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By [Mike Conley](#) | The McDowell News Published: August 31, 2009

McDowell joins WNC outdoor 'quilt' effort



photo by Mike Conley

Members of the McDowell Quilt Trails Committee stand in front of the quilt panel "North Wind" at the home of Mike and Jill Lucas. They are (from left) Mike Lucas, Janet Williams, Nora Worthen, Alice Stecker, Linda Smith, Cathy Green, MACA President Heather Cotton, Jill Lucas and Ann McNutt. Buddy, the dog owned by the Lucases, sits in front.

If you're driving down the road and see a beautifully colored panel hanging from a nearby barn, outbuilding or business, then you are already on a quilt trail.

More than 140 "quilt panels" can be found on the sides of barns and buildings in six western North Carolina counties. Yancey and Mitchell counties have the highest concentration. If you have driven through Burnsville, for example, you might have spotted the brightly colored panels along the sides of nearby barns or other structures. They resemble the sections of an old-time quilt and each one has a certain meaning.

A group of dedicated and enthusiastic volunteers are now working to get a similar quilt trail established here in McDowell County.

"Quilting is part of the Appalachian Mountain tradition," said Nora Worthen, member of the McDowell Quilt Trails Committee.

Worthen and her fellow committee members are encouraging folks to have a quilt panel installed on their buildings. They also want to make people more aware of these unique panels and the meanings behind them. The quilt trails committee comes under the umbrella of the McDowell Arts Council Association (MACA).

The committee members are quick to point out that the panels are not actually quilts that would be sewn together. They are instead large exterior wooden panels that are painted in bright colors to resemble the sections of an old-time quilt. The property owner can pick the design and the colors but the panel must look like something that came from an old quilt. The block can vary in size from 2 feet by 2 feet to as large as 8 feet by 8 feet.

"Each one tells a story, something about that person, the site, [or] the history," said Heather Cotton, president of MACA.

Tourists who want to see the quilt panels can get a map from a local arts council or tourism development agency. They then travel the back roads looking for the colorful blocks and learn something about their meanings. A quilt trail can be used to promote local tourism and heritage.

"It is also a celebration of our local history," said Cotton.

Meanwhile, the tourists who come here to see the quilt panels will spend their money locally.

"It has an indirect benefit for businesses," said Cotton. "Another great thing about this program is it's all about buying local."

For example, a group of women from Spartanburg, S.C. recently came to Burnsville to see the quilt panels up there. While traveling the quilt trail in Yancey, these women spent approximately \$3,000 at local businesses, according to members of McDowell's quilt trail committee.

The idea for the quilt panels and the trails got started in Ohio with a woman named Donna Sue Groves. She put one up in honor of her mother who was a quilt maker. The concept caught on with other people and pretty soon quilt panels started appearing on barns and other buildings in Kentucky and Tennessee. Now, 33 states have quilt panel programs.

There are already five quilt panels on display in McDowell County. The Orchard at Altapass has one that reflects the place's apple orchard heritage. Mike and Jill Lucas have one proudly hanging on their barn near Lake James' Black Bear landing. Alice Stecker has one at her home at the Bear Cliff subdivision.

The Lucases put their quilt panel on a red barn that overlooks Lake James and Black Bear landing. The light blue and white panel is titled "North Wind."

"We chose the 'north wind' for our panel because the north wind does howl here in the winter," said Jill Lucas, who's also a member of the local quilt trail committee. "We saw that pattern and chose the colors," said her husband Mike, who's also on the committee.

"It's very appropriate for this spot."

The members of the committee want to add more. They hope that homeowners and business owners alike will agree to have them installed on their buildings. The cost for the owner can vary depending on the size. A 6-foot by 6-foot quilt panel can cost around \$375 and that includes the cost of installation. The panels should last around eight to 10 years before they are refurbished. There are also certain rules to follow when picking out a design for a quilt panel.

"If they don't like the ones they find in the (quilt panel) book, we will help them to design their own," said Jill Lucas. "We will also hang them, they don't have to do that."

In return, the local committee will list the location, the title and the meaning behind the quilt panel in a brochure that can be handed out to tourists.

"It is part of the county's effort to bring in tourists and it's not invasive," said committee member Ann McNutt.

Already, the committee has gotten interest for 12 new quilt blocks in McDowell.

Last month, the Marion City Council heard a presentation about the quilt trail for McDowell County. Mike Lucas is already hard at work building two panels that will be given to the city of Marion. No city tax money will be spent on the city's two panels.

"It is all definitely hand work," said Mike Lucas in his workshop. "We hope we can do it in three weeks. "

The two panels for the city will be installed on the Historic Marion Tailgate Market shelter. One is inspired by the city's logo and slogan "Where Main Street Meets the Mountains" and it will be placed on the shelter's western site. The other is titled "Grape Basket" and it will front on the east side towards Main Street.

"This is beautiful. This is really nice," said Councilman Billy Martin as he looked at the designs. "I think this is one of the most clever, attractive programs I have seen in a long time," said Mayor Pro Tem Steve Little about the quilt trail.

In addition, the Old Fort Board of Aldermen agreed to purchase two quilt blocks, the size and pattern to be determined at a later date.

Also, the historic Carson House will soon have a quilt panel. It will be inspired by an old slave quilt, called "Crazy Patch," that is on display inside the Carson House.

This quilt is believed to contain symbols for the Underground Railroad, the secret network that helped slaves escape to freedom. The National Endowment for the Humanities selected the historic quilt to be a part of its "Picturing America" program for 2008-2009. The panel for the Carson House will be based on this design from more than 150 years ago. It will be placed on the old barn, located behind the house, which is now going through a restoration.

The designs for the panels are not limited to just the exterior boards hanging from buildings. The designs can be reproduced on T-shirts, mugs, pins, magnets, notecards, clocks and just about anything else.

"People notice them," said Jill Lucas.

The committee members are also looking for other volunteers who can help them put the quilt panels together and boost local awareness of the program. They have formed a partnership with the Mountain Glory Quilt Guild. The committee is looking for a large enough space to work on the wooden panels and store them until they are hung in place.

"All of this doesn't happen overnight," said Mike Lucas.

For more information about the quilt trail program for McDowell County and other quilt trails, call MACA at 652-8610 or visit www.mcdowellquilttrail.wordpress.com or www.quilttrailswnc.org.