

THE AFRO-AMERICAN HERITAGE BICENTENNIAL COMMEMORATIVE QUILT
Blog by Sheridan Collins, August 28, 2020

In the late 1960s, race riots had exploded in Portland's Black community stemming from alleged police brutality and racism. Subsequent police shootings of Black youth increased the animosity. In the 1970s, some 200 homes and businesses in the mainly African-American neighborhood of Albina were being razed for the controversial expansion of Emanuel Hospital. Starting in 1970, under the plan of conservative school superintendent Robert Blanchard, schools in Black neighborhoods were being closed and Black students bused to white schools. In 1975, the Calmax Symposium held in Corvallis on "The Status of Blacks in Oregon" decried the "Second Reconstruction Era" where Blacks were not involved politically or economically, and were afraid to speak up for each other.

In this environment, 15 African-American women in Portland came together in 1974 to create a quilt to celebrate Black history. Quilts are creations of fabric remnants reused and sewn together in a new format and design. Quilting has endured through history as a common social activity among women of all ethnicities and races, who gather together to make beautiful, functional textiles while building community. The 15 women in Portland dedicated their quilt to the past, present and future of democracy and their Black heritage. Their plan was to complete it by the time of the United States Bicentennial in 1976.

The process challenged them to decide which of many Black success stories to tell and how many historical facts to include. The quilt was divided finally into 30 blocks, spanning Black history in America from the time of Columbus in 1492 to the era of Hank Aaron in 1974. Red, white and blue stripes divide each block from the others, unifying the quilt aesthetically and underscoring the overall patriotic message the quilters intended--that Black history is a stirring and integral part of American history. Each woman created a block, and several sewed more than one. The group ultimately decided to call it the Afro-American Heritage Bicentennial Commemorative Quilt (AAHBCQ), going so far as to copyright the name to protect the artistic value of the quilt.

After completion, the quilt was donated to the Oregon Historical Society in a well-publicized ceremony and exhibited. It then traveled to Harvard University, the Department of State, and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. It has been seen only rarely since then, last exhibited here in 1997. **As part of Portland Textile Month, it will be on display at OHS October 1 to November 2, 2020.**

To profile the quilters is to learn something about how they rose above the racial injustice of the times as Portlanders. As African-Americans, they all suffered degrees of racial discrimination in their daily lives and yet made huge contributions to strengthen Portland's social and political fabric. This quilt represents their pride in their country and their race, and their hope for unity in community, and so can offer lessons for Portland today.

The women represented the best of their African-American community in Portland. Their names can be found in Who's Who in the West, the Dictionary of American Women, the Oregon Journal's 10 Women of Accomplishment, and many other volumes. It was **Jeanette McPherson Gates** who called them together with the idea of the project, and she continued as one of the co-chairs throughout the two years of work. More than anything else, the women wanted this quilt to be a means of teaching people about Black history.

Education was a keystone of Jeanette Gates' life. After growing up in New Orleans, she graduated *summa cum laude* from West Virginia State College in 1948 and the following year got a Master's degree in business from New York University. With her husband, Jeanette Gates lived and worked in Japan for two years during the postwar occupation. Later, returning to Portland, she would teach business and accounting at the college level and develop curricula for Portland Public Schools and Portland State University.

Despite many disappointments in a racist society encountered first in Louisiana and then in Oregon, Jeanette Gates fought injustice where she found it, according to her daughter **Sylvia Gates Carlisle**, the only living quilter and now a medical doctor in California. In 1970 her mother filed suit in U. S. District Court in Oregon against Georgia Pacific for hiring discrimination, and won. "She was strong," Sylvia says. "You had to be."

Sylvia says it was difficult for her growing up Black in Portland. Her mother, though, fought against invisibility. She would not let Sylvia read books like Tom Sawyer that portrayed Blacks in a subservient and ignorant way. Sylvia remembers her mother taking issue with the curriculum in Portland Public Schools for its poor telling of Black history. Jeanette Gates put together an alternative curriculum and made Sylvia present it to Superintendent Robert Blanchard. For years Gates used her money from the Georgia Pacific settlement to bring two noted historians to Portland each summer to teach teachers about Black history.

