

# Barn Quilts Blaze a Trail

## *Through Garrett County*

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A distinctively American form of public art, the barn quilt, has arrived in Garrett County. To date, 14 barns adorned with bold, colorful quilt patterns have transformed its landscape into an open area gallery celebrating the area's rural heritage and distinctive beauty. Garrett County is the first in Maryland to embrace this popular art form by creating a barn quilt trail that continues to grow in popularity and size.

While the art of decorating barns dates back to Colonial times, inspiration for the current barn quilt movement came from Donna Sue Groves, whose mother Nina Maxine was a fifth-generation quilter from Roane County, West Virginia. During family road trips, Donna and her family played barn-watching games to spot different barn styles, advertisements like those for the iconic Mail Pouch tobacco, and barn art such as hex signs to pass the time. In 1989, Donna and Nina purchased a farm in Adams County, Ohio, with a tobacco barn. Donna promised her mother that she would paint a barn quilt on that barn. While working in the area of community development for the Ohio Arts Council, she began to view the numerous empty barn walls she saw during her frequent travels as opportunities for public art while thinking about that promise to her mother. In 2001, she decided to keep and expand upon that promise by forming a grassroots group to paint a series of barn quilts, thereby creating the Adams County Quilt Barn Sampler Project. Her barn quilt concept has now spread to more than 3,000 barns located in 30 states and two Canadian provinces.

"We're proud to make Maryland a part of that," says Karen Reckner, director of the Garrett County Arts Council and a founding member of the Barn Quilt Association of Garrett County, Inc. She describes the County's response as "Fabulous, everyone loves the idea."

Karen played a key role in developing the Garrett County barn quilt initiative. After reading an article about the barn quilt trail that Donna Sue had developed, she



**"Turkey Tracks" (above) is one of the Editor's favorite patterns and one of the 14 in Garrett County at the time of the printing of this publication.**

headed to Ohio and followed one of its barn quilt trails. "I loved it at first sight," she says. "I thought it would be such a fun thing to do in Garrett County."

At the time Karen learned of barn quilt trails, she was the Director of Business Services and Training with the Garrett County Chamber of Commerce and she saw the potential to bring attention to the area and promote the County's businesses and attractions. An initial meeting to share the concept with Joyce Bishoff, Bev Willams and Cheryl DeBerry led to the formation of a core group to



Amish Dahlia



Love Ring



Snail's Trail



Ohio Star



Variation Star



Circle of Life in Garrett County



Summer Star Flower



Garden Maze



Sallie's T



Double Pinwheel



Crazy Quilt



LeMoyne Star



Delectable Mountains

All of the quilts shown here are the 14 that are currently on barns in Garrett County as of the date of this publication. Go to the web site for more information and a map of the self guided tour with addresses and GPS coordinates.

[www.garrettbarnquilts.org/tour](http://www.garrettbarnquilts.org/tour)

The quilt patterns here may appear distorted because they are actual photos of the quilts on the barns.

promote the concept. Additional meetings led to more ideas and conversations from people involved with the arts, government, agriculture, business, education and the community at large. "It was truly a grassroots effort," Karen says.

That collaborative effort resulted in the formation of the Barn Quilt Association of Garrett County (BQA) as a non-profit organization to better realize the potential of the barn quilt as, in the words of the BQA's mission statement, "a sustainable heritage tourism attraction/activity." The group has created a comprehensive web site featuring a wealth of information that includes some history of the project, a map of the self-guided Garrett County Barn Quilt Tour with addresses and GPS coordinates, barn quilt photos and descriptions, opportunities to get involved, coming events, news, and even a barn quilt puzzle that changes each month. The site offers barn quilt lapel pins and refrigerator magnets for sale online and at Four Seasons Stitchery in Grantsville. Future plans include a book about the barn quilt project and classes related to quilting and quilts as an art form.

Garrett County's barn quilt designs range from traditional patterns like stars and turkey tracks to contemporary motifs, such as the four season motif depicted in the *Circle of Life in Garrett County* and the vivid orange and yellow *Snails Trail*. Each "quilt" consists of an aluminum square with designs painted with a special paint commonly used for signs. *LeMoyne Star* was the first to be hung, in November, 2008, with the most recent addition, *Snails Trail*, mounted this past July.

"We hope we'll have people coming to the area to see the [barn] tour and thus see Garrett County's offerings,

which will help our small businesses," Karen says. She notes that the BQA is now receiving inquiries from motor coach companies interested in offering tours. A "cell phone tour" will soon be available along the Garrett County Barn Quilt Trail with a recorded message providing information on each barn quilt's history, pattern, family history and GPS location. Also, signs featuring QR (Quick Response) symbols located at each site can be scanned with smart phones to provide the recorded message.

In celebration of the County's barn quilt trail, the BQA has created an annual Barn Quilt Festival featuring Appalachian-style music, local foods, activities, auction, artisans, demonstrations and a Family Heirloom Quilt Show. Proceeds benefit the quilt trail. The Festival was such a hit in its first year that it earned Garrett County the Maryland Tourism Council's *Best New/Improved Product or Event Award* for 2010.

Interest locally continues to grow as more landowners sign up to have their barns considered as a barn quilt site. "Barns selected don't have to be pristine," Karen says. "We are embracing historic structures, with each barn style reflecting its heritage. Some have been in the same family for five to seven generations." She has noticed that some owners of selected barns have made repairs and planted flowers, efforts that promote their preservation and further beautify the location.

In the end, Karen says, "It's not really about quilts. It's about preserving our Appalachian heritage, including farm history, the arts in Appalachia and how we got to be here."



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