



Gee's Bend Oral Histories

Collected by Yixuan Maisie Luo and Catherine Williams



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Above: Detail of a quilt by Mary Lee Bendolph.

Cover: Louisiana Pettway Bendolph and Rubin Bendolph Jr. hold up an antique quilt by Louisiana's grandmother, Annie Pettway, in front of the quilting studio used by Louisiana's mother, Rita Mae Pettway.

Inside cover: Rita Mae Pettway's hand.

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Introduction

By Yixuan Maisie Luo & Catherine Williams

The Gee's Bend Oral History project studies and honors the lives of the quilters and other residents of Gee's Bend, Alabama, which is located on a remote peninsula in the Alabama River. This project began in July 2017, when Andrea Packard, Director of the List Gallery, Swarthmore College, traveled to Gee's Bend to research an exhibition planned for fall 2018: *Piece Together: The Quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph*. While conducting interviews with area women, Tinnie Pettway, an elderly quilter, asked if Swarthmore could help record the traditions and values of her community. When Packard returned to Swarthmore, she collaborated with Professor of Sociology Sarah Willie-LeBreton to solicit proposals from students who wished to conduct oral history interviews in Gee's Bend during the summer of 2018. They chose to approve our proposals, then guided our grant requests and preparations and mentored us as we traveled to Gee's Bend and worked on this publication.

Though many of the women from Gee's Bend are renowned for their quilts, not many people

know about their individual experiences growing up there. While it is understandable that many observers admire the Gee's Bend aesthetic, the quilters themselves have often been described collectively. The purpose of the Gee's Bend Oral History Project is to preserve stories that might otherwise be lost, learn more about the conditions in which the quilting tradition developed, and explore the variety of quilters' individual perspectives.

On May 25, 2018, we drove to Gee's Bend from Selma, AL. When we arrived, Rubin Bendolph Jr. was waiting for us outside the home of his mother, Mary Lee Bendolph. He introduced us to many women quilters who live in the community and helped us explain the intention of our project to interview participants. During the week we spent in Gee's Bend, we were able to conduct interviews with 15 people. At the beginning, we were worried that some people might not be willing to share personal stories with us, but in fact, all individuals we talked to were welcoming and generous, and many shared numerous stories. Some of the interviews went on for three to four hours. In these interviews, we discussed a wide range of topics with participants, including their memories of growing up in Gee's

Bend, experience of farming and sharecropping, religious faith, and the generosity of a tight-knit community that shared its resources.



Nathaniel Pettway gave us fresh plums from the backyard of his mother, Loretta Pettway, when we visited them. He enjoys taking care of his mother's garden, where he has also planted other fruit trees.

Every interviewee offered unique stories and perspectives based on their own experiences. Rosetta Pettway and her sisters, Gloria Jean Hopkins and Lucy Lee Weatherspoon, shared

their experience participating in the 1965 civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery. Rennie Y. Miller, who was the secretary of the Freedom Quilting Bee, offered her hopes and concerns for the future of the community, since many of the well-known quilters are in their eighties and members of younger generations are moving away to pursue better employment or educational opportunities. Claudia Pettway Charley, the daughter of quilter, Tinnie Pettway, shared with us her goals for preserving community traditions and current projects promoting the quilts of Gee's Bend. The different backgrounds of people we talked to allowed us to gain a more holistic understanding of the history and the people of Gee's Bend.

In addition to the interviews, we also participated in a three-hour service led by Reverend Clinton Pettway at Ye Shall Know the Truth Church in Gee's Bend. Several church members shared their personal experiences and interpretations of some Bible passages while Reverend Clinton Pettway guided the congregation. In the second part of the service, China Pettway and Deaconess Haley Bendolph led the singing section accompanied by drums and piano. Everyone was singing and moving from their hearts.



During a church service, Mary Lee Bendolph (left) stood up singing, "Look Where He Brought Me From," a song she says came to her from God during a dream. Everyone was clapping and singing with her, and two young local community members played drums and keyboard.

What follows in this book are excerpts from the transcribed interviews as well as photographs we took during our visit. We begin by presenting some of the stories shared by elderly members of the community, then conclude with the views of younger individuals who live in or near Gee's Bend. These materials offer just a sampling of our experience with those we had the opportunity to share time. Before publishing the book, we sent the interview transcripts to the participants to review and edit if they would like. We also asked for their consent to publish excerpts for educational purposes.

Excerpts from the interviews have been condensed and lightly edited for clarity. We selected excerpts that we think offer particular insight into life in the Gee's Bend community, and omitted stories that participants wished to keep confidential. We are not aiming to present a complete overview of the community, and we are aware that it is impossible to do so with the information gathered in just one week. Instead, we hope to offer a closer look into experiences that have shaped the development of the quilting tradition in Gee's Bend. In addition, we hope that this book can help community members record their stories and preserve intangible parts of their cultural heritage.



Now closed, the local K-12 school that Rubin Bendolph Jr. and many people of his generation attended.

Acknowledgments

We are deeply grateful to Rubin Bendolph Jr. for graciously helping to identify participants for the project, scheduling interviews, orienting us to Gee's Bend, taking care of us while we were there, and providing additional support and advice after our trip. We would also like to thank Claudia Pettway Charley for advocating for this project and writing in support of our funding applications. Without them, it would have been difficult to interview so many people in such a short time. We appreciate the Petrucci Family Foundation and the Black Studies Program at Swarthmore College for funding our trip to Alabama to collect the interviews. We would like to thank Andrea Packard, Director of the List Gallery, and Sarah Willie-LeBreton, Provost and Professor of Sociology with a joint appointment in Black Studies, Swarthmore College, for their guidance and support throughout the project. They gave us a way to hear the voices of individuals in Gee's Bend. Finally, we are deeply grateful to all those who participated in the project: Essie Bendolph Pettway, Louisiana Pettway Bendolph, Mary Lee Bendolph, Rubin Bendolph Jr., Claudia Pettway Charley, Loretta Pettway,

Reverend Clinton Pettway, Minnie Pettway, Nathaniel Pettway, Nancy Ross Pettway, Rosetta Pettway, Rita Mae Pettway, Tinnie Pettway, Lucy Lee Weatherspoon, and Frances Young. It would have been impossible to make this book without their willingness to believe in this project, tell us their stories, and allow us to share them with you.



At the time of publishing this book, we are seniors at Swarthmore College. Yixuan Maisie Luo (left) is an Honors major in Studio Art with a minor in Religion. Catherine Williams (right) majors in Black Studies with a minor in Psychology. Rubin Bendolph Jr. took this picture of us standing with Mary Lee Bendolph outside of her house. One of her quilts hangs behind us.

Nancy Ross Pettway



Born in Catherine, Alabama, Nancy Ross Pettway (b. 1936) attended Prairie Mission School and went to state vocational trade school in the Wenonah community of Birmingham, AL. After graduation, she worked in a variety of settings, including a hair salon and the cafeteria at Prairie Preparatory School. She later worked in the Solomon Brothers Factory for approximately 12 years. After she retired in 2003, she joined the Gee's Bend Quilt Collective and has been working there ever since. We interviewed Nancy R. Pettway at the Gee's Bend Quilt Collective, where she visits every day to make quilts and embroideries along with other quilters. She shared

stories about how she moved to Gee's Bend, how she supported her family as a strong woman, and her journey as a quilter. Below are excerpts from our interview.

Yixuan Maisie Luo: How did you start quilting?

Nancy Ross Pettway: I did not quilt with my mother. I started quilting by watching other people. [Points to a photograph of Alonzia Pettway] And see this lady right up there with that pitcher in her hand? She said, "Nancy, we going to start quilting." I said, "I will thread y'all needles when you quilting." She said, "You going to thread the needles or you going to sew?" And so, I start sewing—up, down, up, down, up, down—until I caught on how to quilt. I still do it now she's dead and gone. But I thank her very much for encouraging me to get on and do what I have to do.

