

# Quilting and Family Traditions in Gee's Bend, Alabama

Grade Level: 3-5

## Subjects

Art, English language arts, History

## Themes

Cultural preservation, Identity, Resilience, Social justice

## What Students Will Uncover

The importance of remembering our past through traditions, art, and stories

## Essential Questions

- What are traditions and why are they important?
- How do traditions carry on from generation to generation?
- How do quilts tell stories?
- How can art portray love and beauty?

## Lesson Overview

Students watch a film about five African American women who are quilters living in Gee's Bend, Alabama. Students will engage in learning experiences that explore the tradition of quiltmaking and the ways in which cultural traditions, history, and stories are passed down from generation to generation.



COMPANION FILM

### While I Yet Live

by Maris Curran

## Materials

Online access to the film "[While I Yet Live](#)" by Maris Curran

[Google Earth](#) or map

[Project Zero's Visible Thinking | I Used to Think... Now I Think](#) (PDF)

[Note-taking sheet](#): Film Analysis tool

## SDGs



## Standards & Frameworks

[SEL Competencies](#)

[C3 Framework](#)

[CCSS ELA Standards](#)

## Key Issue

The cultural tradition of quilting provides meaningful ways to honor and document family history and traditions.

## Lesson Objectives

Students will:

- Understand the significance of cultural traditions
- Explore how quilts have multiple purposes
- Learn ways that history and culture are passed down from generation to generation

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# Background

## Putting the Photo Essay in Context

*This section is intended for the educator and provides information about the film and the connections between the women quilters in Gee's Bend, Alabama, voting rights, and the civil rights movement.*

Gee's Bend, Alabama, is a town with a complex cultural and historical heritage. As a result of both geographic and socioeconomic conditions, the Black community of Gee's Bend has struggled to achieve economic independence, viable access to voting, and social equality. In 1935, Gee's Bend became part of the Federal Government's Resettlement Program, which sought to help farmers struggling with extreme poverty. The old Pettway plantation was bought and then rented to the tenants who were descendants of the original enslaved African Americans who were forced to work there<sup>1</sup>. An isolated and impoverished community, Gee's Bend—officially named Boykin after a white segregationist—is surrounded by water on three sides. For years, town members depended on a rickety ferry to transport them to Camden, the nearest commercial town and polling place, where residents were systematically denied their right to vote. After the Voting Rights Act of 1965 passed, the legal barriers to voting were removed. However, the ferry many depended on for transportation to polling places was suddenly taken out of commission by white officials in 1962 in an attempt to make it more difficult for the community of Gee's Bend to travel to Camden. To vote, many residents had to take a forty-mile overland route to Camden, and most

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1. Donna R. Causey, "Gee's Bend was a part of Federal Government's Resettlement Program in 1935 and a part of Roosevelt's New Deal plan." Alabama Pioneers, n.d.

community members did not have access to a car.<sup>[2]</sup>

The ferry service was finally restored forty years later in 2006. Although the physical as well as the legal path to voting largely cleared, the town continues to suffer from economic and social inequality and the ongoing effects of historical injustice.<sup>[3]</sup>

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## **The quilts reveal complexities of their social, economic, and cultural history and represent a triumph of resilience and creative artistry.**

During the historic 1965 march on Selma, known as ‘Bloody Sunday,’ Civil Rights leader John Lewis, along with other activists, led a march over the Edmund Pettus Bridge to advocate for equitable voting rights, including for those in Gee’s Bend. At this time, only two percent of African Americans in Dallas County, Alabama, were registered voters.<sup>[4]</sup> Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. also encouraged the people of Gee’s Bend to try to vote. He said, “You are somebody. Cross the river for Freedom.”<sup>[5]</sup>

*While I Yet Live* by Maris Curran tells the story of five African American women who live in Gee’s Bend and are descendants of enslaved people who worked on the Pettway Plantation and still bear the Pettway name.<sup>[6]</sup> The women are acclaimed quiltmakers who have been recognized for their artistry and storytelling. Their work has been on exhibit at the Smithsonian, in museums around the world, and has been featured on U.S. stamps. The quilts reveal complexities of their social, economic, and cultural history and represent a triumph of resilience and creative artistry.<sup>[7]</sup>

Quilts have been used by people around the world to express important historical, cultural, and religious symbols and stories within their patterns. For African-American quilters, quilts were used for many various purposes such as warmth, decoration, and as an artistic medium to tell their own unique stories. For the women of Gee’s Bend the art of quilting has been passed down from generation to generation from the early 20th century to the present. “Gee’s Bend quilts carry forward an old and proud

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2. Clyde Haberman, “[Martin Luther King’s Call for Voting Rights Inspired Isolated Hamlet.](#)” *The New York Times*, March 8, 2015.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Christopher Klein, “[How Selma’s ‘Bloody Sunday’ Became a Turning Point in the Civil Rights Movement.](#)” History.com, updated July 18, 2020.

