



# THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD QUILT CODE

A History of African-American Quilting from  
Ancient Practices to the Civil War Times

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According to James Norman, from the beginning of human existence, it has been necessary to locate a common link of communication between people. In the Neolithic Era, which is classified as the late Stone Age, languages began to spread. Some six hundred languages were spoken among clansmen in Africa alone, and many more in Europe and the near East. Unfortunately, because many of these clans split or completely disappeared, and because sounds and words fade easily from memory, hundreds of these languages died out without a trace or way of chronicling. Language has assumed many different written forms, which essentially are codes for certain concrete things or abstract ideas. With the rise of ancient civilization, the evolution of a writing system had begun. Pictograms led way to ideograms, which influenced some of the first phonetic, alphabetic, and syllabic writing systems in history (Norman 5–14).

Today, many different types of code exist, among them sign language, Braille, and Morse Code. All these codes are steeped in ancient tradition. In essence, a clansman carving pictograms into a cave wall and a woman stitching a symbol into a family quilt would be striving to get the same idea

across; both desire to use written language as a bridge between humanity.

Unknown to most people, quilting has also been a tool for communication and has been a long-standing tradition in many different cultures. Not only were quilts used for utilization purposes, but they also provided women with an outlet for their creativity during a time when it was expected of them to remain relatively docile homemakers. Many women could put together what was called a “Tact Quilt” in a matter of a few days. They would take scraps of old clothing that their family had worn out, cut strips of it (regardless of the color, pattern, or design), and tie it together over whatever filling was deemed fit to keep them warm. Sometimes leaves were used, while other times these housewives employed crushed newspapers as the batting. When warmth wasn’t the object, numerous women quilted for decoration or even to keep track of familial records. Marriage quilts often literally determined a woman’s status for marriage. These quilts were truly supposed to be showpieces, demonstrating a woman’s domestic art. Once the quilt was completed, it was shown to the prospective in-laws, and her marriage worth was evaluated. Album quilts were used to keep track of family history. Often, important dates were sewn into the quilt, along with names and important scenes depicting familial events. Often, these quilts told a story. Sometimes if a loved one had died, a piece of his clothing might be used in the quilt composition. No matter what the genre, quilting gave many women a sense of community. According to one author, “it ties us all together, we are the thread, we are the stitch, we form the stitch, and we form the quilt” (qtd. in Castrillo par. 10).

A quilting pattern often overlooked in today’s society is the Underground Railroad quilt code. Used during the time of abolition and the Civil War, this visual code sewn into the pattern of quilts readied slaves for their upcoming escape and provided them directions when they were on their way to freedom. While there were ten different quilts used to guide slaves to safety in free territory, only one was to be employed at a

time. In order to memorize the quilt code, sampler quilts would be constructed with one pattern next to the other. These patterns were intended to be used as mnemonic devices. When the time came, the first of the ten quilts was laid out by fellow slaves either in the window or on a clothesline, until all of the escaping slaves had gotten the message. Then the next one would be laid out and so on, until the slaves passing through the plantations had arrived to safety.

Instead of taking the time to piece the front and back of the quilts together with delicate and precise stitching, the slaves would use simple pieces of twine to join it together. Each tie was placed exactly two inches apart, and was comprised of a certain number of square knots. This created a grid pattern on the back of the quilt, which is now believed to be a mapping indicator between safe houses on the journey (usually, there was a safe house every five to twenty-five miles).

This code was kept secret for years, for secrecy and honor are two things most valued in African tradition. Many times, ancestors of some of these escaped slaves recall being told the story of the quilt code, and then warned against disclosing the information. Ozella McDaniel Williams was an elderly African-American woman who sold her quilts in a marketplace down in South Carolina. Mrs. Williams was the one who finally broke the silence about the Underground Railroad quilt code. She restates the code for Tobin and Dobard's book, *Hidden in Plain View* (the bolded words are the quilt patterns in this code): "There are five square knots on the quilt every two inches apart. They escaped on the fifth knot on the tenth pattern and went to Ontario, Canada. The **monkey wrench** turns the **wagon wheel** toward Canada on a **bear's paw** trail to the **crossroads**. Once they got to the crossroads, they dug a **log cabin** on the ground. **Shoofly** told them to dress up in cotton and satin **bow ties** and go to the cathedral church, get married and exchange double wedding rings. **Flying geese** stay on the **drunkard's path** and follow the **stars**" (Tobin and Dobard 22-23).

