

STORY QUILTS AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD: **Safe Passage from Slavery to Freedom** Ozella McDaniel Williams

For many years quilts were used as a means of communication during times of slavery. Since slaves were not allowed to learn to read or write, other systems of sharing information were created. This was accomplished through music and the art of quilting.

*The djembe or "talking" drum concept was brought over from Africa. It was used to send messages through high and low pitched drum beats, as well as to show patterns in the beats themselves. Slaves developed a system of musical sounds on the djembe that allowed them to communicate between plantations.

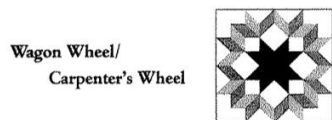
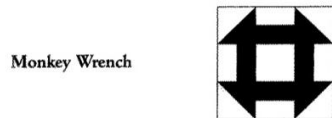
*Songs and folk tales created by the slaves not only told stories, but also worked as a system of coded messages that contained warnings or instructions for the next step in a plan to escape slavery. Many of these stories were inspired by Biblical tales. Harriet Tubman, an escaped slave that led over 300 slaves to freedom over several years around 1847, was nicknamed "Moses".

*Quilts contained hidden messages in the patterns and construction. Knots were tied in between squares to indicate how far on a journey slaves needed to travel. Specific colors represented safety or danger. The patterns themselves told a story and provided a map for slaves to follow on their journey to freedom.

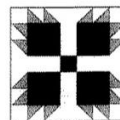
Quilts had 3 purposes:

1. To prepare the slaves for their journey.
2. To tell slaves what to do on their journey.
3. To give directions.

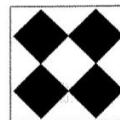
Ozella's Underground Railroad Quilt Code Patterns



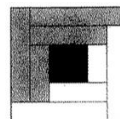
Bear's Paw



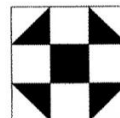
Crossroads



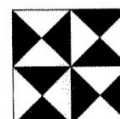
Log Cabin



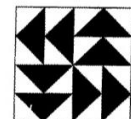
Shoofly



Bow Tie (also known
 as Hourglass)



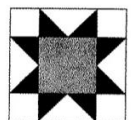
Flying Geese



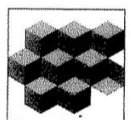
Drunkard's Path



Star/Evening Star/
 North Star



Tumbling Blocks
 or Boxes



The following is a list of significant quilt patterns and their meanings. It is believed this is the original order of the patterns.

Monkey Wrench: Gather all the tools needed for the journey. "Tools" did not necessarily mean hammers and wrenches. Slaves gathered supplies:

1. To construct structures for shelters.
2. For direction, like a compass.
3. For defense.
4. To gather food.
5. For purchases, such as food.
6. To be cunning, alert, knowledgeable and determine if strangers were friends or foe.

Wagon Wheel: Pack the provisions you need as if packing for a trip. What would you put in your wagon? Take only what would be essential for survival.

Bear's Paw: Follow the trails of bear prints. The bear tracks lead to food and water. In Ohio, along the Underground Railroad, there is an area known for its black bear population called "The Firelands". A bear population existed along the Appalachian mountain range stretching from the southwest area of South Carolina to the range's northeast axis along charted Underground Railroad routes.

Crossroads: Cleveland, OH.

Log Cabin: When this quilt hung over clotheslines or fences it indicated either a safe house, or a house to avoid. The pattern usually had a red center to represent fire. Some patterns were constructed with a dyed black center piece (blue indigo was often considered "black" because it was made by "black" people; the centers may have been organically dyed black or blue indigo). Some felt this quilt was hung by resident slaves to indicate to others to avoid the house, as the owners did not help slaves. Yellow centers, like a beacon of light, may have indicated a safe house where slaves could take refuge.

Shoofly: Shoofly may have represented an actual person that helped steer slaves to safety during their journeys. Shoofly could be either a man or woman, like Harriet Tubman.

Satin Bow Ties: "Exchange double wedding rings" meant to let go of the bonds of slavery. The rings represented the chains slaves were often forced to endure. Churches provided refuge for slaves, helped them remove chains if they were still bearing them, gave them food and shelter, and donated a clean set of clothes. It was important to blend in with common people, since there were bounty hunters looking for slaves to capture and return to their owners for profit.

Flying Geese: The geese represented both slaves and real geese flying North. When this quilt was hung out to be seen, one set of geese would occasionally be colored a separate color than the rest, indicating true North. It also meant that slaves should start looking to the geese as guides, noting the direction they flew and their eating/traveling habits.

Drunkards Path: A warning to slaves to move in a zig-zag fashion and occasionally double back over their steps to trick slave trackers.

North Star: A guiding light for fleeing slaves. The North Star has always been connected to the Underground Railroad. The song, "Follow the Drinking Gourd", is a song of directions and warnings for slaves on the run. It refers to the Little Dipper, pointing to where the North Star can be found.

Follow the Drinking Gourd: Richie Havens

When the sun come back,
When the firs' quail call,
Then the time is come
Foller the drinkin' gou'd.

Chorus:

Foller the drinkin' gou'd
Foller the drinkin' gou'd
For the ole man say,
"Foller the drinkin' gou'd".

The riva's bank am a very good road,
The dead trees show the way,
Lef' foot, peg foot goin' on,
Foller the drinkin' gou'd.

The riva ends a-tween two hills,
Foller the drinkin' gou'd.
'Nuther riva on the other side
Follers the drinkin' gou'd.

Wha the little riva
Meet the grea' big un,
The ole man waits-
Foller the drinkin' gou'd

Tumbling Boxes: Time to escape to Canada.

Remarkably, throughout the construction of these quilts, either by slaves or servants, the act of sewing itself was praised by the mistress of the house. Sewing was seen as industrious, a pursuit of skills and not as a creation of secret codes. Slaves caught sewing were praised for learning a craft instead of punished.

Wade in the Water: Ella Jenkins

Chorus:

Wade in the water,
Wade in the water children.
Wade in the water,
God's gonna trouble the water.

See dat host all dressed in white,
God's gonna trouble the water.
The leader looks like the Israelite,
God's gonna trouble the water.

See dat ban' all dressed in red,
God's gonna trouble the water.
Looks like de ban dat Moses led,
God's gonna trouble the water.

Steal Away: Mavis Staples & Lucky Peterson

Chorus:

Steal away, Steal away,
Steal away to Jesus.
Steal away, Steal away,
I ain't got long to stay here.

My Lord calls me, He calls me by the thunder
Green trees are bending, poor sinner stands a trembling
Tombstones are bursting, poor sinner stands a trembling
My Lord calls me, He calls me by the lightning

The trumpet sounds within a my soul,
I ain't got long to stay here.