



Quilting, Art, and Connection to Place

Grade Level: 6-8

Subjects

Art, English language arts, History

Themes

Bearing witness, Cultural preservation, Identity, Resilience, Social justice

What Students Will Uncover

The significance of quilting in Alabama and its contribution to art, culture, and society

Essential Questions

- How do traditions preserve culture and history?
- What is the significance of Gee's Bend, Alabama, in the civil rights movement?
- How does quiltmaking reflect cultural stories and traditions? How does quiltmaking reinforce bonds between generations?
- What is the purpose of art? Can art have a practical purpose?

Lesson Overview

Students watch a film about five women quilters living in Gee's Bend,



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 \(PDF\)](#)

"[Quilts](#)" by Nikki Giovanni (Poem)

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

SDGs



Standards & Frameworks

[SEL Competencies](#)

[C3 Framework](#)

[CCSS ELA Standards](#)

Alabama, and explore the cultural significance of quilting and its connection to place. Students engage in learning experiences to consider the significance of the women quilters and their relationship to Gee’s Bend, including the history of voter suppression in Alabama during the civil rights movement.

Key Issue

The quilters of Gee’s Bend, Alabama, share cultural heritage stories through their art and their connection to place and share their fight for voting rights.

Lesson Objectives

Students will:

- Analyze the importance of quilting as an art form
- Recognize how history and culture is passed down from generation to generation
- Explore the connection between the civil rights movement and the quilts of Gee’s Bend
- Understand how Black communities’ access to voting rights have been suppressed

Background

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 there¹. 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

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.

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 community members did not have access to a car.^[2]

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.^[3]

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.^[4] 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."^[5]

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.^[6] 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.^[7]

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.](#)"

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 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."^[8]

Lesson

Setting the Stage: Lesson Introduction

Engage students with this exercise before introducing the story.

1. Ask students to read Nikki Giovanni's poem "Quilts."
2. Ask students to describe the symbolism of quilts in the poem.
3. Read the last three stanzas aloud. Ask students to describe the purpose of a quilt across multiple generations. What memories might quilts contain?

**When I am frayed and strained and drizzle at the end
Please someone put me in a quilt**

**That I might keep a child warm
And some old person with no one else to talk to
Will hear my whispers**

**And cuddle
Near**

Nikki Giovanni "Quilts"

Engaging with the Story

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

1. Tell students that they will watch a short film called *While I Yet Live* by Maris Curran. The story is about five African American women quilters living in Gee's Bend, Alabama, who are preserving their family tradition.

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

2. Ask students to look up Gee’s Bend, Alabama, on a [map](#). The town is officially called Boykin. Share that the residents of Gee’s Bend have long struggled to gain fair voting access due, in part, to the geography of their town. What do you notice about Gee’s Bend geography? (*Note to educators: the Background section provides additional information for reference and context.*)
3. Before watching the film, ask students to share with a partner their thoughts about quilts. What is their purpose? Why might individuals want to preserve quilts?
4. Give students the [note-taking sheet](#), which is organized into the following four themes: family, art, culture, and history. Ask them to write down any notes, observations, and quotes from the film that stand out to them.
5. Watch the film [While I Yet Live](#) by Maris Curran (15 minutes).

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. Ask students to complete the [note-taking sheet](#) after watching the film. Engage the whole class in a discussion by inviting students to share their thoughts and observations about each theme (family, art, culture, and history). What were their favorite parts of the film?
2. Building off of students’ observations, lead a discussion using the following prompts centered on the four themes:
 - Describe the women in the film, their homes, and their experiences and feelings about quiltmaking. How do the quilters express joy and love for their art form?
 - Describe the family stories that are shared throughout the film.
 - Gee’s Bend—35 miles southwest of Selma, Alabama—is home to 700 residents, most of whom are descendants of enslaved people who worked for generations in the fields of the local Pettway plantation. How do the women feel about living in such a small tight-knit community? Describe the advantages and challenges of living in a town where everyone knows each other.
 - Share with students that there has been an ongoing struggle for the people of Gee’s Bend to have equitable and fair access to voting due, in part, to their geographic location. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. visited Gee’s Bend in 1965 and encouraged residents to register to vote and to participate in the march to Selma, Alabama. Why do you think Dr. King insisted on having the voice and vote of this community heard?

