



Upstate Heritage Quilt Trail

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106 African Village

Quilter: Anna Mae Willis

Sponsor: The ARTS Center Clemson

Location: 212 Butler Street, Clemson, SC

GPS N34° 41.1656', W082° 49.3586

<http://explorearts.org>

The quilt, called *African Village*, was originally designed and made by Anna Crittendon Willis of Clemson. An only child born in Tennessee in 1925, Anna moved with her parents to Seneca at the age of two. She lived there until 15 years ago when she relocated to Clemson. Her tidy fenced yard and cottage give a visitor no clue as to the remarkable art that is created inside.

Now 87, Anna spends most of every day with scissors or needle in hand, surrounded by a spectacular array of colorful finished or in-progress quilt tops. Her tiny form moves from stack to workspace with the energy and enthusiasm of a teenager – despite hip and knee replacements in recent years -- and the sparkle in her eye, when it comes to quilting, hasn't diminished since her mother taught her to cut out her first square at the age of four or five.

Anna's lifelong love of quilting began at home near downtown Seneca, watching her mother and a friend quilt together on a suspended frame that was raised at night to the ceiling and lowered next day. The old quilts, she remembers, were two and a half yards square, made to fit a single bed.

"Never could tuck them in right!" she says with a laugh.

Anna's mother, widowed early when her father died at 37, was a powerful figure in her life. A resourceful woman who worked as a cook and nutritional worker at Oconee Memorial Hospital until she retired, she taught Anna to use what she had. While she worked, the young Anna took care of the family cow and chickens.

Anna's delightful free-hand cutouts of chickens and other animals in the series of quilts she calls *African Village* are inspired by that early first-hand experience. Other more sophisticated designs were influenced by her later travels to Chicago and Key West and other points in the U.S.

"People would give Mama scraps," she said, "and we made quilts from hog and chicken feed sacks – the big white ones that held 50 pounds of hog 'shorts,' we'd wash the letters out in cold water. The pretty printed ones, we'd make clothes with and use the scraps for quilts."

Anna's quilts are a marvelous mixture of classic patterns and her own creative designs. In the *African Village* quilt made in Clemson in 2009 and selected to hang on the outer wall of the Arts Center in Clemson, free-drawn figures, animals and structures mix with a classic patterned guinea hen in fanciful foliage. Many of her quilts also feature her exquisite embroidery skills.

Quilter Anna Willis is as extraordinary as her work, a woman who loves her craft and meets each day with fresh ideas and great expectations.



If you ask to see her awards, she will pull out a yellowed envelope filled with blue and red ribbons from the Anderson County Fair as well as myriad others collected from other shows over the decades.

The Arts Center is a community non-profit arts center, providing arts education and making fine art exciting and accessible to the community. It is housed in the Calhoun Bridge Center, formerly the Morrison Annex. It is one of three non-profits located there, including the Clemson Child Development Center and the Clemson Area African-American Museum. Hours are M-Th 10 – 5, and Friday 10 – 2.

Story was written by Dot Yandle a local writer, collector of folk art, and city historian for the City of Clemson.

For more information and photos of the Quilt Trail, click on www.uhqt.org and join us on Facebook.