I made my first quilt out of some cloth I had in an old trunk that I had bought from the Freedom Quilting Bee—some corduroy. I made that quilt and Bill Arnett [the collector of Southern Black



Founded in 1966 with the help of Father Francis X. Walter, the Freedom Quilting Bee was an outgrowth of the civil rights movement. It provided spacious quilting facilities and income for the local women through commercial contracts with companies, such as Saks Fifth Avenue and Bloomingdale's. Some local quilters started working at the Quilt Collective in 2003. The Freedom Quilting Bee closed in 2012.

folk art], came along and he said, "I heard that you made a quilt." I said, "Yes I did, but I didn't quilt it because I was sick today. Lola and her mother and friends all quilt the quilt for me." And so he got that quilt before I even finished. I had hemmed it, but I didn't finish cutting the threads on it. He took it with him and that quilt ended up in a museum in Houston, Texas. And it went [to museums] all around [the country] for the next five years. I enjoyed doing it. It was very much a help for me because I was down and out—income had got real low. My husband had

passed. I didn't have help from other sources, 'cause my nephew who was helping me, he was stranded [and] going through a divorce with his family. So he couldn't help me like I needed. That lady, [Alonzia], said, "Go home and get all your quilts out your trunk and on your bed, put all the quilts out." She got me started. And I thank her very much. She is in the grave, but I thank her very much.



Nancy R. Pettway's friend, Mary Lee Bendolph, stands by the entrance to the Gee's Bend Quilt Collective. Previously, the building was the site of Gee's Bend Day-care Center. Photo: Andrea Packard, July 2017.

Nancy R. Pettway compared the experience of selling her quilts with the biblical parable about the widow's oil (2 Kings 4:1-7).

NRP: There's scripture in the Bible about how the lady said that her husband had passed and

she was going to sell her boys to pay her debt off. A prophet came along and told her, "Don't sell your children. Get every jug that you can find." The more oil she poured, the more oil come out. Just like [that], I got my quilts out that trunk and everything. Thank God for it. I went to making quilts, I gave away a lot. I didn't hold nothing back. I gave away a lot to those who needed it. Now I got quilts enough to take care of my whole entire family. Thank God, thank the Lord for every bit of it. God had blessed me, just like a miracle. Thank you Jesus! I have a lot to be thankful for.



A church service schedule posted on the information board at the Quilt Collective.

YML: Did you visit museums to see the quilts?

NRP: I sure did.

YML: What was it like seeing them on a wall in museums?

NRP: Oh it was a blessing. Her quilt [Lola Pettway's] and my quilt were side by side in the museum. Yes. I went as a guest with her.

YML: Do you think quilting makes you feel empowered?

NRP: Oh yes, yes, yes. It brought us a long way—a long way. [It brought] a lot of things I never thought I'd have. Never thought I'd have the chance to see. Those quilts brought us a mighty long way. From the poor house—ain't going to say to the rich house—but from the poor house to the better house. There was much improvement on our lives.

Nancy R. Pettway also talked about how the Quilt Collective was managed, and how the quilters divide the income from selling quilts and other products.

NRP: I make my part, she makes her part, somebody else makes their part. Everybody helps with their share of the quilting.

Catherine Williams: So once people buy things from here, does it all go into one big—

NRP: Whatever everybody sell, they get paid for it. Then a portion comes back [to the Collective] and takes care of the lights and the gas and the water and everything we have to take care of. We have to pay for that, too, out of whatever we sell. And so it's a homegrown operation that we, in Gee's Bend, set up.

Towards the end of our conversation, Nancy R. Pettway mentioned that her process of quilting has changed with the acquisition of tools and the improved living conditions in Gee's Bend.

YML: Do you like using a sewing machine more than your hands?

NRP: Yes. I don't want to sew with my hands. Only thing I do with hand sewing is when I do embroidery work. [A sewing machine is] so fast, 'cause while you tryin' to sew a block with your

hand, you could make a whole quilt.

CW: Do you still use quilts yourself?

NRP: Yeah, I still use quilts, but houses now are fixed in a way that you don't have to use one. When I was growing up, me and my sister always put six or seven quilts on the bed in the wintertime. You had to do it 'cause the house was so cold, and the fire died out in the middle of the night. Houses are different now. They got gas and electric systems that keep your house warm, so it makes a big difference. I didn't even put a quilt on my bed this past winter.



The Quilt Collective store offers a variety of products, from potholders to full-size quilts made by many Gee's Bend quilters.

Rosetta Pettway Lucy Lee Weatherspoon Gloria Jean Hopkins

Growing up with two young brothers at home, Lucy Lee Weatherspoon (b. 1953), Rosetta Pettway (b. 1947), and Gloria Jean Hopkins (b. 1955) helped their parents on the farm throughout their childhood. Rosetta Pettway never quilted because she prefers doing farm work. Gloria Jean Hopkins and Lucy Lee Weatherspoon learned how to quilt when they were young and are still actively quilting. They worked in Bridgeport, Connecticut until 1978, when they returned to Gee's Bend for a more peaceful retirement. All three of them are mothers, and most of their children live in nearby cities. We interviewed the sisters on the porch of Rosetta Pettway's house. They shared stories of growing up on a farm in Gee's Bend, dramatic events that happened in their lives, and how they came back to Gee's Bend to retire. The excerpts below



From left: Rosetta Pettway, Lucy Lee Weatherspoon, Gloria Jean Hopkins.

include their memories of exhibiting quilts, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s visit to Gee's Bend, and participating in the 1965 civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery.

Yixuan Maisie Luo: How was it growing up in Gee's Bend?

Gloria Jean Hopkins: Well, when we were coming up, we were really going into the field at a certain age to pick cotton. I started quilting at the age of 13. My mama, she always got a quilt. When you get out of school, you gotta quilt. We really didn't go to school that much. Mostly, we were in the field. Young kids these days have

the opportunity to go to school. We didn't have those opportunities. We had to pick cotton, had to plant cotton, had to do it all when we was coming up. And nowadays, we don't plant cotton. We just sit and sometimes we make quilts—or not.

Lucy Lee Weatherspoon: I used to pick 200-some pound of cotton a day. My father had no boys until later. We were girls and we had to do all the work. We had to do the men's work. We had to take the mule and give him water, we had to feed him, we had to hook him up with a wagon. When it rained, we had a day off to go to school. And after, when the sun came back, we had to go to the field to plant cotton, corn, peanut, okra, squash, tomato—all that stuff.

But really, we had a good time back in those days. Now people say you are not having a good time, but really you were having a good time, 'cause there is so much killing and all that now. When we was coming up, all doors would be open. We had to close no door and lock no door. We almost all the time was up. Then, [we] had no air conditioner, nothing. Had the fan. We used to cook up food to take into the field. You take your food and a bucket, what you call a sot

bucket. And we used to eat from that same sot bucket, like cooked cabbage, okra, salt meat, fat pork. And when we put milk in the jar, we'd all drink out of that jar. We'd drink and pass around to each other. That is what we did when we was coming up. We used to have cows. I used to milk the cow and turn and churn and get the butter off. We used to do it all.

GJH: Our mama used to beat us all the time. We used to go and be home at certain times at night—if you went home after the sun go down, you are gonna get beaten.

LLW: You know, our mama was mean to us. Before she passed, we told her thank you for [how you] brought us up because we ain't going to steal, we ain't no prostitute, we [worked]. When we left home, we went to Bridgeport, Connecticut. We all worked jobs, we bought stuff, paid our rent. We came back home.

GJH: I had four kids. One daughter and three boys. Now they have families, all working. When we were coming up, when you have a baby, you couldn't go to school. You had to stay home.

LLW: Now I look back on my life, I wish I had

gone to school and gotten me an education. But we didn't and everybody says it ain't too late, but I don't want to be going to school old. Can't remember nothing!

