

USPS Spotlights Harriet Powers Quilts

by John F. Dunn

In the next few weeks we will see a demonstration of the diversity of subjects and designs that make up the United States stamps program.



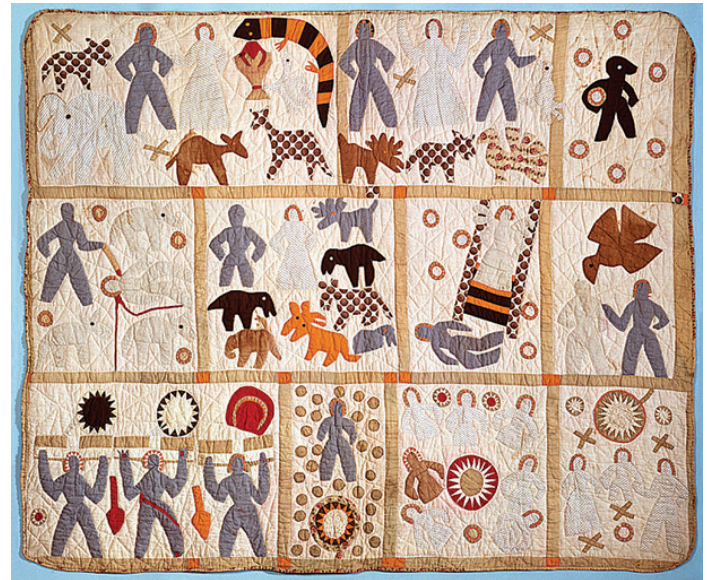
On February 28 in Washington, D.C., this pane of 20 honors Harriet Powers. Born Oct. 29, 1837, on a plantation near Athens, GA, the future quilter is believed to have learned to sew as a child. At 18, she married Armstead Powers, an enslaved farmhand. After emancipation, they bought four acres in nearby Sandy Creek, Ga., where they raised cotton and vegetables. Along the way Powers made five quilts.

In 1886, Powers entered her “Bible Quilt” in a local fair, most likely the second annual Northeast Georgia Fair, in Athens. Smith displayed the piece in the Negro Building of the 1895 Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, and several Atlanta University faculty wives were so impressed they decided to commission a new quilt from Powers as a gift for the vice president of the university board, Charles Cuthbert Hall. The “Pictorial Quilt,” completed in 1898, remained in the Hall family for 62 years.

Derry Noyes, an art director for USPS, had worked on previous stamps featuring quilts but never thought of these works of fabric art as canvases for telling stories. “This is what is extraordinary about Harriet Powers’s quilts,” she said. Noyes chose details that would hold up well at stamp size and still communicate the stories Powers was trying to tell, and looked for variety and color combinations that worked well together. Each of the four stamps in the pane of 20 features a panel selected from Powers’s “Pictorial Quilt.”

Powers’s “Bible Quilt,” now belongs to the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. From the Smithsonian website, https://www.si.edu/object/1885-1886-harriet-powers-bible-quilt%3Anmah_556462, we learn “...Harriet Powers...exhibited it at the Athens Cotton Fair of 1886 where it captured the imagination of Jennie Smith, a young internationally-trained local artist. Of her discovery, Jennie later wrote: ‘I have spent my whole life in the South, and am perfectly familiar with thirty patterns of quilts, but I had never seen an original design, and never a living creature portrayed in patchwork, until the 1886 Athens, Georgia [Fair]... [The Powers displayed] a large accumulation farm products...all the attractions usual to such occasions, and in one corner there hung a quilt-which captured my eye...I was fascinated. I offered to buy it, but it was not for sale at any price.’”

“Four years later, Mrs. Powers, at the urging of her husband because of hard times, offered to sell the quilt, but Miss Smith’s financial affairs were at a low ebb and I could not purchase.” Later Jennie sent word that she would buy the quilt if Harriet still wanted to dispose of it. Harriet ‘arrived one afternoon in front of my door in an ox-cart with the precious burden in her lap encased in a clean flour sack, which was still further enveloped in



a crocus sack. She offered it for ten dollars—but-I only had five to give.’... [Harriet’s] husband said she had better take the five dollars.

“Mrs. Powers regretfully turned over her precious creation, but only after explaining each of the eleven panels of the design, which Jennie Smith recorded. Briefly, the subjects are Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, a continuance of Paradise with Eve and a son, Satan amidst the seven stars, Cain killing his brother Abel, Cain goes into the land of Nod to get a wife, Jacob’s dream, the baptism of Christ, the crucifixion, Judas Iscariot and the thirty pieces of silver, the Last Supper, and the Holy Family.”

For the Pictorial Quilt, at <https://wpthistory.org/2021/12/harriet-powers-pictorial-quilt/> the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, tells us, “The most famous and fascinating quilt in the Museum of Fine Art’s collection is the Harriet Powers Pictorial Quilt...The story of the quilt links the life of its maker Harriet Powers, who was born into slavery, to the work of Reverend Charles Cuthbert Hall as an advocate for education of newly emancipated African Americans.



Made in the 1890s, the quilt shows biblical scenes juxtaposed with astronomical events such as a meteor shower and natural phenomena such as the “dark day of 1780.” The quilt was gifted to Reverend Hall in 1897 and installed on the second floor of Synton House at Westport Point. The quilt was a treasured possession of the Hall family and was eventually donated to the Museum of Fine Arts.