The Monkey Wrench pattern would have been the first

quilt to be laid out from which the slaves could glean information. This quilt conveyed the message that slaves were supposed to begin preparing for their journey to freedom by collecting not only physical but also mental tools. As for the physical tools, slaves would need supplies to set up shelter, a compass, and weapons for defending themselves. By instructing the slaves to collect mental tools, the quilt pattern encouraged them to be cunning, alert, and knowledgeable about the journey ahead. It also motivated them to reshape their self-image, to realize that they were soon to be free.

The second pattern in the code was the Wagon Wheel. This pattern informed the slaves that they needed to begin preparing for the journey by packing food and other provisions as one would pack a covered wagon. This advised them to keep in mind what would be valuable on the journey, what type of materials would be needed for survival. The wagon wheel was an obvious symbol for the moving slave party since wagons were a popular way of hiding fugitive slaves on their way to the next destination.

Both the Monkey Wrench and Wagon Wheel patterns are thought to be interconnected in the Underground Railroad code. When the code in *Hidden in Plain View* states that “the monkey wrench turns the wagon wheel,” art historians seem to believe that it implies that the monkey wrench may have been a person who had authority over the wagon wheel, which symbolized the moving slave party. The monkey wrench is thought to be a person, organization, or group that knew the plantation’s layout incredibly well and was aware of the daily going-ons. This way, he would be able to help without being suspected of anything.

The Bear’s Paw pattern is the third part of the code. This pattern instructed the slaves to follow a path that literally had numerous bear paw prints. By following such a trail, the slaves would inevitably be led to both food and water. In areas throughout the country where bears were considered to be scarce, the pattern was given other names. In Pennsylvania it was often called the “Hand of Friendship,” and in New York, a

“Duck’s-Foot-in-the-Mud.” The Bear’s Paw pattern is remarkably similar to the African Hausa embroidered map of a village. Both patterns share similar shapes and a centralized design. For example, the Hausa King’s House would be an equivalent to the Plantation Big House. Likewise, Hausa Workshops would be the same as a Plantation blacksmith shop, weaving house, or any other of a number of plantation workstations. “Just as the Hausa design defines the perimeter of the village and identifies major landmarks,” say Tobin and Dobard. “The Bear’s Paw pattern could be used to identify landmarks on the border of the plantation because its composition of squared, rectangles, and triangles reflects Hausa map designs” (Tobin and Dobard 91).

Crossroads, the fourth pattern in the code, was identified as the place where many different paths merge. Cleveland, Ohio, is historically the end of the Underground Railroad; it was the crossroads on each slave’s journey, the place where each individual decided on where his next destination would be. This pattern is believed to be based upon the Kongo crossroads symbol. Shaped in the form of a Greek cross, this symbol historically marked the spot in the Kongo community where one would stand in order to take an oath. The Greek cross was used symbolically to place a line between the ancestors of the tribe and the living that were there to witness the event. The person taking the oath was instructed to stand squarely on the cross; in other words, he was instructed to stand at the intersection of the living and the dead, and represent the two.

The Log Cabin pattern is the fifth and probably the most well known of the patterns in the Underground Railroad code. Art historians have examples of this pattern dating back to at least the 1830’s. Though not an original pattern made up for the quilt code, the code variation was different from previous Log Cabin patterns. When used in the fifth quilt for escaping slaves, the center of the pattern would sometimes be yellow, indicating a safe house up ahead, or black, instead of the traditional red. The alternating dark and light fabric strips

arranged around a centralized yellow or black box indicated to slaves that the house the quilt was hanging on would protect them.

There isn't much information about the sixth pattern, the Shoofly. At most, the pattern is thought to signify a specific person who helped the escaping slaves. Specifically, it is thought to be representative of free blacks who helped the escaping slaves. Many of these free blacks were thought to be part of Masonic societies, who are believed to be the actual designers of the Underground Railroad code.

The seventh pattern in the code is called Bow Ties. This pattern instructed fugitive slaves to not only change their clothes, but also to disguise themselves. The Bow Tie is a familiar secret symbol, one in fact that is also shared by the Masonic order mentioned above. Therefore, not only might this symbolize the changing of clothes, but it also may show fugitive slaves that they were among alliances. This pattern has strong roots in Africa as well. Tobin and Dobard believe that "this pattern would be very familiar to African secret society members, especially the Poro, who saw it representing protection. The Bow Tie pattern is also similar to the Kongo cosmogram with its 'four moments of the sun.' The triangular quadrants indicate morning, midday, evening, and night. The Bow Tie quilt pattern thus has the potential of forming a compass and a sundial in cloth" (Tobin and Dobard 107–108).