- How does the act of singing connect the quilters?
 - How do quilts themselves tell stories?
3. Organize students into pairs or small groups. Use [Project Zero's Visible Thinking Routine](#) (pdf), "I Used to Think ... Now I Think ...". Ask students to reflect on the nature of quilts after learning about the Gee's Bend quilters and have them share their responses with the whole class.

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. The quilters use different styles to create the quilts. Some include a patchwork method using old pieces of fabric from work clothes and other sources. Learn more about this method by visiting Gee's Bend Quilts on the [Souls Grown Deep](#) website. Souls Grown Deep is an organization that "advocates [for] the inclusion of Black artists from the South in the canon of American art history." Select three quilts from this collection that you enjoy. Research information to learn more about the quilter, her life, and the quilting method she uses. Either write a short essay (2-3 paragraphs) or create a short presentation to share your findings.
2. The Gee's Bend artists and their work were discovered by a collector in 1997. To learn more, read "[The Equals of Klee and Matisse'—the Alabama quilt-makers who shook America](#)" in *The Guardian*. Respond to the following prompts in a short essay: Describe what the collector did with the quilts. How did the quilters respond? Do you think that the quilters were honored appropriately for their work? Why or why not?
3. 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. Choose a quilt in the collection and gather the following information: artist name, date, dimensions, and location. What drew you to learn more about this quilt? Describe the story of the quilt. Share your findings with the class.

What's Happening Now

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

1. 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 African American artists in the South. 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.
2. Follow Gee's Bend Quilters on Instagram [@geesbendquiltmakers](#).



Take Action

with the UN Sustainable Development Goals

How will you learn about the issues of voter suppression?

Many individuals today continue to face inequities and voter suppression in their communities.

1. 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 in the Black community, has a fair right to vote. Read more from [*Time Magazine*](#) about her work in the 2020 election, where she initiated a massive voter registration effort that significantly increased new voter registrations.
2. Abrams founded the organization, [Fair Fight Action](#), which aims to promote fair elections around the U.S. The organization has documented voters' stories. [Watch one of the voter's stories](#). Share the story you watched with a family or community member and ask if they have experienced or witnessed voter suppression.

[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.

- *Belle, The Last Mule at Gee's Bend: A Civil Rights Story* by Bettye Stroud
- *Leaving Gee's Bend* by Irene Latham
- *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* by Susan Goldman Rubin

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)
- "[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. (Website)
- [Online quilt designer.](#) PreQuilt, 2020. (App)
- Brown, Nadia E. and Bry Reed, "[Stacey Abrams's success in Georgia builds on generations of Black women's organizing.](#)" *The Washington Post*, December 10, 2020. (Article)
- [Museum of Fine Arts Houston.](#) (Organization)
- [International Quilt Study Center & Museum.](#) (Organization)

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.2.6-8.** Explain specific roles played by citizens (such as voters, jurors, taxpayers, members of the armed forces, petitioners, protesters, and office-holders).

- **D2.Civ.14.6-8.** Compare historical and contemporary means of changing societies, and promoting the common good.
- **D2.Geo.2.6-8.** Use maps, satellite images, photographs, and other representations to explain relationships between the locations of places and regions, and changes in their environmental characteristics.
- **D2.Geo.7.6-8.** Explain how changes in transportation and communication technology influence the spatial connections among human settlements and affect the diffusion of ideas and cultural practices.
- **D2.His.1.6-8.** Analyze connections among events and developments in broader historical contexts.
- **D2.His.5.6-8.** Explain how and why perspectives of people have changed over time.

Common Core State Standards (CCSS)

- **CCSS.ELA-SL.9-10.1 and SL.11-12.1.** Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 [or 11-12] topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- **CCSS.ELA-SL.9-10.5 and SL.11-12.5.** Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understandings of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.1.** Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

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.

Family	Art
Culture	History

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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