

## Underground Railroad Quilt Code

Secret messages in the form of quilt patterns aided slaves escaping the bonds of captivity before and during the American Civil War.

Slaves could not read or write; it was illegal to teach a slave to do so. Codes, therefore, were the slaves' existence and their route to freedom, which eventually became known as the Underground Railroad. Some forms of dance, spirituals, code words and phrases, and memorized symbols all allowed slaves to communicate with each other on a level their white owners could not interpret. Codes were used by whites aiding the slaves, and by Blacks aiding the slaves. The Blacks included other slaves, free men and women. In slavery, secrecy was one way the blacks could protect themselves. Even the youngest child was taught to effectively keep a secret from anyone outside of the household.





Most quilt patterns had their roots in the African traditions the slaves brought with them to North America. They were captured and forced to leave their homeland. The Africans' method of recording stories was by committing it to memory and passing it on orally to following generations. Quilts were passed down the same way. It is interesting to note that, in Africa, the making of textiles was not until the slaves' arrival in North America that this task fell to the females.





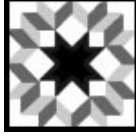
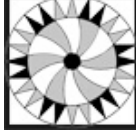
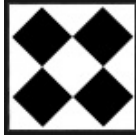
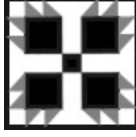
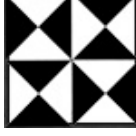
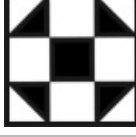
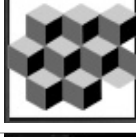
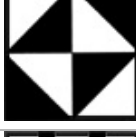
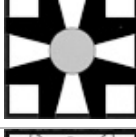

The quilt patterns, used in a certain order, relayed messages to slaves preparing to escape. Each pattern represented a different meaning. Some of the most common were "Monkey Wrench", "Star", and "Wagon Wheel". Quilts slung over a fence or windowsill, seemingly to air, were passed on to knowing slaves. As quilts hung out to air was a common sight on a plantation, neither the slave nor the overseer would notice anything suspicious. It was all part of a day's work for the slaves.

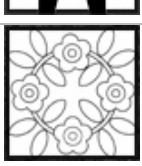
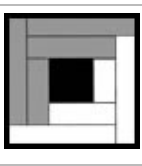
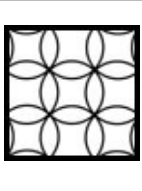
A characteristic of African culture is the communication of secrets through the use of common objects. Objects seen so often they are no longer noticeable. This applied to the quilts and their patterns and knotting. It has been suggested that the stitching and the knotting on slave quilts contained information, too, as map routes and the distances between safe houses. Using the quilts, slaves could effectively communicate nonverbally with each other and aid each other.

There is still controversy among historians and scholars over the quilt code theory, and whether slaves actually used codes concealed within quilt patterns to follow the escape routes of the Underground Railroad. As oral histories leave no written record, there is no written proof that the codes actually existed. What remains are the stories passed down through the generations from teller to themselves, and, following the code of secrecy, many of the stories were never told.

### Quilt Codes

	<p><b>Flying Geese:</b> A signal to follow the direction of the flying geese as they fly in the spring. Most slaves escaped during the spring; along the way, the flying geese were used as a guide to find water, food and places to rest. The quilt maker had flexibility as it could be used in any quilt. It could also be used as a compass where used together.</p>
	<p><b>North Star:</b> A signal with two messages--one to prepare to escape and the other to lead to freedom in Canada. North was the direction of traffic on the Underground Railroad. This signal was often used in conjunction with the song, "Follow the Leader" which contains a reference to the Big Dipper constellation. Two of the Big Dipper stars are referred to as the North Star.</p>
	<p><b>Monkey Wrench:</b> A signal to gather all the tools required for the fleeing slave, meaning the physical tools, as well as the mental and spiritual ones.</p>
	

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	<b>Sailboat:</b> A signal that either a body of water was nearby or that boats were nearby.
	<b>Drunkard's Path:</b> A warning signal to take a zigzag route to elude pursuing their hounds that are in the area. A slave spotted travelling south, for instance, suspected of escaping.
	<b>Dresden Wheel:</b> It is possible that the Dresden Plate could be a variation of the Dresden Wheel. Records indicate that the Dresden Plate quilt pattern did not emerge until the 1850s.
	<b>Wagon Wheel/Carpenter's Wheel:</b> A signal to the slave to pack the items in the wagon or that could be used while travelling. It could also mean to pack the necessary for survival, as if packing a wagon for a long journey, or to act up in preparation for escape. Some records indicate this symbol meant a wagon compartment in which slaves could conceal themselves, would soon be en route to freedom.
	<b>Wagon Wheel Variation:</b>
	<b>Crossroads:</b> A symbol referring to Cleveland, Ohio, which was the main crossing of several routes to freedom. On a less literal level, the term "crossroads" also refers to a turning point in one's life, where a choice must be made and then carry on.
	<b>Bear's Paw:</b> Follow a mountain trail, out of view, and then follow an actual trail would lead to water and food.
	<b>Bow Tie (or Hourglass):</b> A symbol indicating it was necessary to travel in disguise or change from the clothing of a slave to those of a person of higher status.
	<b>Shoofly:</b> A symbol that possibly identifies a person who can guide and help slaves escape along the Underground Railroad and who knew the c
	<b>Tumbling Blocks or Boxes:</b> A symbol indicating it was time for slaves to meet a conductor was in the area.
	<b>Broken Dishes:</b> A symbol referring to a signal that involved broken crockery at a landmark.
	<b>Britches:</b> A symbol indicating the escaping slave needed to dress as a free person.
	<b>Rose Wreath:</b> A symbol that indicated someone had died on the journey.

	<p><b>Rose Wreath:</b> A symbol that indicated someone had died on the journey. In tradition to leave floral wreaths on the graves of deceased.</p>
	<p><b>Log Cabin:</b> A symbol in a quilt or that could be drawn on the ground indicating necessary to seek shelter or that a person is safe to speak with. Some so indicated a safe house along the Underground Railroad.</p>
	<p><b>Double Wedding Ring:</b> This pattern did not exist until after the American Civil War. The Double Irish Chain pattern did and is believed to have symbolized the chains. When a slave saw this quilt displayed, it meant the rings or shackles of slavery were removed. When marrying, slaves did not exchange wedding rings; they “jur</p>