

# The Secret Codes of the Quilts

Prepared for the Slave Quilts Exhibition  
held at the  
Friends Meeting House, Upper Goat Lane, Norwich  
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## *The Quilts of the Underground Railroad*

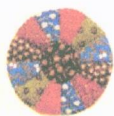
Quilting has become an art form in the modern age when there is a profusion of beautiful fabrics, but its origins lie in the distant past when it was discovered that two layers of padded cloth gave warmth. It is said that it was in ancient China that the idea of padded clothing first appeared and that western travellers to the East, such as the Crusaders, found that in the Middle East, padded and quilted jackets were worn. They brought back to Northern Europe padded coats worn under their armour. Old pictures show that such coats were often made of small pieces of cloth – early patchwork.

Whatever the truth of that theory it is certain that quilts became common items in the homes of Europe in the Middle Ages. These early quilts have not survived but from written records and early house inventories we know that quilting was an important part of domestic life. Fabric was all hand woven and so it was necessary to use up all the scraps left over from the making of clothes and all the good pieces of fabric saved from garments that were no longer serviceable for wear – patchwork quilts. Wool was plentiful and was carded and used for the stuffing of quilts. Discarded pieces of wool from the less desirable parts of a fleece could be obtained by quite poor people and there was always wool to be gathered from hedges and bushes in

the fields where sheep had been kept. Even if no wool was easily obtained, old garments were used as the padding for very little was wasted. We get a picture of dull utilitarian quilts made of used and faded scraps of fabric but all people at all times have demonstrated their innate artistic talents and the scraps were arranged to make patterns.



In rich households where there were servants to do quilting and money to buy good cloth, beautiful quilts were made and it is believed that old illustrations showing backgrounds of wall hangings may well have been showing quilts made for decoration in the homes of the rich. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century certain patterns for blocks of quilting began to appear and these patterns were exchanged among friends and given names. Early in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when the Pilgrim Fathers and other groups of settlers went to America the women took their quilting patterns with them. Groups of quilters took different patterns with them and there were patterns from several different countries.



As the settlers moved away from the first coastal settlements into the unknown west and new poorer settlements grew up the quilters had to be even more ingenious for there were no shops and only the occasional Quilting "Bee" gave the women any social life. Quilting had become a very important part of American domestic life. In the settled and prosperous places such as the large plantations of sugar, cotton and tobacco where the estates had some distance

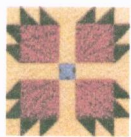
between them they also held Quilting "Bees". Here, on the plantations, there were slaves and the slave women were taught to quilt. They often made quilts for their mistresses and they all made quilts for use as bedding in the cabins.



The slave quilts showed great ingenuity and clever use of scraps of "left over" cloth from the "Big House", pieces of worn out garments and an occasional piece of cheap fabric bought when they had earned money for some extra duty. They were skilful in dyeing cloth from dyes made from plants and they devised new quilting patterns as well as using the old patterns that they had learned from their mistresses. For padding the quilts they used old clothing, old worn blankets and cotton from the rejected pieces of cotton when the cotton crop was harvested and baled. These scraps of cotton fibre often contained seeds and became lumpy with washing in hot water and harsh soap but they needed quilts for bedding. Slave women worked on their quilts after their days work was done and working well into the night was not easy. One ex-slave recalling his childhood talks of having to hold the only light, a piece of pine set alight, until late in the night while his mother quilted. Another recalls having to start helping with the quilting as soon as she came in from working in the fields. With every disadvantage the slave women produced some quilts of remarkable quality as is seen in the relatively few that remain. Despised as they were the slaves showed that no bad treatment, no loss of dignity could prevent them



from producing work of artistic merit, drawing as they did on a long history of African achievement in the arts.



West Africa was the place where most of the slaves were bought for enslavement and that part of Africa had a history of skilled and decorative work. In our age tourists buy articles of interest and often of clever construction, and art galleries in the rest of the world are proud to own and exhibit the West African art. In much earlier times the metal workers of Benin and the textiles woven in many places have not been surpassed. The slaves mixed together and treated as objects by the slavers, were often people with great skill in various trades and occupations, and although in general most of them had no chance to use their skills in their new lives, as slaves the ability was there. The African nations from where the slaves were taken did not develop writing as did many other races but they developed a way of communicating by using signs and symbols, and in their textiles they communicated and recorded events and tribal knowledge. Geometric drawings and sometimes circles form part of their cosmology. In quilting some of the old signs were reproduced in differing forms in a simplified way. This inherent ability to read messages conveyed in symbols was to play an important part in events between 1834, when all slaves in the British Empire were set free and the Civil War when all American slaves were freed.



