

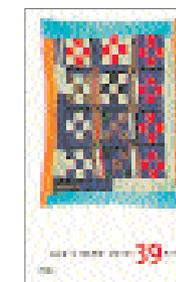
By Arianne Cohen
Photographs by Livia Corona

How to Quilt An American Stamp

The women of Gee's Bend, many of them descendants of slaves, were just doing what their mothers and grandmothers had taught them to do. And then fate stepped in.

In January 2004, 15 men and women convened in a hotel near the U.S. Postal Service headquarters in Washington, D.C., and began sifting through submissions. This was the Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee, an amalgamation of historians, academics, artists, and others charged with evaluating the thousands of ideas for stamps that pour in each year, then selecting a handful to be issued. They review nominations for baseball players, bygone politicians, paintings, pop stars.

In that session, they considered a case for quilts—quilts made by the elderly women of Gee's Bend, Alabama. How those quilts traveled 745 miles from a backwoods hamlet to the nation's capital—and, now, to the upper-right-hand corner of envelopes nationwide—is a tale that's nothing short of amazing. >



THE LEADER
Opposite page:
Mary Lee Bendolph,
at home in Gee's
Bend, is the quilting
bee's queen bee.
THE LEGACY
Left, clockwise from
bottom: Stamps
featuring the designs
of Ruth P. Mosely,
Patty Ann Williams,
and Bendolph.



TEAMWORK

Above, from left: Bendolph, Arlonzia Pettway, Nettie Young, and Annie Mae Young gather at a quilt frame to stitch together the three layers (top, batting, and lining) of a quilt. Below, clockwise from top left: Stamps based upon the quilts of Lottie Mooney, Arlonzia Pettway, Jessie T. Pettway, and Loretta Pettway.

The town of Gee's Bend (also known as Boykin) has looked much the same for most of its two centuries: population fewer than 700, few houses, few stores. There, in the early 1800s, slave women began "piecing up" bedspreads—cutting rags into piles and then sewing them into quilts. The tradition was handed down, and handed down again. "I've been making quilts since I was 12 years old," says Mary Lee Bendolph, 70, the unofficial leader of a community of perhaps 45 quilters, many of them lifelong friends. "I seen my mama piecin' quilts, and I wanted to. I didn't have anything to make a quilt with. My first quilt, I used old raggly pants, shirts, skirts, flour sacks, sugar sacks, all kinds of things."

For generations, the quilts were viewed purely as practicalities, not artwork. "I used the quilts to keep warm," says Arlonzia Pettway, 83, whose surname is a vestige of local slaves. "Sometimes you had to put three or four on your bed to keep warm. You could see the sunrise through the wall cracks."

If the quilts were utilitarian, they were still not your grandmother's casual throws. Each one, in the Gee's Bend way, had personal expression woven into its design. Fabric might have been taken from a loved one's clothing—a baby's first shirt, a husband's work pants—which infused each quilt with both the mood of its maker and the stories of her family: a living

history. "The quilts have *joy* in them," says Pettway, who has made more than 2,000 quilts for her friends, her 9 children, and her 74 grandchildren and great-grandchildren. "When I make 'em, I imagine that my family enjoyed the clothes. When I make a quilt, it keeps me from feeling lonely. It lifts up your spirits."

Enter into the saga William Arnett, a historian of African American art, and his son, Matt. In 1997, they were looking at a book of portraits of quilters when they came upon a photo of Annie Mae Young, 77, and one of her creations. "We couldn't take our eyes off it," says Matt Arnett. They drove down to Gee's Bend from Atlanta unannounced. "We showed her the photograph, and she thought she might have burned the quilt." After a good search, Young found it and offered to give it to them for free. They insisted on paying. She said, Well, maybe \$25? The Arnetts gave her \$3,500.

