

# The Underground Railroad Quilt Codes\*



Secret messages in the form of quilt patterns helped enslaved people escape the bonds of captivity in the Southern states 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 important to 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 the slaves to communicate with each other on a level their white owners could not interpret.

Codes were created by both Blacks and Whites helping the slaves. The Blacks included other slaves, former slaves or free men and women. In slavery, secrecy was one way the Blacks could protect themselves from the Whites; even the youngest child was taught to effectively keep a secret from anyone outside the family.

## History of Quilt Patterns

Most quilt patterns had their roots in African traditions the slaves brought with them to North America when they were captured and forced to leave their homeland. The Africans' method of recording their history and stories was by committing them to memory and passing them on orally to following generations. Quilt patterns as codes were passed down the same way. It is interesting to note that in Africa the making of textiles was done by males; it 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 patterns were "Monkey Wrench," "Star," "Crossroads" and "Wagon Wheel." Quilts slung over a fence or windowsill,

seemingly to air, passed on the necessary information to slaves. As quilts hung out to air were a common sight on a plantation, neither the plantation owner nor the overseer would notice anything suspicious. It was all part of a day's work for the slaves.

There is still controversy among historians and scholars over the quilt code theory and whether or not escaping 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 in the quilt patterns actually existed. What remain are the stories passed down through the generations from the slaves themselves, and, in keeping with the code of secrecy, many of the stories were never told.

*\*Government of Canada, Black History Month, Underground Railroad Quilt Codes  
[http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/multiculturalism/black/under\\_rail.asp](http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/multiculturalism/black/under_rail.asp)*

**Here is a list of some frequently used quilt patterns:**

**Wagon Wheel/Carpenter's Wheel:** This was a signal to the slaves to pack the items that were needed for travel by wagon or that could be used while traveling. It could also mean to pack the provisions necessary for survival, as if packing a wagon for a long journey, or to actually load the wagon in preparation for escape. Some records indicate that this symbol meant a wagon with compartments in which slaves could hide.

**Crossroads:** This was a symbol referring to Cleveland, Ohio, which was the main crossroads, with several routes to freedom. On a less literal level, the term "crossroads" also means reaching a turning point in one's life, where one must make a choice and then carry on.

**Bear's Paw:** This code meant to follow a mountain trail, out of view, and then follow an actual bear's trail, which would lead to water and food.

**Bowtie:** This was a symbol indicating that it was necessary to travel in disguise or to change from the clothing of a slave to that of a person of higher status.

**Shoofly:** This was a symbol that identified a person who could guide slaves and help them escape along the Underground Railroad.

**Tumbling Blocks or Boxes:** This was a symbol indicating that it was time for slaves to pack up and go because a conductor was in the area.

**Broken Dishes:** This symbol indicated broken crockery at some future landmark.

**Britches:** This symbol indicated that the escaping slave should dress as a free person.

**Log Cabin:** This symbol was used in a quilt or drawn on the ground to indicate that it was necessary to seek shelter. It also meant that a person was safe to speak with. Some sources even say it indicated a safe house along the Underground Railroad.

**Rose Wreath:** This symbol indicated that someone had died on the journey. It was an African tradition to leave floral wreaths on graves.