Rosetta Pettway: We had it hard, but still it wasn't hard like it is now. I enjoyed my life when I was coming up.

LLW: I did, too. There were no man trying to rape you and have sex with you, put you on drugs or alcohol and all that stuff. So, had a good life.

RP: I don't regret it.

Rosetta Pettway, Lucy L. Weatherspoon, and Gloria J. Hopkins later talked about seeing Gee's Bend quilts in museums.

LLW: We already had been quilting, but when Mary [McCarthy] and Bill [Arnett] came along, they discovered the quilts and said it was art. We all had a bunch of quilts and other stuff. It was 2000 then. We all went off in 2002 [to see the first exhibition of Gee's Bend quilts at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston]. Every time you look, we were going off to different places.

We are making quilt, quilt, quilt. We are going on. That helped us a lot because it was helping us pay our bills. Sometimes we had a sale [and got a check during our trip]. He brought us a long way.

Catherine Williams: After your quilts were put in a museum and sold, did that change how you felt about quilting?

LLW: I still felt the same, you know.

GJH: I sure felt the same.

Rosetta Pettway went on to describe how museums created and sold products and capitalized on the popularity of the quilts.

RP: I went into New York to [the Whitney Museum exhibition] and saw my mother's quilt in it. I needed to take a picture. Anybody could stand next to a quilt and [take] a picture, so I stood next to my mother's quilt and they took the picture. They made everything out of our quilts. They made socks, plates, everything.

YML: Do you have some quilts that you know you will never sell?

LLW: Yeah, I have one that I didn't sell. Bill Arnett wanted it and I told him, "No, I am not gonna sell this quilt, I am gonna keep this one." And I kept it and I still have it.

GJH: I sure got one. That is for my kids for a while.

CW: Did you ever run into any problems or issues with art collectors, like William Arnett?

LLW: Not really. I like them 'cause they used to come in, like you all, and see and buy the quilts. They enjoyed it.

YML: Did they pay for all the quilts when they took them?

LLW: They paid for some of the quilts. I am speaking for myself. I didn't get paid for all my stuff. They got it, but they ain't paid. Some of the things they paid for, some of them they didn't. They sure didn't, 'cause I got a picture [of one of my quilts] now right in my room, but he took [that one] back to Georgia. He didn't pay me for that quilt. He took a lot of them, but I didn't get paid for them. But I don't worry about them though.

GJH: I had some that he hasn't paid me for, but I don't worry about them. And they still have the quilts, though what they did with them I don't know.

LLW: I don't have that kind of heart to hate them for what they do to me. I got to care for what I do and pay for what I do . . . so I still love them. Sure do.



Rosetta Pettway (left), Lucy Lee Weatherspoon (middle), and Gloria Jean Hopkins (right) held up a large quilt by Lucy L. Weatherspoon for us to see. She uses the quilt daily.

YML: Where do you get fabric for your quilts now?

LLW: Sometimes the Collective [has] a lot of stuff. Then we go back and get [fabric] from

Mary Ann [Pettway, who manages the Quilt Collective]. When we go off on a trip, people have a lot of stuff for quilting—pieces. They buy some fabric and give it to you. I have a container full of stuff. When I need it, I pull it out and make me a quilt. I [also] buy mine from Walmart, 'cause sometimes that stuff [people give you] has too much color in it.

GJH: I get all my stuff from Walmart, really.

YML: Are you worried that quilting, as a tradition, will go away in the future in Gee's Bend?

LLW: I believe it is gonna go away, 'cause the young generation—girls and boys—they don't wanna quilt. Their mind is not into that. They are into their phones. That's all they are into. 'Cause back in the old days, we had to [quilt]. We kept it up, and we still do it, you know.

Later in the interview, the sisters talked about participating in civil rights protests, including the 1965 Selma to Montgomery March.

LLW: She [Rosetta Pettway] was in that march across Edmund Pettus Bridge. They sprayed tear gas and water.



Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, an hour's drive from Gee's Bend, was the site of the event known as Bloody Sunday (March 9, 1965). Rosetta Pettway participated in the non-violent march from Selma to Montgomery to protest for the right to vote. The marchers were attacked by state troopers and policemen with tear gas and batons.

RP: Yeah, my knees skinned up. I couldn't walk. They hurt so bad. My mother and father told me when I got home to pull off all my clothes before I go in the house. My coat and things had all that tear gas and stuff on them, so I had to strip before I went inside the house.

LLW: But I went to jail. [They drove us] all the way to Camden, AL. We were singing that song,

"Can't jail us, [we] are going to school . . . can't jail us." All of us were singing. [The police] put us on that bus. I asked, "Mama where are we goin'?" We stayed there three nights. I cried so much.

GJH: They stayed there 'til Sunday. I had to stay home with my two brothers. My mama wouldn't let me go.

LLW: They gave us food in jail—white beans. My mama [was] praying. We laid on that cold floor, hard floor. Only one side to lay on. Oh my God, that was so disgusting! When you put that many women in there, you go in their bathroom, it was all filled with pee. I don't know why I was there for three nights. I didn't do nothing. I didn't eat, [it was] just so nasty up in there. Oh my God. I bet there was something like over one hundred people there in one place. Only women. I think I was about 15 or 16 when I went to that jail. My daddy came to pick us up. I was so happy to see him. I was happy to get off that floor, my God! Martin Luther King Jr. came down here. He even went to church and made a speech, but he didn't really stay. People lined up in the church, and he left at nine o'clock, but he came back again and made a speech.

RP: [When] Dr. King went to Camden, we went marching, too. I remember one time, when we were standing in the middle of the street in Camden, a big old truck came [at us], and I had my hands up [in the air]. I thought, "Oh God!" We couldn't get out of the street when we were marching. My heart was like boom, boom, boom!

YML: How long did you march?

RP: It started in 1962 and we stopped by 1965.

YML: Did you walk from Selma to Montgomery?

RP: I didn't walk that time—I ran. My knees were wailing. So many people who went, they got lost.



On the last day of our trip, we visited Selma and saw a mural that commemorated Bloody Sunday.

Frances Young



Frances Young (left) and her sister, Mary Lee Bendolph (right), at Mary Lee Bendolph's house. During our interview with Frances Young, Mary Lee Bendolph and her daughter, Essie Bendolph Pettway, were also present.

The youngest child among the 17 children of Aolar and Wisdom Mosely, Frances Young (b. 1954) was born in Gee's Bend and stayed there until 1972. She attended Selma University for a year and then moved to New York City. She now lives in Alberta, Alabama. Frances Young came to Mary Lee Bendolph's house for our interview and shared various childhood experiences. She described how she got electrocuted when she was young, the impacts of the incident, and her religious experiences and calling. Below are some excerpts from her stories.

Frances Young: I had a sleeping disorder and I slept a lot. But I do remember my mother and father taking us into the field. We had a large farm. We planted potatoes, cucumbers, squash, okra, and everything. We had a big family. Most of my older sisters was grown and gone. My mother had children while they—my older sister and brother—was having children. They was all gone so I was there with the grandchildren and I was raised up with them.

We worked hard in the field and all that. But I loved it. I liked to do work. We used to race to pick [cotton]. When I got a little older, I used to race to pick 200 pounds. I used to get my sack on my shoulder, and I'd just pick from one row. I would pick it fast 'cause everybody wanted to beat the other one. Every day we picked cotton, and we used to have sugarcane millet. That's sweet. I don't know if you know about that. We ate that for our supper or whatever. We always did something out in the garden or had collard greens mostly.

When we'd come out the field from working, we used to ride on the horses and in a wagon. We had a wagon and a horse, and we would come out the field from working that whole day, and

my mama would have one little thin piece of meat, not much bigger than these two fingers. And cornbread and greens, and that's what I'd eat. But I was so glad to get it, you know?

