

Betsy Ross redux:

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

This is a printable version of my website. My purpose in offering it is the same as when I began researching and writing about the "Quilt Code" in 2002: to uncover and share reliable information about an important and, unfortunately, often myth-embellished period in American history.

*I don't charge to lecture on the "Quilt Code," and while I retain the copyright to this book, it is offered at no cost as an educational tool. You are welcome to publish excerpts - as long as you tell people your source. (I'm not so much interested in credit; I'd just like folks to be able to see for themselves if my sources check out.) And you are invited to print out as much as you like to share with others as long as you do so at your own expense. In other words, **don't charge for or take credit for something you received free.***

Please - don't add your name to the list of those who have tried to profit from the "Quilt Code" myth! The people who suffered under slavery, and who fought and died to abolish it, deserve better from us.

If you'd like notice of updates, please email me at hcquilts@cox.net.

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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, quilting, 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 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's 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's 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".*

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Introduction

In 1999, Random House publishing subsidiary Doubleday, known for its popular fiction and "lite" nonfiction, announced the release of a remarkable new book by Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard. Half a dozen years earlier, Tobin wrote, she had been approached by an elderly black woman in Charleston, South Carolina with a surprising story: during the half century before the Civil War, quilts had been used by African-Americans as a means of conveying messages concerning escape on the Underground Railroad. Not surprisingly, the "Underground Railroad Quilt Code," as it came to be known, quickly captured the popular imagination: for generations, a secret code originating in Africa had been "hidden in plain view" in everyday quilts! Quilt stores now sell "Code" books, tour guides and antique dealers use the "Code" to sell antiques, and educators struggling to make sense of Black History Month use "Code" storybooks to teach variations of the story to children in Social Studies classes.

Meanwhile, professional historians and an increasingly vocal group of laymen and women - students of quilt history and the history of African-Americans - have decried the "Quilt Code" as without factual basis, accusing its proponents of sloppy scholarship at best and sheer hucksterism at worst. They wonder why none of the people asserting they learned the "Code" from family oral history claims a single ancestor who actually escaped North. And they complain that just as the history of African-Americans had gained acceptance as worthy of serious study, documented stories of black accomplishments and heroism were being ignored in favor of a convenient pop-culture tale whose dubiousness insults the very culture it ostensibly celebrates.

Which view is correct? Does the "Underground Railroad Quilt Code" have any basis in fact?

In the years since the publication of *Hidden in Plain View* this writer has studied the "Quilt Code" in depth. Research included conversations with Serena Wilson, niece of Ozella Williams, and lengthy correspondence with Teresa Kemp, Wilson's daughter, who also promotes the "Quilt Code". I was disappointed that although her emails to me totaled more than 6,000 words, and she not only repeatedly stated that she wanted to answer in detail any questions I had but offered to send me documentary evidence she said her family had kept for generations, when I sent her specific questions regarding the individual quilt blocks described below, Kemp's emails to me abruptly stopped.

In late July 2004 Kemp again made contact with me, blaming a computer virus for her two-year silence. Over a period of about 10 days she sent me another dozen emails totaling another 3,000 words, none of which answered any of my questions about the

"Quilt Code". She did, however, make a number of new claims, including that the Daughters of the Confederacy are somehow behind objections to the "Quilt Code" myth, and that historians reject the "Quilt Code" because they "did not bother to check or get other information".

As she did in 2002, Kemp repeatedly promised to answer specific questions I sent her about the "Quilt Code". She even agreed to send me copies of the evidence she claims to have unearthed. She never sent me anything, nor did she ever reply to follow-up emails asking for their whereabouts. But while Kemp may have abandoned her correspondence with me, she continues to send out notices of lectures and other appearances, and applied for a Federal government grant to teach the "Code". In 2005 she announced she had opened a "[museum](#)" and gift shop in Atlanta, for which she charges admission.

The "Quilt Code" timeline

The first mention I have found of a "Quilt Code" - the idea that quilts were somehow used as signals by or for escaped slaves in connection with the Underground Railroad - is a single line in the voiceover narrative for [Hearts and Hands](#), a 1987 video about women and quilts by feminists Pat Ferrera and Elaine Hedges:

They say quilts were hung on the clotheslines to signal a house was safe for runaway slaves.

Strangely, the companion book coauthored by Julie Silber contains no such statement. I wrote the film production company for information on the source of this claim, but did not receive a response. In late 2005 I located the filmmaker's original research file, and obtained copies of the folders relating to abolition, the Civil War, and African-Americans. I found nothing on quilts as signals; however, among the correspondence was a letter expressing concern about the script's historical accuracy.

Other parts of *Hearts and Hands* have come into question. Ellie Sienkewicz, regarded as the leading expert on the history of Baltimore Album quilts, noted in 1989 that the book cites two credible historians for its confident, detailed history of Mary Ann Evans's significant contribution to the design of such quilts. Sothebys relied on the book's assertions to attribute three quilts to Evans; each sold for a small fortune. But Sienkewicz points out that the book mischaracterizes its sources: where *Hearts and Hands* is unequivocal, they are only tentative, and the conclusions one does make are unsupported by simple math. Concludes Sienkewicz, the authors of *Hearts and Hands* are among those who have transmuted "theory into fact."

In 1989, folklorist Gladys-Marie Fry curated an exhibit of African-American quilts, [Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts of the Ante-Bellum South](#). (Despite its title, almost all of the quilts in the exhibit date from well after the Civil War; several are from after 1940.) Fry's account elaborates on the claim in *Hearts and Hands*:

Quilts were used to send messages. On the Underground Railroad, those with the color black were hung on the line to indicate a place of refuge (safe house)...Triangles in quilt design signified prayer messages or prayer badge, a way of offering prayer. Colors were very important to slave quilt makers. The color black indicated that someone might die. A blue color was believed to protect the maker.

Fry's book is peppered with footnotes, but she provides no source for this remarkable

statement which, as far as I have been able to find, is the first time such a claim ever appeared in print.

A seminar was held in connection with Fry's exhibit. [Jonathan Holstein](#) recalls quilt historian Cuesta Benberry's reaction to the seminar's presentations: the "main road", said Benberry, of African-American quiltmakers was being ignored in favor of what Holstein calls "an attempt to define African-American quilts using small samplings of specific times, areas, or groups" resulting in a distorted, stereotyped understanding that was "ill-advised at best and unconsciously racist at worst" and which "has led to some major scholarship disasters".

Though there has always been an unfortunate mixture of fact, myth and speculation in some quilt writing and scholarship, it has been particularly evident in discussions of African-American quilts. There, the mixture has functioned as a dangerous substitute for missing history. This too has led to some recent fiascos of scholarship.

- Abstract Design in American Quilts: A Biography of an Exhibition (1991)

Benberry attempted to correct what she called "erroneous assumptions" with another, scholarly exhibit, *Always There: The African-American Presence in American Quilts*, which celebrated the wide variety of styles shown in the quilts of black women. In her introduction to the companion book, Benberry points out that many stories about quilts are the product of "overactive imaginations," and notes:

A story, as yet undocumented, tells of quilts in the "Jacob's Ladder" pattern (renamed "Underground Railroad") hung outside houses as a signal to passengers on the Underground Railroad that the homes were safe havens for the fearful travelers.

In her companion book, Benberry compares the 1980s explosion of interest in African-American quilts to the 1970s craze for Amish quilts. She notes the influence of Afrocentrism and of Women's Studies programs in the last decades of the 20th century, and observes with dismay the rapid development of pop-culture assumptions about African-American quilts and their makers:

African-American quilts became one of America's newest forms of exotica. Continued scrutiny of [a small group of African-American quilts whose style was outside the traditional American quilt aesthetic] resulted in the promulgation of a number of theories which were immediately accepted as fact....Long established canons of quilt history research...were no longer deemed essential.

Such an extremely myopic view of African-American quilts made many scholars of black history and quilt history researchers uneasy....[Q]uilt historians realized findings gathered in these early studies of black-made quilts had been extrapolated far beyond what the evidence would legitimately support.

Unfortunately, such premature assumptions have been made and have gained wide credence....[m]any persons have accepted the erroneous assumptions of these skewed studies and are certain they can identify African-American quilts on sight. They are often wrong but never in doubt.

In other words, at the same time stereotypes about black *people* were ostensibly being abandoned, stereotypes about their *quilts* (and thus their makers' individuality) were becoming entrenched.

Such warnings went unheeded. The next year, Maude Wahlman published [*Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts*](#). The book had originated as a thesis and was also published in 1987 as a journal article.



Wahlman and her book

Of the five thousand slides of African-American quilts and their makers Wahlman claims to own, as evidence she selects only 103 quilts made by two dozen quilters. Ninety percent date from the 1980s birth of the "art quilt" (which have been described as "paintings" made of fabric and found objects such as beads, feathers and wire) and the post-Civil Rights Movement revival of interest in African culture.

Using the very criteria and methodology Benberry had only recently described as "myopic," Wahlman claims to find in these quilts specific African "signs and symbols" which black Americans somehow passed down through ten generations. This comes as a surprise to the few nonprofessional quilters in her book. Blissfully unaware of the hidden messages in their quilts, until Wahlman enlightens them they think they are just being creative. (Some, like [Charlie Logan](#), sound insulted by Wahlman's assertions: "I taught myself. It doesn't mean anything.") Wahlman pointedly ignores the meanings these artists give their creations, and decides on other, subconscious motivations, most of which relate somehow to voodoo. Wahlman sets the stage for the notion that African-American quilts are full of hidden meaning, and also suggests quilts may have been used as escape signals. She gives no details.

Signs & Symbols was followed by a rash of children's storybooks asserting various connections between quilts and the Underground Railroad.

The first, published in 1992, was written by one of the "fiber artists" in Wahlman's book. In Faith Ringgold's *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad Quilt in the Sky*, two children encounter the spirit of Harriet Tubman. She soars with them through the night sky, explaining that every 100 years a railroad train made of stars traces the path she took as she led runaway slaves to freedom." Ringgold's book tells the fugitive to look for a house with a quilt "flung on the roof. If you don't see the quilt, hide in the woods until it appears." In other words, a particular house is to be located by a sign *that isn't there*.

By far the most well-known of the "Quilt Code" children's books is [Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt](#), published in 1993. Four years earlier, author Deborah Hopkinson heard a short radio story about an "art quilt" exhibit including the work of Elizabeth Scott, celebrated for her contributions as a pioneer in that field. Among the mixed-media quilts in the exhibit was one by Scott entitled "[Plantation Quilt](#)," randomly covered with applique stars. The artist herself never mentions a "code", or any use of quilts in connection with escape, but Hopkinson's title character, a young slave, makes a quilt that is literally a [map](#) of the area surrounding the plantation where she lives, which she then uses to escape.

Hopkinson says she also used *Stitched from the Soul* as her source, but has repeatedly stated the book is fiction. But it *feels* real - so real, in fact, one [scholarly journal](#) celebrates the author as an "African-American writer who employ[s] the quilt as a symbol of resistance to control and dominance" in whose book "cultural identity is created by the symbolic tradition of the quilt and its representation of Afrocentric motherhood". [Hopkinson](#) describes herself as "an Irish girl from Lowell [Massachusetts]."

Benberry and others had cautioned that

a procedure in which the quilts from a small group of black quiltmakers from a limited time frame are selected, examined for common characteristics, conclusions reached, interpretations devised, and extrapolations from these made to all African-American quilts of all times, is at odds with the accepted method of historical inquiry.

She warned that without careful, methodical investigation, "a too-hasty, anachronistic interpretation" would be reached. Yet less than a decade after their first mention in 1987's *Hearts and Hands*, an entire pop-culture mythology had been created around African-American quilts.

Sandra K. German was a founder of the Women of Color Quilters Network. In the 1993 issue of the American Quilt Study Group journal *Uncoverings*, German quotes

cofounder [Carolyn Mazloomi](#) regarding the impact of one such exhibit, organized by collector [Eli Leon](#) :

I was on fire [says Mazloomi] to hear about the history - the rich history - of African American quilting...Instead, when we went to see the show at the museum, one of the first things I noticed was that the quilts in Eli Leon's collection were very much unlike my own, or those of the other women of AAQLA [African American Quilters of Los Angeles]...Then we viewed the faces of a group of white [quilters]...It was as if they were asking whether all African American quilters produced only the seemingly haphazard, irregular and impromptu-style quilts portrayed in the show." The answer was clear...The encounter left her with....a lasting suspicion as to the validity of that show, its claims, and its ramifications for the future of African American quilting. The Network founders wholly rejected the assertions of Leon and his contingent.

German quotes cofounder Melodye Boyd's recollection of a conversation with the Baltimore Arts Council:

She was interested in displaying quilts made by Afro-American quilters, but only those made in the "traditional" style or where those quilts that are made in the Euro-American style clearly show the influence of the "traditional" style.

And German herself recalls the group's 1993 efforts

...to have our work juried into an important show of African American folk art. Slide submissions were reviewed and, not surprisingly, rejected. As with many such experiences, some of the jurors had adopted the mistaken and misguided criteria advanced by [Eli] Leon and others - to the exclusion of all else. Sadly, the sting of this rejection was made even more excruciating when we later learned that the esteemed but erroneous jurors were themselves African American. Of the dozens of people of color who submitted work, only one aspirant's work was selected because it was stereotypically "African American."

The genesis of Hidden in Plain View

In 1993 [Jacqueline Tobin](#), a former therapist who taught writing, women's history and "women's words" at a Denver college, was wandering a Charleston, South Carolina tourist mall in search of information about baskets. Tobin had recently coauthored *The Tao of Women* with sociology professor and New Age author Pamela Metz, whose *The Tao of...* books include *Calm, Loss and Grief*, *Learning, Gardening*, and *Travel*. Although *The Tao of Women* claims that "in 1950, a secret woman's writing was discovered near Hunan, China", [anthropologists and linguists](#) point out that *nu shu* was actually a simplified adaptation of standard Chinese writing, and that it was not "secret"; men had simply ignored it as unimportant.



