

<b>QUILT CODES</b>				<b>Student/Class Goal</b> Students often have questions when reading text or online sites about the reliability of the writing and how they judge whether the author has written facts or not.		
<b>Outcome</b> <i>(lesson objective)</i> Students will be able to list criteria that are useful in evaluating the credibility of historical sources and claims and write a paper defending their views.				<b>Time Frame</b> 3-5 hours		
<b>Standard</b> <i>Read with Understanding</i>				<b>NRS EFL 3-6</b>		
Purpose	Benchmarks	Word Knowledge	Benchmarks	Comprehension	Benchmarks	
Purpose for reading	3.1, 4.1, 5.1, 6.1	Decoding skills		Strategy use	3.11, 4.11, 5.11, 6.11	
Select text	3.2, 4.2, 5.2, 6.2	Word parts		Text structural elements	3.12, 4.12, 5.12, 6.12	
		Context clues	3.5, 5.5, 5.5, 6.5	Genres		
		Reference materials		Literary analysis	3.14, 4.14, 5.14, 6.14	
		Word relationships		Drawing conclusions	3.15, 4.15, 5.15, 6.15	
		Content vocabulary	3.8, 4.8, 5.8, 6.8	Making connections	3.16, 4.16, 5.16, 6.16	
		Figurative language				
		Fluency				
<b>Materials</b> A copy or classroom set of the book <i>Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad</i> <i>Information Literacy: Evaluating What You Find</i> Teacher Resource <i>Criteria for Evaluating Information</i> Handout Underground Railroad (UGRR) Quilt Code articles Quilt Codes Learning Objects						
<b>Learner Prior Knowledge</b> If this is the first time students have examined historical documents and analyzed them in terms of credibility, the teacher will need to teach this concept using the <i>Information Literacy: Evaluating What You Find</i> Teacher Resource. Students should be comfortable finding Internet websites by using a search engine.						
<b>Instructional Activities</b> Step 1 - Explain to students that in 1994, historian Jacqueline Tobin met Ozella McDaniel Williams, an African-American quilter, in the Old Market Building of Charleston, South Carolina. Williams told Tobin a story that had been passed along from generation to generation in her family. In general terms, Williams described a secret communication system that employed quilt-making terminology as a message map for slaves escaping on the Underground Railroad (UGRR).  Williams' story prompted Jacqueline Tobin to enlist the help of Raymond Dobard, an art history professor and well-known African-American quilter, in an attempt to unravel the mystery of Williams' claim to an UGRR Quilt Code. Their efforts led to the publication of <i>Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad</i> (1999). Their ideas have unraveled an intriguing topic for ongoing research but have also generated important questions surrounding the credibility of historical sources.  Read aloud or distribute copies of the Cuesta Benberry's Foreword to <i>Hidden in Plain View</i> entitled "The Heritage of an Oral Tradition: The Transmission of Secrets in African American Culture" (1999, p. 1-3). Have the students summarize Benberry's main points and discuss their findings using discussion webs.  Step 2 - Ask students to find the best possible information they can about Quilt Codes. With electronic technology providing an overwhelming amount of information, students will need to evaluate all sources they encounter in their study for credibility.						

Working in triads, have students construct a list of criteria that can be used to evaluate the credibility of claims. Some general guidelines to use in evaluating information sources would include: credibility, accuracy, objectivity and support, as shown in the following chart from [Evaluating Internet Research Sources](#).

<b>Credibility</b>	trustworthy source, author’s credentials, evidence of quality control, known or respected authority, organizational support. Goal: an authoritative source, a source that supplies some good evidence that allows you to trust it.
<b>Accuracy</b>	up to date, factual, detailed, exact, comprehensive, audience and purpose reflect intentions of completeness and accuracy. Goal: a source that is correct today (not yesterday), a source that gives the whole truth.
<b>Objectivity</b>	fair, balanced, objective, reasoned, no conflict of interest, absence of fallacies or slanted tone. Goal: a source that engages the subject thoughtfully and reasonably, concerned with the truth.
<b>Support</b>	listed sources, contact information, available corroboration, claims supported, documentation supplied. Goal: a source that provides convincing evidence for the claims made, a source you can triangulate (find at least two other sources that support it).

**TEACHER NOTE** More in-depth descriptions of these criteria can be found in the *Information Literacy: Evaluating What You Find* Teacher Resource. You can choose to use a student-developed handout from their list of criteria or use the provided handout to guide students in their research.

Step 3 - Share a copy of the UGRR Quilt Code article [Flesch-Kincaid readability estimate 7.2] using an overhead or distribute the handout and review the code with students. Also show students the quilt pattern illustrations from the book. Model the evaluation process using the handout *Criteria for Evaluating Information* or a similar student-developed list of questions with students. Students can work in pairs to supply the necessary information about the UGRR Quilt Code article. Discuss results as a large group.

Once the teacher has modeled the evaluation process, have students choose one of the selected articles listed below, find other articles from the websites provided or use Benberry’s original article. Students can choose to work in pairs or individually. Distribute copies and a criteria handout for each article. Then, ask the students to apply their criteria for evaluating credibility to the UGRR Quilt Code theory.

**Putting it in Perspective: The Symbolism of Underground Railroad Quilts** [Flesch-Kincaid 12.0]

**The Underground Railroad Quilt Code** [Flesch-Kincaid 12.0]

**Unraveling the Myth of Quilts and the Underground Railroad** [Flesch-Kincaid 11.9]

**Did Quilts Hold Codes** [Flesch-Kincaid 8.8]

**UGRR Quilt Code** (chapter) [Flesch-Kincaid 6.5]

Step 4 - Each student should write a paper to defend or refute the UGRR Quilt Code idea, using the research they have completed that met the criteria for credibility.

