

## **THE GEE'S BEND QUILTMAKERS**

### **NETTIE YOUNG**

Nettie Young (b. 1916 – d. 2010) was the mother of Rennie Young and the stepdaughter of Deborah Pettway Young, who taught her to quilt at a young age. Throughout her life, Nettie preferred to sew without templates and patterns, instead tracing her own ideas onto fabric: 'Didn't need a pattern', she once said. 'Same with quilts. If I seen a dress or a quilt or something I liked, I can make it. I just draw it out the way I want it.' Nettie's work is included in the collections of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Nasher Museum of Art, Durham, North Carolina.

### **MINDER COLEMAN**

Minder Coleman (b. 1903 – d. 1999) was the daughter of Pleasant Pettway, the granddaughter of Ella Lewis and the mother of Minnie Sue Coleman. Minder was one of the Gee's Bend's leading citizens. She was a founding member and vice president of the Freedom Quilting Bee, and for a time served as president of the Farm Security Administration's agricultural cooperative and weaving cooperative. In collaboration with Mattie Ross and Patsy Mosely, Minder wove draperies for the Roosevelt White House and helped weave cloth that was made into a suit for President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

### **JOERINA C. PETTWAY**

Joerina C. Pettway (b. 1881 – d. 1945) was the mother of Jennie Pettway. Her only surviving quilt is a variation of a 'Log Cabin' from around 1940, in which the squares are divided between stitched strips and solid blocks of cloth cut in a sawtooth pattern. Although she passed away before the Freedom Quilting Bee was established in 1966, it was the 'Log Cabins' produced by earlier generations of quilters such as Joerina that first garnered the attention in New York and ultimately became synonymous with the Freedom Quilting Bee.

### **RACHEL CAREY GEORGE**

Rachel Carey George (b. 1908 – d. 2011) was the daughter of Maria Pettway Carey and Reverend William Carey, minister of the Pleasant Grove Baptist Church, the niece of Delia Bennett and the mother of Annie Mae Carey. Rachel worked until her nineties and produced quilts for years after that. As her daughter Annie Mae recounts: 'My mama worked until she was about ninety and her mind kind of slowed down. She didn't want to slow down. She even tried to climb trees until we stopped her. And she kept on quilting.' Rachel's quilts are held in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Milwaukee Art Museum.

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## POLLY BENNETT

Polly Bennett (b. 1922 – d. 2003) was the daughter of Mary Mooney, who first taught her to quilt at the age of eight or nine. From her early years to the end of her life, Polly's style of quilting remained notably diverse: she produced structured patterned quilts and abstract, freeform works composed of long rectangular strips. 'The first was, I believe, a 'Nine Patch",' Polly recalls. 'Then I started making what I call a "get-together", just putting pieces together – any color, any sizes. Back in them days, I didn't care how they looked, I just put them together using old clothes mostly'.

## REBECCA MYLES JONES

Rebecca Myles Jones (b. 1896 – d. 1986) was the sister of China Grove Myles, whose Pine Burr Quilt became the official state quilt of Alabama in 1997. Rebecca created quilts using corduroy, a material that only became available as a result of the contracts awarded to the Freedom Quilting Bee cooperative in the late-1960s, but it is unknown whether she ever worked there.

## LORETTA PETTWAY

Loretta Pettway (b. 1942) is the daughter of Mary Pettway, stepdaughter of Plummer T. Pettway, granddaughter of Prissy Pettway and Sally Miller, and great granddaughter of Dinah Miller. While she was surrounded by so many quiltmakers in her youth, she has kept her artistic practice relatively private in her adult life, producing quilts emblazoned with notably more experimental designs than those of her relatives. Her c.1960 quilt, Medallion, was one of ten Gee's Bend quilts to appear on a set of US postage stamps in 2006.