HIPV author Tobin

The proprietor of one [Charleston Market](#) stall was [Ozella McDaniel Williams](#), a 70-ish Howard University graduate and former school administrator now in the business of selling quilts. Ozella (as Tobin later refers to her) was dressed in "brightly colored, geometrically patterned African garb," and called Tobin over to tell her a fascinating story: her mother had taught her that specific block patterns in quilts had been used by African-American slaves in connection with escape North. Ozella said she had been telling her story for years, but none in the African-American community either believed or corroborated it. Tobin bought one of Ozella's quilts, took a brochure with her phone number, and went back home to finish her basket story.

Months later, Tobin decided to phone Ozella for more information about the "Code". But although she had approached Tobin with the story in the first place and provided her phone number, Ozella suddenly refused to talk.

This, says Tobin, "added an element of intrigue" to the story. In her words, she was "hooked".

Tobin contacted art history professor Raymond Dobard, hoping Dobard's race (and possibly his Howard University connection) would induce Ozella to be more forthcoming with him than she had been with Tobin. Dobard declined, but suggested Tobin pursue the issue, since "[w]e've all been waiting and hoping to find a Code".

Tobin spent the next three years looking for information about the Quilt Code. She says she "traveled down the Mississippi from St. Louis to New Orleans" (odd, since that was

the western border of the slave states, and as far east from Ozella's Charleston as possible) but nobody she consulted could give her any information about it. She could find no slave-made quilts containing one. Eventually she went back to Charleston. First, she says, she "immersed herself in the flavor of the Old South" by taking a carriage ride. Then she showed up at Ozella's uninvited, and somehow prevailed upon her to reveal the Code. Tobin was "no longer the journalist in search of a story"; she was "taking part in a time-honored women's ritual of passing on wisdom from one generation to another." [Recalled](#) Dobard:

And then a Sunday morning in May I received a call, and Jackie was speaking in something of a whispered voice, as if she were almost afraid to ask the question. And she said "Raymond, here's what she said to me" - the code. And she followed by saying "Have you heard of anything like this before? Does it seem credible to you? Is this the real thing? And my response was "Jackie, it's a miracle. Yes, I think you've found what we've all been hoping to find, and that's a real code."

Dobard promptly agreed to coauthor, and within a day of finding an agent, three publishers bid on the book. But while Dobard's own Howard University Press would seem the most logical choice for an ostensibly scholarly work on African-American history, Tobin and Dobard signed with Doubleday, Random House's middlebrow subsidiary. Ozella died in 1998, just a few weeks after Tobin's last meeting with her. Just eight months later (and as Ozella had predicted before her death), Dobard was promoting *Hidden in Plain View* on the Oprah Winfrey show. Although the book is primarily Tobin's creation, when the Oprah Winfrey show and other producers called to arrange for public appearances, it was Dobard they wanted, not Tobin - - who was even passed over by Denver quilt guilds. According to Wahlman, "I think that's partly because he's African-American, partly because he has a Ph.D. They think he's the scholar, but she's the scholar." [Tobin was miffed](#) , but said that Dobard "acted as though we've got to do this to sell the book."

Tobin [claimed](#) Ozella's family "all corroborated the story, albeit in slightly different versions, gave me the same history of the story. Relatives from Ohio, Georgia and California have confirmed the story their mother and grandmother told Ozella." But Ozella's niece, Teresa Kemp (who lives in Georgia), wrote me that the family only found out about the book by accident, after it was published. According to Kemp, Tobin never contacted either her or her mother, who lives in Ohio.

One of the book's three introductions is written by Wahlman, without whose book *Signs and Symbols* Tobin claims *Hidden in Plain View* "could not have been written." Amazingly, Benberry wrote another, which was viewed by some as a credibility coup for the authors. In it Benberry claimed Tobin and Dobard "established a significant

linkage between the Underground Railroad, escaping slaves and the American patchwork quilt." And shortly after the book's publication in [1999](#), Benberry predicted Ozella's "oral history" would "generate a great deal of controversy," which she dismissed as coming from "the custom of scholars to look askance at oral tradition, at anything that can't be proved by the written word." In 2002, Benberry thought that giving Tobin credit for "her good intentions but not for [her] careful research" was "most distressing and condescending". But a year later, she appears to have stepped away from the book. The [Cincinnati Post](#) reported in 2003:

[T]hree years and much controversy later, Benberry won't vouch for the book's accuracy. "I don't know," she said, when asked whether she believed the story. "I'm still waiting for the weight of the evidence to tip the scale one way or another."

Scholarship under fire

Less than 20% of *Hidden in Plain View* actually discusses Ozella's "quilt code". Forewords, acknowledgments, authors' notes, an epilogue, a glossary, and a timeline of slavery take up 52 of the book's 208 pages. Its format alone makes a careful reading difficult: strangely for a nonfiction volume, the book has neither index nor footnotes, and lumps all its sources together in a 16-page bibliography. (Tobin explains that it "was written for the average, non quilter, not the quilt historian.") The bibliography's length suggests extensive research; but of 159 works listed, the book actually cites only 33 - of which three are juvenile literature. In fact, *Hidden in Plain View's* bibliography includes nine works written for children; a *novel* about the Amistad rebellion; contemporary poetry; a *Whole Earth Magazine* article on African-American music by a columnist who also writes on family therapy, the movie *Titanic*, and why children like Xena Warrior Princess; and a book claiming that the earth was populated by extraterrestrials.

It is difficult to draw a connection between the sources *Hidden in Plain View* does cite and the conclusions at which it arrives. [More than once](#), the sources say nothing remotely like what Tobin and Dobard suggest; in other cases, the authors use a [poorly-researched secondary source](#) (which does support their claim) rather than referring to the original document (which does not). Tobin [admits](#) that the book's photographs are "certainly of recently made quilts," but explains "there was not time to seek out antique quilts, nor were we trying to be accurate as to the date of the quilt shown." When asked why the book contained a photograph of a 20th century quilt pattern, Tobin blamed the book's "graphics editor" - even though Dobard himself had not only provided the photo, but made the quilt block himself.

The book's poor scholarship was derided by historians from every discipline, who noted its claims were contradicted by everything known about quilts and the Underground Railroad. The only one to say anything remotely positive takes great pains to avoid saying the book's claims have any factual basis. Damning *Hidden in Plain View* with faint praise, [Joseph Reidy](#) (a colleague of Dobard) merely says it "opens up new ways of thinking" about the Underground Railroad and that he "appreciates" Dobard's attempt to "mine [material culture] for...hidden meanings". Even Dobard equivocates, stating that the book's claims are based on "informed conjecture." And he openly admits to turning accepted research methodology on its head:

We have thus found ourselves to be obliged to reverse conventional procedures, having to present a theory before finding a wealth of tangible evidence.

The "Quilt Code" gets its legs

But when *Hidden in Plain View* was featured on Oprah Winfrey (to which only [Dobard](#) was invited, much to Tobin's irritation) and Ozella's relatives appeared on the TV program *Simply Quilts*, it quickly became a part of the pop culture already surrounding African-American quilts. Eleanor Burns, a white publisher of quilt pattern books, issued one for an "Underground Railroad Sampler". Quilt shop owners marketed the book, quilt block kits, and classes based on the "Quilt Code". White, middle-income suburban quilters - some 95% of the multibillion-dollar quilting market - frequently say the "Code" story makes them feel good. It is common to hear them confidently assert - at a safe distance of 150 years - that had they lived during slavery, they would have been conductors on the Underground Railroad themselves.

By February 2000, the Code had morphed from Dobard's "informed conjecture" into unquestioned historic fact. The February 2000 issue of *American Visions*, a peer-reviewed arts journal, published an excerpt of HIPV, prefacing it with an introduction [claiming](#) that Ozella had actually shown Tobin

a quilt dating from slavery that, she explained, bore markings that had guided runaway slaves along the routes to freedom.

This quilt does not appear in *Hidden in Plain View*; has never been mentioned by either Tobin, Dobard, Wilson, or Kemp; and could not be found in Kemp's Atlanta "museum". It appears to be the figment of the journal editors' imagination.

School systems desperate for an easy way to teach the complicated subject of slavery added *Sweet Clara* and Ozella's "Quilt Code" to their Social Studies curricula.

Meanwhile African-Americans' documented historic accomplishments - not to mention actual stories of escape - were studiously ignored. Some in the rather ladylike quilt world suggested that questioning the historical accuracy of the "Quilt Code" was too upsetting, and perhaps not quite nice. Others argued that serious historians knew the truth, and it didn't matter what the average American thought about how enslaved blacks escaped to freedom. In a strange twist of logic, many privately expressed the fear that by challenging a new stereotype of African-Americans, they'd be called racist. Others wondered condescendingly whether African-Americans "just need something to cling to" (an actual email this writer received). No one, however, could explain what benefit to blacks exists in promoting urban legend as historic fact.

In 2001, children's book writer Marcia Vaughan's *The Secret to Freedom* was published. The book, which one review says is written in a "modified colloquial language that hints at the unschooled plantation speech," tells the story of 10-year-old slave girl who is given a sack of quilts by her brother, a conductor on the Underground Railroad. At his instruction she displays the quilts to help slaves escape. The book won a Teachers' Choice award; numerous guides are available so that teachers can use the book in classes about the Underground Railroad.

In May 2002, *Traditional Quiltworks* magazine published an article by Ozella's niece, Serena Wilson, who after an apparent falling-out with Tobin had gone on the nationwide lecture circuit herself. Her article (pages [1-2](#), [3-4](#), [5](#)) provided what she called "new information" on the "Quilt Code", but in the process she often contradicted her aunt Ozella. She also provided lecture booking information and the location of her gift shop. For like Ozella, Wilson had a business making and selling quilts.

In 2003, Kentucky native Clarice Boswell published *Lizzie's Story*, which the author claims is based on the life of her grandmother (who was born five years after the Civil War ended) and who, says Boswell, taught her the "Quilt Code". She [lectures nationwide](#) promoting her book and her own, elaborate and very different version of the "Code", but does not permit her lectures to be recorded because, [she says](#), her story changes a little every time.

Also in 2003, Hopkinson published yet another "Quilt Code" children's storybook, *Under the Quilt of Night*. It contains an entirely different "code" from the one in her earlier *Sweet Clara*. In 1997, she had queried members of the Quilt History email list on the factual accuracy of the claim that quilts were used as Underground Railroad signals.

List members discouraged her from promoting what they said was a myth; Hopkinson responded that her new book "will probably include a note indicating that this hasn't been proven or documented fully."

In 2004, [Bettye Stroud](#) joined the throng with her children's book *The Patchwork Path: A Quilt Map to Freedom*. The book is described as "fiction but includes a lot of facts". It contains yet another version of the "Quilt Code".

That year Macia Fuller also joined the "Quilt Code" lecture circuit. A [review](#) of a [book](#) by another author quotes Fuller, describing her as an "arts curator and African history scholar from Sacramento," but no other information on her has been located. Fuller claimed in a 2005 lecture that the earliest evidence "of African-Americans on the U.S. continent" dates from when "Africa and South America were connected" some 135 million years ago. (Scientists believe *Homo sapiens* first appeared 120,000 years ago.)

That fall, a Kingston, Ontario family constructed a "[corn maze](#)" (admission \$6 adults), through which visitors are guided by a "quilt code".

In June 2005, the *New York Times* reported that residents of the central Long Island town of Stony Brook had started claiming the local [Setalcott Indians](#) had used their own "Quilt Code" to help fugitive slaves escape:

The Morning Star pattern indicated help would come from a Native American, she said, and the color of an Hourglass indicated the time of day: red meant the morning, yellow or green the afternoon, blue or black the evening. Mr. Green said his grandmother told him a zigzag pattern like the Drunkard's Path referred to winding routes, known only to Setalcotts and accessible only by canoe, through the swamps and wetlands along the North Shore.

In August 2005 a Trotwood, Ohio newspaper [announced](#) the school board had commissioned a massive "Quilt Code" [mural](#) for the lobby of the region's new high school, based on a book written by a former board member. The cafeteria is decorated with enormous "Quilt Code" [blocks](#).

In late October 2005 a University of Nevada/Las Vegas professor asked H-Slavery listmembers for help on behalf of master's degree candidate Theodore Ransaw, who was writing his master's thesis on the "Quilt Code" but had been unable to find any evidence it existed. Fifteen scholars told him there was no such evidence, and that the "Code" was myth. Ransaw then contacted me, admitting Wilson and Kemp's claims "seemed speculative." Less than six weeks later, he submitted his thesis, which unquestioningly accepts the "Quilt Code's" existence. Ransaw also accepts Kemp's claim that she has an "authenticated first hand account" of the "Quilt Code," although he admits he has never seen it. The 80-page document, which refers to *Hidden in Plain View* (one of his "most heavily used sources") as "Hidden in Plain Sight," is riddled with significant factual

errors and fabricated statements relating directly to his claims. *For more on the Ransaw thesis, click [here](#).*

Not to be outdone by Ransaw or the Setalcotts, in February 2006 Wilson and Kemp's [website](#) began claiming that "Jewish people used Quilts during the World War to let others know when Nazi presence made it dangerous to come and go." Severin Hochberg, senior historian at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, says there is no evidence quilts were ever used in this manner.

In 2006 the *Times* featured the "Code" again, announcing that a statue of Frederick Douglass being erected at the corner of Central Park and 8th Avenues in New York would be embellished by sculptor Algernon Miller with images of "Code" quilt blocks.

In his introduction, *Hidden in Plain View* co-author Dobard was careful to characterize Ozella's story as an interesting theory needing further study. But since then, he, Tobin, and every other "Code" proponent has presented it as historical fact.

Is it?

At least fifteen different, contradictory "quilt code" claims (sixteen, counting Ransaw's additions) are now in circulation. And while several proponents assert the "Code" was passed to them through family oral history, none claims a single ancestor who actually escaped North; all remained in the South. Quite remarkably, not a single woman who ostensibly passed down the "Code" through her descendants seems to have used it herself.

Those genuinely interested in quilt history and the history of the Underground Railroad must wonder which account - if any - is accurate. Can any of these claims be supported by independent sources? Do they stand the test of the National Parks Service's own [guidelines](#) for substantiating Underground Railroad claims?