Flying Geese, the eighth pattern, was not only an indicator of the best time of year to escape, but also pointed to the north, which was the direction that the slaves were ultimately headed. This pattern too had many different names depending on the region where it was found. Flying Geese was also known as Wheel, Dutchman's Wheel, Wild Goose Chase, and Dutchman's Puzzle. The pattern is comprised of eight triangles, two pointed in each direction: north, south, east, and west. All the quilt-maker would have to do was to make the northern arrows distinct by using a different color or pattern. Then, the escaping slaves would be able to tell that they needed to head in a northern direction.

The Drunkard's Path pattern was a warning of sorts to the slaves. It cautioned them to stagger their path in such a way that it couldn't be traced. Slaves were even warned to double back every once in awhile, just like the stitches on the reverse side of the quilt. The tenth pattern, Stars, is very much connected to Drunkard's Path. While zigzagging their way to the north, slaves were instructed to follow the stars such as the Big Dipper and North Star. Some African tribes, namely the Dogon of Mali, mapped the heavens so accurately that it still baffles scientists today. Therefore, it makes sense that slaves would have the learned knowledge to map the heavens on one of their quilts.

Another pattern worth mentioning, though not an official part of the code, is the Double Wedding Ring pattern. This design is thought to signify the breaking off of mental chains, letting go of the idea that they were slaves and grasping onto freedom. This part of the code still remains somewhat of a mystery. It has been suggested that the pattern may signify the ringing of a bell two times or some other audible signal.

Today's quilts have time-honored African roots. "Strip construction, large-scale designs, strong contrasting colors and variations from symmetrical patterns all appear to reflect textile patterns found in parts of Africa" (*America's Quilting History*). Various symbols in African writing systems or codes were often adapted and included in quilt patterns. "The African symbols of *bogolanfini*, *nsibidi*, and *vai* employ ideographs—abstract configurations—in conveying messages. They are part of an African textile tradition in which abstract, figurative, and geometric designs are used separately, and in combination, to endow the cloth with protective power and to signal information" (Tobin and Dobard, 41–42). Common African symbols that have been adapted into quilting patterns include the checkerboard, the hourglass, and the pinwheel. Significantly, each of these symbols is also part of the Underground Railroad quilt code. Color and stitches were also important pieces of African culture brought over to colonial

America. A specific tradition brought over from Africa is the strip quilt. Many times, strips of cloth called *kente* were woven together in order to make one big blanket. Scholars consider this strip quilting technique to be the ancestor of modern African quilts.

Colors and combinations of colors often held protective meanings. When used in quilts, blue was considered to be a very spiritual color, and the color combination of blue and white is considered to be protective by the Mende and Ibo tribes. Red and white used together symbolized Shango, the Yoruba god of storm. Bright colors were used often in quilts because they were likely chosen in Africa so that members of each tribe were able to recognize their alliances and enemies from far away. Besides the colors, patterns were sometimes used as protection to ward off evil spirits. By using the strip quilting technique, patterns were often broken up and uneven, which was said to break up the line of evil. This is because of the African belief that evil travels in straight lines. In addition to this practice, different herbs were often placed in the batting to give the quilt a certain empowerment. Charms were sometimes sewn into quilts and made to meet the special needs of its user. They were created by a person of supposed spiritual power, such as a priest or conjure woman, in order to ward off evil spirits or heal disease or sickness. These charms historically carry a secret significance. In the Kongo tribe, the *nkisi makolo* practice was used as a hidden source of power. The word *nkisi* can be translated into the English word for charm; *makolo* refers to the practice of using knots in the making of charms. Therefore when combined in the practice of textile making, the practice of *nkisi makolo* refers to the tying and knotting of an object in order to give it spiritual power.

Quilts took all different shapes and forms, especially during the Civil War and Abolitionist time in the mid to late 1800s. Many times, women fighting for the Union side would hold quilting benefits and general fairs in order to raise money for the Union army. "Gunboat Quilts," were a popular style used in this fundraiser. Made out of silk, these fancy

quilts displayed floral arrangements cut in the style of a medallion, and were able to make quite a bit of money for the Union cause. By the end of the war it is estimated that over 250,000 quilts and comforters had been made for Union soldiers (*America's Quilting History*).

Unknown to much common belief, quilts have a history that didn't singularly include a method of warmth or means of decoration. Many quilts have deep ancestral roots, symbolic meanings, and sentimental value. More importantly, some quilts were packed with hidden insights and cultural meanings, which continue to flourish today. As Henry Louis Gates says, "The African slave, despite the horrors of the Middle Passage, did not sail to the New World alone. These African slaves brought with them their metaphysical systems, their languages, their terms for order, and their expressive cultural practices which even the horrendous Middle Passage and the brutality of everyday life on the plantation could not effectively obliterate" (qtd. in Tobin and Dobard, 34).

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