That purchase spurred a father-son buying spree. "Word got around Gee's Bend that crazy white people were overpaying for quilts," says Matt Arnett, who eventually helped organize the quilters into a business collective. When the Arnetts had bought more than a hundred quilts, they showed the work to elite institutions such as the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, both of which would



How to Stamp a Stamp

The last stop on the quilts' long journey



APERSON IN EACH QUILT

Gee's Bend quilts are made largely freehand—few guidelines—with shape, color, and design left to the maker. They reflect mood. Those of Loretta Pettway (above) feature blues and grays. Sadness pervades, hinting at a hard life.

eventually stage exhibitions. The *New York Times*, reviewing the show at the Whitney, called the quilts “some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced.”

Once seen by the wider world, the women's handiwork became a phenomenon; today, some quilts sell for more than \$20,000, half of which goes directly to the maker. The pieces generated prints, postcards, books. The women—many of them descended from slaves—began to realize their own surreal but very welcome American Dream. In Gee's Bend, extensions were added onto several homes.

Early in 2004, Derry Noyes, an art director with the U.S. Postal Service, comes into the story. She'd spotted the dazzling quilts in a catalogue from the Corcoran Gallery of Art and brought the images to the Stamp Advisory Committee. The board was duly impressed. “The quilts tell a story through their extraordinary color combinations, bold patterns, and improvised designs,” says committee chairman Ron Robinson. “They are the ‘art of the people,’ mirroring the energetic spirit of America.”

This past March, the Postal Service scanned digital images of 10 quilts and printed 500 million stamps on elephantine rolls (see sidebar). The quilt stamps will be available at post offices next Friday.

The women of Gee's Bend and their artistry constitute a remarkable, even astonishing American story. But for their part, the quilters view this like just about everything else—simply and personally. “Everyone needs stamps, just like quilts,” says Loretta Pettway, 64. “It makes me feel good.” ■

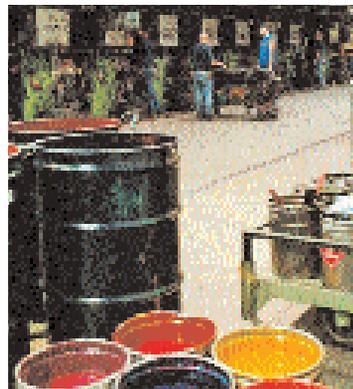
What is now called the United States Postal Service was created in Philadelphia by Benjamin Franklin on July 26, 1775. The first U.S. stamp ever issued was an 1847 five-center featuring, fittingly, Franklin. Today, the Postal Service, the country's third-largest employer after the Department of Defense and Wal-Mart, prints 35 billion stamps a year in denominations ranging from a penny to \$14.40. All that postage has a face value of \$10.8 billion. Here's a look at the making of the quilt stamps, among the 23 commemorative issues of 2006.



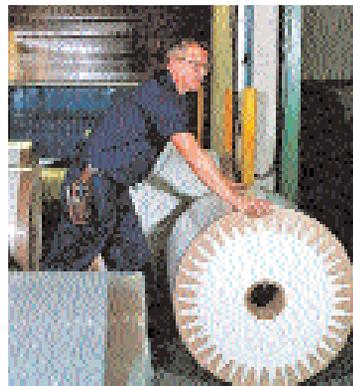
2. First, photographs of the quilts are scanned. The colors are separated digitally, then cylinders, each of which picks up only one shade of ink, are engraved.



4. Tom Ludington runs the splitter, which cuts the roll in half. Some stamps are sold individually or in coils; the quilts will be offered in booklets.



1. Cans of primary-color ink await loading into printing machines at a plant in Wisconsin. Four colors are used in today's stamps; the 1847 Franklin was a rusty brown.



3. Press helper Bill Toutant rolls in stamp paper. After printing, the roll will weigh some 900 pounds and contain 3 million stamps, worth (at 39 cents each) \$1.17 million.



5. If manager Dan Koch finds any flaws, adjustments are made on the press. The finished stamps can be bought at post offices or online at www.usps.com/shop.