[Roland Freeman](#), founder of [The Group for Cultural Documentation](#) and author of many books on African-American history, has researched African-American quilt history for decades. In [a 2002 interview](#), Freeman observed "There is a whole group of people who wallow in the concept of how we got over, but I couldn't find any evidence to support [a quilt "code"]." Like [Giles Wright](#), director of the Afro-American History Program of the New Jersey Historical Commission, Mr. Freeman wonders how such a "mass conspiracy" could have existed without leaving behind some evidence. He finds no evidence of a "code" - something that the authors of *Hidden in Plain View* fail to note when they mention his book.

Historian and acclaimed *Harriet Tubman* biographer [Kate Clifford Larson](#) observed on [afrigeneas.com](#) , a site devoted to African-American genealogy research, that

by dressing the story up all cute and pretty with quilt patterns and kindly folks who used them to guide runaways to freedom - then we don't have to talk about the realities of slavery, and of running away, etc. It seems to me to be part and parcel of the continued erasure of African American history - by creating mythical stories the truth is eventually lost. No one needs myths as a substitute for history, nor as a way to explain the complications of history. There is plenty of the real stuff out there, waiting to be exposed and taught to everyone.

Shelly Pearsall, who writes [historical fiction](#) for children, concurs:

[The "Quilt Code"] enables schools to keep from tackling the realities of the runaway slave experience. I think it also diminishes the incredible courage, guts, and individual determination the journey required. There were no quilts -- there was hunger, there was fear, there was illness, there was bad weather, there was frequent misinformation and losing your way -- it was not a lovely journey of hopping from one quilt pattern to the next.

Faith Davis Ruffins is a historian at the Smithsonian Institution and curator of an exhibit at Cincinnati's National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. In the same *Cincinnati Post* interview quoting Benberry and Reidy, Ruffins says *Hidden in Plain View* is "really a disservice" to Underground Railroad history. She notes that neither Tobin nor Dobard seem to have researched Ozella Williams's own background. According to Ruffins, *Hidden in Plain View* is "made up of speculation and supposition...There is a huge issue of implausibility. There are no sources...They do not provide a single shred of evidence that this is true."

George Nagle, editor of [Afrolumens.org](#) , asserts that "This persistent fairy tale has been leading researchers down false trails for too long. It's time to debunk the myth and get on with serious research."

Author Dobard brushes aside this skepticism as "irritating."

Sources

Thanks to the firsthand accounts of slave life recorded during the WPA Writers Project in the 1930s, and more than 200 published [autobiographies](#) and diaries of former slaves and Underground Railroad participants (half published before the Civil War, the rest afterward), we have many detailed descriptions of escape and of quilting - even a list of the quilt blocks former slaves said were their favorites. Harriet Tubman herself refers to quilting; piecing quilt blocks was this Underground Railroad conductor's favorite way to pass the time while hiding in the woods, waiting for sundown when she could guide her "passengers" to freedom. Larson's biography notes that Tubman gave a quilt (as payment or in gratitude, we do not know) to the woman who hid her when she first escaped from slavery. But none of the firsthand accounts of slaves who actually escaped to freedom (unlike those said to have used the "Code") mention any sort of "code" using quilts. Ozella, her niece Serena Wilson - both in the business of selling quilts to tourists - and children's book writer Clarisse Boswell are the only source of this information. And their accounts of the "Code" directly contradict each other.

Research on this subject included conversations with Wilson and lengthy correspondence with Teresa Kemp, her daughter, who also lectures on the "Quilt Code". I was disappointed that although her ten [emails](#) to me in May 2002 totaled more than 3,000 words, and she repeatedly stated that she wanted to answer in detail any questions I had, when I sent her specific questions regarding the individual quilt blocks said to be included in the "Code," Kemp's emails to me abruptly stopped.

In late July 2004 Kemp again made contact with me, blaming a computer virus for her two-year silence. Over a period of about 10 days she sent me another dozen [emails](#) totaling another 3,000 words, none of which answered any of my questions about the "quilt code". She did, however, make a number of new claims, including that the [Daughters of the Confederacy](#) are somehow behind objections to the "quilt code" myth, and that historians reject the "quilt code" because they "did not bother to check or get other information".

As she did in 2002, Kemp repeatedly promised to answer [specific questions](#) I sent her about the "quilt code". She even agreed to send me copies of the evidence she claims to have unearthed. She never sent me anything, nor did she ever reply to follow-up emails asking for their whereabouts. But while Kemp may have abandoned her correspondence with me, she continues to send out notices of lectures and other appearances, and applied for a Federal government grant to teach the "Code". In 2005 she announced she had opened a "museum" and gift shop in Atlanta, for which she charges admission.

Underground Railroad history

In her 2002 magazine article, Serena Wilson writes that the "Quilt Code" was used by slaves in the area of Charleston, South Carolina and southern Georgia, and that escaped slaves on the Underground Railroad traveled across the Appalachians to Ohio (and then maybe to Niagara Falls, 200 miles east) and eventually into Canada. But the map in *Hidden in Plain View* shows no such route.



Map courtesy National Parks Service

In fact, Underground Railroad historians agree that the very few escaped slaves who headed north were not from Georgia and the Carolinas, but from border states (Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland and Virginia). By one historian's reckoning, more than 99% of escaped slaves traveled south, not north, blending into cities like Charleston itself. Only a small percentage of fugitives participated in the Underground Railroad; most ran away on their own, spontaneously, whenever the opportunity presented itself.

Christopher Densmore, Curator of the Friends Historical Library at Swarthmore College, [observes](#) that

....[t]he problem with the general picture [of the "quilt code" story] is that it does not fit with the narratives of fugitive slaves, or with the accounts recorded in William Still's The Underground Railroad (1872) or with more recent scholarship, notably John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweniger's Runaway

Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation (1999). *These accounts stress the individual and ad-hoc nature of most escapes and attempted escapes that were done on individual initiative and involved individuals or small groups of people. **Hidden in Plain View** appears to assume a regular flow of fugitives from South Carolina into Canada. According to the 1850 census, which attempted to document the number of fugitive slaves, South Carolina had 16 fugitives out of a total population of 284,984 enslaved people.*

Even if the number of "code" participants was ten times the recorded number of fugitives, wouldn't it simply be easier to communicate with a whisper or gesture?

Wilson and Kemp's slippery grasp of Underground Railroad history is further demonstrated by the [2006 version of their new website](#). Historian Kate Clifford Larson points out some significant errors:

- ▶ The site claims on its "Research/Links" page that Francis Ellen Watkins Harper and Ann Marie Weems were enslaved in Oklahoma. This is not true; Weems was from Washington DC, and Harper was from Baltimore, where she was born and raised a free woman.
- ▶ The site erroneously claims on its FAQs page that there were "large numbers of free Black in all of the states in existence". The table offered as proof shows the number of free blacks owning real estate in certain cities, which says nothing about the total free black population. For example, while the table lists 13 free blacks owning property in Boston, the city's [original records](#) show an actual free black population of 603. But in [1850](#), almost 95% of African- Americans lived in the 16 slave states. In four of those states, more than 99% of African-Americans were slaves. And in only five (Virginia, North Carolina, Maryland, Delaware and New Jersey) did free blacks constitute more than 6% of the total African- American population; one-third were children under age 14. Until he reached free territory, nearly all the adult blacks a fugitive would meet would be slaves themselves.

[Giles Wright](#) asks why a handful of Charleston-area slaves would have to develop an elaborate "Quilt Code" to share information. Some "Code" proponents claim the quilts were traditional oral historians they call "fabric *griots*". (Actually, a [griot's](#) work was not restricted to historic fact; it included creating and performing what are best described as ballads of praise.) But couldn't people with a strong oral tradition just tell each other? Why would this "code" make them risk the long, indirect route Wilson and Ozella describe - one not mentioned in any other source, and one that not even Hidden in Plain View's own maps show? Wright documents many other errors in the "Quilt Code" story, calling it "nonsense," "sheer conjecture" and "speculation" which "greatly misrepresents"

black history.

In an email to me, Kemp characterized Wright's objections as "minor". Nevertheless, in 2006 Wilson and Kemp's website abandoned Wilson's "Code" route for one more sweeping, extending it "[n]ot just North to Canada but also South through Florida to the Carribean; through Texas to Mexico, and further West to California; to New England where they would take whaling vessels to the Pacific North West."

Some "Code" proponents explain its absence from [slave](#) and abolitionist autobiographies by claiming a culture of secrecy prevented its revelation. This is the principle behind every conspiracy theory: absence of evidence proves a massive coverup. Yet even the narratives published while the system was operating describe escape methods in detail. Since then, Underground Railroad participants and their descendants have revealed not only their names, escape methods, and the code words used in written messages; they point out hiding places and safe houses with historic plaques.

"Code" proponents ask us to believe that while these secrets could safely be revealed, the Code somehow could not. In other words, abolitionists were entrusted with fugitive slaves' very lives, but somehow not entrusted with the "Code" (but then, how would an abolitionist have known to hang a quilt outside to signal the house was "safe"?). Revelation of the "Code" would, it seems, have to wait until Ozella McDaniel Williams somehow determined that Jacqueline Tobin was the worthy recipient of this great secret.

How were quilts supposedly used?

The heart of the "Quilt Code" - its most essential piece - is the connection between a block's name and the message it is supposed to convey. So in order to understand it at all, we need to know the pre-Civil War name for each of the blocks used.

Modern quilters often think familiar traditional blocks were "born" with the names we call them today. But quilt historian Barbara Brackman points out that quite the opposite is true. Well after quilt patterns were first published nationwide in the late 1890s, a block's name changed from region to region, as the author of an 1894 *Scribner's Magazine* article observed. Thus there is no way for us to know whether the names we give quilt blocks today are the same names used 150 years ago.

Even if we throw out the idea that in the "Code," a block's name is meaningless, and believe that the image itself were the message, if any of the "Quilt Code" blocks had different names in the 1850s (or if a name used then for one block refers to a different block today), we cannot know which blocks were used; we can certainly have no idea what meanings they had. In other words, even if a "code" did exist, the "Quilt Code" block kits sold today are likely more fiction than fact. And every new "Code" proponent claims new meanings for certain blocks and adds others to the list.

"Code" proponents cannot agree on how quilts were supposedly used, and who used them:

- ▶ Most claim they were hung as signals - from a clothesline, a window, over a porch, over a roof, or even from a church steeple. Kemp, for example, [says](#) that such quilts "let the conductor know if I can provide clothing or food or lodging and if it is safe for that group to come to the house." But while admitting that "[e]very quilt in the country hung out in the daytime since no one had washing machines or dryers! Every quilt was not an UGRR Coded Quilt even if it had the patterns on it", she does not explain how fugitives could determine which were "coded" quilts displayed as signals, and which quilts were simply being hung out to air.
- ▶ In late 2005 Kemp also began [asserting](#) that quilts containing blocks "that represent the longitude and latitude of maps of the period prior to 1840's" were actually "carried by UGRR conductors as physical land maps".
- ▶ Others - including Kemp's own great-aunt Ozella - say they were used as mnemonic devices - a "playbook" to be memorized before escape.

- ▶ [Boswell](#) says they were used in both ways *and* that quilts in one particular pattern (the Rose Wreath) were given as congratulatory gifts to slaves who escaped to Canada, but she has never produced any of these award quilts.
- ▶ To complicate matters further, Kemp now claims on her website that the only person who would know the Code would be the conductor of the escape - and then only if "they were from a tribe that used that language, then he or she could read the language in the quilt." If UGRR participants in the area hung out coded quilts with a different "language," or if the conductor were incapacitated, lost, or captured, it seems the fugitives were out of luck.
- ▶ Some claim a "sampler" quilt including each pattern was used; others, that only one pattern was used in each quilt. Boswell says the sampler was used to teach all the "codes," so that escaped slaves could read the single-pattern "signal" quilts that would be displayed along the way. In June 2002, [Boswell](#) also said two identical "code" quilts would be made, one of which was given to the slaveowner's wife, who would then hang the quilts out on "the line every morning, and they had no idea they were helping to free slaves." (Since there are around a dozen patterns in the "Code", one wonders when these slaves had time to do anything but quilt.)
- ▶ Some proponents claim the quilts were used by "slaves and abolitionists" without racial distinction. Others, such as Wilson, claim they were used only by blacks (both slave and free), who devised the patterns directly from African sources and shared them among themselves. But in a [2004 lecture](#), Boswell claimed that abolitionists traveled from plantation to plantation taking a census of slaves, doing reconnaissance, and teaching slaves the "Code".

All the block names "Code" proponents use are those in common use after 1930 - about the time Wilson's Grandma Nora Belle (Ozella's mother, and the "Code" source for both Wilson and Ozella) would have been quilting. How can anyone assert these are the same names used during the Underground Railroad years? Why, if Wilson learned the "Quilt Code" from the same source as her aunt Ozella and Wilson passed on the "Code" to Kemp, do the three women differ on what message the blocks were supposed to convey and how they were used? Why are there so many conflicting stories about which blocks were used, what they meant, and how they quilts were used? Wouldn't it have been important for a consistent message to be transmitted?

Blocks in the "Quilt Code"

Every "Code" proponent has her own list of blocks, but here are a few of those most commonly claimed.

Log Cabin

All the "Code" versions that specify a pattern include this design. However, there is considerable disagreement over what the pattern actually meant.

In *Hidden in Plain View*, Ozella says it instructs slaves to "dig a log cabin" in Cleveland, but the authors speculate that no actual cabin was involved; rather, they say, this meant either drawing a secret symbol on the ground or the amount of time it would take to build a log cabin.



Closeup of Log Cabin quilt c.1865. Each "log" strip is about 1/4" wide.

- ▶ Citing Fry, Dobard also says the Log Cabin quilts may have been hung outside to signify an Underground Railroad "safe house".
- ▶ Stroud, on the other hand, says the block is "a sign that someone needed assistance."
- ▶ Wilson - Ozella's niece - says the pattern refers to the Canadian government giving escaped slaves land for every acre they cleared. Yet the only such land grants I found predated the Underground Railroad, and were for blacks who had fought for Britain in the War of 1812. [Canadian land](#) was only "free" until the government surveyed it, after which those living on it either had to purchase it or leave. Many black settlements disbanded as a result. I could find no reference to a land-for-labor offer such as Wilson describes. Even if such a grant existed, Wilson does not explain how knowledge of it would assist in escape.
- ▶ Kemp, Wilson's daughter, said it signaled to fugitives that shelter was available.
- ▶ Boswell combines all these ideas: she says that (a) drawn in the dirt, the pattern signified a friend; (b) the quilt pattern instructed slaves to set up a home in a free state (why did they need to be told this?); and also © indicated a safe house

depending on the color of the center, as described below. She also claims the block was "invented" by Susan B. Anthony, and says [Anthony](#) hung a quilt in her window if the house was safe; if a quilt was not displayed, it meant her father "who opposed abolition" was home and therefore the house was not safe. (In fact, Anthony's father was a prominent abolitionist long before his daughter got involved.)

