



**CITY OF BIRMINGHAM  
MUSEUM BOARD AGENDA  
556 W MAPLE  
Thursday, March 7, 2024  
5:00 PM**

***Mission Statement:*** *The Birmingham Museum will explore meaningful connections with our past, in order to enrich our community and enhance its character and sustainability. Our mission is to promote understanding of Birmingham's historical and cultural legacy through preservation and interpretation of its ongoing story.*

**1. Call to Order**

**2. Roll Call**

**3. Approval of the Minutes**

Minutes of February 1, 2023

**4. New Business**

A. Planning and Process, Strategic Plan for 2025

**5. Communication and Reports**

- A. Director Report
- B. Member comments
- C. Public comments

**6. Next Meeting: April 4, 2024**

**7. Adjournment**

NOTICE: Individuals with disabilities requiring accommodations for effective participation in this meeting should contact the city clerk's office at (248) 530-1880 (voice), or (248) 644-5115 (TDD) at least one day in advance to request mobility, visual, hearing or other assistance. *APPROVED MINUTES OF THE MUSEUM BOARD MEETINGS ARE AVAILABLE IN THE CITY CLERK'S OFFICE AND ON THE CITY WEBSITE AT [www.bhamgov.org](http://www.bhamgov.org).* City of Birmingham, 151 Martin, Birmingham, MI 48009; 248.530.1800. Persons with disabilities that may require assistance for effective participation in this public meeting should contact the City Clerk's Office at the number (248) 530-1880, or (248) 644-5115 (for the hearing impaired) at least one day before the meeting to request help in mobility, visual, hearing, or other assistance.

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**CITY OF BIRMINGHAM  
MUSEUM BOARD MEETING  
556 W. Maple  
Thursday, February 1, 2024  
5:00 PM**

Members Present: Kristy Barrett (Alternate), Alexandra Harris, Marty Logue, Jay Shell  
Members Absent: Caroline Ashleigh, Bev Erickson, Pat Hughes, Judith Keefer  
Student Members Present: None  
Administration: Museum Director Leslie Pielack  
Guests: Brian Devlin, Nagy Devlin Land Design

The meeting was called to order at 5:03 PM by Chairperson Logue.

**Approval of the Minutes  
Minutes of January 4, 2024**

**MOTION:** by Shell, seconded by Barrett:

To approve the minutes of January 4, 2024.

**VOTE:** Yeas, 4  
Nays, 0

**New Business**

Brian Devlin, Historic Landscape Architect from Nagy Devlin Land Design presented his initial landscape plan for the pond area, including the boardwalk across the pond, a patio on the south side of the pool, and a paths around the pond and to the Rouge overlook. His plan incorporates the data provided by AEW Engineering regarding the boardwalk location, water level, and associated engineering issues. The movement of water at and below the surface is a significant consideration.

The historic features of the pool would be suggested by the existing remnant of the wall at the north, the boardwalk edge on the east, and the patio on the south. To help visually suggest the missing west wall, he suggested the use of a partial rectangular dressed (shaped) stone overhang on the north side. The site can be interpreted with QR codes rather than physical signage, which will be more sustainable and help maintain the natural appearance of the area. He is recommending the use of natural stone to complement the site and other improvements. Because of the overgrowth of invasive plants and trees, he is recommending that all existing trees and shrubs around the pond be removed, with the exception of a large bald cypress, Norway spruce, and white cedar.

He also presented his recommendations regarding landscape plant materials that are native or native-derived and would be aesthetically appropriate, lower maintenance, and more sustainable for the environment of the pond, which has both upland and wetland characteristics. Design goals include:

- referencing or suggesting original elm trees
- utilizing columnar trees at the street
- utilizing plant groupings to minimize maintenance and create harmonious companion plantings
- limited plant types and varieties to maintain visual and natural balance

Director Pielack suggested that the project will be easier to fund and install if done in logical phases; the first phase would include the landscape design elements along Willits and around the parking space, with later phases gradually completing the paths and work around the pond. Board members reviewed his recommendations and agreed by consensus with his plan, and provided suggestions and direction regarding trees and plant choices. Additional suggestions were made concerning providing drainage under the patio for the seeps and surface water. Mr. Devlin will return in April to share additional design detail and graphics with the board.

