

The Underground Railroad “Quilt Code” - FAQs

When people refer to the “Underground Railroad Quilt Code,” what do they mean?

A system of using quilts to help African-American slaves escape to freedom in the North or Canada during the first half of the 19th century. It first appeared in *Hidden in Plain View*, published in 1999.

What are Hidden in Plain View’s sources for the “Quilt Code” story?

The early 1990s claim of Ozella McDaniel Williams, an African-American woman who used the story to sell a quilt to a white woman in a tourist mall. The authors found no other evidence.

How is the “Quilt Code” said to have worked?

Claims keep changing, but as of January 2007 they involve variations on the following themes:

- ▶ **Mnemonic device** - to teach how to escape; each block said something different. Messages are either unhelpful to escape (“when you get free you can marry”) insultingly obvious (“head north”) or dangerous (“follow bear tracks to shelter and food”)
- ▶ **Messaging system** - displayed outside like a signal flag, often in strange places (from a cathedral tower at noon when bells rang indicated church was a safe refuge). Recently claimed that only the conductor could read the message, and then only if he knew the “African dialect” it used.
- ▶ **Map** - an actual map of the escape route, brought along on the escape. Knots tying the quilt together are claimed either to indicate a measure of time or distance, or latitude/longitude.
- ▶ **Award** - given as congratulatory gifts to slaves when they crossed the Canadian border.

What quilt blocks are said to have been included in this code, and what did they mean?

Too many to list; at last count at least 16 versions, including two contradictory accounts from Ozella and her nieces. All include blocks first introduced in the 1920s (Double Wedding Ring, Sunbonnet Sue, Dresden Plate) and the Log Cabin (which originated after Underground Railroad stopped operating). There are at least 7 different, conflicting claims about how the Log Cabin pattern was used.

What evidence is there that quilts were used in this way?

NONE.

- ▶ Abolitionist and fugitive slave memoirs detail many other message systems; none uses quilts.
- ▶ The “Code” contradicts what historians *do* know about the UGRR and how slaves escaped to freedom.
- ▶ Ozella’s niece, who runs a for-profit “Quilt Code” museum and gift shop in Atlanta, claims to have a firsthand written account of the “Code”, but refuses to produce it. No “Code” quilt is known to exist.
- ▶ Ozella’s niece says Eliza Farrow, an African-born ancestor, developed and taught the “Code” as a married woman. Records show Eliza and her husband were born in northeast Georgia just a few years before the Civil War began. Ozella’s generation was the first to leave the South.

What quilt, Underground Railroad, and African-American historians believe a “Quilt Code” either did or could have existed?

NONE. All describe it as a late 20th century myth, like Betsy Ross or George Washington and the cherry tree.

For more information on the “Quilt Code” myth, visit www.ugrrquilt.hartcottagequilts.com.