Sylvia's block, #13, celebrated the Emancipation Proclamation signed by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863 ending slavery in southern states--her image of a clenched fist standing for the determination of African-Americans to gain equality in all aspects of American life. Jeanette Gates quilted three blocks: Block #7 and #19 in honor of her idol 19th-century writer, speaker, abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass, and Block #12 titled 40 Acres and a Mule, a reminder that most Blacks remained landless and economically disadvantaged years after emancipation.

Gladys Sims McCoy was another of the quilters, well-educated with a master's degree in social work. She created block #25, recalling the Supreme Court decision of *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education* which struck down segregation in public schools. In a second block, #4, she honored poet Phyllis Wheatley, a slave from Senegal whose owner encouraged her to learn to read and write and who in 1773 became the first Black in America to publish a book of poetry. While Wheatley's

might not be a household name, Gladys McCoy's is well known in Oregon. In 1970 she became the first person of color elected to public office in OR, winning a spot on the Portland Public School Board.

Gladys McCoy had grown up in the Jim Crow South where racism was blatant. In Portland, she recognized that racism was just as strong but more subtle. Still, from the school board she was elected Multnomah County Commissioner two times in a row, and then Multnomah County Chair twice. In 1979, the county named the health department building for her.

According to McCoy, things were not worth doing if "others are not better off as a result." The Gladys McCoy Award was established in Portland in 1994, a year after her death, given to an individual who has exemplified her life by making major contributions to civil rights, human rights, affirmative action, children and youth, family issues, community, neighborhood, local political party, local government, environmental issues and/or education. It shows the strength in her family that Gladys's husband William McCoy in 1972 became the first African-American to win a seat in the Oregon legislature.

The quilt points out that Black men have been part of American history for centuries. In Block #1, **Martha Payne** profiled Alonzo Pietro, the Black pilot of the Spanish ship Nina, who arrived here with Columbus in 1492. She worked for years for United Way. In 1977 she was named Oregon Mother of the Year. Her son was one of the first Black men to graduate from the Air Force Academy. Martha Payne quilted two more blocks of great importance to Black history, memorializing in #14 and #15 the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery in all the United States, and the 14th Amendment giving civil rights to former slaves.

Quilter **Kathryn Hall Bogle**'s achievements were in journalism, starting while a student at the University of Oregon when she sold an article to the Christian Science Monitor about racial slurs. Of the quilters, Bogle had lived in Oregon the longest at 65 years and could trace her Black family lineage in Oregon back the furthest, to 1863. As she built her news career, though, she couldn't manage to get hired as a fulltime reporter. In 1937 she told about that and other problems being Black in an article for The Oregonian titled, "An American Negro Speaks of Color." The Oregonian paid her for the piece--the first time The Oregonian ever paid a Black person for an article.

Kathryn Bogle continued to write as a freelancer for Black papers like The Scanner, the Observer, the NW Enterprise in Seattle, and the Pittsburgh Courier. In 1993 she was received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Portland Association of Black Journalists. Kathryn Bogle chose to quilt Block #21 recognizing the Black National Anthem "Lift Up Your Voice and Sing," and Block #24 honoring President Harry Truman's 1948 Executive Order integrating the Armed Forces. Her son Dick Bogle followed his mother in a news career after eight years as a policeman,

becoming the first Black on-air TV reporter in the Northwest. He was later elected to the Portland City Council and was a major supporter of jazz in the city.

Quilter **Mildred Love** put together the only block specifically connected to Oregon, #6 about Tom York. York took part in the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1804-06, as a slave of William Clark, learning sign language and acting as interpreter in interactions with the Indians. York was given his freedom at the end of the expedition. Mildred Love also quilted Block #8 of Harriet Tubman who worked the Underground Railroad to free dozens of Black slaves, and #30 of Hank Aaron, the Home Run King of professional baseball in 1974. After the quilt was finished, Love was thrilled to finally meet Aaron when he came to Portland.