**TEACHER NOTE** The [Purdue Online Writing Lab](#) (OWL) “Creating a Thesis Statement” will provide you with suggestions for scaffolding your student’s writing if they are unfamiliar with this particular approach.

**Assessment/Evidence** *(based on outcome)*

Completed list of criteria

Defense paper

Discussion and Teacher Observation

**Teacher Reflection/Lesson Evaluation**

*Not yet completed.*

**Next Steps**

To continue on the topic of the Civil War & Slavery, the lesson *Quilting Geometry* would be next in the series. Quilt Codes Learning Objects will give students additional practice doing research on the Internet and evaluating sources.

**Technology Integration**

Putting it in Perspective: The Symbolism of Underground Railroad Quilts <http://www.quilthistory.com/ugrrquilts.htm>

The Underground Railroad Quilt Code <http://www.ugrrquilt.hartcottagequilts.com/>

Did Quilts Hold Codes <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/pf/70630403.html>

UGRR Quilt Code (chapter) [http://www2.oakland.edu/oujournal/files/SP2005\\_70-79.pdf](http://www2.oakland.edu/oujournal/files/SP2005_70-79.pdf)

UGRR Quilt Code <http://www.osblackhistory.com/quilts.php>

Quilt Code FAQs <http://ugrrquilt.hartcottagequilts.com/QuiltCodeFAQs.pdf>

Quilt Code Talk <http://www.tedpack.org/quilt1.html>

The Credibility Challenge: In Search of Authority on the Internet <http://factchecked.org/LessonPlanDetails.aspx?myId=23>

Discussion Webs [http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/discussion\\_webs.pdf](http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/discussion_webs.pdf)

**Print Resource**

Tobin, J. L. and Dobard, R. G. (1999). *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*. New York: Anchor Books.

**Purposeful/Transparent**

As students are reading more and varied texts, they will need to know how to evaluate if sources are true. There are historical document on the GED test to evaluate and make judgments about.

**Contextual**

Each of us is confronted with more and more information that is readily available on the Internet and we must increase our information literacy levels in order to make informed decisions in our lives.

**Building Expertise**

After collecting information about the quilt codes, students write a paper in defense of what they believe to be true.

# Information Literacy: Evaluating What You Find

## Teacher Resource

*What is Information Literacy?* The set of skills needed to find, retrieve, analyze, and use information. The beginning of the 21st century has been called the Information Age because of the explosion of information output and information sources.

*Who needs Information Literacy?* We all do – in school, in the workplace and in our personal lives. Being information literate ultimately improves our quality of life as we make informed decisions when buying a house, choosing a school, hiring staff, making an investment, voting for our representatives and so much more.

*Why is Information Literacy important?* **Data smog** refers to the idea that too much information can create a barrier in our lives. This data smog is produced by the amount of information, the speed at which it comes to us from all directions, the need to make fast decisions and the feeling of anxiety that we are making decisions without having all the information that is available or that we need. Information literacy is the solution to data smog. It allows us to cope by giving us the skills to know when we need information and where to locate it effectively and efficiently; to enable us to analyze and evaluate the information we find, giving us confidence in using the information.

One component of information literacy is **source evaluation**, the skill of analyzing information sources in order to assess their credibility. The ability to assess different sources of information is highly relevant to the task of operating within a complex information society. We need ways to determine if the information we find is the best, most accurate, or most current information available.

- *Why is evaluation important?* Not all information is reliable, authoritative, objective, current, or appropriate. Critical evaluation of information resources is necessary to ensure that you select the best resources to support your work or make decisions.
- *How do you evaluate information?* To evaluate information you should carefully appraise the characteristics of the sources that create and publish information. You should thoroughly analyze the content contained within information resources. After evaluating an information resource, you should use the results of the assessment to determine whether or not it is reasonable and prudent to use particular pieces of information for a designated purpose (i.e., work projects, personal decisions or a class assignment).
- *What are the criteria for evaluating information?* To systematically and effectively evaluate information, you should examine each of the following criteria for the information resources that you are considering: bibliographic criteria (authority, currency, audience, source/publisher) and content criteria (accuracy, coverage/scope, objectivity/bias, quality, relevance). The following chart will provide questions to ask and ways to direct you and your students as you look for information.

<b>Authority</b>		
Questions to ask	How to find out	Web issues
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Who is this author?</li> <li>~ What expertise does s/he have?</li> <li>~ Should I believe what s/he says? Why?</li> <li>~ What are the author's qualifications and credentials for writing about this subject?</li> <li>~ How reputable is the publisher?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Check the source itself for information about the author's credentials.</li> <li>~ Check the publisher of the source. University presses tend to publish books or journals with articles by scholars who are recognized experts in their field.</li> <li>~ Check a library catalog or database to find out what else the author has written.</li> <li>~ Check a biographical source.</li> <li>~ Read a critical review if your source is a book or film. A review will often give information about the author or others responsibility for the intellectual content of the source.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Often difficult to determine authorship of Web sources.</li> <li>~ Search engines may retrieve pages out of context making it difficult to know where you are.</li> <li>~ If author's name is listed, his/her qualifications are frequently absent.</li> <li>~ Publisher responsibility often not indicated or easily found.</li> </ul>