When I was little, I had so many bad incidents. I was electrocuted, really, to tell you the truth. We was washing clothes, and there was a wire on the washing machine. It was broken at the edge 'round where you unplug it and plug it out back. I took my hand out the water and tried to unplug it. When I put my hand on that, I started to shake, and it picked me up off the ground. My niece was out there. She was screaming and calling my father, and he ran into the house and turned the electricity off, and I dropped to the ground. I still have the prints in my hand from that. Three of them. And I still have the prints from where the mule kicked me. So, the Devil been trying to kill me ever since I was young.

Catherine Williams: After the accident when you were electrocuted, do you remember how it was treated?

FY: I don't even know how it was treated. I can't remember. It wasn't nothing, but bumps came on, and I burst them, and they just dried up,

but I didn't go to no doctor for it. It just went away. That's all. And I don't know whether it did any harm to my body. My hands sweat a lot, but I know a lot of people's hands do sweat. Other than that, I don't know what happened, and I don't know what they did when I was kicked, 'cause I was knocked out under the house. I don't know how long I was out there before they found me, so, there's a lot I just can't explain. I never did do any quilting like Mary Lee Bendolph, 'cause my hands sweat. You see how water is coming out them now? I don't know whether it was from the electric shock or what, but water just poured out from them, so I couldn't quilt. My mother didn't try to make me. All I did was thread the needles for her and put them on the edge of the quilt bed, and they did all the quilting.

CW: Can you tell us about your religious faith?

FY: Well, yes. When I was called to be a preacher, I had this dream that Minister Chris [Christopher Pettway], Essie's husband, was on the pulpit, and I had walked into the church. I was sitting on the front bench. I had the Bible in my hand, and I was turning the pages in the Bible. He was on the pulpit. He said, "Frances,

come on up here. You know you got to preach, don't you?" And I kept on turning the pages, and Pastor Pettway, he said, "Look at her, she's ignoring me!" I regularly turn the pages of the Bible, and then Pastor Pettway said to me—it wasn't his voice, but it was another strong, demanding voice. He said, "Frances, come on up here!" So then, I got my Bible and went up on the pulpit, and when I got up there, all the ministers gathered around me, and I blended in with them. And I think, "I was supposed to be called." But I didn't go and tell nobody that I was going to be a preacher then.

God showed me many other dreams. One time, I asked him to make it plain and clear to me whether he called, 'cause I didn't want to go before. So I had another dream when I was working [at that Hooker store]. I dreamed I was going to work in his store, and Hooker and all the men was in the back. They do backhoe work too. As I was walking in the store, Hooker said, "Frances, you know you've got to preach, don't you?" And I just kept on walking and those young men that were with him said, "Oh yes, she knows, she knows." But I kept on walking, and I ignored him. Now, I done ask God to make it plain and clear to me. How plain and clear

could it be? But, two years passed by and I didn't do nothing. No way I was going to do nothing with these sweating hands. That's the thing I said.

The last dream I had, I was in this big old white building, and Pastor Pettway came and gave me a microphone. You know the one they be preaching with on the platform? And then, he gave it to me and started walking off. All of a sudden, he disappeared. I had the microphone in my hand and I said, "Reverend Pettway, what you want me to do with this?" And then, when I turned around, I saw all of these people and they was looking at me. They looked like they was waiting for me to say something—wanting me to say something—and out of my mouth, I began to tell them about Jesus. And then, all of a sudden, the microphone disappeared out of my hand, and now I gotta to go find this microphone. I went into this big old church, and I was walking down the aisle in the church, and I looked up and saw two little grey microphones down on the floor in front of the pulpit, [which are used by church members when singing]. And then, [I saw] that black microphone, it was sittin' up on the pulpit, and I said, "Oh, I done find that microphone! That's Reverend Pettway's micro-



During church service on May 27, 2018 at Ye Shall Know the Truth Church, Frances Young (right) was sitting next to the pulpit while China Pettway, Deaconess Haley Bendolph, and Reverend Clinton Pettway sang.

phone—it don't belong to me—but I done found it!" That's when I told Pastor Pettway about the dream, and I said, "Well, what do you think—I'm going to be one of the praised?" He said, "No, it's going to be more than that." I wanted him to tell me that I was going to be a preacher. I wanted somebody else to say it, you know? Those dreams was letting me know, but it took a lot to convince me 'cause I didn't want to do it. I was nervous with my hands. I had all kinds of thoughts, but when God gives you a dream, they have meanings. God's got a plan for you, but it still took me a long time [to accept the calling]. As soon as I woke up from the dream, guess who called me? Pastor Pettway. I said, "Oh Pastor, I think God has called me to preach, and I accept the calling."

Although Frances Young is not a quilter, she grew up using quilts. We asked if the quilt patterns influenced her dreams.

FY: To me, the quilts were just something to keep me warm. I didn't ever think nothing of it. People now make a great deal out of the quilts, but to us, we just had something to keep us warm in the wintertime. It wasn't no big deal, you know?

Essie Bendolph Pettway: It was just a symbol of something mama had done to keep us warm.



Detail image of a quilt, Pump Handle Spin Top (1954), by Aolar Mosley, mother of Frances Young and Mary Lee Bendolph and grandmother of Essie Bendolph Pettway.

Rita Mae Pettway



Rita Mae Pettway (b. 1941) grew up with her grandparents, Ed O. Pettway and Annie Pettway, on their farm, and started doing chores when she was five. She started quilting at the age of 12 and has lived in Gee's Bend almost all her life. Rita Mae Pettway still quilts frequently. Many of her quilt tops are handsewn. We interviewed her at the quilting shed that was built by her daughter, Louisiana Pettway Bendolph. During our interview, she shared her daily routine, her connection with Gee's Bend, and how quilting has become part of her life. After our interview, we watched Rita Mae Pettway handsew a quilt that she was working on and saw some quilts in progress at her house next to the quilting shed.

Rita Mae Pettway: My grandma, Annie Pettway [taught me how to quilt]. When she started teaching us, she [let us] start quilting in the corner. Later, she let us get on the big part of the quilt. If we didn't do it right, then we have to take it loose and redo it.

Yixuan Maisie Luo: So you have been quilting ever since. Was there any point when you felt, "This is tiring," and you didn't know how to keep going? Or did you always think of quilting as part of your life?

RMP: No, it is just part of my life that I like to do. [Quilting] helps keep my mind together and keep my hands from being stiff. [My hands] were stiff before but, you know, they don't feel that bad as they used to.

Catherine Williams: After the quilts were exhibited in museums and sold, did that change how you saw yourself as a quilter?

RMP: It didn't change much for me. I just like to do it, and it gives me comfort in my life. When stuff is going on, I just sit and start putting some pieces together. It was just something I loved to do, and I still like to do.

YML: Could you tell us a little bit about your daily routine? What do you do in the morning, and when do you usually start quilting?

RMP: When I first wake up, I do my prayer. And then I fix my breakfast, and eat after that. I sit there for a while, and then I get up around about ten, and I go to the nutrition center. I [think] the best thing to do [is to] just sit back and relax and do some different stuff instead of quilting every day. I quilt some days in a week and some days I don't.



Rita Mae Pettway shows us quilt tops she handsewed. Many of the quilts she makes are for her grandchildren.

YML: Do you see yourself as an artist?

RMP: No. It is just something I like to do.

YML: How do you choose what colors to put next to each other? By how you feel?

RMP: Just how I feel. That is what I put in the quilt. It might not look good to my daughter, but it looks good to me. Whatever color I can get.

YML: What about the land—or places—that you love? What are some very special things about Gee's Bend to you?

RMP: There are a lot of special things. I grew up around my grandparents, so the land does not belong to me. We were just staying here, keeping the household. I was the only grandchild, so I was the one who checked over them when they got sick. And my aunt and other people, they lived in New York—they went to work up there. I went to New York and stayed there for two weeks. And then I came back to the house, and I have been here ever since—years and years. I didn't like [New York]. I like being in the country.