- ▶ Louisianan Cely Pedescleaux claims that "a log cabin quilt always has a light and a dark side as part of its design. If the quilt was displayed light side up, that meant the fugitives would be running by day; dark side up meant running by night." How would Pedescleaux suggest [these 19th century Log Cabin quilts](#) be hung so that the light or dark side was "up"?
- ▶ Fuller's description of the Log Cabin is particularly complex. In a February 2004 lecture at a Sacramento library, she stated:

The Log Cabin quilt is a map of the town. See all these squares? They represent houses. So the slaves would know how big the towns were. Here is a house and here is a house. (Pointing.) Black is a symbol of danger – so you see these black squares in the center? Slaves would know that that house was not safe. Do you notice the other squares in the centers? They have little colored flames in them, to represent a fireplace. You know how safe and warm it is to snuggle up to a fire? These squares with flames in them showed the slaves this house was safe."

--from notes taken at lecture by Marilyn Maddelena Withrow;
email to author, 2/9/2005

The color of the Log Cabin's center is of great importance to "Code" proponents, but the colors' meanings seems to be up for debate. According to African textile historian Peggy Gilfoy, among the Ashanti gold signifies wealth, and blue and black signify danger and death. Compare this to the claims of "Code" proponents:

- ▶ Fry says that the centers of these "signal" Log Cabin quilts were **black** - which apparently meant both "safe house" and "someone might die". But she provides no source for this information, and her [other claims](#) about quilts are demonstrably unreliable.
- ▶ Hopkins's fictional *Under the Quilt of Night* uses a Log Cabin with a **blue** center to indicate safety.
- ▶ Boswell's quilt works like a traffic light. She says the quilt signified a "safe house" if the center was **black**; a **yellow** center meant "caution"; a **red** center meant "danger".

- ▶ Lecturers Fuller and [Toni Leoman](#) disagree, claiming that a **red** center indicated a fire was burning and the home was safe; a **black** center meant that the fire was out, danger was close and to keep moving.
- ▶ Dobard speculates "black" was really **blue** (Fry says blue "protects the maker"), but then points out that a Log Cabin quilt owned by Underground Railroad conductor William Still had "a **yellow** center", so perhaps yellow was the "safe house" signal since "in Africa, the color yellow is used to signify life."
- ▶ Meanwhile, "quilt code" lecturer Gloria Bowen claims that the centers of the Still quilt are not yellow, but **black!**



A variety of 19thc. Log Cabin quilts. Which color center is the "right" one - and what does it mean?

Whatever the color of the Log Cabin center, the assertion about a "safe house" signal is directly contradicted by Tobin's post-publication [statement](#) that Ozella said quilts were *not* hung as signals, which in turn is contradicted by her niece's claims that they [were](#).

Presumably in an effort to prove some sort of quilt/Underground Railroad connection, author Tobin [points](#) to a Log Cabin quilt pictured in her book, which she says is "dated 1840-1850....It was a gift given to the Rev. William King by the former slaves he took to Ontario and freed." But according to Alice Newby, retired curator of the Buxton (Ontario) Museum where the quilt is housed, while it was indeed a gift to Rev. King from his former slaves, the quilt has no connection at all to the Underground Railroad. The makers of the quilt were Rev. King's own slaves, whom he himself freed and who came with him to [Canada](#) in 1849; they did not escape, via the Underground Railroad or any other means. The quilt, she says, dates from *after* the group arrived in Canada.

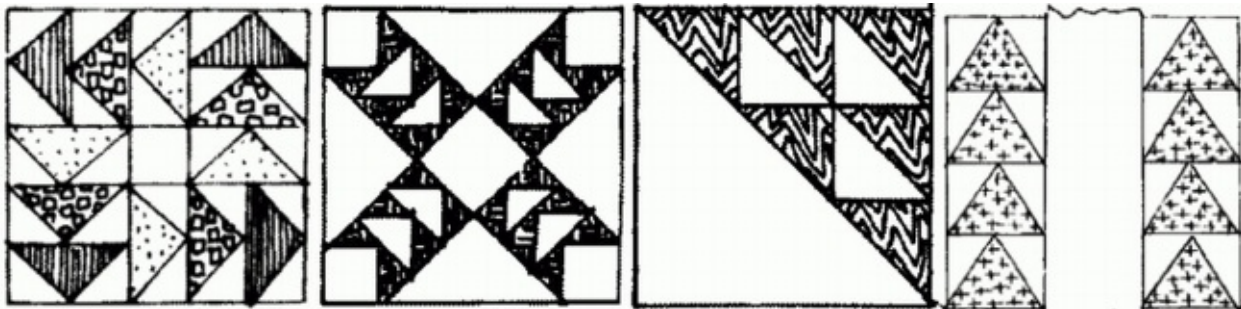
Newby, who is a descendant of the original Buxton settlers, described *Hidden in Plain View* as "totally ridiculous."

While claims have been made that some Log Cabin quilts date to the antebellum period, written inquiries regarding how the age of these quilts was determined either have received no response, or no evidence was offered documenting the quilt was anywhere near the age claimed.

In fact, the Log Cabin pattern seems to be limited to the North as a popular expression of Union sentiment; I have not been able to find any documented examples dating from before the Civil War. Quilt historian Barbara Brackman notes in *Quilts from the Civil War* that the earliest date-inscribed quilt of this pattern is dated 1869:

Quilt historian Virginia Gunn has found three written references to Log Cabin quilts as fundraisers for the union cause in 1863, the likely year for the beginning of the style. At that point the underground Railroad no longer functioned as it had before the War....So we must not imagine Log Cabin quilts as signals in the decade before the War. Rather, like Emancipation, the pattern grew out of the War. It is more historically accurate to view their symbolic function as an indicator of allegiance to President Lincoln and the Union cause...One indication that a Union connection [with the pattern] continued is the relative lack of late nineteenth-century Log Cabin quilts made in the former Confederate states.

Flying Geese



Flying Geese blocks from Barbara Brackman's Encyclopedia of Pieced Quilt Patterns.

Brackman notes five different patterns with this name. How do we know which one the "Code" uses?

- ▶ Fry claims that "Triangles in quilt design signified prayer messages or prayer badge, a way of offering prayer." She makes no mention of triangle patterns being used in a "code".
- ▶ Stroud and Ozella say Flying Geese "reminded" slaves to head north. Why would they need reminding?
- ▶ Boswell says the pattern instructed to take their cues on direction, timing and behavior (including stopping to rest and eat) from the migrating geese. Were slaves likely to leave in the dead of winter, or forget to rest and eat along the way, that they had to be told otherwise?
- ▶ Wilson uses the first block pictured, and says it instructed slaves to travel in whatever direction the 2 darkest triangles were then pointed, making the way the quilt was displayed critical. But in a written reply to questions from elementary school students, author [Tobin](#) emphatically stated that Ozella never said the quilts were used as signaling devices. Is Ozella's niece wrong, or did Tobin misunderstand Ozella? If so, what else did Tobin misunderstand?
- ▶ In presenting a printed fabric in a Flying Geese pattern, Fuller said it was called Broken Plate, claiming that slaves believed that it was used in quilts because "when things were broken up, it would confuse people". What help is this to escaping slaves?

Tumbling Blocks

This pattern was first used by genteel Victorian ladies to show off scraps of their finest silk fabrics. But Wilson says this pattern was hung on a clothesline to tell slaves "to gather food, clothing, and anything that could be used as weapons". Boswell generally [agrees](#) with her. But Wilson also says it "was the code name for Niagara Falls, the final landmark before crossing into Canada and freedom," and that escaped slaves "crossed the [Niagara] river in boats, while others swam."



19thc. Tumbling Blocks quilt, courtesy Teri Ascolese.

This writer grew up a few miles from Niagara Falls. [Here](#) is a view of the river above the falls; [below](#) the Falls the Niagara is 100+ feet deep, in a deep, rocky gorge, and travels at a speed of 8-22mph). (The current water flow is only about half what it would have been in the 19th century.) A [Niagara history website](#) recounts one rowboat adventure:

July 16th 1853 - three men working on a dredging scow (barge) which was anchored in the Niagara River east of Goat Island [i.e., above the Falls] decided to go to shore during the afternoon. The only way to shore was by use of a row boat. As the three men started rowing to shore, they soon discovered that the current of the water was much stronger than they had anticipated. Suddenly one of their oars broke. The small row boat entered the American Channel rapids and swept downstream. The rowboat capsized. Two of the men were swept to their death over the brink of the American Falls. The third man, Samuel Avery, was able to grab onto some tree roots growing from a rock just east of Chapin Island. Avery spent the night stranded in the cool fast flowing water. The sound of the rapids prevented any of Avery's screams for help to be heard.

The next morning, Avery's plight was observed by several tourists. Efforts to rescue Avery began. Initial efforts consisted of releasing boats and raft from the Bath Island Bridge. None of the craft were able to reach Avery. Finally a boat which was tethered to the Bath Island Bridge was guided downstream and reached Samuel Avery. With little strength left, Avery was able to climb into the boat but the boat immediately capsized throwing Avery back into the turbulent waters. Throwing his hands up in surrender, Avery let out a final scream, fell backwards into the water and was swept to his death over the American Falls.

How likely is it that slaves would swim across the river anywhere near the Falls?



A 19th century view of the Niagara River below the Falls. The Suspension Bridge was over 1,000 feet long and spanned a gorge more than 200 feet deep. The water moves at up to 20mph. Travelers could also hazard the ferry crossing. "Code" proponents claim fugitives swam across this river to Canada.

In fact, escaped slaves specifically describe using the ferry at Youngstown, at the northernmost end of the river, almost at Lake Ontario; there was also a ferry below the Falls (see image above). In 1848 the first footbridge was built across the 200-foot-deep gorge, followed by a railroad bridge in 1855. Harriet Tubman is known to have brought some of her passengers across that bridge by train. But none of the "Codes" mention it.

Wedding Rings

The Double Wedding Ring is featured in most "Codes"; Wilson says it represented both slave chains and being free to marry. (How does this information help slaves escape?) But the research of numerous quilt historians shows the earliest examples and published patterns of this block are from the late 1920s.



On October 20, 1928, *Capper's Weekly* published a Double Wedding Ring pattern, whose design it credited to Mrs. J.D. Patterson of Wellington, Kansas. (This was Celia Yeager Patterson, b.1855 in Illinois to parents from Pennsylvania; she emigrated to Kansas between 1874-77.) A week later the pattern appeared in Ruby McKim's *Kansas City Star* column, and also was featured in the Ladies Art Company catalog.

Quilt historian Roderick Kiracofe says that there are no reliably documented quilts in this pattern that date before 1920. Jonathan Holstein concurs. In the September 1978 issue of *Quilters Newsletter Magazine*, Holstein observed that he had never come across a Double Wedding Ring quilt whose design, materials or workmanship suggested it dated from before the 20th century, and that that the design originated in the late 1920s or early 1930s in one of the many quilt articles published during that period:

This dating would account for its absence from the [Ruth] Finley book [Old Patchwork Quilts and the Women Who Made Them] (published 1929) and presence in the [Carrie] Hall book [The Romance of the Patchwork Quilt in America] (published 1935)...As for there not being "even folk takes about it to satisfy our curiosity," this would be accounted for by its recent origin.

In *The Romance of Double Wedding Ring Quilts*, Bishop observes that this pattern appears to be the most popular in the history of quilting - but notes only three claimed to originate in the 19th century. The museum said to house one states it has no record of ever owning such a quilt; the evidence cited regarding the age of the other two (both of

which are said to date from well after the Civil War) leaves many questions unanswered.

And Wilson's claim about the Double Wedding Ring contradicts what her aunt Ozella said. According to the account in *Hidden in Plain View*, once slaves got to Cleveland they were supposed to "put on silk or cotton bow ties, go to the cathedral church, get married and exchange double wedding rings." In other words, slaves still in danger of being captured were told not to head for the Canadian border, but to stop in Cleveland, get dressed up, go to the biggest church in town, and get married, exchanging "double wedding rings," this is a 20th century custom; in the 19th century, only the bride received a ring. (Nobody ever explains how any of this helps slaves escape to freedom.)

The authors of *Hidden in Plain View* seem to have realized the 20th century origin of the Double Wedding Ring pattern was problematic. But while they are happy to take Ozella's claim the "Code" even *existed* at face value, here they doubt her recollection. Rather than wonder about this inconsistency, however, they speculate that perhaps the Double Wedding Ring pattern wasn't used after all; perhaps it was another pattern (author [Dobard](#) has suggested Job's Tears, while Tobin points to Irish Chain), or perhaps not a quilt pattern at all - maybe the ringing of bells. They propose that "cathedral church" didn't really mean an actual church, but perhaps a cave or a cemetery, or not an actual place at all. Likewise, they suggest "get married and exchange rings" had nothing to do with marriage or rings. On further questioning, Ozella admitted to the authors that perhaps this really meant getting your slave rings cut off in a cathedral where the stained glass windows would keep people from seeing what was happening inside - a very different message from the one she first volunteered.

It seems that at least according to *Hidden in Plain View*, nothing can be determined about how or even whether this pattern was used or what it conveyed.

Fuller says simply that "we" call the pattern "Slave Chain," and that it meant that slaves were not free to marry. (She does not explain how this helps slaves escape.)

But according to [Boswell](#) in a 2004 lecture:

From their steeples, Catholic churches hung quilts with the slave chain design, later renamed the wedding ring design by Dutch women in Pennsylvania. The quilt was hung when the bells rung at noon and indicated it was a safe place for the slaves to stay.

(Presumably, by "Dutch women in Pennsylvania" Boswell means the German-American community commonly known as the Pennsylvania Dutch but she gives no source for her

information.) Even presuming that escaped slaves were wandering around downtown at midday to see this quilt in its unusual location, it is hard to imagine a more obvious way of sending a "secret" message.

