable quilted garments.

Julia's quilts have been exhibited at the Rocky Mountain Quilt Museum, the City and County of Denver, the Pacific International Quilt Festival and other regional venues. She is a member of the Rocky Mountain Wa Shonaji Quilt Guild, Arapahoe County Quilters and the Colorado Quilt Council. To see additional work by Julia Payne, please visit the Rocky Mountain Quilt Museum from May 6 -- August 2, 2008 where her works will be exhibited during *Sisters in Cloth: A Collection of Works by African American Textile Artists*.



In 1990, one woman's dream became a reality with the opening of the Rocky Mountain Quilt Museum (RMQM) in Golden, Colorado. Thanks to the vision of Eugenia Mitchell and the generosity of many people, the museum assures a safe haven for over 400 quilts in our permanent collection. RMQM is dedicated to the preservation of family heirlooms, celebration of the historical traditions of quilts, and promotion of the art found in quilts and quilting as an inspiration for the future.

The Rocky Mountain Quilt Museum boasts two galleries with rotating exhibits ranging from historic and traditional bed quilts to contemporary art quilts. RMQM is also dedicated to offering exemplary classes, lectures and workshops for all ages. Many of our education programs travel to other community organizations thanks to our wonderful volunteers and teachers. Our world-class research library is open to the public, and in the museum store, *QuiltMarket*, you'll find quilts, the museum's own reproduction fabric line, beautiful gift items, books, and more for sale.

Stop in and see us in downtown Golden under the arch!
Open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday-Saturday
Admission Fee Charged

Upcoming Exhibits

Through May 3, 2008

I **Naturally Colorado:**
Quilts by David Taylor

II **New Acquisitions, Old Favorites:**
Quilts from RMQM's Collection

May 6, 2008--August 2, 2008

I **Sisters in Cloth:**
A Collection of Works by
African American Textile Artists

II **Pre-1840 Bed Coverings**
American Quilt Study Group -
2006 Quilt Study

August 5, 2008--November 1, 2008

I **30 Years of Collecting:**
Amish Quilts from the
Henry and Angela Hite Collection

II **Raising the Barr:**
Quilts by Barbara Barr

November 4, 2008--January 31, 2009

I **California Gold**

II **Speaking in Cloth:**
6 Quilters, 6 Voices



Rocky Mountain Quilt Museum
1111 Washington Avenue
Golden, CO 80401
303-277-0377 www.rmqm.org

Celebrate

Educate

Preserve

Gee's Bend

Questions and Activities

Historic Timeline

1. Ask students to research significant events leading up to, during and following the play *Gee's Bend* and to place them in chronological order.
2. What changes or innovations were happening during these times?
3. How was the United States changing? How was the world changing?

Gee's Bend Timeline

1. Ask students to chart the journey of one of the characters from the play *Gee's Bend*.
2. What significant events happened in that character's life?

CO History Standard 1.1

Students know the general chronological order of events and people in history.

CO History Standard 1.2

Students use chronology to organize historical events and people.

Collage/Quilting

Goal: To create a quilt based on a collage.

Materials: Multi-colored construction paper

Glue

Old magazines, newspapers and/or other pieces of ephemera

Scissors, if needed

1. First pick a theme to create the collages. This can be a personal event, a general idea or a theme represented from your curriculum. The more specific the goal the easier it will be to define what you need.
2. Once your theme had been chosen, start by collecting pictures and words collected from old magazines, newspapers, or other pieces of ephemera.
3. When you are ready, glue the pieces that you have chosen to a piece of colored construction paper.
4. From this collage, pick colors and shapes that you wish to take and to create an abstract construction paper quilt
5. Tear, or cut, strips of colored construction paper and place them in piles.
6. Arrange the strips into geometric shapes and paste them to either the back of the collage or a new piece of construction paper.
7. Glue these strips to the paper.

CO Model Content Standards

Visual Arts 1: Students recognize and use visual arts as a form of communication.

Visual Arts 4: Students relate the visual arts to various historical and cultural traditions.

Gee's Bend

Questions and Activities

Questions:

- 1) Describe the relationship that Sadie, Nella and Alice have at the beginning of the play? How do these relationships change through the play? Describe how their roles change through the play?
- 2) Why does Alice start Sadie on quilting and not Nella? What does it mean to pass this knowledge from one generation to the other?
- 3) What does having land mean to Macon? What does the key he gives Sadie symbolize?
- 4) Why do the women make quilts in Gee's Bend? How does the use of the quilts change over time?
- 5) Why does Sadie want to go to Camden and follow Dr. King? Why does she want to go to Selma?
- 6) Why is Macon upset with Sadie when she gets a drink of water from the water fountain in Camden? How does this change their relationship?
- 7) Why does Asia want to sell her land? Why does she want to move to Selma?
- 8) How does the character Sadie change through the play?
- 9) What role does the river play in the story? How does the ferry's role change?
- 10) How effective is the playwright in chronicling the history of the town through the journey of one family? Explain how this works or does not work.