Tinnie Pettway Minnie Pettway

Growing up as sisters on a farm in Gee's Bend, Tinnie Pettway (b. 1936) and Minnie Pettway (b. 1939) started quilting at the age of seven or eight. They have lived in the community for most of their lives and are still quilting today. We interviewed Tinnie and Minnie Pettway at their house. They shared stories about growing up on their farm, traditions and rituals in the community, what it was like to see Gee's Bend quilts in museums, and visiting doctors in Camden after the Gee's Bend Ferry was eliminated by Wilcox County officials. Our interview lasted approximately three hours. During our conversation, Tinnie Pettway, who writes beautifully, also read to us from a stack of her diaries and poems. Minnie Pettway generously gave us potholders they had made as gifts.

Minnie Pettway: I was the oldest of five children and my parents farmed, and so, when we got old enough, we farmed. That farming



consisted of picking cotton. My dad planted everything because he was a very hard worker, so he made sure we had plenty to eat. He planted everything that he could plant, and we had to work and gather that stuff and put it up for the winter. It was hard. We went to work before the sun came up, pretty much all the time, and when we came home, it was always dark because my dad didn't intend to beg, and he didn't have to borrow money. He meant for us to work—work for what we got. And that's what we did. We raised all the food—the chickens—and they had eggs. And other things: we had pigs. He was a hunter and a fisherman, so he kept us cleaning fish. We didn't like all that hard work, but we got used to it, because that's the way it was during that time.

In the wintertime, they would call men from the community to come help, and they would kill the pigs and scrape the hair off and wash them and cut them up. My daddy would put them in the smokehouse and salt the hams and the pork shoulders and the ribs. And the excess fat, the ladies would cut it up and put in a great big black washpot and make the cracklings. And then, we would take the chitlins—I mean the intestine—and we would wash them out. I remember when we didn't have a refrigerator, my momma would take the chitlins, and she would cook them and put them in jars and seal the jars up and put them in a thing called a smokehouse, and during the winter, that's what we ate, the chitlins.

Tinnie Pettway: And not only that, they would grind up the lean part of the meat.

MP: Right.

TP: And make sausage and we would stuff—

MP: —Some of the intestine.

TP: We'd stuff them in the sausages, and they lasted. We didn't know anything about bacon. There was no bacon.

MP: When the meat cured in the smokehouse, [my father] would get some type of wood and smoke it. And that would finish curing it. My mom would just go into the smokehouse all through the year and cut cured pork meat and cook it for us, and that's what we ate. And like I said, we go to the store for ham now. We didn't have to do that. She went into the smokehouse and got it and that's what she would cook. The peas, the collard greens, the turnip greens, and the beans—that's what we cooked it with.

And then the chickens, we killed a lot of chicken. But that was something for Sunday dinner. You didn't eat chicken every day of the week. You might've had eggs, but you didn't eat the chicken every day.

TP: We would take the pig bladder that hold the pee, and pour it out. When they killed hogs, [they would] rinse that bladder out and put a cane in there with a hole in it. And we would blow that bladder up.

MP: And that was our balloon.

TP: And we'd play with that, we just keep bouncing it together, and it grew bigger and

bigger. Once, my mama even painted one of those bladders. We hung it up. When they killed the hog, they would cut the liver right off the hog, and put that by the fire and let the fire cook it a little bit and we'd be eating that liver. It'd be burning our hands and mouth but we'd be eating it—put a little salt on it.

MP: You'd have to see it to realize what we talking about.

TP: And when we would plant our garden, my dad would dig these big holes in the ground. We'd go to the hen house, get that poop, and we'd go shake it up and down—all down the row—and then we would cover over it—

MP: —Because that was our fertilizer.

TP: And that's right, it was fertilizer. And then we'd sit the onion on top of it, and the roots would go down and grab that poop. When we pulled the onions up to cook them, those roots would be all around poop, and we just cut it off and cook the onion. And we didn't think nothing about it.

TP: And we had plenty [of] peanuts, and my

dad had a lot of all kinds of fruit trees. So then a lot of food just grew wild, you could go in the field and pick blueberries.

MP: And pick, like, blackberries, blueberries, plums, persimmons, black walnuts, mulberries, grapes.

TP: That's right, and those things we didn't have to plant. But, although some people didn't have food, we always had much more than we could eat. And my dad was crazy, that's what I said, 'cause he just worked us to death and he never got tired.

MP: And then he would plant fields of watermelon—big watermelons. Just to give it away. Now, we had to do the work, but he'd planned to give it away. My brother and I, we would go down and make a big patch [for the watermelons], and we'd load up a truck and just go around to people's house sometimes, just give them watermelons.

TP: That's right.

MP: Everything had a process. With the sweet potatoes, once you do it—plowed them up and

got them out the field—then you had to spread them out. My dad would spread them out for a couple days in the sun to draw the water out. Then you got pine straw and put them down on it. And they looked like teepees. They'd put them 'round this stick in the middle. They'd just stack sweet potatoes up all around that stick. And then you put straw on top of that, and then you go get corn stalks that you put all the way around that teepee. And then you'd throw dirt up on it, and the sweet potatoes would last all winter in that teepee.



While talking about farm life in Gee's Bend, Minnie Pettway showed us a big onion that she had just harvested from her field. She and her sister still grow some vegetables and fruits on their land.

MP: You didn't start school until after everything was gathered in.

TP: —In October.

MP: Right, so we didn't hardly start school until about October.

Catherine Williams: Since you would get back really late from the fields, when did you learn to quilt? Did you learn from your mom?

MP: When did we learn to quilt? Oh, that was our punishment. My mom taught us how to quilt because if we didn't do what we was told to do, Mom would punish us and make us sew quilts.

TP: We started quilting when we was about seven, eight. She used to just cut the pieces, cut up all the quilt pieces. We would take a needle and stick it through and string it. And then, after a while, she started the sewing. And of course, we weren't sewing right. She'd pull the thread out so many times because our stitching was too long.

MP: At that time, we weren't sewing quilts for sale. We was sewing for our beds.

TP: Because we had one fireplace.

MP: Right, that was our fireplace behind that black thing. [Now that] we are too old to haul wood, we got a gas heater.

TP: In all the rest of the house, there was no heat, and it was cold. So those quilts were a necessity. It had nothing to do with art. Well, my mom was competitive [with] the other women. She tried to make [the most] beautiful quilts, and she tried to make more quilts than the other women. [Afterwards], they'd lay their quilts right on the fence to show off what they had done.

MP: And sometimes your bed might have three or four quilts on top. When you get ready to go to bed, you get under three or four quilts. That's what kept you warm in the wintertime.

TP: That's exactly right.

MP: It's just that sometimes they'd be so heavy, when you're a little person you can hardly turn over.

TP: And it was five of us. Two of us girls slept together, and two of my brothers slept together,

and then another one slept somewhere else. So the three quilts that [my mom] put on our bed served two people.

MP: And the same with my brothers, right? But then, my mom would always have a lot of quilts, and every spring of the year, all around we had a wire fence, we had to take all those quilts out and air them out.

TP: Every year—it kept them smelling fresh.

CW: How did you wash the quilts?

MP: We had a black pot, one of those big black pots you put a fire under, and you put the quilt in. And you chuck up and down. And you do that to help clean them.



The type of black pot that families in Gee's Bend used to clean quilts.

TP: And they made the soap—lye soap—and they put that lye soap in the pot of boiling water, and you just stand 'round that pot and you chuck and you chuck 'til you got the stuff as clean as you could. But all the stuff the people used, well, the people of Gee's Bend didn't know they were crafty—artistic—but they were. When we think about it now, there were a lot of very artistic people, because everything people needed, they made. My daddy never bought a washboard. He would take a board and some chisels and he would chip and chip. The women had no money, but they would go out and scrap cotton after everybody finished picking cotton and they took it to the gin house. And the gin people would buy it and sometimes they'd make a little—fifteen, twenty dollars. As much as they could.

