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Did Quilts Hold Codes to the Underground Railroad?

Two historians say African American slaves may have used a quilt code to navigate the Underground Railroad, but others say differently.

BY SARAH IVES



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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.

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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." 

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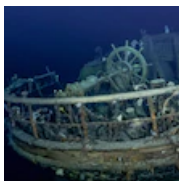
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