## SUE WILLIE SELTZER

Sue Willie Seltzer (1921–2010) was born in the Gee's Bend area before moving north to Rehoboth. The daughter-in-law of Bettie Bendolph Seltzer, she spent her early years working in the fields and only began to quilt in her thirties or forties. Rather than piecing together blocks in traditional patchwork patterns, Sue used 'strings' of squares and rectangles to construct dynamic abstractions, often contrasting two colours or tonalities. In 2020, her quilt Columns of Blocks (2003) was acquired by the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.

## LUTISHA PETTWAY

Lutisha Pettway (b. 1925 – d. 2001) was the daughter of Patty Pettway and the sister of Allie Pettway and Sweet T. Pettway. Lutisha struggled more than most women of her generation in Gee's Bend: having not inherited any of her father's

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farmland, she lived in relative poverty while also caring for a son with Down's Syndrome. Lutisha made quilts using scraps of corduroy and, most prominently, old work clothes, a technique born from scarcity and resourcefulness that became the founding ethos for generations of quilters. Her 1950 quilt, Bars, was a memorial to her late husband sewn from his denim work clothes. The work is now held in the collection of The Museum of Fine Arts Houston.

## HELEN MCCLOUD

Helen McCloud (b. 1938) lives in one of the least travelled parts of Gee's Bend. Daughter of Della Mae Bridges and sister of Annie Pearl Bridges, she married into the Gee's Bend community through her second husband, Almos McCloud. As such, the quilts of McCloud and her mother, while bearing the visual and practical hallmarks of the Gee's Bend quiltmaking tradition, remain compositionally distinct, an illustration of the connections between the quilting communities of Gee's Bend and the culture of Wilcox County and the Black Belt more broadly.

## LUCY MINGO

Descending from several generations of quiltmakers, Lucy Mingo (b. 1931) is the daughter of Ethel Young and the granddaughter of Nellie Pettway. Having quilted from a young age, she is considered one of the finest of the second generation of Gee's Bend quilters, something reflected in recent acquisitions by Baltimore Museum of Art and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. During the civil rights era, Mingo became one of Gee's Bend's leading spokespersons, joining Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on a march to Selma in 1965.

## ESSIE BENDOLPH PETTWAY

Essie Bendolph Pettway (b. 1956) is the only daughter of Mary Lee Bendolph, the granddaughter of Aolar Mosely and one of the few women of her generation to remain in Gee's Bend. Essie showed her talent for quilting at an early age, beginning her education at the age of eight and completing a two-sided quilt in her mid-teens. Following this, she made uniforms for the armed forces, an experience that allowed her to tackle more complex quilt patterns but also encouraged her to experiment with her designs. 'The work I do is military work', she has said. 'We sew camouflage fatigue jackets for the army, and everything's got to be exactly right. So when I get home, I can mess up like I want to.'

## LORETTA PETTWAY BENNETT

Loretta Pettway Bennett (b. 1960) is amongst the youngest of the quilters working in Gee's Bend. Daughter of Qunnie Pettway, Loretta was introduced to sewing at the age of five or six and continues to draw influence from the work

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of her ancestors: 'I came to realise that my mother, her mother, my aunts, and all others from Gee's Bend had sewn the foundation, and all I had to do now was thread my own needle and piece a quilt together.'

## QUNNIE PETTWAY

Qunnie Pettway (b. 1943– d. 2010) was the mother of Loretta Pettway Bennett, daughter of Candis Pettway, granddaughter of Sally Miller and great-granddaughter of Dinah Miller. She worked for a long time at the Freedom Quilting Bee and would bring home ornate fabric scraps, frequently creating improvised versions of traditional patterns in her quilts.

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## NANCY PETTWAY

Unlike many of the Gee's Bend Quiltmakers, Nancy Pettway (b. 1935) never worked at the Freedom Quilting Bee. Instead, she purchased the corduroy used in her quilts directly from the cooperative. Her approach to quilt making is architectural, comparing the process of designing a quilt to that of designing a house: 'When you design a house, you make in your mind how your house design to be. When you start on your sewing machine or using your hands, you bring in your mind just how you want your quilt to look'.