<b>Accuracy</b>		
<b>Questions to ask</b>	<b>How to find out</b>	<b>Web issues</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Does the author support her/his statements with data or references to research?</li> <li>~ Are quotations attributed to named people?</li> <li>~ Does the source have notes, a bibliography or a list of references?</li> <li>~ How reliable and free from error is the information?</li> <li>~ How do you know?</li> <li>~ Were there editors and fact checkers?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Examine the source itself.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Anyone can publish on the Web.</li> <li>~ Web resources may not be verified by editors or checked for accuracy.</li> <li>~ No standards yet developed.</li> <li>~ Web pages move. If you quote this source, will it be available later?</li> <li>~ Web pages are susceptible to accidental and deliberate alteration.</li> </ul>
<b>Currency</b>		
<b>Questions to ask</b>	<b>How to find out</b>	<b>Web issues</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ When was the information published?</li> <li>~ Is the date of publication important to the subject matter?</li> <li>~ Is the content of the work up-to-date?</li> <li>~ Is the publication/copyright date clearly labeled?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Check the date of publication or copyright for all your sources.</li> <li>~ Notice whether your source is a reprint. If so, the publication date may be misleading. The copyright dates will tell you when the information was first published.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Dates not always included on Web pages. If included, a date may have various meanings: date information first written, date information placed on Web or date information last revised.</li> </ul>
<b>Objectivity (Purpose, Bias, Audience)</b>		
<b>Questions to ask</b>	<b>How to find out</b>	<b>Web issues</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ What is the purpose of the source?</li> <li>~ What is the author's attitude toward the subject?</li> <li>~ To what extent is the information trying to sway the opinion of the audience?</li> <li>~ Is the information presented with a minimum of bias?</li> <li>~ Is it intended for a scholarly or a popular audience?</li> <li>~ Who is responsible for its dissemination?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Read or skim the source you are evaluating. The introduction or preface may state the purpose, either directly or indirectly.</li> <li>~ Determine whether the source is published by an organization with a particular purpose.</li> <li>~ Determine whether the source attempts to sell a product or promote a particular point of view. Also, see if it presents a balanced view.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Goals and aims of the people or groups presenting material is often unclear</li> <li>~ Web often functions as a "virtual soapbox"</li> <li>~ Distinction between advertising and information is blurred on Web</li> </ul>
<b>Source/Publisher</b>		
<b>Questions to ask</b>	<b>How to find out</b>	<b>Web issues</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ If the source is a periodical article, was it reviewed by experts in the field before publication?</li> <li>~ What is the reputation of the publisher?</li> <li>~ If it is from the Internet, was there any review process?</li> <li>~ Whatever the source, was it critically reviewed after it was written or posted?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ To find out whether a journal is peer reviewed or refereed, check an issue of the journal to determine if it's scholarly, professional, non-specialist or popular.</li> <li>~ Information may be published by an association, a university press, a commercial publisher, a government or even an individual. If you know something about the publisher, you can often identify bias and point of view.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Lack of a review process.</li> </ul>

## Suitability (Coverage, Scope)

Questions to ask	How to find out	Web issues
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>~ Does the source contain the information you need?</li><li>~ Is it written at a level you can understand and that is appropriate for the intended audience?</li><li>~ What topics are included in the work?</li><li>~ Are the topics included explored in depth?</li></ul>	<p>If available, read the abstract of the periodical article or skim the table of contents and index of a book. Browse a few pages of the sources. Look for technical or specialized language; check that the focus is not too general or specific for your needs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>~ Web version may differ from print version of same title.</li><li>~ Often hard to determine extent of Web coverage.</li></ul>

"General Criteria for Evaluating Information," Humboldt State University Library, January 18, 2005. <http://library.humboldt.edu/owls/owl5-Criteria.htm> (accessed August 11, 2008).

"Evaluating What You Find," The University of Tennessee Libraries, 2004-2005. <http://www.lib.utk.edu/instruction/learnhow/evaluating1.html> (accessed August 11, 2008).

"Information Literacy Program: Criteria for Evaluating ALL Types of Information," Otis College of Art and Design. <http://library.otis.edu/evalinfo.htm> (accessed August 11, 2008).

## **Criteria for evaluating information**

Selection \_\_\_\_\_ Author \_\_\_\_\_

### Text Source

*How was the source located? What type of source is it? Does the source contain a bibliography?*

### Date of Publication

*In which country was it published? What is the reputation of the publisher? Does the source show a particular cultural or political bias?*

### Author's Qualifications

Authority of the source of the selection

Authority of sources quoted within the selection

Concerns about the copyright date?

Author's purpose

Author's attitude toward subject

Author's attitude toward audience

Author's bias

Effectiveness of the author's argument

Reader's purpose for reading the text and reader's own bias

Has the material been reviewed by a group of peers or has it been edited?

How does this article compare with similar articles?

# Underground Railroad Quilt Code

<http://educ.queensu.ca/~fmc/may2004/Underground.html>

Ozella Williams is an African American woman who lives in South Carolina. She makes and sells quilts. Ozella's family has passed down a story. The story tells about a secret code. The code helped slaves remember the ways to escape to freedom. Ozella's grandmother told the story to Ozella's mother. Ozella's mother told it to her and she continues to tell the story to others about the Underground Railroad Quilt Code. The secret message is hidden in quilt patterns from the days of slavery. The women who were quilters remembered the story and passed it down to each new generation.

## Ozella's Underground Railroad Quilt 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*.

According to Ozella, there were ten quilts used to direct slaves to take particular actions. Each quilt featured one of the ten patterns. The ten quilts were placed one at a time on a fence. Since it was common for quilts to be aired out frequently, the master or mistress would not be suspicious when seeing quilts displayed in this fashion. This way, the slaves could nonverbally alert those who were escaping. Only one quilt would appear at any one time. Each quilt signaled a specific action for a slave to take at the particular time that the quilt was on view. The code had dual meaning: first to signal slaves to prepare to escape and second to give clues and indicate directions on the journey.