### **Communication and Reports**

Museum Director Pielack reviewed the Director Report and shared the proclamation received from the Oakland County Board of Commissioners last night at the presentation by museum volunteer Joy Young. The proclamation will be displayed in the lobby with our other awards.

### **Member Comments**

Board alternate member Barrett was unable to share the Black History month flyer with the School Board at a recent meeting and did not meet the newsletter deadline, but will be following up with Superintendent Robeson for other possible collaborations.

### **Public Comments**

None.

**The next Regular Meeting is scheduled for Thursday, March 7, 2024, at 5:00 PM.**

Ms. Logue adjourned the meeting at 6:30 PM.

# **Proposed Strategic Plan Revision Process, 2024/2025 for 2025-2028**

July 2024-September 2025

## **I. Review and Assess Museum's Status, Role, and Goals**

### Months 1 to 3: Background and Orientation for Museum Board Members

1. Review information on current and future trends in the museum field
  - a. National trends and reports; American Alliance of Museums, American Association for State and Local History
  - b. Leslie's input from History Leadership Institute
2. Develop 2 or 3 general directions for next ten years derived from national trends

### Months 4 and 5: Assess status of Birmingham Museum in context

1. Review and discuss mission and vision as well as ordinance definitions
2. Review Birmingham Museum's accomplishments, past ten years (since 2013)
  - a. Objectives met
  - b. Objectives revised
  - c. Objectives unmet but still applicable
  - d. Objectives abandoned
3. Review possible new objectives
4. Establish current and future audiences
5. Identify Birmingham Museum current strengths and needs in light of vision, mission, and ten year goals
6. Identify opportunities, partners, and capacity-building possibilities, and challenges

### Months 6 to 9: Develop assessment tool/s and process for community input

1. Identify most important areas of feedback
2. Identify audience segments and means to engage with each segment
3. Develop process and tools for seeking input

## **II. Analyze and Develop Plan**

### Months 10-12: Community Feedback and Analysis

1. Gather and analyze data
2. Review ways/methods of incorporating data into a ten-year plan for the museum

### Months 13-15: Develop plan and present to City Commission

1. Draft document; review; finalize
2. Send Museum Board approved plan to City Commission



## Director Report

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**DATE:** March 7, 2024  
**TO:** Museum Board  
**FROM:** Leslie Pielack, Museum Director  
**SUBJECT:** Director Report

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Repairs/Updates—A warm spell finally made it possible to complete the museum's sign repair—last fall one of the graphic panels separated and needed to be reattached properly. Our sign has been a very important part of our community engagement, and it's great to see it back intact. The museum lobby's electrical and light fixtures have received needed updates, and we are looking into repairing/replacing our picket fencing along Maple that has been deteriorating over the past few seasons.

Podcast Update—We have produced 15 episodes of our podcast, *Birmingham Uncovered* and after less than a year (11 months), there have been approximately 1050 downloads...and counting. This is a true achievement for a podcast of this nature, and if you have not listened to it yet, you don't know what you're missing!

Presentations, Presentations, Presentations, continued!—We have a few more presentations scheduled at area libraries and other organizations in the next month, and have hosted a few more groups here at the museum. We continue to get a high degree of interest in our current exhibit and plan to keep it in place at least through the summer.

School Tours—We are once again working closely with the Birmingham Schools to coordinate the local history curriculum tour program for 2<sup>nd</sup> graders here, planned for May.

Phase 1 of UGRR Project Complete; Phase 2 to Begin Soon—Michigan Humanities has received its final report and released the remaining funding for Phase 1 as well as the funding for Phase 2. The museum will continue to pursue the research with additional help from researchers around the county in what has been shown to be one of the most important public history projects in our area in recent years.


Staff Professional Development Opportunities This Summer—Donna and myself submitted conference proposals to the Midwest Museums Association to share some of our successes in the area of collaborative programming and local history of the Underground Railroad and archival techniques for working with digital FindAGrave cemetery memorial files as a museum resource. Both proposals were accepted and we will be sharing our ideas in August with our colleagues in Ohio.

Also, I have been accepted into a special American Association for State and Local History Leadership in History summer institute and 'think tank' for developing strategies and approaches to contemporary museum practice, which will include a two week stay in June. This will help me bring back ideas and trends from the field to our museum strategic planning process later this summer and fall.