5. Amie Wallach, “[The Fabric of Their Lives.](#)” *Smithsonian Magazine*, October 2006.

6. Causey, “[Gee’s Bend was part of...](#)”

7. Wallach, “[The Fabric of Their Lives.](#)”

tradition of textiles made for home and family....And while they learn from one another and know each others' styles, they strive to be themselves. Each quilt is both the signature of an individual and the banner of their community."<sup>[8]</sup>

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## Lesson

### Setting the Stage: Lesson Introduction

*Engage students with this exercise before introducing the story.*

1. Share with students pictures of quilts using the website [Souls Grown Deep](#).
2. Explain that a quilt is a few layers of fabric sewn together. Smaller pieces, called patchwork, come together to create different designs. Some quilters use a quilting frame, a structure that holds all of the parts of the quilt.
3. Share with students the following quote about quilts from Mensie Lee Pettway. Quilts can be used as blankets. They are also pieces of artwork and are used for wall decorations.
4. Explain to students that some quilters include pieces of clothing from their family members, such as a dress from a grandmother.
5. If you were to make a quilt, what pieces of fabric from your home or from your family would you include? How might this represent beauty? How might this connect you to your family heritage?

**“A lot of people make quilts for your bed, or to keep you warm. But a quilt is more. It represents safekeeping, it represents beauty, and you could say it represents family history.”**

Mensie Lee Pettway

*Stitchin' and A Pullin': A Gee's Bend Quilt* by Patricia McKissack

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8. [Gee's Bend Quilting Collective](#).

## Engaging with the Story

*Before watching the film, introduce students to the story and provide specific tasks of observation.*

1. Introduce the film by telling students they will watch a short film about five African American quilters who live in Gee's Bend, Alabama. The women featured in the film learned the craft of quilting from their ancestors and continue to pass down the tradition.
2. Show students Gee's Bend, Alabama, on a [map](#).
3. Give students the [note-taking sheet](#), which is organized into these four themes: family, art, culture, and history. Ask students to think about these themes while watching the film and write down any notes.

## Delving Deeper: Discussion Questions

*Encourage students to examine the themes and issues raised in the story. (Note for educators: Just as quotes from a book or text are used to prove an analytical thought, students use the film to justify their reasoning.)*

1. Watch the film, *While I Yet Live* (15 minutes).
2. After viewing, go back through the film and pause it at the noted times. Ask the following questions:
  - 4:41** - Ask students to describe the women in the film, their homes, and their experiences and feelings about quiltmaking. How did the women share how quilting was part of their family heritage? Describe the family stories that are shared throughout the film.
  - 6:53** - What fabrics did the women use to make their quilts?
  - 12:27** - "You can look at a quilt and it can give you a feeling of something. You know it can give you love. You can see love. You can see peace. You can see joy in different quilts." How do quilts function as pieces of art?
  - 13:28** - How do the quilts get passed down from generation to generation?
3. When the class has finished viewing the film, ask:
  - Do you think a quilt is a form of art? Why or why not?
  - How do quilts themselves tell stories?
  - What questions would you want to ask the quilters in the film?

## Reflecting and Projecting

*Challenge students to consider the film's broader implications and to integrate their knowledge and ideas from various points of view.*

1. Ask students to visit the [International Quilt Study Center and Museum](#) on the Google Arts and Culture platform. The museum is home to the largest public quilt collection. Have students choose a quilt in the collection and gather the following information:
  - a. What is the artist's name?
  - b. When was the quilt created?
  - c. What are the dimensions of the quilt?
  - d. What is the quilt's location?
  - e. What do you like most about this quilt?
2. Ask students to interview a family member to learn more about a cultural object, or artifact, in your home. Does your family have an object or artifact that has been passed down through generations? Ask your family member what the object is, how old it is, where it came from, and who owned it in the past. Students can write a short paragraph describing the object, or they can share their findings with the class.
3. Ask students to create their own drawing (online or on paper) of a quilt square. Use these questions to help students think about their design: What would you like to include in your quilt square? How might your quilt include the place you live? How might your quilt square reflect a family tradition that you would like to preserve?