## The Underground Railroad Quilt Code Patterns

Quilt Pattern Name	Message, Code or Signal	Citation <i>from Hidden in Plain View</i>
 <b>Monkey Wrench</b>	Prepare the tools you'll need for the long journey to freedom, including the mental and spiritual tools. It also signifies the pilot (of a ship's wheel) is prepared to begin the transport.	p. 70
 <b>Wagon Wheel</b>	Load the wagon or prepare to board the wagon to begin the escape.	p. 70
 <b>Bear's Paw</b>	Take a mountain trail, out of view. Follow the path made by bear tracks; they can lead you to water and food.	p. 84
 <b>Crossroads</b>	Refers to Cleveland, Ohio, a destination offering several routes to freedom. It also signifies reaching a point where a person's life will change, so one must be willing to go on.	p. 97
 <b>Log Cabin</b>	A secret symbol that could be drawn on the ground indicating that a person is safe to talk to. It also advises seeking shelter.	p. 104
 <b>Shoofly</b>	Possibly identifies a friendly guide who is nearby and can help.	p. 104
 <b>Bowtie</b>	Dress in a disguise, or put on a change of clothes. Make the best use of time (bow ties turned sideways look like an hourglass).	p. 107
 <b>Flying Geese</b>	Points to a direction to follow, such as where geese would fly during spring migration.	p. 111
 <b>Drunkard's Path</b>	Create a zig-zag path, do not walk in a straight line, to avoid pursuers in this area.	p. 113
 <b>Star</b>	Follow the North Star. Worked in conjunction with the popular song, "Follow the Drinking Gourd," a reference to the Big Dipper constellation.	p. 114

# Putting it in Perspective: The Symbolism of Underground Railroad quilts

by Kris Driessen

To understand the special role quilts may have played in the Underground Railroad, we first have to understand the life and times of the people who lived during the years the railroad was running, approximately 1830-1862. These times were politically turbulent and impossible to summarize in a few brief paragraphs. This article should be considered an overview only.

In the first year of the US Census, 1790, the United States of America consisted of 3.8 million people including 694,000 slaves scattered along the 16 states of the east coast. The issue of slavery was a thorny one for the new government. The 40,000 slaves in the northern states of CT, NJ, NY, PA and RI worked alongside free white men in cutting, burning, and clearing bush for cultivation. Southern slaves were vitally important to the economy of the southern states, which depended on the production of labor-intensive crops such as sugar, coffee, cacao, tobacco and rice. Southern states agreed to join the United States of America only on the provision that they were allowed to keep their slaves.

Congress was well aware of the both the importance of southern crops to the economy of the United States and the importance of slave labor to the production of these crops. As the country expanded westward, provisions were made for slavery to continue. Yet as each new area was opened to slavery, the voices of abolitionists (anti-slavery proponents) got louder. As a compromise, An Act to Prohibit the Importation of Slaves into any Port or Place Within the Jurisdiction of the United States was passed in 1807. At that time there were approximately 1.1 million slaves in 18 states.

Anti-slavery sentiment in the North continued to grow in the early 1800's. The Missouri Compromise established a boundary between the slave states of the south and the free states of the north at the state line between Pennsylvania and Maryland, the Mason-Dixon line. Included in this compromise was a prohibition of slavery north of this line. At the same time, abolitionists were having an effect in the northern states. By 1810, the northern slave population in the North had dwindled to roughly 27,000.

The invention and distribution of the cotton gin in the late 1700's and early 1800's allowed 50 pounds of cotton to be processed each day, making the crop profitable for the first time. After the invention of the cotton gin, the yield of raw cotton doubled each decade. 1815 marked the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Cotton mills were opened in and around Lowell MA which could process this southern cotton into cloth. The invention of the steamboat and the opening of the complete Erie Canal in 1825 ensured this cloth could be made widely available to all Americans including those that were beginning the trek west.

Not everyone in the north was anti-slavery. Most either didn't care or recognized the importance of free labor to southern industry. Slaves were not recognized in society as being potentially equal. They were seen as children who must be protected even while they were being exploited. In 1820, the Missouri Compromise was declared unconstitutional in the Dred Scott Decision as it violated the Fifth Amendment of the Constitution, which prohibits Congress from depriving persons of their property without due process of law. This reopened parts of the Louisiana Purchase to slavery.

In 1829, transportation by railroad began in the United States. The term "Underground Railroad" was coined shortly thereafter to refer to the organization of people who helped slaves escape. According to legend, it was named after a comment a slave owner made after his escaping slave swam a river and disappeared on the other side by way of an Underground Railroad.

Escape from slavery was not easy. Most slaves were uneducated and ill prepared for a long journey. Escapes were generally not planned; they were spur-of-the moment decisions made to take advantage of a favorable circumstance. Few took advantage of the Underground Railroad from Maryland, Virginia and the Carolinas. In fact, of the 4 million slaves that escaped during the period 1830 - 1862, less than 1% fled north. Most melted into local black communities passing themselves off as free men or headed south to Spanish Florida and Spanish Mexico. Slaves that did travel north found themselves facing professional slave catchers patrolling the borders between slave states and free states. Free blacks traveling by train or steamboat had to carry official papers listing their name, age, height, skin color, and other distinguishing features.

In 1833 the American Anti-Slavery Society was formed, publishing a newspaper called the Liberator. Consisting primarily of white people, their goal was to convince slave owners of the evils of the system they supported through moral persuasion. Noted authors and lecturers such as William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth began to travel the country lecturing on the evils of slavery. They found many supporters both in the northern states, where slavery had been abolished by 1827, and in England, where all slaves had been given a gradual emancipation in 1838. While these abolitionists were writing and publishing their articles, newspapers and magazines, the South released a flood of proslavery propaganda. Tensions were high and the political pot was beginning to heat up.

