

Quilts Used as Codes for the Underground Railroad: Truth or Tale?



African American History month is a time to reflect, commemorate, and celebrate the history of African Americans in the United States. The Underground Railroad (a secret system enabling enslaved people to escape to the north) is a widely discussed and celebrated event in African American history. In recent decades, accounts of quilts used to aid enslaved people's escape to the north have surfaced in books and school curricula and have led to many variations of Underground Railroad quilts. This issue of Multicultural Moment will explain the connection between quilts and the Underground Railroad and present resources that refute the connection.

The Quilt-Underground Railroad Connection. The story of quilts used as codes to aid the escape of enslaved people has appeared in children's literature and scholarly work. One reason the stories have become popular is they represent using ingenuity to triumph and overcome adversity.

- In her 1993 book, *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African American Quilts*, Maude Southwell Wahlman presents the quilts and stories of several African American quilters to highlight the similarities to African textiles and symbolism.

Rose Mitchell of LA County's African American Resources Center explains the story of the quilt codes (which were a set of quilt patterns) and the message each signified to slaves in this video.

- The children's book *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt* (1993) by Deborah Hopkinson tells of a seamstress living in the big house who dreams of using a cloth to create a map to help her escape. Another children's book, *Journey to Freedom* (1997) by Courtni Wright, told the story of a family escaping to freedom with the aid of Harriet Tubman. The story included quilts hung on porches that indicated safe houses to guide escaped slaves to freedom.
- *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*, the 2000 book by Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard, has become the most significant work on the topic. Tobin and Dobard documented oral interviews with Ozella McDaniel Williams and African American women who shared stories of quilt symbols used as codes to help enslaved people escape. Ms. Williams reported that the stories were passed down orally within her family. After gathering her accounts and conducting research into several African cultural traditions that may have influenced the use of codes in textiles, the authors note:

Because of its imagery, Ozella's underground railroad quilt code lends itself to conjecture. Exactly how the code was used, we do not know. However, Ozella's words and our research enable us to theorize the following. The quilt patterns listed in the code were intended as mnemonic devices. They were used to aid the

slaves in memorizing directives before leaving the plantation (Tobin & Dobard, 1999, ch. 3).

Arguments Against the Quilt-Underground Railroad Connection. Many historians and Underground Railroad scholars acknowledge the quilt-underground railroad connection as a feel-good story but challenge the story's validity.

Shortly after the publication of *Hidden in Plain View*, historian Giles Wright wrote a critique of the book. He argued that the book further contributes to the many existing myths and misrepresentations about the Underground Railroad; it also questions the book's omission of who created and implemented the quilt code system. You can read Wright's [full critique](#) of the book.

Quilter and quilt historian Barbara Brackman's book, [*Facts & Fabrications: Unraveling the Story of Quilts & Slavery*](#), addresses the issue. Brackman argues, "We have no historical evidence of quilts being used as signals, codes or maps. The tale of quilts and the Underground Railroad makes a good story, but not good quilt history."

While critical of the theory of quilt codes, folklorist Laurel Horton has chosen to focus instead on the wide appeal of the story and people's beliefs in the quilt codes. Read more about her perspective in her 2007 work, "[Uncoverings](#)."

In a 2007 *Time* article, "[Unraveling the Myth of Quilts and the Underground Railroad](#)," Stacie Stukin presents sources on both sides of the argument, including the following explanation from African American photographer, quilt collector, and documenter, Roland Freeman: "*Hidden in Plain View* is how we got over those white folks. Right under the nose of white folk, we're sending signs and symbols, and they didn't know it. While I think it's so ridiculous, African Americans are starved for those kinds of stories in our culture, and we're willing to accept it because it's what we want to hear."

After reviewing sources from both sides, is it truth or an interesting tale? You decide.

May we avoid blaming or bias based on our circumstance and continue to be grateful for the gifts of the global community.

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February 2022