"Sue Bonnet"



Early 1930s Sunbonnet blocks

Although the name seems to refer to the block we know as "Sunbonnet Sue," the one pictured and displayed by Wilson in the *Traditional Quiltworks* article is known as Southern Belle, Colonial Lady and Umbrella Girl, so both designs are addressed here.

Wilson says that "Free women in the North wore long dresses with Sue bonnets," and says this block tells slaves they would receive disguises once they reached the North. But capture was more likely (and disguise more critical) while escaped slaves were still in the South.

Why does the block tell them they will receive such clothing only "when they reached the North"? (In 2002 Boswell said the pattern used was "[Britches](#)", which meant "slaves could get clothes for their children", but in [Lizzie's Story](#), that message is conveyed by "Bow Tie" - which in Stroud's *The Patchwork Path* tells fugitives to hide in a church!) Whichever block was used, how does this message help them escape? If Wilson's reference is to the Sunbonnet Sue block, why did Eliza use this name for it?

During the Underground Railroad period and for generations afterward, these deep-brimmed hats were universally known as "poke bonnets". The first reference this writer has found to a "Sunbonnet Sue" quilt block dates to 1930. And according to West Virginia Heritage Quilt Search findings, the Southern name for the block was "Dutch Girl". Why did Eliza call the block and the hat by a name not used in her part of the country? If she did use her region's common name ("Dutch Girl"), what message does that convey?

In fact, the earliest "Sunbonnet baby" figures are in redwork embroidery, and date to around 1905. The "Sue" applique block didn't appear until 50 years *after* the Underground Railroad disbanded; the earliest known "sunbonnet" applique quilt (by Marie Webster, called [Sunbonnet Lassies](#) or Keepsake) was first published in the *Ladies Home Journal* in January 1911. Quilt historian Brackman notes that the Sunbonnet applique pattern "did not trickle down to the quilting public until the late 1920s".



Wilson holds the Southern Belle quilt made by her grandmother Nora

If the reference is in fact to the Southern Belle block, the number of names by which it is known shows how vague the period is which it supposedly depicts, making a 19th century origin doubtful. In fact, the style of dress shown in the block is a romanticized, 20th-century interpretation of 18th and 19th century fashion. The design's popularity spanned the 1920s Colonial Revival and (ironically, considering the Code's inclusion of it) the 1936 release of Margaret Mitchell's book *Gone with the Wind* and its 1939 movie version. It was also available in embroidery transfers, dinnerware, planters, and pictures. In fact, the pattern for the "Colonial Lady" quilt pictured in Wilson's article - the one she says her grandmother made "during the early 1950s" - is a later adaptation of the pattern that first appeared in *Grandma Dexter's New Applique and Patchwork Designs* ([36B, #2900-2905](#)), published by Collingbourne Mills in 1932-33, along with the Double Wedding Ring and Dresden Plate patterns.

Dresden Plate



*Dresden Plate quilt, 1936,
California (Library of Congress)*

Wilson says this block instructs fugitives to "look for a church with Dresden Plate windows in Canada." She says that she was told by an historian that the Niagara Falls BME Church (presumably the church where "they would be welcomed by a Free Black Society") was "established in 1856 as a meeting place for the Black community."

In fact, that church was established in 1814. The original building, constructed in 1836 at the beginning of the Underground Railroad, is still standing. Its windows are not round like plates, but pointed at the top in a Gothic arch as was typical of that era.

But although segmented-disk blocks did exist *in the last decades* of the 19th century, the name "Dresden Plate", and the design's unique serrated or scalloped edges, originates in the late 1920s, most probably with Ruby McKim's *101 Patchwork Patterns*.

Since the publication of *Hidden in Plain View*, [Tobin](#) has said that the "Dresden" reference in her book was an editorial error and had "nothing to do with the quilt block, despite the fact that there was a later quilt pattern of that name."

If as Tobin claims the inclusion of the Dresden Plate block was indeed an editorial error, why was the book's picture of the Dresden Plate block (shown at right) supplied by author Dobard himself? Who is right, Wilson and Dobard, or Tobin? What other editorial errors are in *Hidden in Plain View*?

The question is unavoidable: If the Dresden Plate, Wedding Ring, and "Sue" or Colonial Lady blocks are part of the Underground Railroad quilt "Code", why is it that while 19th century examples exist of all the other blocks named, there are none for these popular Depression-era patterns? How likely is it that they somehow disappeared without a trace for 60 years, only to suddenly re-emerge in the late 1920s?



*The Dresden Plate block
Dobard made for HIPV.*

If "Code" proponents somehow included these patterns by mistake, how much should we rely on the remainder of what they say?

Bear's Paw

Most proponents claim in one way or another that this block instructed slaves to follow bear tracks to find water and fish (even though the American [black bear](#) is almost vegetarian, not a predator, and gets most of its protein from insects).

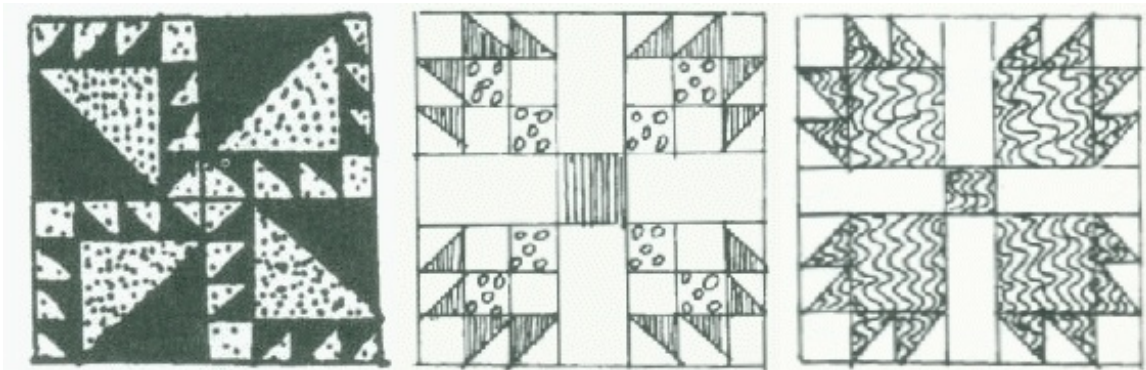
[Dobard](#) has all sorts of ideas about this block, all having to do with bears. He says that because "bears have very good memories" (unlike deer or mockingbirds?) they knew where to go for water and "natural" food. Dobard then suggests that spring is the best season to escape, and that fugitives could hide in a bear's den - "provided the bear doesn't return." This presents several problems. Cubs do not leave the den until April, and the National Wildlife Federation warns that bears can be dangerous "when accompanied by cubs, when surprised by the sudden appearance of humans, when approached while feeding, guarding a kill, fishing, hungry, injured, or breeding.) Finally, he says "there was only one state, really between Cleveland and Charleston where you would find all of these hills and mountains to follow the footprints of the bear. Today, we call that place West Virginia." This echoes Wilson's claim that an Underground Railroad route went west across the Appalachian Mountains from South Carolina.

But Dobard seems not to have consulted his book's own Underground Railroad map. No routes are known to have crossed west over the Appalachians; they divide and pass on either side of that mountain range. In fact, only one route traverses the Appalachians at all, and it goes from eastern Tennessee, northeastward towards Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Why would slaves be instructed to follow a long, dangerous route not described in any Underground Railroad history, or even on *Hidden in Plain View's* own map?

Conversely, Clarice Boswell claims the pattern "alerted slaves to be aware of their environment and watch the path of the bear."

By the 1840s, hunting had so decimated the bear population in the eastern US that hair-dressing manufacturers had to obtain bear fat from Canada. Population aside, spotting bear tracks is difficult even for [experienced trackers](#) :

I find bears challenging to track because their feet are relatively flat. They walk plantigrade, or flat-footed. You would think that such a large animal would leave huge imprints. Actually, they don't. Most of the time, the tracks I find are indistinct flattenings of the soil. Every once in a while, I find a nice clear print showing all five toes and maybe the claws. Usually the claw marks are not visible. And, sometimes, the fifth toe doesn't make an imprint. Tracking bears is like tracking barefoot humans. There are no sharp edges on the feet to leave distinct impressions on the ground.



Three of the "Bear Paw" blocks pictured in Brackman's block encyclopedia.
How do we know which - if any - is the right one?

Leoman, presumably based on Boswell, says that the pattern identified "landmarks on the edge of the plantation." How is this useful? Why would fugitives be instructed to follow - or avoid - the hard-to-distinguish tracks of an animal they were unlikely to encounter? Would they really need to be told to "be aware of their environment"?

Brackman catalogs several different "Bear Paw" patterns, three of which are shown above. The earliest known by that name (from the first known catalog of quilt patterns, circa 1890) is at left, and looks nothing like the one used by the "Code". The one at center is from the same catalog as the Double Wedding Ring. And in 1946 author Ruth Finley noted that the one at right (the design claimed by the "Code"), is also referred to as "Duck's Foot in the Mud" and "Hand of Friendship"! How do "Code" proponents know which block, and which name, is correct?

Monkey Wrench

Ozella said this block instructed slaves to "gather tools for the journey ahead," but her niece gives the block two other, different meanings. First, Wilson claims the monkey wrench was a "very important tool on the plantation" and thus the pattern referred to slaves escaping in wagons, which the monkey wrench was used to repair.



Urban legend, propagated by Ripley's *Believe it or Not* in the 1930s, says this tool was invented in 1858 by a Charles Moncke. But historians have learned it originated in England decades earlier, and that it was indeed used on carriage axles and [advertised](#) as a "monkey wrench" during the first half of the 19th century.

However, the monkey wrench's use appears to have been extremely limited, particularly before the Industrial Revolution was well under way. Whether it was "very important" on any plantation, or if it was even widespread enough in the rural South for a significant number of people, black or white, ever to have seen it might be answered by a survey of plantation estate inventories.

Occasional claims that it was invented, made, or used in Africa appear to be without foundation. The adjustable ("monkey") wrench was developed for use on carriage axles, but wheeled transport was not used in sub-Saharan Africa. And while West Africans readily adopted European products (from rifles to machine-spun yarn), they actively chose to continue to import these items rather than manufacture them locally.

As Wright has observed, if this block was part of the "Quilt Code" before the monkey wrench was in use, how could it refer to that tool?

Wilson also says this was an African "symbol of a person who led caravans through the desert and through jungles". But no "deserts" or "jungles" exist in the part of Africa from which most slaves were taken; most of it is grassy savannah (much like a prairie) and seashore, with the remainder rolling hills and low mountains.

If a block did have more than one meaning, how did slaves know which one was intended?

To add to the confusion, this block has also been known by at least 30 other names, including Bear's Paw - and Brackman's *Encyclopedia of Pieced Quilt Patterns* lists four different blocks known as Monkey Wrench! How do we know this is the right one?

Other blocks

Fuller claims yet another pattern dating to the 1930s. Taking her cue from the title of a 1972 [Goldie Hawn movie](#), she declares:

See this butterfly quilt? This means freedom. Butterflies are free! It was made from dresses and shirts of people they left behind so that they could remember the people after they went North and were free.

In other words, this quilt was supposedly made by fugitives *after* reaching freedom - and has no value in the "Code". Is there any evidence fugitives actually brought along scraps of clothing of the people they left behind?

In her lectures, Clarice Boswell claims for the "code" two more patterns not mentioned by either Ozella, her nieces or anyone else I have found:

The grandmothers flower baskets pattern was given to slave owners and often hung in their backyards. They didn't know that a code was sewn into the quilt, leading slaves to a secret cellar or tunnel behind the flower gardens.

Although quilts made of hexagonal pieces were introduced in the mid-19th century, they were commonly referred to as "Honeycomb"; the 1894 *Scribner's* article says that in "various parts of the United States" it is called "Job's Trouble". Like the Tumbling Blocks pattern, such quilts were typically made of fine silks. Their appearance is very different from the "Grandmother's Flower Garden" name and design introduced in the 1930s. And along with the Wedding Ring, Sunbonnet and Dresden Plate blocks, it is among the Depression's most popular quilt designs.

Boswell again:

The ring of roses [presumably President's Wreath] was used as celebration that the slaves had arrived safely in Canada.

No examples of such an "award" quilt have been documented.

The Carpenter's Wheel [a/k/a Dutch Rose or Broken Star]... This pattern would have particular significance to slaves skilled in a craft—such as carpentry. It told slaves to “run with faith” to the west—northwest territories.

The [nearest](#) "west-northwest territories" would have been Iowa and Kansas - the latter known in the 1850s as "Bleeding Kansas" because of the violent clashes there between

slaveowners and abolitionists. It did not become a free state until after the Civil War began. How likely is it that slaves would be instructed to go there?

Fabrics available to slaves

Those unaware of the history of textiles often mistakenly presume that the first quilts were crazy-patched, made from dressmaking scraps or saved from worn-out garments. In fact, quilts started as a luxury, available only to the well-off. Fabric was expensive, and rather than being cut to fit the wearer, except for high-fashion clothing, garments were boxy in form, leaving very few scraps left over for quilting. Even among whites, until the 1840s few people had more than one or two changes of clothing, all of which had to be sewn by hand.



Fugitive slaves, known as "contrabands," who escaped across Union lines in Virginia, 1862. (Library of Congress)

This was particularly true in the antebellum south, which imported virtually every manufactured good from the North or overseas. Local and state laws pointedly discouraged manufacturing, causing some Southerners deep concern the more inevitable war appeared. The region's few textile mills were small, averaging only 12-24 looms (New England mills commonly had 10 times as many). Most such mills were devoted to producing warp for home weaving, a few checks and plaids, and utility cloth for the plantation or prison on which the mills were situated. This utility cloth was commonly known as "Negro cloth," and was a coarse, unbleached or brown-colored cotton similar to today's osnaburg. (In *Textiles in America*, Florence Montgomery notes that 19th century osnaburg was made in "blue and white or brown and white stripes, checks, and solid colors".) As its name suggests, Negro cloth was commonly used for

slave and prisoner clothing. In fact, the number of Southern mills *decreased* by one-third between 1840-1850 - which required slaveowners to buy more "Negro cloth" from the Northern mills that offered it.