Collections Acquisitions Update—Part of our increased visibility and association with the Underground Railroad project has resulted in our receiving a very unique item from a Birmingham donor (see attached). It is one of a set of reproductions from the 1990s authorized by the Smithsonian of an African American 'story quilt' in their collection. The reproduction quilt was acquired by a local Birmingham family, who used to send it to their children's elementary schools over 30 years ago so the teachers could use it to teach Black history. It is an interesting piece that will help us tell our local Black history story.

Podcast Data, April 25, 2023 to February 29, 2024

- 15 podcasts produced
- 770 downloaded through Apple/Android Play stores; 360 from museum's YouTube channel
- The map below shows the distribution of the 770 downloads through mobile phone playstores all over the world.



## Birmingham Uncovered

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**Photo of Donated Object: Reproduction of Harriet Powers Story Quilt**

Recently received by the Museum as a donation from a Birmingham resident whose family has owned this quilt since the 1990s. The quilt was taken to Birmingham elementary schools during that period when the family's children were attending, and used by teachers to teach students about Black history. This gives it special historical value to our community and our collection, and it will be useful in our future programming as well.

**From the web: Background on the Harriet Powers 1886 Story Quilt (Reproduction), 1994.** (*San Jose Museum of Quilts and Textiles*). The Smithsonian contracted 1200 reproduction quilts in the early 1990s based on Harriet Powers' 1886 Story Quilt as a fundraiser. The quilts were featured/sold in the Spiegel catalog. One of these was purchased in Arizona by a woman whose daughters were Birmingham residents. They took the quilt to their children's Birmingham elementary schools in the 1990s to be used by teachers as a Black history teaching tool. The quilt border of the item donated to the museum has been tacked on top and bottom for hanging.



Harriet Powers Story Quilt (Reproduction)  
Harriet Powers 1994



San Jose Museum of Quilts & Textiles  
San Jose, United States

A Smithsonian reproduction of Harriet Powers original "Story Quilt". Harriet Powers was born a slave and lived near [Athens](#), Georgia. In 1886 when Harriet was 49 years old, she had finished her first quilt to exhibit at the Clarke County Cotton Fair. She combined the African style of applique, with European style stitching to create unique "story quilts" which are preserved today as remarkable pieces of both folk art, and history. Her story quilts depict biblical tales and local histories. She

began exhibiting them in 1886 at the Cotton States and International Expo. Her Bible Quilt is at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History and Pictorial Quilt is at Museum of Fine Arts in [Boston](#).

Techniques: Machine pieced, hand appliqued and quilted  
Credit Line: Gift of Jackie Greenfield

#### Details

Title: Harriet Powers Story Quilt (Reproduction)  
Creator: Harriet Powers  
Date Created: 1994  
Location Created: United States  
Physical Dimensions: 86.5 x 84 inches  
Subject Keywords: Quilt, Harriet Powers, Bible story quilt  
Type: Quilt  
Medium: Cotton



MAY/JUNE 1994

# PIECEWORK™

ALL THIS BY HAND

MAGINEL WRIGHT  
THE GIFT OF EMBROIDERY



What merry zigzag trims plain cloth,

hides the trace of a hand-me-down hem,

then froths into lace?

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See page 40.

DEPARTMENTS

2

**NOTIONS**

*From the editor*

3

**BY POST**

*Letters from readers*

14

**LEGACY**

*Identifying keepsakes*

Glass spools and commemorative pincushions

18

**CRAZY QUILT**

*Event, news, and things*

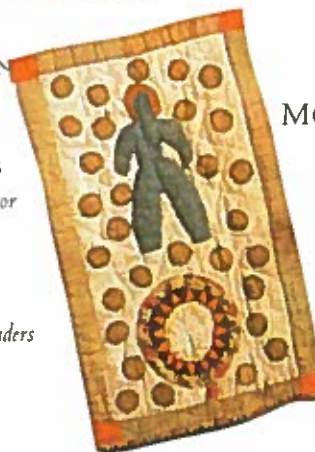
*Bobbie Irwin*

92

**BOOK MARKS**

*Books in review*

*African Majesty*



# PIE

2

**MOTHER SEVERYNA'S MISSIC**

Vibrant folk embroideries have  
come from Ukraine to the

*Tatjana K*

4

**TO TELL  
HARRIET POWERS AND THE  
TRADITION IN AFRICA**

These remarkable quilts  
are both delightful

*Trish F*

4

**A MATTER OF  
BEADED BAGS FROM**

In difficult times, small beaded  
bags were as sure as their n

*Galer Brin*

**A BEADED BAG**

*Designed by J*

5.