Yixuan Maisie Luo: What was it like for you selling your quilts when art collectors, such as William Arnett, came to the community?

MP: The women of Gee's Bend were glad because they didn't [have much] money.

TP: [Bill Arnett] got the money, and he controlled all the money.

When we got to those museums [to see Gee's Bend quilt exhibitions], you had people lined up—as if the President is coming—on the side of the street. And by the time we'd get off the bus, oh we got such a great audience! People coming and hugging you, I tell you, some of them cried, they were so glad to see you. Because Gee's Bend quilts got very famous, and people weren't joking. They were so glad to see us, and I told my aunt, I said, "Look at these crazy people, and those old quilts." That was when I first start traveling. The quilts didn't mean that much to me, so I wasn't seeing them as art, but I learned to appreciate them as art as we went on. At first, they were just quilts made out of old scraps and whatever you could find. My mom used to find pieces on the side of the road, and she would take them and wash them. Then she would put [the scraps] in the quilt. [After those trips], we started our own little quilting thing and we named it "That's Sew Gee's Bend."



Minnie Pettway shows the label for their brand, That's Sew Gee's Bend, that they sew onto their products.

Tinnie and Minnie Pettway also talked about funeral and marriage rituals in the Gee's Bend community.

MP: And now we're going to start telling you about the way people used to bury people out here.

TP: Oh yeah.

MP: If Tinnie would die today—

TP: Don't say me! Say somebody else.

MP: If a person would die like this afternoon or tonight, then they had to bury them the next day, 'cause there was no funeral home to embalm them. The men would get a wagon and go cross on the ferry to Camden and buy a casket and come back and they would bury them the next day.

TP: And we didn't have to worry about who it was. We didn't have no phone, but we had two things that let us know who was dead. The bell would start to ring.

MP: If it was an old person, the bell would ring

a long time. If it was a young child, it would ring a short time. And then when they start, when you hear the bell ring, all you had to do was go to the door and listen to where the crying was coming from.

TP: [You would hear] screaming and chanting, "Oh Lord, my mama gone! I ain't going to see Mama no more, oh Lord!" and they would scream—sometimes the whole family would be out there. They'd be chanting.

When people got married down here, they would get together and they would go around to every house, and they'd say, "Hello, we ready to get married, give us something."

MP: Sometimes what they gave them was an old hen or rooster. Or, if they had canned some food, a jar of jelly.

TP: Nobody sent invitations, they didn't even try and call it out in the church.

Tinnie and Minnie Pettway also described the scarcity of health care in Gee's Bend and the way racism particularly impacted women when they were pregnant or giving birth.



Tinnie Pettway read to us from the diaries and poems she has written since she was young.

TP: My aunt was a midwife in our family. I think if they hadn't [made it illegal], Minnie probably would have been a midwife, because our great-aunt—my dad's aunt—was a midwife, and my dad's sister was a midwife. Then they made it illegal. My aunt took one girl over to Doctor Paul when she was about to have a baby. That baby was going to be breech born, but that doctor wouldn't see that girl. She stayed there [to wait], but she had to bring the girl back home. The next day, the girl hadn't had the baby. Three days [went by] and she just couldn't have the baby. So my aunt said she just had to get some nerves. She ran out to that doctor, she told him, "Doctor, if you don't do something for this baby, this girl, this baby will die!" So finally, the doctor

did something—turned that baby—and so the girl soon had her baby. The doctor would make them clean up behind the baby. [My aunt] was so mad. She left and didn't clean up after the baby was born. But I'll tell you, it was something. Black people been doing all that stuff, laughing, grinning when the white folks yell at them, and picking up the money off the counter when they threw it on the counter because they don't want to touch your Black hand.

MP: That's right, they would never let their hand touch your hand if you give them money, they would just sling it on the counter.

TP: That's right, that's stuff they did.

MP: That's just the way it went.



A corner of Tinnie and Minnie Pettway's house.

Claudia Pettway Charley



Claudia Pettway Charley works on a quilt. Photos here and on pages 34-39 appear courtesy of her.

As the only child of Tinnie Pettway, Claudia Pettway Charley (b. 1965) helped her mother with many tasks, played saxophone, and had a interest in fashion while growing up in Gee's Bend. She now lives in Birmingham, Alabama, and operates That's Sew Gee's Bend, a business that promotes the tradition of Gee's Bend quilting. She also created the website: www.sewgeesbend.com. We had the chance to interview Claudia Pettway Charley over the phone.

She shared her experience growing up as an only child, baptism rituals in the community, how she manages her quilt company, and her hopes for preserving the quilting tradition and history of Gee's Bend.

Yixuan Maisie Luo: Can you tell us about growing up in Gee's Bend?

Claudia Pettway Charley: We were known for farming and quilting. Farming to eat and quilting to stay warm, to survive during the winter months because there was no heat, one fireplace in the house. That is pretty much all you had and the rest of the house was ice cold. So quilting was something that the women mostly did in Gee's Bend for their families. It was not done by patterns because they could not really afford patterns. They found their materials from old clothing, things that had already worn out, maybe things found within the community. And so that is pretty much how things became so abstract. I guess that is the beauty of it. There weren't any fabric stores or anything like that. They pretty much used what they had and the knowledge that they had. Just put it together the best they could, and it turned into this

beautiful art form that we have now.

Catherine Williams: After the quilts started to be sold as art, how did that change either how you felt or your perception about them?

CPC: I could not believe it, because again, we are simple people in Gee's Bend. So it is something when people look at a quilt, which was never intended to be artistic, and say, "This is beautiful, this is worth something!" When museums and galleries exhibited Gee's Bend quilts and said, "They are worthy. People need to see what is coming out of the community," it was a shock for everyone. No one ever expected that it would turn into what it has—and it is still going on. Now, I get emails asking me, "Can you come here? Can you speak there? We would love to have some of your products to show here." So it is different. It definitely brought Gee's Bend and the state of Alabama to the forefront, I think, as far as recognition is concerned.

Maybe some of the quilters were compensated fairly, some probably were not. I would love to see more things develop in Gee's Bend because there are needs—things that I think we should have had in the past—and things we should

have now. It is a work in progress. I don't think it stopped us from quilting. I just think that now we have a product that others see [as] worthy. We will keep pushing and making sure that quilting does not become a dying art. And so we are proud to know we are trailblazers in the area of quilting and art. We have a long way to go as a community, but I am not gonna stop until something changes. We need a little bit more.

YML: Considering that there is not the need to quilt to stay warm now, and many members of the younger generation are living away from Gee's Bend, what are some ways to make sure that quilting doesn't become a dying art?

CPC: One thing is that a lot of people, in my category and younger, have moved away from Gee's Bend because they have to make some way of living, what I would call regular jobs. We'd be traveling to Selma, Alabama, or Camden, Alabama, both of which are limited in important opportunities. I think that for me, you just have to find the time [to quilt], you have to. Not being there every day in Gee's Bend [doesn't] mean you cannot quilt. Although I didn't grow up as a quilter, I can quilt and a lot of people who are my age have done so. I communicate with a lot

of people in my community, and they are definitely getting on board and saying things like, "Yes, my mom has quilts that need to be finished, so I am definitely gonna start working on those—and even doing some things for sale." So, I don't think that we are going to lose out, because a lot of people are moving back to Gee's Bend. It is exciting to see the process. It may be a little bit slow, but I don't think we should count it out at all.



Bohemian Blues (2014), by Claudia Pettway Charley.

YML: Some women who we interviewed talked about how they don't really plan out the quilts, and if they don't like it, they just unthread the whole thing. Can you talk about the process of sewing pieces together and taking them off and seeing how colors and shapes work? Have you done that, or did you see your mother do that?