By 1850, the United States consisted of 32 states stretching from coast to coast. Total population was 23 million, of which 3.2 million were slaves and 424,000 were free blacks according to the US Census that year. The South provided three-fifths of America's exports, most of it in cotton, while the North continued to expand its manufacturing base.

Pressure increased on southern slave owners as the country expanded westward. Territories were governed by Congress which maintained the status quo until the territory became a state. Since Mexico had abolished slavery in 1822, this meant that any territory created from land formerly governed by Mexico had to remain a non slave area. No slave holder would settle in a free territory, so when the territory became a state, it naturally became a free state, which tipped the balance of power in Congress.

The southern dependence on free slave labor pressured the legislature to pass The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 which allowed slave hunters to cross into free states and bring escaping slaves back to their masters. At the same time, laws were enacted heavily fining anyone caught helping these escaping slaves. This was a tremendous concern for free blacks in the North, since the slave catchers often kidnapped legally free blacks as well as fugitives. The Underground Railroad continued to function, albeit under a heavy veil of secrecy. Between 1850 and 1860 the Railroad doubled the number of passengers it carried to freedom.

The Fugitive Slave act prompted Harriet Beecher Stow to write Uncle Tom's Cabin in 1851 as a serial in the abolitionist newspaper, The National Era. Her goal was to show the physical, sexual, and emotional abuse endured by enslaved people and the terrible impact of slavery on families. Her book quickly became a controversial best seller. Uncle Tom's Cabin was both praised as a tremendous achievement by abolitionists and attacked as biased and inaccurate by slavery proponents.

About 300,000 slaves had fled to Canada by this time. Benjamin Drew, a Boston abolitionist acting in cooperation with officers of the Canadian Anti-Slavery Society, visited various towns in Canada, interviewing slaves who had made good their escape and established new lives. His book *The Refugee: Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada Related by Themselves* published in 1856 corroborated the abuses named in the Uncle Tom's Cabin.

The political pot began to simmer in the late 1850's as the southern states continued to protest what they saw as unequal representation in Congress. They demanded more rights for their states, feeling strongly that the right to govern themselves was guaranteed by the US Constitution. They felt they were being unfairly taxed by the northern controlled congress and that efforts to prevent slavery in the growing country were designed to destroy their economy. Ironically, no matter how much it abhorred slavery, the North never disagreed with the South that the issue of slavery was one which the Constitution gave each state the right to decide for itself. Congress had determined that the issue was one of property rights and the definition of "property" was a state issue, not a federal one.

The election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 and the southern fear of his abolitionist tendencies brought the political pot to a boil. On December 24, 1860, South Carolina Seceded from the Union, followed in short succession by Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Louisiana, Texas and Georgia, forming the Confederate States of America. The US House hastily passed a resolution promising non-interference with slavery in any state in February to no avail. On April 12, 1861 Confederate batteries opened fire on the union troops at Ft Sumter SC. The bombardment of Fort Sumter was the opening engagement of the American Civil War.

It is inaccurate to state that the cause of the Civil War was solely slavery. Over 80% of Confederate soldiers did not own slaves. They were fighting for the right of their state to govern itself. Likewise, few Union soldiers fought strictly to free the slaves. They were fighting to preserve the Union. However, the issue of slavery quickly became the politically correct spin used by Northern politicians.

On January 1, 1863, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation which declared, "that all persons held as slaves" within the states that had seceded from the Union "are, and henceforward shall be free." Provided, of course, the Union won the war. The Confederate States of America did not feel bound by this proclamation since they planned to win the war. It applied only to states that had seceded from the Union, leaving slavery untouched in the loyal border states. It also expressly exempted parts of the Confederacy that had already come under Northern control. Although no slaves were actually freed by Emancipation Proclamation until after the war, the speech did have the effect of adding moral force to the Union cause.

After the war, there was an explosion of published information such as diaries and autobiographies detailing the abuses of slavery. Northern women wanted to know their family members had not died in vain. Since many former slaves could neither read nor write, they were assisted in writing their stories by white sympathizers. *Memoirs of a Slave Girl*, written in 1861 by the literate slave Harriet Jacobs is one such story. More slave narratives can be found here.

While these diaries are a certainly a valuable source of information about the Underground Railroad, a more reliable source may be the thousands of interviews done in 1936 - 1938 by the Federal Writers Project which recorded first hand reports of slave life. These interviews documented many escape routes, both on and off the Underground Railroad.

The idea of quilts being used in the Underground Railroad for purposes other than bedding was not mentioned either in the written documents of the period or in the interviews given years

later. That is not to say they could not have been used in a form not discussed. However, care must be taken not to romanticize this possibility.

To quote quilt historian Xenia Cord, "Quilt research and quilt history often rely heavily on the oral anecdotes and oral memories of quilters, stories that link women with common interests to a body of shared information. This information, strongly buttressed by written memoirs, documented sources, pictures, tangible artifacts, and previously published research allows the historian to contribute to the body of knowledge that is American quilt history.

Occasionally a theory is presented that offers an engaging view of the American past; the theory may not have substance and may not be documentable in any scholarly way, but it provides a vehicle through which we believe we can understand our past. This is the case with studies that supposedly reveal hidden codes or messages in quilts. A number of popularly disseminated misunderstandings about the role of quilts prior to the Civil War in the preparation and escape of fugitive slaves, and in the Underground Railroad are at present being taught to our children."