**MAGINEL WRITING  
AND THE GIFT OF**

Custom-embroidered garments and new  
career for this t

*Mary Jane*

We scorn to wear a bit of silk,  
A bit of Northern lace,  
But make our homespun dresses up  
And wear them with a grace.

From the ballad, "The Homespun Dress,"  
in *Mississippi Homespun*,  
by Mary Edna Lohrenz  
and Anita Miller Stamper

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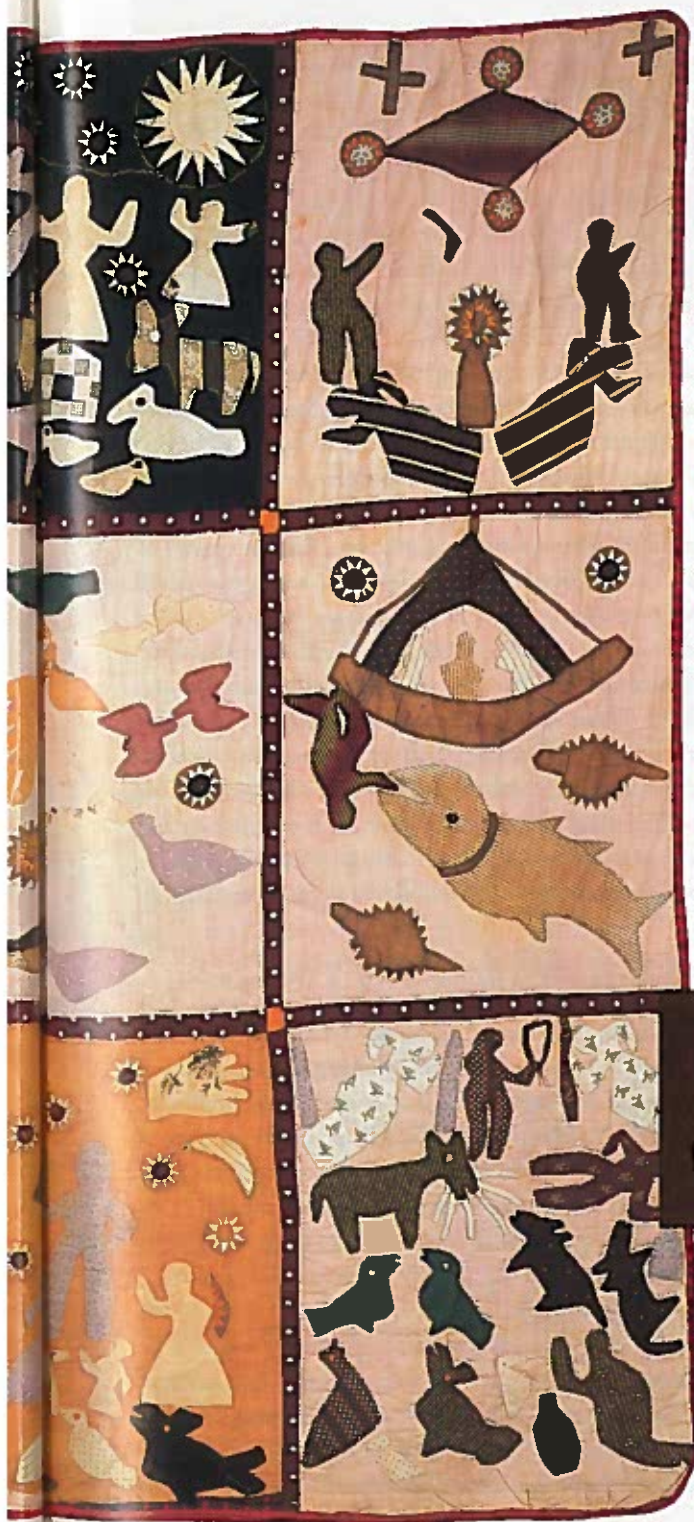
# *To Tell a Story*

BY TRISH FAUBION





HARRIET POWERS AND THE  
RELIGIOUS-NARRATIVE TRADITION IN  
AFRICAN-AMERICAN QUILTS



**Harriet Powers**  
(1837–1911), quilter.  
*Courtesy of the Museum of  
Fine Arts, Boston.*

*THE NEXT HISTORY is the Holy Family:*

*Joseph, the Virgin, and the infant Jesus with the star  
of Bethlehem over his head. Those are the crosses he had  
to bear through his undergoing. Anything for wise-  
ment. We can't go back any further than the Bible.*