CPC: I have seen my mother and my aunt take some things apart and maybe use them for something else. For me personally, if I start on a project and I find that I am not sure, most times I will stop the project completely and start on something new—because at the particular time, maybe I am just not feeling the direction that I am going, from the inside. Not to say that it could possibly be a bad project. It could be my mood and that [particular] color choices may not be good for me today. Maybe I am not feeling yellow, or maybe I am feeling black, not something of happiness. I am just thinking like, "No, I am not doing this today. I am gonna just put you right over here, in your little place. I am gonna do something else." So that is pretty much what I do, and I don't necessarily have a particular thing in mind. I do know that there are maybe colors I want to work with. I may think, "I wanna do a nine patch, or I am going to do strings today." [I might] not necessarily know how it is gonna turn out, but at least I know that today I am going to do a piece and this is what it is going to be.

A lot of the quilts for me are abstract, and I tend to use smaller pieces, which makes the process last much longer. Usually, I will work on a seg-

ment of a piece if I am doing a huge quilt. And later, I may take another segment of the same colors and do something a little bit different. I am much slower than most of the older quilters simply because I don't quilt 24/7. I am busy, running a company, marketing Gee's Bend, promoting, meeting with people, and I am still a wife, a mom, you know, so my time is limited. Whereas people like my mother and some of my cousins, they just quilt all day long. We laugh about it. I have a cousin, she quilts so much faster. We sit down together, and sometimes we do a workshop. She would just be going all day long, and I might be still on one block, but eventually, it will come all together. I never take anything apart, but I will stop and start with something else if it is not going in the direction I think it should.



Claudia Pettway Charley (left) demonstrated handquilting as a guest artist at the Grand Bohemian Art Gallery, Birmingham in March 2016.

CW: Do you prefer sewing by hand or do you use a machine for the most part?

CPC: I use a machine only for potholders. As far as the quilting, it is all by my hand unless I have a client who says, "I don't really care if it is done by a machine." Then I would use a machine. But it is difficult for me to make a quilt all on machine. The top I've done on a machine. That is basically for reinforcement. A quilt has pretty much three parts. I call it a sandwich. So your top layer is the part that you would see. That is the design of the quilt. That is put together with a machine, but when you talk about the inside—the batting—and the back side, and putting all those three layers together, that is done by hand. That is what makes Gee's Bend stand out. They are handquilted and that is the beauty of it. Someone actually had to put a needle on one side and come up the other side. I think that is also one of the reasons why our quilts are collectable.

YML: A lot of the individual quilters are becoming famous and their quilts are being collected by museums. Do you think that has influenced people to quilt less as a group in the community? For example, a lot of the women used to

make quilts together at the Freedom Quilting Bee and they would sell them, but it seems like there are currently fewer people making quilts together and it is more like an individual act. How do you think marketing the quilters as individual artists has influenced people?

CPC: I remember that even though my grandmother and others would come to the house and gather together to quilt, the quilts still belonged to a certain woman. It is easier for them to quilt individually [now] because they are also preoccupied with other things they are having to do. To make them set a time to get together to quilt might be a little more difficult now. But even at the Freedom Quilting Bee, back in the 1970s, when they were doing quilts for Bloomingdale's or Macy's, they would get together and would work on those projects for those particular retailers. So it was different when they had a project that they need to complete and they had so many units that they were expected to have done. But now, they don't necessarily have [to create specific products for retailers]. They quilt at home or they may sometimes quilt with the community, and they sell according to what they have. It is not a [commission], like, "Okay, right now this is what we need, this is what we want."

I think this is the reason why more women quilt individually.

Later, Claudia Pettway Charley shared her experience of baptism and other religious rituals in Gee's Bend.

YML: For a lot of the people we have interviewed, religion is very important. Could you talk a bit about the role religion plays in your life and in the process of quilting?

CPC: I think that because we didn't have a lot as far as the community's concerned, God was the source of all sources and we believed that wholeheartedly. For us, religion was it. Everybody, mostly, went to church on Sundays, because times was tough for the older generation, they had no one else to get them through. For me, definitely that was part of growing up. On Sundays, I went to church. Back then, unlike now, we sought out God. We didn't just stand up and join the church. Our revivals were actually weeks of going into the woods or a quiet place to pray from sunup to sundown—as long as you are there with nature and God. You'd hope that He would hear you and deliver you from all your sins and that you would be able to

receive and be baptized, and that's what we would call "getting religion." That was the term for it. So revival was a process for me, of praying with other people, older and younger, hoping that He would touch our hearts and we would believe and receive.



Many people we interviewed, such as Tinnie Pettway, Minnie Pettway, and Mary Lee Bendolph, regularly attend Ye Shall Know The Truth Baptist Church. Photo: Andrea Packard, July 2017.

I remember as a little girl staying out there for hours praying, and at night going to church and sitting there and going through what would have been, for outsiders, a ritual. But you were there, and your pastor would preach and the sisters (well, I call them sisters, but they were members of the older generation), they would come by the mourning bench and they would start to

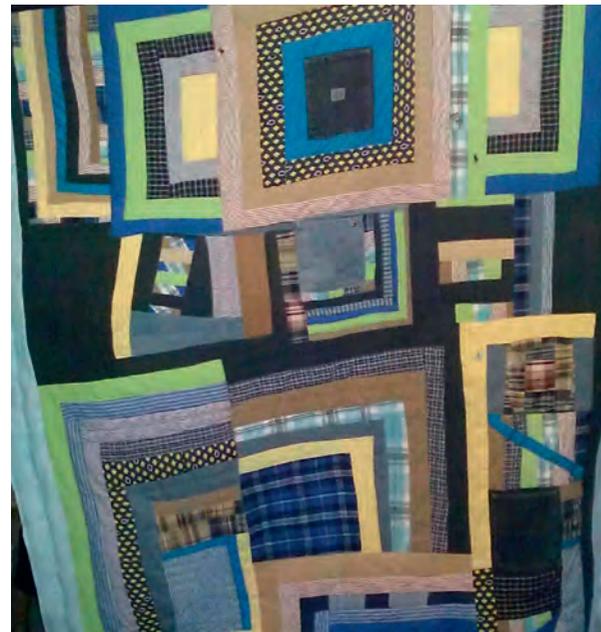
sing and mourn these melodies. And it was so powerful. You are there, you are on your knees, actually, in the church, and once you are "delivered," you would jump up. Some would get up fast, some slow, some just really filled with the Holy Ghost's power, and that person on that night, they would say, "got religion."

You would hear the person who had just been converted say, "Thank you, God for saving me," and things like, "Thank you, Jesus!" And they would come to people's houses, and people would congratulate them and shake their hands and hug them. This is the type of the place where I grew up. This is my community. This is my Gee's Bend, and unless you lived there, these are things that you would never know about or understand.

I didn't get baptized in what they call nowadays modern church pools. In Gee's Bend, we were baptized in a creek. Everybody would come together once a year in August, back then in my time, and they would put together the sheet-like tents. They would tie them from one tree to another tree. There would be the boys' dressing room and the girls' dressing room. The pastor and the deacon board members, they

would actually be in the creek. All the members of the church, which was at the time, Pleasant Grove—and even members of other churches—would come, and they would be on the banks of this creek standing up. It was a powerful experience. You were actually dressed in a white garment, which would be a sheet that your family had put together—kind of like a robe. They would tie your hair and you would be taken to the creek, and they would just walk you down to the water. The pastor would be at the end because he was the one who was going to baptize you. And you would just walk down and people on the bank would start singing, “Take Me to the Water.” Every time someone did it, they would sing. The preacher would be standing there and he would ask you the questions, of course, about confessing and giving your life over to Christ, and you'd be like, “Yes!” and he would say, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,” and when he said, “Holy Ghost,” you were dipped into the water. You were not sprinkled. People were standing, holding your nose and taking your back, and you would go under the water and come up soaking wet. And people are shouting in the water. You never seen anything like it before.