Quilter **Rebecca Miller** got to meet the subject of her block #27, too, Leontyne Price, when Price visited Portland in 1975. Born in Mississippi, Price learned to sing from her mother, developing into a world-famous soprano, signing with the Metropolitan Opera Company in 1960, and winning numerous awards, including 19 Grammys and the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Altogether, Rebecca Miller made five quilt blocks, more than any other quilter, and had the idea of red, white and blue striping between the blocks. Her other blocks included #9, The Dred Scott Decision, the Supreme Court's horrendous ruling under Chief Justice Roger Taney that a slave was not a citizen and couldn't sue for his freedom, as well as #10 of Booker T. Washington, founder of Tuskegee Institute; #16 about the 15th Amendment which gave Blacks the right to vote; and #20 of Mary Church Terrell, one of the first African-American women to earn a college degree and a lifelong fighter for racial equality.

Quilter **Eddie Rollins** chose to present Dr. Carter G. Woodson in block #17. A scholar, writer and historian, he is called the father of Black history for chronicling the contributions of Blacks in America. Eddie Rollins also depicted an image of the Courts in block #5, stitching them like three stair steps—District courts, Appeals courts, Supreme Court. In an interview in 1976, quilt project co-chair Jeanette Gates explained the reason for that block: "Everything that we have accomplished that has meant anything to us as a race has been through the courts."

Naomi Owens honored the railroads in block #11, which--besides uniting the country from coast to coast--gave hundreds of jobs to African-Americans and became the economic engine for Blacks in Portland. Naomi Owens was said to be "persistent in her dedication to Revolutionary War heroes" and quilted block #2 of African-American patriots Crispus Attucks, who died in the Boston Massacre in 1770, and Prince Whipple, who crossed the Delaware River with General George Washington on Christmas Day, 1776.

Quilter **Mildred Reynolds** was a co-chair of the bicentennial quilt project. Among her many community activities, she was president of Jack and Jill of America, a dedicated to raising African-American children to be leaders, and a founder of the

Portland chapter of Links, a national Black women's civic organization. Her husband Walter was the first Black to receive a degree from the University of Oregon Medical School. Mildred Reynolds' block #23 honored Dr. Charles Drew, an African-American surgeon who was a pioneer in blood research.

Ozella Canada was a leader in the Urban League Guild of Portland and the Council of Negro Women. She depicted Richard Allen in block #3, the first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, born a slave in Philadelphia in 1760. In block #26, she honored trumpeter Louis Armstrong, born poor in New Orleans on July 4, 1900, who became a goodwill ambassador to the world from the U.S. through his music.

For **Lylla Phillips** the quilt represented "an artistic documentary of the past and the present, as well as the spirit of the future," said in a radio interview at the quilt's dedication. In Portland Lylla Phillips sat on the board of the NAACP, watching her husband struggle for years with employment discrimination that was documented in the Oregonian in 1974. She tied with Mildred Love for the most stitches in the quilt and was responsible for all the binding work. She quilted block #22 portraying contralto Marion Anderson, the first African-American to sing with the Metropolitan Opera. After being denied permission by the Daughters of the American Revolution to perform at Constitution Hall on Easter 1939 because of her skin color, Anderson sang on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial before 75,000 people and a radio audience of many more.

Musical contributions by Black Americans appears again in quilter **June Border Brown's** block #18 showing Jubilee Hall and the Jubilee Singers. The Jubilee Singers came together in 1871 at Fisk University in Nashville to raise money to keep the African-American school open. Jubilee Hall was built with the money raised, and Fisk survives today as a private liberal arts university.

In their quilt blocks, **Sarah Mayfield**, a nurse, and **Hazel Beatrice Whitlow**, an elementary school teacher, focused on the civil rights struggle of the 20th century. Mayfield's block #29 honors the Civil Rights Act of 1964, guaranteeing equal rights for all. Whitlow's block #28 portrays The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. King's efforts to achieve full civil rights for African-Americans won him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, the same year the Civil Rights Act became law.

Overall, the quilt's message is an uplifting one. Despite their collective history of disappointments, the makers of the Afro-American Heritage Bicentennial Commemorative Quilt decided to stress citizenship rather than bitterness over racism. They sought to look at the road ahead showing their pride in country, race and community, while honoring the best of what was past. This beautiful textile is a marker of time and place but can also serve as a road map to Portland citizens for repairing racial divides and working in common for a bright future.