S

o Harriet Powers described a block of her 1886 quilt, one of two remarkable appliqué quilts created by an African-American woman about whom little else is known. These so-called

Bible quilts are part of a religious-narrative tradition that, according to Cuesta Benberry in *Always There: The African-American Presence in American Quilts*, was "idiosyncratic to southern black women." Quilts in this tradition record religious stories, legends, and historical events, and several recent quilt scholars have detected parallels between the techniques and motifs in such quilts and those in African textiles.

**Pictorial quilt,**  
105 x 69 inches,  
circa 1895–1898, by  
Harriet Powers.  
Pieced and  
appliqué cotton  
embroidered with  
plain and metallic  
yarns.

*Courtesy of the Museum of  
Fine Arts, Boston.*



### AN "INTERESTING WOMAN"

Gladys-Marie Fry provides what personal history we have of Harriet Powers in her Epilogue to *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Ante-Bellum South* (see "Book Marks," January/February 1994, page 83). Harriet Powers is described as a very religious, modest, and pious woman who was born into slavery on October 29, 1837, in Georgia. Following emancipation, she, her husband, Armstead, and their three children, Armanda, Nancy, and LeonJoe, apparently farmed in Clarke County, Georgia. Neither Harriet nor her husband could read or write, but they seem to have been prosperous enough in the twenty years between 1870 and 1890 to have purchased four acres of land some time during that period. Tax records indicate that in 1891, their fortunes began to decline. By 1894, Armstead seems to have left the family, and Harriet lived alone from that time until her death in 1911. Gladys-Marie Fry speculates that during those last seventeen years Harriet may have supported herself by taking in sewing. She points out that Harriet either owned or had access to a sewing machine because the two Bible quilts she left behind are machine appliquéd.

The only description of Harriet Powers, an eighteen-page narrative written by Oneita Virginia (Jennie) Smith, of Athens, Georgia, is included in Gladys-Marie Fry's book. Jennie Smith was the head of the art department at Lucy Cobb School in Athens, Georgia, and an artist in her own right. She saw Harriet's first Bible quilt at a craft exhibit at the Cotton Fair of 1886. The originality of the design intrigued her, and she set out in search of the quilter:

I found the owner, a negro woman, who lived

in the country on a little farm whereon she and her husband made a respectable living. She is about sixty-five years old [Gladys-Marie Fry points out that Harriet was actually only forty-nine], of a clear ginger cake color, and is a very clean and interesting woman who loves to talk of her "old miss" and her life "befo de wah."

In 1886, Jennie Smith offered to buy Harriet's Bible quilt, but Harriet refused to sell it. In 1890, however, she contacted Jennie to let her know that the quilt was for sale, and in 1891, Jennie bought the quilt for \$5.00. Before Harriet relinquished it, she dictated a description of each of the eleven scenes that compose the quilt, which Jennie included in her narrative.

Jennie Smith declares her intention of exhibiting Harriet's quilt in the Negro Building at the 1895 Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta. Although the official list of exhibitors for the exposition has been lost, Gladys-Marie Fry explains, "It seems almost certain . . . that Jennie Smith did send the quilt to the Atlanta Exposition." There, the faculty wives of Atlanta University saw it and commissioned Harriet Powers to make a second narrative quilt as a gift in 1898 to the Reverend Charles Cuthbert Hall, president of the Union Theological Seminary. Maude Southwell Wahlman, in *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts*, presents a different version of the story: "A second Bible quilt was reportedly exhibited at the Negro Pavilion at the Tennessee Centennial Exposition in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1897. Wives of Atlanta University professors subsequently acquired it as a gift for the Reverend Charles Cuthbert Hall." Whatever the case, at some point, Harriet also gave Jennie Smith information about the fifteen blocks in this second quilt.

Detail of Harriet Powers's 1898 quilt. Jonah and the Whale.



