

# "The Last Supper" Story

from the

## Rocky Mountain Wa Shonaji Quilt Guild 2nd Quarter 2019 Newsletter

### Wa Shonaji Presents Powers' "The Lord's Supper" to CrossPurpose

Wa Shonaji's version of Harriet Powers' pictorial quilt "The Last Supper" is now hanging in the CrossPurpose/ Providence Church facility. It was presented to Jason Janz, CEO of CrossPurpose, June 9.

Janz reached out to Wa Shonaji Quilt Guild in December 2018 to ask if we could make a Harriet Powers quilt for CrossPurpose's new space at 2030 Richard Allen Court, Denver. Initially he had been looking for a particular person of color he had heard about to make the quilt. Unable to find her, he contacted Terry Nelson, Blair-Caldwell Library's senior special collection and community resource manager, for help. While he was there, our exhibit *Botanical Expressions* was on display and Terry directed him to our exhibit and told him about Wa Shonaji. He was a bit hesitant about contacting us, thinking we would be a group from Westminster or someplace who would not have a clue about Harriet Powers or the vision he had for his quilt. Via our website, we were in contact with each other, and I convinced him that Wa Shonaji *could* make a quilt in the manner he was seeking. Four guild members—Marcia Walker, Mary Lassiter, Stephanie Hobson, and myself—met with Janz to discuss the possibilities of making a Harriet Powers quilt.

We soon learned, after much studying and research, that copyright restrictions would prevent us from making either of the two remaining quilts of Mrs. Powers: *The Bible Quilt* at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History in Washington, DC and the



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*The Guild held quilt exhibits at Denver's Koelbel Library, Boulder Public Library, and Rocky Mountain Quilt Museum in Golden in the late 1990s.*

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*Pictorial Quilt* at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

So on to page two. Kyra Hicks's book *The Lord's Supper Pattern Book* imagining Harriet Powers' "Lost Bible Story Quilt" put us on a different path. We knew we could make the quilt in her book without any copyright restrictions. At this point, other members of the Guild had joined the four of us on this journey: Artie Johnson, Camilla Edwards, Geneva Lottie, Karen von Phul, Milinda Walker, Linda White, and Julie Marsh. We estimate, with our research, fabric selecting, printing of pattern, construction of the quilt from start to finish, including the binding, label and having it documented by CQC, has well over 500 hours of labor. Crystal Zagnoli of the Quilted Cricket quilted the quilt for us.

Janz was well pleased with the results of our labors as were those in attendance at the unveiling of the quilt at the Providence Church service. The chorus was in harmony that day, as always,

with their gift of voice and song. I gave a brief history of the quilt and the life of Harriet Powers. Artie Johnson compiled a book on Mrs. Powers, which was also presented.

It's interesting that Janz delivered a powerful sermon that day on Judgment and judging people. He alluded to the fact that his judgment about us being a group of people from Westminster, who would not know anything about his concepts for a Harriet Powers quilt, was far from truth. At the end of my talk about Harriet and those who worked on the quilt, I made sure to name the places those of us who worked on the quilt were from. What a surprise... Westminster, Highlands Ranch, Arvada, Denver, Greenwood Village, Thornton, and Aurora. Yes, we celebrate diversity in our Guild and in our quilting styles. And our motto, "Each One Teach One," is always in the foreground for Wa Shonaji.

Did I Say Wa Shonaji is AWESOME?

—Joanne Walton

## Harriet Powers (1837–1910)—Slave, Folk Artist, Quilt Maker



[Ashley Callahan](#), Georgia Museum of Art, 04/06/2005 Last edited by NGE Staff on 10/01/2018

Harriet Powers is one of the best-known southern African American quilt makers, even though only two of her quilts, both of which she made after the Civil War (1861–65), survive today. One is part of the National Museum of American History collection at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. The second quilt is in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Massachusetts.

The cotton quilts consist of numerous pictorial squares depicting biblical scenes and celestial phenomena. They were constructed through ap-

plique and piecework and were hand and machine stitched.

Powers was born into slavery near Athens, Georgia, on October 29, 1837, and lived more than half her life in Clarke County, mainly in Sandy Creek and Buck Branch.

The first of the Powers quilts was displayed in 1886 at a cotton fair in Athens, where Jennie Smith, an artist and art teacher at the Lucy Cobb Institute, a school for elite white females in Athens, saw it. She asked to purchase it from Powers, but Powers declined to sell it. Smith remained in

touch with Powers, however, and five years later Powers, having financial difficulties, agreed to sell the quilt for five dollars. At the time of the sale Powers explained the imagery in the squares, and Smith recorded the descriptions along with additional comments of her own.

The history of the second quilt is less clear. One account indicates that the wives of Atlanta University (later Clark Atlanta University) faculty members saw the first quilt in the Cotton States Exhibition in Atlanta in 1895 and decided to commission a second quilt by Powers. Another account suggests that the second quilt was purchased by the same faculty wives who may have seen it at the Nashville, Tennessee, Exposition in 1898. Regardless, the faculty wives presented the quilt to the Reverend Charles Cuthbert Hall of New York in 1898, while he was serving as the chairman of the board of trustees at Atlanta University. Subsequently, the folk art collector Maxim Karolik acquired it from Hall's heirs and donated it to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

Powers' quilts are remarkable for their bold use of applique for storytelling and for their extensive documentation. Her use of technique and design demonstrates African and African American influences. The use of applied designs to tell stories is closely related to artistic practices in the republic of Benin, West Africa. The uneven squares suggest the syncopation found in African American music.

Only one image of Powers herself survives. The photograph (at right), made about 1897, depicts her wearing a special apron with appliqued images of a moon, cross, and sun or shooting star. Such celestial bodies appear repeatedly in her quilts and are often carefully stitched in complex ways, indicating their importance to her. These images may have related to a fraternal organization or had religious significance to her. Powers' interpretations of both quilts have survived, though they are likely influenced by their recorders. Powers herself probably was illiterate and may have used the quilts as visual teaching tools for telling biblical stories.

In January 2005 Cat Holmes, a doctoral student in history at the University of Georgia, dis-

covered the grave of Harriet Powers, as well as that of Powers' husband and daughter. The headstone, which was uncovered at the historic Gospel Pilgrim Cemetery in Athens, reveals that Powers died January 1, 1910.

She was inducted into Georgia Women of Achievement in 2009.

Callahan, Ashley. "Harriet Powers (1837-1910)." *New Georgia Encyclopedia*. 01 October 2018. Web. 16 March 2019.