In 1989, *Stitched from the Soul* by Gladys-Marie Fry was published. In it, she offered a glimpse into the lives and creativity of African American quilters during the era of slavery. It was the first book to examine the history of quilting in the enslaved community and to place slave-made quilts into historical and cultural context. Unfortunately, the author did not confirm any of the family stories given with the quilts, so the book is riddled with inaccuracies and misplaced dates. She later curated an exhibit of these quilts.

Also in 1989, children's book author Deborah Hopkinson heard a story on National Public Radio about an art quilt exhibit by African-American quilters. The interview was discussing the symbolism in the quilts, which inspired her to write a story indicating that a quilt may have been used as a signaling device in the Underground Railroad. Deborah Hopkinson was unable to find any documentation for this theory and so wrote her book *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt* with a fictional quilt. Her book was published in 1993. This book was later listed as a reference for *Hidden in Plain View* as was *Stitched from the Soul*.

Ten years later, the book *Hidden in Plain View* was published which further explored the theory of quilts being used in the Underground Railroad. *Hidden in Plain View* was written by Jacqueline Tobin, a Women's Studies professor at the University of Denver, assisted by Raymond Dobard, an Art History teacher at Howard University. The book documented her discussions with Ozella McDaniel Williams between 1993 and 1997.

Ozella Williams was an African-American quilt store owner in a Charleston SC tourist market. Her professed goal was to ensure that her families' oral history of a quilt code, which had been passed down to her through the generations, was "written down." This code was evidentially a mnemonic device, used to help illiterate slaves memorize directions and activities they may have needed for escape. Ironically, Ms Williams family never used this code to effect their escape. In fact, in later interviews with some family members, they denied knowing anything at all about this "family story." *Hidden in Plain View*, published after Ms Williams death, both documented the family story and created a great deal of controversy at the same time.

Ms Williams claimed the quilt code had come from an African progenitor, presumably sold in the country before An Act to Prohibit the Importation of Slaves was passed in 1807. This means the code must have passed through nine generations of extreme societal change, a daunting task even for a culture who relied on oral history. This may account for some of the discrepancies in the book.

The code related in the book associated quilt block names with their shape, style and color as hidden messages for slaves escaping the Charleston SC area. The origin of the code and how the meaning of the code was communicated between slaves was not explored. Each block, when made into a quilt, would pass on part of the message. These messages were contained in a series of seventeen quilts. Where the slaves found the time to make these quilts, or what fabric they used, was never explained.

Many of the quilt blocks named in the book were not given their names until the early 1900's. The monkey wrench, for example, was not invented until 1858 and so could not have been the name of a block used as a mnemonic device.

Another block referenced was the "bear paw" block, meant to warn slaves of the bears in the Appalachian Mountains through which they must escape. This is problematic because slaves escaping Charleston would not normally take the longer and more dangerous route through the mountains when a shorter, easier route was available. In addition, bears east of the Mississippi had been nearly killed off from over hunting. In 1872, Underground Railroad conductor William Still published a book detailing his activities which indicated that slaves escaping Charleston typically took the coastal route.

It is possible that the ancestor who passed this story on to Ms Williams referred to these blocks by their 20th century names simply as a convenience; however, this changes the story of the quilt code.

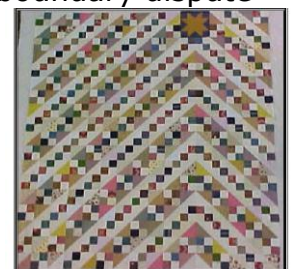
So is the story related in *Hidden in Plain View* completely untrue? It's impossible to say but it is worth noting that the authors have cautioned against believing the story as fact, indicating on page 33 that their findings are "informed conjecture". Authors Jacqueline Tobin wrote this e-mail to the Beaverton School and Raymond Dobard gave this interview both cautioning that the quilt code story was meant to be a mnemonic device, not an actual code placed in a quilt.

*Were quilts used as a signaling device in the Underground Railroad?* Certainly a quilt could have been used to signal a safe house, as could any other common household object. Keeping in mind that most escaping slaves traveled at night, however, it is unlikely that they were told to look for something as suspicious as a quilt hanging on a line overnight or a quilt with a specific pattern of blocks.

*Is there no such thing as an Underground Railroad Quilt, then?* Well, this is a trick question. In the late 1800's, many quilt blocks were named or renamed after political events.



These were blocks such as "54-40 or fight" which referred to the boundary dispute between the US and Canada in 1846; "Burgoyne Surrounded" which referred to John Burgoyne's defeat in the Saratoga Battlefields; the "Lincoln Log Cabin" named in honor of Abraham Lincoln after his assassination and the "Underground Railroad" block (also known as "Jacob's Ladder") which honored the brave conductors and passengers of the Underground Railroad. An



Underground Railroad quilt, then, is one made of Underground Railroad blocks like the this one or the one above.

Historians have to be careful not to blur American history with folktales or bend standards of truth to accommodate personal or financial agendas, which seems to have become the case with the Underground Railroad quilt code myth. Those that continue to perpetuate this myth without regard to the mounds of evidence proving it to be questionable if not outright false, often have a financial motive for doing so.

We have to conclude that there was no special role quilts played in the Underground Railroad. While no one can prove a negative, it seems unlikely that quilts were used as a directional code. Worse, this type of popular myth belies the hard work and dangers faced by the true heroes of the Underground Railroad. When myths are not dispelled and the general public is allowed to believe anything, it hurts the truth of the culture and propagates false truths. History would be far better served if actual research was done on this topic so that we might honor the people who truly deserved it such as Harriet Tubman and Levi Coffin, rather than just endlessly repeating discredited myths and gossip.