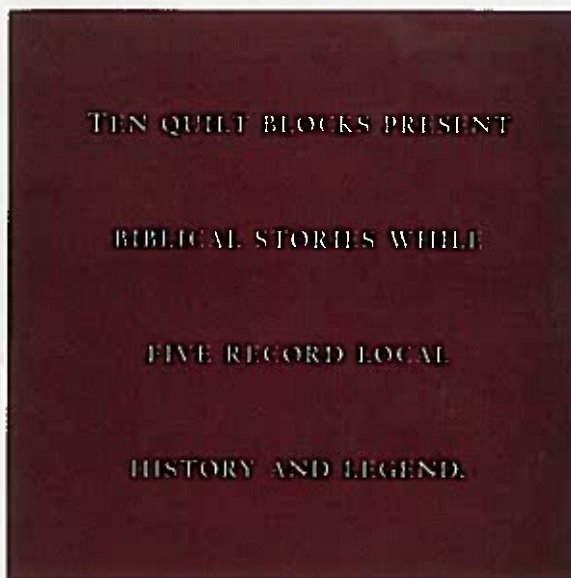
### QUILT SCENES: A JAUNTY DEVIL, A STYLISH ANGEL

Harriet's 1886 quilt measures 88½ inches wide by 78 inches long and consists of eleven blocks arranged in three horizontal rows. The scenes in all eleven blocks are biblical. John Michael Vlach, in *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts*, notes that the first two rows read horizontally from left to right, while the third row reads from right to left. As captions to the photographs of the two quilts, he includes Harriet Powers's transcribed descriptions of the blocks along with Jennie Smith's own—often entertaining—observations. The first block in the top row thus represents Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, "naming the animals, and listening to the subtle whisper of the 'serpent which is beguiling Eve.'" The second block is a "continuation of





Detail the 1898 quilt. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.



Paradise, but this time Eve has 'conceived and born a son.'" The third block represents "'Satan amidst the seven stars,' . . . and is not as [Jennie] first thought, a football player." Jennie goes on to remark, "I am sure I have never seen a jauntier devil."

Of the four blocks in the second row, the first represents the story of Cain killing his brother, Abel. The second block represents Cain going into the land of Nod to get a wife. "There are bears, leopards, elks, and a 'kangaroo hog,' but the gem of the scene is an orange colored calico lion, in the center, who has a white tooth sticking prominently from his lower lip." The third block represents Jacob's dream, with the angel on the ladder. Jennie notes, "She has a rather stylish appearance." The fourth block is Christ's baptism. "The bat-like creature swooping down is 'the Holy Spirit extending in the likeness of a dove.'"

The bottom row of four blocks begins at the right with the Holy family (Harriet's description of it opens this article), then moves to the Last Supper (with only seven disciples "all robed in white spotted cloth, but Judas is clothed in drab, being a little off-color in character"). Next is a block with Judas and the thirty pieces of silver. "The large disc at his feet is [the] 'star that appeared in 1886 for the first time in three hundred years.'" The leftmost block shows the Crucifixion.

#### SECOND QUILT: BIBLE SCENES AND WEIRD WEATHER

The 1898 quilt (actually circa 1895–1898), 105 inches long by 69 inches wide, consists of fifteen blocks, three rows of five blocks each. Ten blocks present biblical stories while five record local history and legend.



Detail of Harriet Powers's 1898 quilt. The mule with frozen breath, depicting a memorable freeze, February 10, 1895.

Unlike the earlier quilt, the blocks have no discernible sequence. Harriet repeated (with variations) three panels from her earlier quilt: Adam and Eve in the Garden (top row, fourth block), Christ's baptism (top row, fifth block), and the Crucifixion (bottom row, fifth block). The new biblical scenes include Job praying for his enemies (top row, first block), Moses and the serpent (top row, third block), the whale swallowing Jonah (second row, first block), God creating two of every kind of animal (second row, second and fourth blocks and bottom row, fourth block), and according to Harriet, "the angels of wrath and the seven vials. The blood of fornications. Seven headed beast and 10 horns which arose out of the water" (second row, fifth block).

The remaining five blocks represent what were for





**Pictorial quilt,**  
88½ by 78 inches,  
circa 1886, by  
Harriet Powers.  
**Pieced and**  
**appliquéd cotton.**

*Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.*

Harriet more recent events and history. The second block in the top row represents "the dark day of May 19, 1780. The seven stars were seen 12. N. in the day. The cattle all went to bed, chickens to roost, and the trumpet was blown. The sun went off to a small spot and then to darkness." Gladys-Marie Fry explains that meteorologists have observed dark days for centuries. "As the atmosphere becomes polluted with smoke from forest fires, day is turned into night. In the period from 1706 to 1910, eighteen dark days were recorded. The most famous was May 19, 1780. . . . Scientists say this was confined to New England, but oral tradition concerning the dark day circulated throughout the country."

