

The Quilt Code

Ozella McDaniel Williams was an African American woman making and selling quilts in Charleston, South Carolina. Her ancestors were slaves.

In 1994 Jacqueline Tobin met her by chance in the old market place and listened to her story - about quilts being used as coded messages for slaves to escape to the Underground Railroad.

Ozella said that quilts were used to direct slaves to take particular actions. They were placed one at a time on a fence or veranda rail on the plantation. As it was common for quilts to be aired out frequently, the master or mistress would not be suspicious. Some women slaves were highly skilled seamstresses in the Plantation owner's house so had access to fabric and thread and knew the patchwork blocks which were used in quilts.

Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard recorded this oral history in their book 'Hidden in Plain View'. It has met with controversy since its publication because of a lack of corroborating

evidence but we think that it is a wonderful story!

Much of women's history is not recorded because it is in domestic artefacts which have worn out or been discarded. Re-creating these quilts has for us been an experience of adding visually to the story of the Abolition of the Slave Trade and opened our eyes to the astonishing courage of so many slaves who made the bid for freedom.

American Quakers, apart from the slaves themselves, were the first people, as far as history tells us, to question the right of anyone to own another person. Convinced that all people were equal in the sight of God, they began to organise opposition to slavery. They beseeched British Friends to stop the trade as a first step to abolishing slavery itself. From those first leadings of the Spirit, it took a hundred years for slavery to be made illegal. It continues however, in many forms today.