To quote Fergus M. Bordewich (the author of *Bound for Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America*), "In an age when self-interest has been elevated in our culture to a public and political virtue, the Underground Railroad still has something to teach: that every individual, no matter how humble, can make a difference in the world, and that the importance of one's life lies not in money or celebrity, but in doing the right thing, even in silence or secrecy, and without reward. This truth doesn't need to be encoded in fiction in order to be heard."

# THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD QUILT CODE

LEIGH FELLNER

*"I believe that it is better to tell the truth than a lie.  
I believe it is better to be free than to be a slave.  
And I believe it is better to know than to be ignorant."*

-- H.L. Mencken

The premise of the "Quilt Code" is that various geometric patterns commonly found in American patchwork quilts were used to convey messages in connection with the Underground Railroad. But even among Code proponents, the patterns' meanings, how the quilts were used, and who used them is a matter of debate: as of mid-2005 at least 15 contradictory versions of the Code were circulating. Some proponents claim the Code as part of their family oral history, but none can point to an ancestor who used it to escape to the North or even participated in the Underground Railroad.

Firsthand accounts of fugitive slaves and Underground Railroad participants detail many ways of conveying messages but never mention using quilts, and the details of the Code are incompatible with documented evidence of the Underground Railroad, slave living conditions, quilt making, and African culture. For example, the Code includes quilt patterns known to have originated in the 1930s, and while Code proponents say certain patterns are derived from African symbols, the messages the Code assigns to them conflict with the meanings the symbols have in Africa.

Along with many other myths involving quilts and subcultures (such as the Amish), the Code materialized in the 1980s during the post-Bicentennial revival of folk art, the popularization of women's history studies, and Western notions of African culture comparable to early Hollywood depictions of Native Americans. The earliest mention of a "quilt code" is a brief statement in a 1987 feminist video: quilts were hung outside Underground Railroad safe houses. (No source is given for the assertion and it is conspicuously absent from the companion book.) In 1993 a white Massachusetts woman elaborated on the Code idea in *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt*, a children's fiction book; its heroine makes a quilt containing a topographical map she uses to escape from slavery.

Not long after *Sweet Clara* was published, Ozella Williams, a retired California school administrator, used her own version of a "quilt code" to sell quilts in a Charleston, South Carolina tourist mall. One of her customers was Jacqueline Tobin, a white instructor in "women's words," who unsuccessfully pressed Williams for details. When Williams refused to return Tobin's phone calls, Tobin visited Williams unannounced and "coaxed" the elderly woman to reveal the Code to her. The resulting book, *Hidden in Plain View*, was published after Williams' death, and was promoted by Oprah Winfrey and quilt shop owners, who produced Code quilt kits for the multibillion-dollar quilters market, and by antique dealers who used the Code as a marketing tool. Williams' family members developed a cottage industry lecturing on the Code and selling related merchandise. Although no historian has ever supported the Code, by 2001 elementary and secondary schools were teaching it as historical fact. But after scholars pointed out numerous discrepancies between the Code and documented Underground Railroad history, earlier supporters of the Code began distancing themselves from its claims. Tobin herself has since complained that "people have tried to push the book in directions that it was not meant for".



Tuesday, Apr. 03, 2007

## **Unraveling the Myth of Quilts and the Underground Railroad**

By Stacie Stukin/Los Angeles

A quilt with an "Evening Star" pattern, believed by some to be a secret code used by slaves to guide them along the Underground Railroad.

When Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard explored in their book *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* (Random House) a family legend that said messages encoded in quilts helped slaves escape to freedom on the Underground Railroad, they had no idea that their hypothesis would inspire rancor from scholars who declared it false. They also couldn't have predicted how their story, published less than 10 years ago, would capture the popular imagination — being treated as fact on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, in museum exhibits, in children's textbooks and on the Web, and spawning an industry of quilt code books and patterns.

"Hidden in Plain View is the story of one woman's family," explains Tobin, a journalist and teacher, who said she first heard about the codes when she bought a quilt from a woman named Ozella McDaniel Williams at a Charleston, S.C., market in 1994. Williams told Tobin that for generations women in her family had been taught an oral history that stated that quilt patterns — like log cabins, monkey wrenches and wagon wheels — also served as directions that helped slaves plan their escapes. Since she lacked historical data to back up Williams' claim, Tobin enlisted her friend Raymond Dobard, a quilter and art history professor affiliated with Howard University, to help research and write the book, which is now in its sixth printing and has sold over 200,000 copies. "It's frustrating to be attacked and not allowed to celebrate this amazing oral story of one family's experience," says Tobin. "Whether or not it's completely valid, I have no idea, but it makes sense with the amount of research we did."

Relying on the oral history of one family, without corroboration from other sources, is what offends historians like Giles Wright, an Underground Railroad expert who works for the New Jersey Historical Commission. "The Underground Railroad is so rife with distortions and misinformation, and this is just one more instance when someone comes across folklore and assumes it's true," he says.

Historians like Wright are trying to set the record straight every chance they get. They present papers for publication and at conferences. They fill pages and pages of websites debunking what they believe to be a myth akin to George Washington chopping down the cherry tree. They engage in heated debates on Underground Railroad and quilt studies e-mail lists. And a few months ago Barbara Brackman, a renowned quilt historian, even published her own book called *Facts and Fabrications; Unraveling the History of Quilts and Slavery* (C&T Publishing) to present what she considers to be an accurate assessment of slavery, quilts and the Underground Railroad.