Unlike blankets, quilts were an extravagance that used two layers of fabric and a great deal of thread - another "import"; because of seam allowances, patchwork quilts used up even more fabric and thread. They also took much more time to make than blankets. Even after commercially produced cotton fabric and thread became more affordable, quilting was costly in both time and in materials. On many plantations, slaves were issued not clothing but yard goods, once a year, and would have to sew their clothes themselves whenever they had the time. If those garments wore out, they had to do without until next year.

Certainly the WPA slave narratives contain references to slaves making quilts. But if the average enslaved field hand didn't have dressmaking scraps or yard goods, couldn't they have used their worn-out clothing to make patchwork? Consider these observations about field hands' clothing, [compiled in 1853](#) :

Mr. Weld has shown by abundant and unimpeachable testimony, that "the clothing of slaves by day, and their covering by night, is not adequate either for comfort or decency." (p. 40, &c.)

Virginia: Hon. T. T. Bouldin, a slaveholder, in a speech in Congress, Feb. 16, 1835, said: "He knew that many negroes had died from exposure to weather," and added, "They are clad in a flimsy fabric that will turn neither wind nor water."

Maryland: "The slaves, naked and starved, often fall victims to the inclemencies of the weather." (Geo. Buchanan, M. D., of Baltimore, 1791.)

Georgia, &c.: "We rode through many rice swamps, where the blacks were very numerous" — "working up to the middle in water, men and women nearly naked." (Wm. Savery, of Philadelphia, Minister Friends' Soc., 1791.)

Tennessee, &c.: "In every slaveholding State many slaves suffer extremely, both while they labor and when they sleep, for want of clothing to keep them warm." (Rev. John Rankin.)

The South generally: "Men and women have many times scarce clothes enough to hide their nakedness, and boys and girls, ten and twelve years

old, are often quite naked among their masters' children." (John Woolman, 1757. *Journal, &c.*, p. 150.)

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A young fugitive slave
(US Army collection)

"Both male and female go without clothing at the age of 8 or 10 years." (John Parrish, Minister Soc.Friends, 1804.) Same testimony from many others more recently.

Tennessee, &c.: "In every slaveholding State many slaves suffer extremely, both while they labor and

Alabama, 1819: "Hardly a rag of clothing on them." — "Generally the only bedding was a blanket." (S. E. Maltby.)

Virginia: "Two old blankets." (Wm. Leftwich.) Advertisements of fugitives every year often describe them as "ragged" or "nearly naked."

Florida: "They were allowed two suits of clothes a year; viz: one pair of trowsers with a shirt or frock of osnaburgh, for summer; and for winter, one pair of trowsers and a jacket of negro-cloth, with a baize shirt and a pair of shoes. Some allowed hats, and some did not; and they were generally, I believe, allowed one blanket in two years. Garments of similar materials were allowed the women." (Wm. Ladd, late of Minot, Me.)

"The slaves are generally without beds or bedsteads." — "I have seen men and women at work in the fields, more than half naked." (Testimony furnished by Rev. C. S. Renshaw, from his friend.)

Frederick Douglass, who as a slave had seen conditions firsthand, concurred:

Their yearly clothing consisted of two coarse linen shirts, one pair of linen trousers, like the shirts, one jacket, one pair of trousers for winter, made of coarse negro cloth, one pair of stockings, and one pair of shoes; the whole of which could not have cost more than seven dollars....The children unable to work in the field had neither shoes, stockings, jackets, nor trousers, given to them; their clothing consisted of two coarse linen shirts per year. When these failed them, they went naked until the next allowance-day. Children from seven to ten years old, of both sexes, almost naked, might be seen at all seasons of the year.

*There were no beds given the slaves, unless **one coarse blanket** be considered such, and none but the men and women had these.*

While several observers describe a "coarse" or "thin" "blanket" being distributed to each adult slave every year or two, none so much as mentions a quilt.

If the *average* slave (not the small minority of house servants, craftsmen and others hired out to work in town) was barely covered in a "ragged" garment of "flimsy" fabric, and children as old as twelve were left naked, how likely is it that any garment, however threadbare, would be cut up to make a quilt?

African symbolism

Serena Wilson and her daughter claim that the *actual quilt block patterns themselves and their meanings* are taken directly from the African "secret societies" in which they were used and where their ancestor, Eliza, learned them. From Wilson's article:

My great-grandmother Eliza originally learned the patterns of the Secret Quilt Code in Africa.

From Wilson and Kemp's website:

The QUILT CODE consists of African symbols and prints that have a mathematical base and secret meanings that are a audio visual communication system that is still used today

Kemp wrote me in May 2002:

The use of the quilts were not tied to the period in America when slaves had to run away but back to the secret societies in Africa where many of the Africans who were enslaved came from. The patterns and codes are still know and handed down and the techniques I was taught are still in use in those African countries today and are dated through the Africian Universities and historians.

Likewise, in 2004:

What do you know of African textiles and print makers. That is the beginning of the pattern and the secret societies of Africa. Much like fraternities and sororities in American universities. Similar to Masons and Eastern Stars they are social organizations.

In an August 2004 email Kemp stated that

they surprised us with a message from the Igbo Chief of the area our family is from in West Africa. She has sent us a video greeting

From the FAQs page of Wilson and Kemp's [website](#) in 2006:

In our quilts, the distinct stitches, the dying, colors, construction were unique, and weaving techniques particular to African tribes. Also the colors of the patterns

along with the arrangement of the symbols and patterns were and still are used in African languages or dialects.

In summary, the inheritors of the "Quilt Code" appear to believe that their ancestor Eliza, an Igbo from Benin, learned these symbols (those pictured in *HIPV* are Adinkra) from secret societies while she was a child in Africa.

Yet in 2005 she [said](#) that "Every quilt was not an UGRR Coded Quilt even if it had the patterns on it" - suggesting that the "Code" quilt blocks were in common use among whites who were not Underground Railroad participants.

The most striking aspect of "Code" proponents' description of African symbolism is their apparent presumption not only that the numerous tribes in the slave-trade area of the African continent not only shared one homogeneous "African" culture - but that this generic culture is the same today as it was during the years of the slave trade, unchanged by the Diaspora, colonization, civil war, and two centuries of technology. While "Code" proponents might not quite say all West African cultures look alike, they seem to have no trouble mixing and matching them as the need requires.

This is a common - and quite racist - stereotype. Writes historian Paul E. Lovejoy:

The methodology that is required to uncover the active linkages between Africa and the Americas must begin with a comprehensive knowledge of African history. Then the same historical techniques must be applied in reconstructing the past of Africans who were forcibly moved to the Americas as in the migration of Europeans into their diaspora. It is a sad comment on the state of slave studies in the Americas that this common sense is often ignored. Some of the best scholarship makes assumptions about the African past that abuse standard historical methodology; including the central importance of chronology, the examination of change over time, the critique of all available source material, the insistence that later events and phenomena not be read back into the distant past, and other aspects of the discipline that are or should be taught in virtually every introductory history course.'

While I have only begun research in this area, what I have found so far shows the following:

Adinkra

During and long after the time of slavery, Adinkra symbols were unique to the Gyaman of Ivory Coast and the Akan of western Ghana. These tribes live hundreds of miles west of Benin, where Kemp's ancestor Eliza is supposed to have come from. Until the late

20th century, Adinkra symbols were used only on fabric worn at funerals as a symbol of mourning; the word "Adinkra" translates as "saying good-bye to the dead". Adinkra symbols are not used among the Igbo (the tribe from which Kemp says her family is descended). The traditional method of printing Adinkra cloth was not developed until around 1818 - about the time Eliza is supposed to have been enslaved and brought to America.

Nsibidi

The Igbo tribe from which Kemp recently claimed she is descended uses a writing system called Nsibidi. Like Roman letters, and even more than Adinkra symbols, Nsibidi are made almost entirely with lines - not the solid geometric shapes used in patchwork. While the Igbo share the Nsibidi system with the Ekoi and Efik tribes, only the Ekoi and Efik have secret societies such as that where Eliza is supposed to have learned the "code". Those societies, whose membership is exclusively male, use special Nsibidi known only to them. A few wealthy women are permitted "honorary" membership, but they are never taught the secret symbols. However, there are no Ekoi, Efik, or even Igbo in Benin; their tribal lands are hundreds of miles away.

With the caveat that my research is only preliminary, what I have learned so far suggests the following:

- ▶ The Adinkra symbols pictured in *Hidden in Plain View* have nothing to do with the tribe claimed by the "Quilt Code" family. Of hundreds of Adinkra symbols, only one or two vaguely resemble "code" blocks; their meaning, however, is entirely different.
- ▶ Eliza could be from Benin, *or* she could be Igbo/Ekoi/Efik, but she could not be both.
- ▶ If Eliza was a member of an Ekoi or Efik tribe which had a secret society, as a female she would not have been taught the secret Nsibidi symbols.

To reasonably assert that the "code" designs originated anywhere in Africa, we must accept that contrary to all evidence, (a) stars, pinwheels, and checkerboard patterns (among others) do not appear in European or American culture before slaves introduced these simple motifs; and (b) that American quilting itself originated in Africa and was brought to America by slaves. There is no evidence of the latter, and ample evidence of such patterns being part of the English textile lexicon. Some of the blocks claimed by the "code" (Pinwheel , Star, Nine-Patch) are among the first ever used in quilting; they appear in English quilts made as early as [1718](#) .

Even older, notes British textile historian Pamela Claburn (*The National Trust Book of Furnishing Textiles*), are blankets commercially woven in Oxfordshire, England which

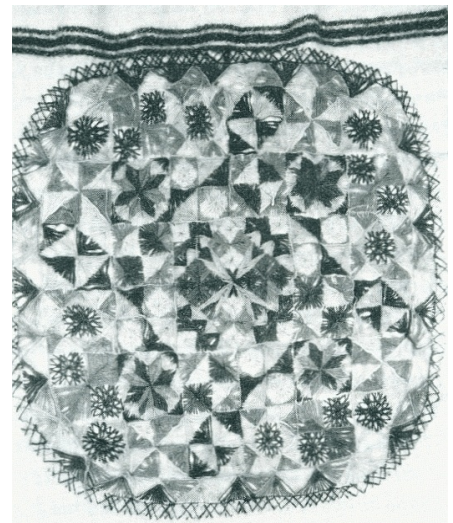
starting in the early 18th century were embroidered with complex geometric patterns including stars and pinwheels

Between 1711 and 1860 [the Early company] made what became known as the "rose blanket" ...[with] motifs embroidered in the four corners....[varying] between 9 and 21 inches in diameter. Blankets were woven in one long length weighing a hundred pounds....The decoration was put on to show where the length should be cut up into individual blankets....Rose blankets were popular in America.

Hidden in Plain View author Dobard has a more equivocal position. He wonders whether "Ozella's story-code [is] a cultural hybrid, mixing African encoding traditions with American quilt patterning conventions" - in other words, while the block designs were not African but European-American, because African culture used symbols, slaves assigned the blocks new, coded meanings.

This would be notable only if using symbols to convey messages is unique to African cultures (requiring "hybridization"); it also presumes that the resultant "encoding" was somehow uniformly shared throughout the slaveholding South.

The most that reason can allow is that *if* a "code" did exist, it *could have* consisted of Anglo-American block patterns to which African-American slaves *may have* attached their own meaning. (At the very least, this would certainly be more logical than introducing unusual African motifs which would have drawn unwanted attention.) But that in itself would be a theory in search of proof - hardly an accepted method of research - and would still require evidence a "code" was used.



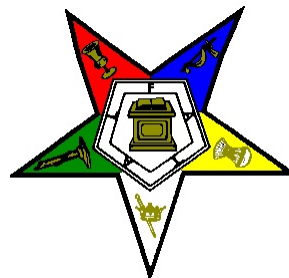
Embroidered geometric motif from an 18th century English "rose blanket"

Prince Hall Masonry and Harriet Powers

Quilt Code" proponents often draw a direct connection between a generic idea of African use of symbols and secret societies (as if these are unique to that continent) and Prince Hall Masonry. (Prince Hall was the African-American responsible for founding the first Masonic Lodges in the US open to blacks in the late 18th century. He supported abolition, but whether his involvement included Underground Railroad activities is an open question.) Some have pointed to Masonic symbols in quilts as indications of a quilt code; this completely ignores both the specific meanings Masons assign to them, and the fact that not all Masons were abolitionists. Similar claims are made regarding Prince Hall Masons - that the symbols actually conveyed a non-Masonic, perhaps African, meaning. This effectively asserts that such individuals were liars - not only to others who "misconstrued" the meaning of the symbols, but to themselves. It also misconstrues the idea of a "secret society." The Masons and Eastern Star are "secret" only insofar as their membership rites are conducted in private and not discussed with the uninitiated.

That aside, it is claimed by some that Prince Hall Masons worked as Underground Railroad operatives in the South. However, the first Prince Hall Lodge was not formed in the South until *after* the Civil War - in Savannah in 1866.

Both Wahlman and Dobard claim that Harriet Powers must have been involved in some sort of "secret society" - probably a Masonic organization. As evidence, they point to an applique on the apron Powers is wearing in the only known photograph of her:



The "star" on Harriet Powers's apron has many points; the Eastern Star emblem, only five.

[When Dobard] has shown the slide of Harriet Powers to quilters' groups around the country, women from the audience have stated with certainty that the star on Powers's apron is indeed representative of the Eastern Star, the women's arm of the Masons.

How did Dobard elicit comments about Powers's applique? Did his audience spontaneously volunteer their opinions after he showed them the photo without comment? Or did he show them the picture, tell them his theory, and then aided by his interpretation, they agreed? Were any of these individuals Eastern Star members familiar with such symbolism? If so, where did they find this "certain" similarity between the Eastern Star emblem (a five-pointed star with a pentagram center) and Powers's applique, which is disc-shaped and has least a dozen points?

We believe it was highly probable that Powers was a member of a secret organization, such as the Eastern Star. The first Grand Lodge, Savannah, Georgia, was established in 1870. For a Grand Lodge to be established, several smaller units, or lodges, would have to have existed throughout the state prior to this.

That statement is misleading on several points.