Then, your whole life would change—the way you were supposed to treat people, the way you responded, and everything. That is how powerful religion is, because that was what we trusted. We believe in going to church, we believe in reading our Bibles, and we believe the Bible studies, and things like that. Back at that particular time, again because of where we were, we didn't get the best understanding of the world. The little that our preachers knew, they taught, and we read. So we believe and still do. I would not trade that experience with anything.



An untitled quilt (2012) by Claudia Pettway Charley.

Later, Claudia Pettway Charley shared her plans for sharing and preserving individual stories and the broader history of Gee's Bend.

YML: When we were interviewing your mother, Tinnie Pettway, she showed us a stack of her writings and told us that she wants to make a book out of them. Is that something you would do soon for her?

CPC: We have several projects in mind and that is one that we definitely want to get out. There is a lot of information out there, but not enough about the day-to-day living and lifestyle of Gee's Bend, which is something that no one could really tell you about unless you have experienced it yourself by being here. So we are excited about this project. We definitely want to do whatever we need to do to get the information out there. I think the stories need to be told for everyone to really understand Gee's Bend.

YML: What are some other projects you had in mind?

CPC: We want to publish my mom's writings. We also want to do audio projects or maybe short films.

Sometimes, one of the questions that people ask is, “What makes Gee's Bend quilts so different from other quilts?” Mostly, they were made from how the women felt on that day—it was therapeutic. There were no psychologists or psychiatrists, but the quilters just getting together and putting those quilts together and being able to talk freely without judgement. That was a support group—putting the value of the community and the quilts together. Art, be it a statue or a painting, is a reflection of an artist's feeling. In our case, it is a quilt. That is something that needs to be heard.



From left: Minnie Pettway and Tinnie Pettway (Claudia Pettway Charley's aunt and mother).

Rubin Bendolph Jr.



Rubin Bendolph Jr. (middle) stands with his mother, Mary Lee Bendolph (left) and sister, Essie Bendolph Pettway, in front of quilts by Essie. Photo: Andrea Packard, 2017.

The youngest son of Mary Lee Bendolph, Rubin Bendolph Jr. (b. 1962) is dedicated to preserving and promoting his mother's quilts and the tradition of quilting in Gee's Bend. He introduced us to many community members, explained the intention of our project, and showed us places in Gee's Bend that had special meanings for him. We interviewed him on May 26, 2018 before he returned to his home in Huntsville, Alabama, where he works as an engineer. The quotations that follow touch on just a few of the many topics we discussed. We omitted our questions here to allow more space for his observations.

"The old people used a lot of home remedies back when I grew up, like the mini-weed tea. My grandmother was a herbal healer in a sense. When we would get tummy aches or diarrhea, she would take a dried cow dumping and put it in a cheesecloth and boil it in water. Then, she would strain it in another cheesecloth to remove any debris, leaving just tea. Next, she would add other ingredients to give it flavor. If at that time I had known it was cow manure, I would have not have drunk it. I guess all the minerals and nutrients in the manure coated the stomach."

"Each October, my dad would slaughter a couple of hogs. After slaughtering them, he would lay the hogs on the homemade tables to cut the meat up into sections, then salt the meat down and hang it in the smokehouse using hooks. My dad would start a fire in the homemade furnace outside the building using hickory or applewood to smoke the meat. Smoking the meat would prevent it from spoiling during the winter, because we didn't have a refrigerator.

The smokehouse was built during the same time period the Roosevelt houses were. Around 1937, they built approximately 100 of these houses here in Gee's Bend, and the house next

door to my mom, where my brother lives, is one of the first four Roosevelt homes built."



A smokehouse where Gee's Benders used to cure meat.

"At times, food was quite plentiful. Even though we all in the community had the same thing, no one had more than other. I think you heard Louisiana Pettway Bendolph talk a little bit about that yesterday. Everywhere you looked, there were plentiful fruits and vegetables. God had trees growing, like plums, and vines growing, and scuffadimes, and berries and fruits. That whole fence was full of fruit—blackberries. So that kept us from starving, because back in the Depression time frame, the merchants from Camden, they came over and took everything that people had."

"When I was young and not old enough to be a church member yet, I felt like I was being forced or dragged to church, because I didn't understand what God's grace was then. Church, for me, was much different than what it is now. On Sundays, you wouldn't see people hanging around out front on the block like you see now, because the sounds that came from the church, the singing and praying were just so powerful. It would penetrate your soul in a sense. It would cause your flesh to crawl. This caused the sinners and gamblers to try to get out of reach of the church sounds. But no matter where in the community you went, you could literally hear the church singing and praying. Today, people still sing, but not as powerfully as back in those days of my youth."

"Back in the day when I was growing up, the church had a bell, and if someone died, one of the members of the church would go up and ring the bell a certain number of times for an older person and fewer times for a younger one. This was our way of communicating—to let others know what was going on—but now they don't ring the bell anymore."

Louisiana Pettway Bendolph



Louisiana Pettway Bendolph (b. 1960) grew up on a farm with her mother, Rita Mae Pettway. As one of the younger generation of quilters, she often takes inspiration from the Gee's Bend tradition of "housetop" designs. Many of her quilts have been collected by institutions, including the Philadelphia Museum of Art. She has demonstrated quilt making widely, including at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Even so, she considers herself as a quilter instead of an artist. She currently lives in Theodore, AL, and visits Gee's Bend often. What follows are some excerpts from our wide-ranging conversation.

"I found that if you keep some of the things that you grew up with, you're reminded where you come from, and how you got where you are."

"When we started traveling with the quilts, people started asking questions and wanted to know about them. It makes you realize that this was something that my great-grandmother, my mom, and her mom, and my aunts had done. I realized that it was something I had inherited from them. You know, a lot of people talk about money, they talk about jewelry. Our parents didn't have that to leave us. They left us with being able to do things with our hands."

"Here in Gee's Bend, women never really had a voice. They did what they were told, and that was whether it was by a father, or by a husband. You didn't get to do what you wanted to do. But when the quilts became nationally recognized, these old women, who had never really left Gee's Bend, were being honored in museums—and how special was that?"

"I tell people: I love coming home, 'cause every time I come—it's just something about Gee's Bend—It's just something about it."

Essie Bendolph Pettway



Growing up with seven brothers in Gee's Bend, Essie Bendolph Pettway (b. 1956) worked on a farm and learned how to cook, garden, and quilt from her mother, Mary Lee Bendolph. She is one of the few quilters of her generation to remain living in Gee's Bend. Two of her quilts were exhibited in fall 2018 at Swarthmore College.

"It was kinda hard, really, growing up here, but I enjoyed my life in this community because it is a loving community and people worked together. I say we grew up as a family. I say this is a family community. We were loved by everybody, and

everybody knew everybody's name. Everybody knew everybody's children. Everybody's children respected the older people."

"In the Depression time, the merchants from Camden came over and took everything that people had. We had to share with one another. When people killed a hog, everybody in the neighborhood used to get a piece of that meat. I couldn't understand how in the world everybody was fed with that one hog and we still had enough meat."

"When I was a child, old people used to get up in the middle of the night, some starting from about nine o'clock [at night] until sunrise. You could hear people praying, moaning, and groaning, and calling on the Lord—asking Him to take care of their children, to raise their children, to teach them how to be adults. They were asking how to treat one another, how to love one another, how to respect one another. You could hear that praying throughout the night. It helped us. We look back today and see that our foreparents prayed for us, and that is what we need to do for our children—pray for them and teach them about God—because there is a generation that has forgotten about God."



This book was published by the List Gallery, Swarthmore College on the occasion of the concurrent exhibitions, *Piece Together: The Quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph* and *Responses to Gee's Bend*, which were presented at Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, September 6—October 28, 2018.

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Opposite: Loretta Pettway shows her quilt.

Back cover: Rita Mae Pettway displays her quilt in progress.