The central block in the quilt (third block, second row) represents "the falling of the stars on Nov. 13, 1833. The people were frighten[ed] and thought that the end of time had come. God's hand staid the stars. The varmints rushed out of their beds." Gladys-Marie Fry explains that "what in fact took place was the famous Leonid meteor storm of 1833, which produced

a dramatic display of shooting stars seen in greatest brilliance in North America."

The first block of the bottom row represents the "cold Thursday, 10 of Feb. 1895. A woman frozen while at prayer. A woman frozen at a gateway. A man with a sack of meal frozen. Isicles formed from the breath of a mule. All blue birds killed. A man frozen at his jug of liquor." Gladys-Marie Fry explains: "According to *Climatological Data* for the state of Georgia (1895-1898), the entire month of February 1895 was unseasonably cold. . . . [The] two-day period, February 8-10, is probably the occasion of the frozen deaths" that Harriet recorded.

The second block in the bottom row represents "the red light night of 1846. A man tolling the bell to notify the people of the wonder. Women, children, and fowls frightened but God's merciful hand caused no harm to them." Gladys-Marie Fry notes that "fireballs or meteors are the only relevant occurrences recorded in scientific literature for the year 1846."

Finally, the third block in the bottom row seems to



be an interweaving of two local legends. It represents "rich people who were taught nothing of God. Bob Johnson and Kate Bell of Virginia. They told their parents to stop the clock at one and tomorrow it would strike one and so it did. This was the signal that they had entered everlasting punishment." It also includes a depiction of "the independent hog which ran 500 miles from Ga. to Va. [H]er name was Betts."

#### ROOTS: MEMORIES OF AFRICA?

Harriet Powers's earlier Bible quilt is housed at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., while her later quilt is at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. These two Bible quilts have delighted quilt enthusiasts and folk art collectors for decades, but only in the past fifteen years have they attracted the attention of textile scholars and historians. They have aroused scholarly interest because needlework techniques seem to connect them to African textile traditions and motifs may have been traced toward both African roots and African-American secret societies.

John Vlach finds Harriet's appliquéd quilts "special creations in which the memory of Africa is sometimes quite strong." He explains that the appliquéd techniques Harriet used are similar to methods found in the appliquéd "tapestries" of the Fon people in Dahomey (modern-day Benin) in West Africa. In Dahomey, the appliquéd textiles were part of the political trappings of kings and chiefs. They were made by members of special sewing guilds and record stories about the leaders as well as convey religious values. They include motifs, such as a particular fish or bird, that have come to represent specific leaders.

The similarity between the Dahoman tapestries and Harriet's quilts goes beyond the use of appliquéd figures to tell stories and teach values. The figures on Dahoman appliquéd tapestries are based on standardized templates handed down through the generations of guild members. "The human figures are assembled from a pattern with five parts, which are manipulated like marionettes to achieve a number of poses." Harriet Powers also seems to have used a standard template for her appliquéd human figures (distinguishing men from women by cutting a V-shaped piece from the woman's skirt to form pants) and varied the position of the arms or the figure itself to serve her purpose.

Other similarities connect Fon motifs and Harriet's quilt motifs, according to John Vlach. He points out that the whale that swallowed Jonah in Harriet Powers's later quilt is much like the fish the Fon used to repre-



INDING SIMILARITIES BETWEEN

HARRIET POWERS'S TECHNIQUES AND

MOTIFS AND AFRICAN TECHNIQUES AND

MOTIFS IS ONE MATTER; DETERMINING

HOW SHE GAINED SUCH KNOWLEDGE

IS TOUGHER.

sent Houegbadja, a ruler in the seventeenth century. Likewise, the birds in several panels of this quilt resemble the large standing birds that depict two kings, Gangnihuesso and Kpengla, and the short-armed crosses and sun motifs that appear frequently in both Bible quilts are common background motifs in Fon appliquéd textiles. Maude Wahlman traces the crosses back to the Fon sign for their sun-god, Lisa, the Yoruba belief in a sacred crossroads, and/or the Kongo symbol for the four points of the sun. She likewise associates the sun motifs with the Kongo cosmogram.