- ▶ The first Georgia Prince Hall Lodge charter was granted in 1866. (Charters in remaining southern states dated from 1870 or later.) But since women cannot be Masons, the Lodge charter date is immaterial. What matters is the date the Lodge's Eastern Star (women's) chapter was formed, which always follows the formation of the Lodge.
- ▶ The first Prince Hall Eastern Star chapter in Georgia was not formed until 1899, in Savannah. Powers lived in Athens, 225 miles away; there has never been a Prince Hall Lodge in Athens. How likely is it that Powers, at the age of 62, joined an organization at least two days' travel from her home?

Tobin and Dobard continue:

In addition to Masonic Lodges, many other beneficial or mutual aid societies and fraternal organizations were proliferating in the South at this time.

But this was also true in the North, and among whites as well. Dobard and Tobin seem to conclude by limply suggesting "if it's not Masonic, it *could* be *something*." Certainly it *could* be; it could equally be Powers's own invention. But no evidence has been provided that the applique *is*, or even *might* be, anything at all, let alone that it is evidence of membership in a "secret society". No actual research into Powers's life

appears to have been conducted; the authors can't even be bothered to find out when the first Eastern Star chapter was formed in Powers's home state. Yet the authors inexplicably "believe" her membership is "highly probable".

Questionable sources

Buckmaster's "Ross Code"

As evidence of a "quilt code", the authors of *Hidden in Plain View* point to what is known among historians as the "Ross Code". This system of code words, well-documented as having been used by UGRR conductors, was named after white abolitionist Alexander Ross, who described it in his 1875 and 1893 memoirs. But in their lengthy discussion of the "Ross Code", Tobin and Dobard never cite Ross. Instead, they resort to two 20th century sources: a book written in 1958 by an author known for her "historical novels," and a 1993 children's book - one of *fourteen* children's books in the only list of sources *Hidden in Plain View* contains:

*The Ross code used numbers, pious phrases, and the times of the day to instruct slaves in running away.... Ross utilized numbers and poetic descriptions in formulating his code. We are told that Pennsylvania was recognized as number 20; Media, Ohio, was number 27; Cleveland, Ohio, was called "Hope"; Sandusky, Ohio, was known as "Sunrise," and Detroit, Michigan, was dubbed "midnight." The entryways into Canada were described by words of praise and thanksgiving to the Almighty: "Glory to God" meant Windsor, Ontario, and "God be praised," stood for Port Stanley (Buckmaster, p. 249). As such, one proposed message reads: " We hope to rise at sunrise; they we rest by midnight," (Hamilton, *Many Thousand Gone*, p. 117). Translated, the message states: Cleveland to Sandusky to Detroit. The final destination was Ontario ("Glory to God and God be praised"). Buckmaster and others missed a probable reference to the Buxton-Chatham area in Canada where several early Black settlements existed...*

Had Tobin and Dobard bothered to read either of Ross's firsthand accounts, they would have discovered that among all the code words he mentions, *not one is for a city or location*. The "city codes" first materialize in Buckmaster's book without any indication of her source, much like Fry's claim about Log Cabin quilts. Hamilton in turn apparently based her book on Buckmaster (who cheerfully admits to a "slight partisanship"). Since *Hidden in Plain View* cites only Buckmaster and Hamilton, not Ross, one wonders whether Tobin and Dobard neglected to check these books' accuracy against the primary source or whether, upon learning that Ross's own words do not support Buckmaster's

assertions, they simply chose to ignore Ross's firsthand account. (I am very grateful to Christopher Densmore for his excellent analysis of this subject, which is reproduced in Appendix I.)

Stitched from the Soul

Also cited by Tobin and Dobard is Gladys-Marie Fry's 1990 book *Stitched from the Soul*. But there are indications that the author - a folklorist, not a textile historian - accepted without question whatever oral tradition she was given without substantiating it with independent research.

It is worth noting that Fry personally examined textiles only "when possible" and that (rather amazingly, since Fry is not a quilt historian), oral histories regarding the age of the quilts were often taken at face value. Apparently Fry did not think it necessary to routinely corroborate the ages claimed for the quilts by using a very simple process: examine the printed fabrics the quilts contain. That is the first step a legitimate quilt appraiser takes in dating a quilt, since printing and dye technology has changed in measurable ways over the past 200 years, and obviously a quilt cannot be any older than the fabrics it contains.

That omission in methodology may explain why, for example, the five quilts described as "made by Phyllis, a slave imported from the Congo in 1818 as a twelve- or thirteen-year-old girl" are quite visibly made from fabrics dating to the 1930s and 1940s (if the maker had been well over 125 years old, would Fry not have noted it?), and why those made by "slave Nancy Vaughn Ford" (described as "good examples of the utilitarian quilts slaves made by slaves for their own use in their own time") contain an op-art heart print in several colorways and a cheery apple kitchen curtain fabric, both from the 1960s. (Genealogical records indicate Ford was born in 1853.)

But Fry's confusion is not limited to quilts with only oral histories. Among the quilts in *Stitched from the Soul* is an unusual [figural applique quilt](#) which Fry says was made c.1850 by "Jane Batson" and "her niece". The quilt also appears in quilt historian and curator Sandi Fox's book *Wrapped in Glory*. Fox discusses it in detail, with a very different conclusion about its age. In 1988, the owner of the quilt identified it as being made by *Mary Jane Batson* and her *granddaughter* *Mariah Chapman*, who passed it on to her own niece *Malinda Spain* in 1922. Names aside, as to the quilt dating from c.1850, Fox observes:

*Contrary to what oral tradition suggests about the quilt's provenance, the surface of the piece provides evidence (in detail and design) that **the blocks could not have been worked in the antebellum period.** Beneath one small foot the*

*background fabric (a handwoven linen, slightly foxed) reveals that a small line of sewing machine stitching has been removed from what might have been an old garment [used to make the quilt]. **The most telling evidence, however, is in the silhouette of the costumed ladies, who all wear bustles and hats dateable to the late 1870s or 80s...**almost all of the articles of clothing on this quilt were available from 1870s mail order catalogs, and [the bowtie on one male figure, rather than a loose antebellum-style cravat] may represent a commercially available cravat....the shoes [on one female figure] are very clearly seen to be an 1870s style with tongues...she wears a cape similar to those popular in the 1880s.*

Apparently Fry simply took the word of folklorist John Michael Vlach, who in his 1978 catalog for *The African-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* misdates the Batson quilt. Vlach also declares unequivocally that "[t]here is nothing African or Afro-American about this quilt except its maker." The Batson quilt does not fit neatly into the ten criteria Vlach devises for African-American quilts. Thus, we are told, a masterpiece made by two generations of African-American women isn't truly African-American because *to a white male academic*, it just doesn't "look" black enough.

A number of other ["antebellum" quilts](#) in Fry's book appear to be made from 20th century fabric. If Fry simply took whatever the quilts' owners told her at face value, how reliable is the rest of the information in her book - particularly when (as with her claim about Log Cabin quilts), she cites no source?

Fry's analytical style is further illustrated in a [video clip](#) in which, among other things, she claims floral garlands surrounding a quilt's center motif are "cleverly disguised snakes." Apparently Fry is blissfully unaware of the 19th century popularity of *broderie perse*, in which floral motifs cut from expensive printed chintz fabric were rearranged into decorative designs including serpentine borders, particularly on center-medallion quilts - [for example](#), the one made by a well-to-do Maryland woman 50 years before Fry's example. (Note as well the handles on the vase.) Such quilts are based on the images in the first *palampore* coverlets imported from India in the early 17th century, such as [this one](#) from *Textiles in America*. Fry even sees "snakes" in the way four letters of the recipient's name are slightly slanted, apparently never considering that the maker might have worked without drafting tools. (Video at 2:59) As "proof" of her analysis she holds up what she says is a modern, sequined "voodoo flag". What might Fry say about the images in [this coverlet](#), made by a white Tennessean of German ancestry in 1792, or [this one](#), made by a white Connecticut woman in 1813?

Fry then turns herbalist (video at about 5:00), describing the "medicinal plants" embroidered on another quilt she says was made by "a 16-year-old slave boy practicing to be a medical doctor". She points out "[Star of Bethlehem](#)" as "good for stomach

ailments" (in fact, it causes digestive distress and heart arrhythmia), inexplicably confounds the irritant "Mother-in-Law's Tongue" ([Sansivieria](#)) with "Rabbit Tobacco" ([Cudweed](#)) as "a tea for herbs and salves", and identifies a carefully embroidered, five-fingered lady's gauntlet glove and [White Oak](#) leaf as immature and mature [sassafras](#) (sassafras leaves sometimes resemble a *mitten*, and have *up to three* lobes or "fingers").

"Without it, HIPV could not have been written"

One of the enthusiastic introductions to *Hidden in Plain View* was written by Maude Southwell Wahlman, a white professor of art history and author of *Signs & Symbols: African Images in African American Quilts*. Tobin returns the favor with a lavish encomium for the 2001 edition of *Signs & Symbols*, claiming that without Wahlman's "research and documentation, *Hidden in Plain View* could not have been written." It is notable that Ozella approached Tobin with her "quilt code" story not long after *Signs & Symbols* appeared in bookstores.

Wahlman's book started out as a thesis, and then became a journal article; subsequent versions vary somewhat from the original edition of the book, so page references below may not be accurate in all cases. It is 141 pages long and contains hundreds of footnotes, but although its subject is quilts, citations of quilt historians are all but nonexistent. (The author does, however, reference both *Stitched from the Soul* and *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt*.) Rather than reinforcing Wahlman's assertions, the few footnotes citing quilt historian Cuesta Benberry actually raise doubts.

In the end, the authority whom Wahlman points to most frequently is herself. And although Wahlman repeatedly states that quilts "could have" or "might have" been used as signals on the Underground Railroad, she never provides any supporting evidence other than the unsubstantiated claims of Fry and Joyce Scott.

Cultural retentions - North America vs. Caribbean and Brazil

Few would dispute that every transplanted ethnic group hands down a variety of cultural preferences in everything from what is considered "tasty" to how closely people stand to each other when they are talking. Surely African-Americans are no exception. But as generations pass, these cultural norms tend to dilute, not intensify. Quiltmaking among the Old Order Amish is a prime example. The Amish did not bring this craft with them when they emigrated to America, but learned it through contact with non-Amish neighbors in the years following the Civil War (the earliest reliably-dated Amish quilt dates to around 1870). They adapted the craft to their own needs, and for generations, Amish quilts were produced in a remarkably homogeneous, insular setting with strict

design rules based in religious faith and a conscious desire for conformity. Since WWII, however, Amish quilts have gradually devolved, thanks to greater contact with outsiders, particularly tourists. Collectors who want a "typical" Amish quilt now have to specifically request the makers use "old" colors and patterns, or they will receive one indistinguishable from quilts made by "mainstream" Americans.

But unlike the insular Amish, African slaves and their descendants were constantly exposed to the dominant, white (and primarily Anglo-)American culture. As Jonathan Holstein observes:

The Lancaster Amish had remained since their arrival in the New World in discrete groups gathered in specific living areas, and their quilt aesthetics showed until recently a high degree of cultural homogeneity and conformity. African-Americans had lived everywhere in the United States and were as varied in circumstances, attitude and condition as any other Americans.

As examples of her "signs and symbols," Wahlman points to folk art from Haiti and Brazil, implying that since Africanisms are often found in, e.g., the *drapo vodou* of Haiti, they must also exist in African-American quilts. But slavery in the US differed significantly from that in Brazil and the Caribbean in ways that had a direct impact on the transmission of Africanisms:

- ▶ **Demographics.** High mortality and low birth rates among slaves in South America and the islands demanded a constant influx of African-born slaves to replace them; such imports continued until 1860. American slaves lived longer and had a high birth rate, and while some smuggling from the Caribbean into New Orleans and the Florida Panhandle did occur, importation was banned in 1808. Thus Afro-Caribbeans have a much more recent, more direct experience of African culture than do African-Americans.
- ▶ **Degree of cultural isolation.** The average Brazilian plantation had hundreds slaves who lived in virtual isolation from whites. After its 1804 revolution, Haiti was virtually all black; it then banned Catholic priests (and thus their significant cultural influence) until 1860. Well into the 18th century, Brazilian slaveowners were importing fabric from West Africa for their slaves. Conversely, the average American plantation had fewer than 25 slaves, who had daily contact with the dominant culture and were actively discouraged from expressing their own; by 1860, 99% of slaves in America were born in the US. The only African-American subgroup which can reasonably be compared to that of Afro-Caribbeans is the Gullah culture of the islands on South Carolina's coast, where African slaves and their descendants were much more free to continue African traditions without interference. Among the

Gullah, Africanisms persist in abundance; no scholarly reinterpretation is required to find them.

At first Wahlman seems merely to be addressing the roots of aesthetics which influence some (but by no means all) quilts made by blacks. In her introduction, she even points out that while *some* African-American quilts have a different aesthetic from those made by their white counterparts,

*[similar designs in African quilted textiles and African American quilts **might be coincidental**, due to the technical process of piecing that reduces cloth to geometric shapes.*

In other words, since a quilt's "building blocks" are squares, circles, and triangles, even if people have different cultural heritages they are likely to come up with similar designs. Then - having admitted the similarity might be entirely coincidental, Wahlman devotes her book to what she says are specific "signs and symbols" from Africa which black Americans have somehow passed down through ten generations. This comes as a surprise to the nonprofessionals in her book, who are blissfully unaware of the hidden messages in their quilts. Until Wahlman enlightens them, they think they are just being creative. (Some, like [Charlie Logan](#), sound insulted by Wahlman's assertions: "I taught myself. It doesn't mean anything.")

It might also come as a surprise to Australian quilters. The traditional Australian "wagga" coverlet, made for generations by British and European settlers and their descendants, blends in perfectly with the quilts Wahlman points to as uniquely African-American. (*For a look at more traditional Australian quilts, click [here](#).*) Equally comparable in strip-pieced format, "spontaneity" and use of color are the "old way" quilts made by non-Anglos in New Mexico in the first part of the 20th century.