## What's Happening Now

*Provide students with follow-up activities and resources to explore current events and updates to the story.*

1. View some of the Gee's Bend quilts online at [Souls Grown Deep | Gee's Bend Quilts](#).
2. In February 2020, in recognition of Black History Month, Etsy partnered with Souls Grown Deep, a foundation whose work is dedicated to the preservation of artwork made in the South by African American artists. The work of nine women quilters from Gee's Bend is now [featured on Etsy](#). Their shops provide quilts, cloth face masks, and other items.



## Take Action

with the UN Sustainable Development Goals

### How will you address issues of inequality?

*Many individuals today continue to face challenges gaining fair access to vote in their communities.*

1. Share with students that in the film they just watched, the people in Gee's Bend have had a difficult time voting in their community. [Look at the map of Gee's Bend](#) and discuss what might be challenging for Gee's Bend residents trying to vote in Camden.
2. During the civil rights movement, the residents in Gee's Bend relied on the Gee's Bend Ferry to take them to Camden to register to vote. [Watch this short video](#) that shows the ferry landing on the Camden side of the river. What do you think would happen if the ferry was closed on voting day?
3. The ferry was, in fact, shut down in 1962, which made voting very difficult for residents. The drive to Camden was 40 miles away, taking up to 2 hours just one way. The ferry would remain closed for over forty years. How do you think this impacted the community and their access to voting?
4. Share with students that American political leader and voting rights activist Stacey Abrams has served for eleven years in the Georgia House of Representatives. She continues to fight to ensure everyone, especially those in the Black community, has a fair right to vote. In the 2020 election, she initiated a massive voter registration effort, effectively increasing new voter registrations. Share with students this [encyclopedia source](#) to learn more about fair voting rights.

*[SDG 10: Reduce Inequality Within and Across Countries](#)*

## Companion Texts

These texts are recommended by teachers who are currently using *While I Yet Live* in their classrooms.

- *Leaving Gee's Bend* by Irene Latham
- *Stitchin' and Pullin' A Gee's Bend Quilt* by Patricia C. McKissack

## Resources

- "[Gee's Bend was a part of Federal Government's Resettlement Program in 1935 and a part of Roosevelt's New Deal plan.](#)" Alabama Pioneers, 2020. (Website)
- "[Michelle Obama.](#)" National Portrait Gallery, 2018. (Organization)
- "[Fabric of Their Lives.](#)" *Smithsonian Magazine*, 2020. (Website)
- "[Gee's Bend Pastimes to Patchwork Tour.](#)" Sweet Home Alabama, 2020. (Website)
- "[The Quilts of Gee's Bend: A Slideshow.](#)" National Endowment for the Arts, 2020. (Organization)
- [Online quilt designer.](#) PreQuilt, 2020. (App)

## Connections to National Curriculum Standards and Frameworks

### SEL Competencies (CASEL)

- **Self-awareness.** The ability to accurately recognize one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior.
- **Social awareness.** The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior.

### College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework

- **D2.Civ.4.3-5.** Explain how groups of people make rules to create responsibilities and protect freedoms.
- **D2.Civ.2.3-5.** Explain how a democracy relies on people's responsible participation, and draw implications for how individuals should participate.
- **D2.Civ.12.3-5.** Explain how rules and laws change society and how people change rules and laws.
- **D2.Geo.2.3-5.** Use maps, satellite images, photographs, and other representations to explain relationships between the locations of places and regions and their



environmental characteristics.

- **D2.Geo.4.3-5.** Explain how culture influences the way people modify and adapt to their environments.
- **D2.His.6.3-5.** Describe how people’s perspectives shaped the historical sources they created.
- **D2.His.9.3-5.** Summarize how different kinds of historical sources are used to explain events in the past.

### **Common Core State Standards (CCSS)**

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.1.** Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.4.1.** Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 4 topics and texts, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.4.5.** Add audio recordings and visual displays to presentations when appropriate to enhance the development of main ideas or themes.

## Film Analysis Tool | While Yet I Live

**Directions:** While watching the film, pay attention to the following themes: family, art, culture, and history. Write down any evidence from the film (quotes, images, etc.) connected to these themes.

|                |                |
|----------------|----------------|
| <b>Family</b>  | <b>Art</b>     |
| <b>Culture</b> | <b>History</b> |

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## We Want to Hear From You

We'd love to hear how you integrate (or plan to integrate) this lesson into your classroom. What were your favorite takeaways and student responses?

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