Nevertheless, the story continues to be told in places like the Plymouth Historical Museum in Plymouth, Mich., where an exhibition entitled "Quilts of the Underground Railroad" is up for the fifth year in a row. Over 6,000 school children have seen the exhibit, which presents the thesis of a quilt code. There are also smaller lectures taking place at local libraries, churches and quilt guilds all over the country. The story has also ended up in lesson plans and textbooks (*TIME For Kids* even published an article about *Hidden in Plain View* in a middle school art book published by McGraw Hill in 2005). Recently the issue got national attention when plans in New York City to include a quilt element in a Central Park Memorial statue of Frederick Douglass, an escaped slave who became a famous abolitionist, raised the ire of historians, who asked the city reconsider using quilts in the design.

But women like Anna Lopez, the education coordinator at the Plymouth Historical Museum, see no reason why the story of quilt codes can't be fact. "What I tell kids is, who writes history? Men do. Mostly white men. Then I

ask, who made quilts? Women did, and a lot of black women made quilts and passed on their oral history. No one wrote down their history, so who knows?"

Roland Freeman, a civil rights activist and photographer who has been documenting African American quilters for nearly 30 years, has another take on why the story is so popular. "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 kind of stories in our culture and we're willing to accept it because it's what we want to hear."

Folklorist and quilt historian Laurel Horton, who has lectured and published papers about the quilt code, says she's given up on trying to debunk the myth. Instead, she says she's more interested on focusing on why the story continues to persist. "This whole issue made me realize it's not a matter of one group having the truth and another not. It's matter of two different sets of beliefs. It's made me realize that belief doesn't have a lot to do with factual representation. People feel in their gut that it's true so no one can convince them in their head that it's otherwise."

# Did Quilts Hold Codes to the Underground Railroad?

Sarah Ives  
for National Geographic News

February 5, 2004

Two historians say African American slaves may have used a quilt code to navigate the Underground Railroad. Quilts with patterns named "wagon wheel," "tumbling blocks," and "bear's paw" appear to have contained secret messages that helped direct slaves to freedom, the pair claim.

Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard first posited the quilt code theory six years ago in their book *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*, published in 1998. In the book, the authors chronicled the oral testimony of Ozella McDaniel, a descendant of slaves. McDaniel claims that her ancestors passed down the secret of the quilt code from one generation to the next.

The code "was a way to say something to a person in the presence of many others without the others knowing," said Dobard, a history professor at Howard University in Washington, D.C. "It was a way of giving direction without saying, 'Go northwest.'"

## The Code

In a series of discussions with Tobin and Dobard, McDaniel described the code: A plantation seamstress would sew a sampler quilt containing different quilt patterns. Slaves would use the sampler to memorize the code. The seamstress then sewed ten quilts, each composed of one of the code's patterns.

The seamstress would hang the quilts in full view one at a time, allowing the slaves to reinforce their memory of the pattern and its associated meaning. When slaves made their escape, they used their memory of the quilts as a mnemonic device to guide them safely along their journey, according to McDaniel.

The historians believe the first quilt the seamstress would display had a wrench pattern. "It meant gather your tools and get physically and mentally prepared to escape the plantation," Dobard said. The seamstress would then hang a quilt with a wagon wheel pattern. This pattern told slaves to pack their belongings because they were about to go on a long journey.

Dobard said his favorite pattern was the bear's paw, a quilt he believes directed slaves to head north over the Appalachian Mountains. "You were supposed to follow the literal footprints of the bear," Dobard said. "Bears always go to water and berries and other natural food sources."

The last quilt had a tumbling blocks pattern, which Dobard described as looking like a collection of boxes. "This quilt was only displayed when certain conditions were right. If, for example, there was an Underground Railroad agent in the area," Dobard said. "It was an indication to pack up and go."

## Fact or Myth?

The quilt-code theory has met with controversy since its publication. Quilt historians and Underground Railroad experts have questioned the study's methodology and the accuracy of its findings.

Giles R. Wright, a New Jersey-based historian, points to a lack of corroborating evidence. Quilt codes are not mentioned in the 19th century slave narratives or 1930s oral testimonies of former slaves. Additionally, no original quilts remain.

"What I think they've done is they've taken a folklore and said it's historical fact," Wright said. "They offer no evidence, no documentation, in support of that argument."

Dobard refutes the claims that his book lacks evidence, noting that he uses oral history and thus lacks written records. "Who is going to write down what they did and what it meant ... [if] it might fall into the wrong hands?" Dobard said.

Addressing the lack of concrete evidence, Dobard emphasized the fragility of quilts. "Consider the nature of quilts. A quilt was to be used," Dobard said. "To expect a quilt that remained within the slave community to survive more than

one hundred years is asking a lot."

Fact or myth, people agree that the idea of a quilt code is compelling. Bonnie Browning of the American Quilter's Society in Paducah, Kentucky, said: "It makes a wonderful story."

<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/pf/70630403.html>

Flesch-Kincaid 8.8

# **THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD QUILT CODE**

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

By Stefanie Bohde

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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<http://www.wisconline.org>

**Logical Reasoning in Speeches**

**Author:** Dr. Cynthia Ellenbecker

**School:** Lakeshore Technical College

**Description:** This activity is cognitive. Students are introduced to credibility in public speaking via primary and secondary research. For example, information brochures, although the student may locate the material himself/herself, it is still secondary research (one step away from first-hand experience).

[http://www.wisc-online.com/objects/index\\_tj.asp?objID=SPH2001](http://www.wisc-online.com/objects/index_tj.asp?objID=SPH2001)

**Searching the Internet**

**Author:** Leanne Healy

**School:** Western Wisconsin Technical College

**Description:** In this interactive object, learners answer questions about doing research on the Internet.

[http://www.wisc-online.com/objects/index\\_tj.asp?objID=IAT204](http://www.wisc-online.com/objects/index_tj.asp?objID=IAT204)

**Quilt Codes Learning Objects**