Finding similarities between Harriet Powers's techniques and motifs and African techniques and motifs is one matter; determining how she gained such knowledge is tougher. John Vlach suggests that she may have had ancestors from West Africa who showed her or told her about the appliquéd techniques or the special motifs. Maude Wahlman makes a case for an evolution of the motifs as West and Central Africans moved to (and through) Brazil, Surinam, Haiti, Cuba, other Caribbean islands, Mexico, and the southern United States. Cuesta Benberry discusses and questions a "current tendency [to] attribute [Africanlike symbols] to an unconscious African cultural memory on the part of the quiltmaker." She suggests that something more immediate to the quilter, such as a black fraternal order, lodge, or benevolent society, might account for the

"enigmatic" motifs that a quilter like Harriet Powers chose to use.

Along these lines, Maude Wahlman offers the intriguing theory that the motifs in Harriet Powers's two Bible quilts work on four levels. Not only can they be interpreted at the African and Christian levels, as she and other scholars have demonstrated, but, she suggests, the motifs are also Masonic and might allude to the Underground Railroad.

To make her case for the Masonic motifs, Maude Wahlman argues that the apron Harriet is wearing in the one photograph we have of her is not a domestic but a ceremonial apron, pointing to the bright and dark suns and the cross (reminiscent of religious motifs in Central and West Africa) as well as the zigzag border. With diagrams, she hints at how the Masonic symbol of the crossed compass and square may be transmuted into a complex zigzag border. She takes her argument one step further and suggests that Harriet might have been a ranking member in an African-American Masonic order and/or a conjurewoman.

Maude Wahlman notes that she is just beginning to

explore the possibility that the motifs on Harriet's quilts are references to the Underground Railroad: "Jacob's ladder is often a reference to the underground railroad. The hog named Betts who ran five hundred miles is said to be another reference; a third may be the Jacob's coffin in the later quilt (sky sign to follow at night?) . . . Are the number of animals a number of miles? Was the quilt sent to the fair as a message of hope . . . ? Was it a code for freedom? Were quilt squares left around as messages . . . ? Can the quilt designs be read as codes for stations on the underground?" Although she makes some interesting points and poses some interesting questions, she does not note that since both quilts were completed long after the Civil War, Harriet would have been recording history.

Absorbing speculations about her Bible quilts make one wish that Harriet Powers herself were here to answer questions. Which theories would she corroborate and which ones dissolve? And might she leave some questions unanswered other than to acknowledge the decisions each individual artist makes in the process of creating something?

**Bible Scenes quilt,**  
cotton appliqué,  
74 x 69 inches,  
passed down in the  
Drake family of  
Thomaston,  
Georgia, circa 1900.

*Collection of and photograph  
courtesy of Shelly Zegart.*



#### AND THE STORY CONTINUES

Harriet Powers is not the only quilter to have made Bible quilts. Maude Wahlman cites two 1775 Bible "cloths" from New Orleans. Cuesta Benberry mentions a four-block Bible quilt, circa 1900–1910, made by a member of the Drake family and featuring two scenes from the Bible—Adam and Eve in the Garden and the Crucifixion. She also lists contemporary quilt artists Yvonne Wells, Peggie Hartwell, Anita Holman Knox, Viola Canady, and Lorraine Mahan among those currently creating quilts in the Bible quilt tradition. Lorraine Mahan uses traditional appliqué





Lord's Prayer quilt,  
appliquéd cotton,  
87 x 85 inches, by  
Lorraine Mahan,  
Philadelphia,  
Pennsylvania, 1974.

Photograph courtesy of the  
Kentucky Quilt Project,  
Louisville, Kentucky.

figures along with cut-out letters in her quilts. Her 1974 Lord's Prayer quilt includes scenes from both the Old and New Testaments surrounding a central section of appliquéd letters that spell out the Lord's Prayer.

Clearly, the history of these religious-narrative quilts is open to further exploration. The quilts themselves, with their lively and evocative scenes, invite further study tracing the tradition's roots and branches, perhaps leading to "wisement." ♦

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR.** *Trish Faubion is the editor for NEWS 3X/400, a technical programmer's journal published in Loveland, Colorado. She divides her spare time among needlework projects, gardening, reading, and hiking.*

#### FURTHER READING

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