Despite the ending of the slave trade in 1807 there were many thousands of slaves in the West Indies and the southern states of the USA

and because of the ending of the transportation of slaves from Africa their value increased. This made escaping from the plantations into the free states more difficult because the slave owners employed slave catchers to follow and recapture any runaway slaves. The Northern states had agreed that these slave catchers had the right to regain the "lost property" of the slave owners. Despite all the difficulties many slaves did escape and a number of ex-slaves worked hard to help others to escape and so did the Quakers and other people with liberal ideas.



In 1834 all slaves in the British Empire were freed when the Emancipation Act of 1833 came into force. Escaping slaves now had two destinations where freedom was assured, Canada and the British West Indies, but they faced a long and difficult journey to freedom. Plantation slaves knew nothing of the country beyond the immediate environs of their plantation. Those who had come to America from the West Indies as children or those who were born in slavery had no recollection of an earlier life as free people and those who had come in the last years of slave trading were, by the 1830's often too old to embark on a long and dangerous journey into the unknown.



To escape needed a great deal of help and this they received. A widespread system of help for escaping slaves came into being. The Quakers set up "safe houses" where slaves would get help along the route and they provided guides to take the escaping slaves from one safe house to the next.

The system was called the Underground Railroad. The guides were called "Conductors", the escapees were known as "passengers". In messages male "passengers" were referred to as "hard ware" and women as "dry goods". A problem remained and that was to find a way of sending messages to the escaping slaves who were illiterate and who would, in any case, find any written messages hard to hide. One answer lay in making use of the African ability to interpret signs and pictorial symbols.



It is believed that a code was worked out using the old quilting patterns that were familiar to all quilters and to display these symbols on textiles that would arouse no suspicion in the owners or their overseers. Humble household quilts could be the means of sending messages. Some of the patterns that were used are shown here and an illustration shows how they were used. A quilt hanging over a window ledge or half door of a cabin in the slave area of the plantation aroused no suspicion but messages could be worked out by the slaves. Some of the quilts were tied and the ties were left in view on the front of the quilt. Knots in the ties denoted distances, the backs of such quilts showed a grid which helped in working out distances.



One lady criticised the "untidy workers who left ugly string ties on the front of a quilt". Little did she know that it was done deliberately and that the knots were there for a purpose! One can imagine the satisfaction that the quilters got in feeling that their hard work at night was serving so useful a purpose.



Few of the slave quilts have survived but the memory of them has been passed on from one generation to another, engendering pride in their ancestors who, in a period of terrible difficulty, fought back against adversity and used the skills of their people to help each other.



America is the country that has always kept its interest in and pride in its quilts and the Slave Quilts are an important part of America's textile treasures and the story of the Underground Railroad quilts is told by Jacqueline Tobin in her book "Hidden in Plain View". In our exhibition we have tried to reproduce what some of the coded patterns looked like as a tribute to those slave women who, working under great difficulties used the codes which were given to Jacqueline Tobin by an elderly women who was the grand daughter of a slave quilter. The story is not corroborated however by other evidence so it has been criticised. Nevertheless oral tradition and the fact that women's history in the form of domestic artefacts and skills often discarded over time because they have worn out or become redundant, does not detract from the likelihood that quilts could also have been used as a code. We should not underestimate the ingenuity, bravery and determination of the slaves, who had no rights or power, to develop strategies for reaching the road to freedom.



# Story of the Underground Railroad

The Monkey Wrench  turns the Wagon Wheel  toward Canada.

With help from Jesus, the Carpenter,  follow the Bears' Trail  through the woods.

Fill your Baskets  with enough food and supplies to get you to the

Crossroads  . Once you get to the Crossroads, dig a Log Cabin  in the ground.

Shoofly  told us to dress up in cotton and satin Bow Ties  . Follow the Flying Geese

 and Birds in the Air  , stay on the Drunkard's Path  . Take the Sailboat

 across the Great Lakes to the North Star  above Canada.

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