Traditional Anglo-Australian quilt, c.1900-20

An unrepresentative sample

Wahlman claims to own 5,000 slides of "African American quilters, their quilts and their environments." But of the 103 quilts Wahlman selects as evidence, only thirteen date from before 1975. A mere six quilts from 1900-74 are pictured. Just seven date from the 19th century - presumably when African motifs would have been fresher in quiltmakers' memories than they would be a century later. In fact, almost 90 percent of the quilts in Wahlman's copiously illustrated book date from after the birth of the "art quilt," the

African independence movement of the mid-20th century, and the 1960s surge in the US of interest in African culture.

Wahlman claims to have interviewed more than 500 black quilters, but all but a handful of the quilts in her book were made by two dozen individuals within the past 25 years. Several have art degrees or call themselves "fiber artists." (One has a series of quilts on "the aftermath of nuclear holocaust". Another is paradoxically described as "an educated teacher who is a sophisticated folk artist." Another is an art professor and former painter whose first quilts "were inspired by Tibetan art".) Three did not begin quilting until the late 1970s; others say they made traditional quilts for decades before developing what Wahlman sees as their "African" style - one only after she began to lose her eyesight. These late 20th century quilts have much in common with African and postmodern "gallery" art, but they share little with the few pre-WWII quilts Wahlman selects for her book.

It might be presumed that this imbalance results from a lack of documented African American quilts from earlier years, but Kyra Banks's survey in *Black Threads: An African American Quilting Sourcebook* shows this is not true. Of 585 quilts in museums alone that are attributed to [African Americans](#), at least two dozen date before 1865, and more than a hundred are from between 1865-1949.

It would seem Wahlman's examples are not even representative of late-20th century African-American quilts. In the 1993 issue of *Uncoverings*, Women of Color Quilters' Network founder Sandra K. German reported the results of her demographic survey of African-American quilters. She noted that more than two-thirds "utilize traditional European American patchwork and applique styles and standards"; only ten percent "worked in the improvisational style promulgated by [Eli] Leon as a standard trait of African American quilts. Clearly, these findings discredit some of the assertions that helped launch the current stereotype avalanche." Her findings are borne out by statewide Quilt Heritage Projects, in which quilt historians surveyed extant pre-WWII quilts in their state for evidence of trends in style and construction techniques. Just as Cuesta Benberry had earlier observed, researchers in Mississippi noted that pre-WWII "quilts made by women of color look just the same as quilts made by white women - the same patterns were used, the same materials, and the same way of working." So did researchers in New Jersey (see below). So why does Wahlman virtually ignore examples from the first 175 years of African-American quilting?

Quilt history, or armchair psychology?

Wahlman shares with Fry a puzzling unawareness of quilt pattern history. Her description of one [1985 quilt](#) (p.47):

By manipulating small triangles often used to create symmetrical geometric patterns, Alean Pearson has created a bold, modern design called Rattlesnake.

Quilters might be forgiven for pointing out that the "bold, modern design" is in fact an unmodified rendition of "Pickle Dish" (Brackman #305), a Wedding Ring variation first published by the *Kansas City Star* in 1931. The only other quilt shown by this maker is in another "mainstream" pattern known as Ocean Waves.

"Strips and strings," says the author, "are sometimes used in Anglo-American quilts, but as one of many geometric patterns," and the pattern of a 1983 quilt (p.37) "derives directly from West African textiles made by sewing narrow strips of woven cloth". These statements might be surprising to those familiar with Log Cabin quilts (which apparently originated in the North), Amish "bars" and "[Chinese coin](#)" quilts, and the ubiquitous frugal "[string](#)" quilts of the Depression era.

A 1981 quilt by Lucinda Toomer is

[a] classic example of improvisation [in which the maker has] taken the basic pattern for Drunkard's Path and manipulated it to suit her own unique vision, yet it is constructed from strips, as in West Africa.

Forty years earlier, this "unique" pattern appeared in the *Kansas City Star* as "Chain Quilt" (Brackman 1455).

An undated (probably c.1980) quilt on p.61 has "forty-eight variations of the Cattle Guard pattern". The "variations" in the 48 Half Log Cabin blocks result from their being made of an assortment of fabric scraps.

To Wahlman the art historian, a cigar is never just a cigar. A [1979 split 4-patch](#) made of men's pajama and shirting material (p.100) is

remarkably sophisticated if one interprets the various symbols appliqued and incorporated from selected printed fabrics, which could refer to secret African scripts...The large light and dark circles, as in Harriet Powers's quilts, could be

derived from a memory of the Kongo sun of life and the midnight sun of the ancestral world....The small hand may be a reference to the African American charm called a mojo or hand.

Also appearing with the "small hand" are a guitar and microphone. This is because the fabric is part of a "Hootenanny" style men's shirting print. Wahlman does not discuss the symbolism of the guitar or mike.

Of the two quilts Wahlman shows from the 1930s, one (p.78) is an elaborately [appliqued pictorial quilt](#) made by "Mrs. Cecil White, Hartford, Connecticut." Described by Wahlman as "one of the liveliest and best-known examples of American folk art in the quilt medium," the quilt contains more than 125 human figures. All but a handful are white; the African-American and Native American figures are grotesque caricatures in stereotypical poses. Yet Wahlman claims that "some" (unnamed) scholars "believe the maker was black." One who Wahlman says does not is quilt historian Julie Silber. Silber had good reason. According to the 1930 US Census, [Mr. and Mrs. Cecil White of Hartford, Connecticut](#), are white; both were born in Maine. (Another couple by the same name lives in nearby Enfield; both are white, born in "French Canada".)

If Wahlman has mistakenly identified this quilt as African-American based on its aesthetics, how reliable is her ability to determine just what aesthetics are uniquely African?

Of the few pre-1920 quilts Wahlman includes:

- ▶ The 1775 applique "Bible cloth" pictured in Florence Peto's 1939 book *Historic Quilts*, says Wahlman (p.71), has appliques whose "raw" edges recall those she claims are on "many" African-American quilts and "the leather cutouts" found on "Yoruba *egungun* costumes," one of which appears - upside-down - on her [website](#) (it should look like [this](#)). But applique in Africa uses a variety of methods; on [kuba cloth](#), for example, the edges are carefully turned under. And Peto describes the panel's appliques being "outlined with a thin, round, black-and-white braid or cord held in place with couching stitches."

Wahlman also says the panel is "from" New Orleans and points to Peto's statement that it was made by a Creole woman. In fact, Peto says only that it is "said to derive" from that city and notes that "no available history" exists on it; to Peto, it has "a Latin, old-world appearance" that "*suggest[s]* the fingers of a Creole woman". (emphasis added)



Compare Peto's "Bible cloth" (right) with quilts made in southern Germany during the same period (left), shown in von Gwinner's *History of the Patchwork Quilt*.

The term "Creole" is vague, but it seems unlikely Peto was using the word as a euphemism for "black," since she follows by noting that the needlework "recalls the technique used in Europe". Peto's instincts seem to have been correct. Two date-inscribed applique quilts remarkably similar in style are pictured in von Gwinner's *The History of the Patchwork Quilt* (pp.61-62); one of them also appears Baird's *Quilts* (p.8-9), where the author describes how the appliques' edges are "covered with cord". Both are from the same period as the "Bible cloth," and were made in southern Germany.

Wahlman admits there is "no way to prove" that the "Bible cloth's" maker was black, but includes the quilt in *Signs & Symbols* anyway.

- ▶ An applique quilt made [c.1854](#) (p.75) has provenance to a New Jersey black woman, Sara Ann Wilson. But it is a classic example of a mainstream American style known today as "Baltimore Album". Other than its human figures being made from black cloth, the quilt is indistinguishable from other "mainstream" album quilts (compare the "Farrington" quilt on p.180 of Bishop's *America's Quilts and Coverlets*, made the same year). Wahlman includes the quilt but never discusses it.
- ▶ Although the maker of a Virginia quilt c.1865 (p.74) is unknown and the figures at its center appear white, Wahlman claims it as African-American. Her argument? Since "it cannot be proved" the maker was black, "that possibility cannot be denied." (Skeptics might read that as "You can't show me it's not, so I'll say what I want.") Wahlman points to what she says is the quilt's "Haitian vevé" design; students of quilt history might observe the pattern is remarkably like the "Pomegranate" design appearing in myriad variations in hundreds of mid-19th-century applique quilts.
- ▶ A quilt made [c.1870](#) (p.76) by Elizabeth Keckley, seamstress to Mary Todd Lincoln, is made of hexagons in a perfect rendering of the traditional English medallion style. Not even Wahlman finds anything uniquely "African" about the design, and in fact the 20th century quilts pictured in the book have nothing in common with its careful mid-Victorian symmetry. She mentions the quilt only in passing.
- ▶ The last 19th century quilt is shown in the image on the next page, at top left. Wahlman dates to 1898, and says it exemplifies the "African American principle of protective multiple patterning, because evil spirits would have to decode the complex mixture of many patterns before they could do any harm." Quilters will immediately recognize this quilt as a "sampler", made by cobbling together an assortment of "sample" and leftover blocks of various sizes in whichever way they fit.

All of the blocks in the quilt are readily identifiable from 1890s Ladies Art Company quilt pattern books. Compare this quilt with the one below it, made by a white woman from same region a few decades earlier. (Also see p.150 of Brackman's *Clues in the Calico*, made by M. Hettinger of Pine Grove Mills, Centre Co., Pennsylvania - probably [Martha](#), born c.1866, who was white). As further "evidence" of African symbolism, Wahlman points out an appliqued hand and foot - shapes that, along with scissors, often show up in 19th century applique and crazy quilts made by women of all races. The templates, after all, were right at hand.



Crazy quilts made in central Tennessee in the last part of the 19th century. Left, made by African-American Josie Covington, Williamson Co. c.1895; below, made by Iora Pool, Morgan Co. c.1870; Iora was white.

Top image from Wahlman's "Stitched from the Soul"; image at right from Ramsey and Waldvogels "The Quilts of Tennessee".



- ▶ It could be argued that Harriet Powers's famous "Bible" quilts (p.72-73) are so unusual that we should look elsewhere for an example of *typical* late 19th century African-American quilting. Even if Powers's style was common, Wahlman is not content with Powers's own [detailed descriptions](#) of her quilts' subjects. Instead Wahlman plays armchair psychoanalyst to the long-dead quilter, using the "evidence" of the "creole Bible textile" described above. Powers was reportedly a devout Christian and had no known connection to the occult, but according to Wahlman her quilts' themes are only nominally Biblical. Instead, says Wahlman, Powers "was a powerful person who was encoding important cultural information into an art form that was acceptable for the 1880s and was not threatening to white people". This "information" included African cosmology, secret Masonic signs (which Wahlman strangely presumes must be African; she also thinks the apron Powers is wearing in one photo indicates she was a "conjurewoman"), and "the workings of the Underground Railroad" without any evidence that Powers ever participated in it or knew anyone who did. But how could Powers be a "conjurewoman" conveying "important cultural information" if, as Wahlman then claims, by the time Powers was

quilting, "the [symbols'] original meanings were forgotten"? As to Wahlman's claim that Powers might have been "an elder of a Masonic lodge" (echoed by Raymond Dobard), Prince Hall Masons historian James Abron said that the applique on Powers's apron resembles no Masonic or Eastern Star motif he has ever seen. Wahlman's use of the term "elder" suggests she is not very familiar with Masonry.

In the end Wahlman presents two contradictory views of Powers. One is of a powerful "conjurewoman" cleverly making quilts containing secret African messages whose nominally Christian form would "pass" among oblivious whites. This requires the reader to accept that the [Bible quilt](#) Powers made for the president of Union Theological Seminary was actually a symbolic prank. Wahlman's other view puts Powers in the passive role of living Ouija board: she only *thought* she was making a quilt depicting important scenes from the Bible, while in reality she was unwittingly transmitting powerful secret African messages (whose meaning had nonetheless been lost in time until revealed by Wahlman). Seemingly unsatisfied with dry historical record, Wahlman also writes that she is working on a "documentary interpretation" of events that "might have" occurred when Powers was making her quilts.

In other words, of the handful of pre-1920 quilts Wahlman bothers to include in her book, two are in a style apparently unique to one African-American quilter (but not unique enough for Wahlman to let them stand on their own merits); four are indistinguishable from the work of white quilters; and the remaining two may not have been made by black quilters at all.

Cultural retentions: Liberian quilts

Beginning in the 1820s and continuing through the Civil War, the African nation of Liberia was settled by freed African-Americans only a few generations after their ancestors were first enslaved. Returning to Africa, these repatriates had a unique opportunity to preserve and reinforce, or reinterpret, the traditional culture Wahlman says was handed down from their native African grandparents. At the very least, it would be interesting to see how their quilts, and those of their descendants, compare to quilts made by blacks who remained in the US. But they are absent from Wahlman's book.

One quilt Wahlman could have included was made in 1892 by Martha Ann Ricks, who certainly had very close connections to her African roots. Her grandmother was brought to America as a slave; Ricks, her parents and grandmother emigrated to Africa in 1830, when she was just 13. Yet her quilt has nothing obvious in common with the African fabrics, garments, and ceremonial items Wahlman shows in her book, nor does it meet

any of her "African-American" criteria. (*Kyra Hicks has researched the Ricks story for several years; in 2007 she released a children's book on Ricks, and a scholarly version for adults is in preparation.*)

Ricks's taste in design seems to have remained the norm among Liberian quilters. The October 1995 issue of *Quilters Newsletter Magazine* features five [contemporary Liberian quilts](#) their makers say are typical; the designs were passed down from their ancestors who brought them from America. Like Ricks's quilt made a century before, they could easily be mistaken for "mainstream" mid-19th century American applique quilts. Even though they chose to return to Africa just a few generations after enslavement in America, Liberian repatriate quilters and their descendants seem never to have resumed using the "signs and symbols" Wahlman assumes are so much a part of African-Americans' cultural identity that even today they cannot resist using them, if only subconsciously.

Such a phenomenon was not limited to Liberian expatriates. Consider the [appliqued](#) and [pieced](#) 19th century quilts in *Always There*, the exhibit and companion book of African-American quilts curated by Cuesta Benberry. These are known to have been made by black women - but they do not fit Wahlman's stereotype of African-American quilts, and are conspicuously absent from her book. And the authors of *New Jersey Quilts*, in describing the quilts surveyed for the New Jersey Quilt Research Project, note:

*the makers of all but one of [the quilts made by African-Americans documented by the Project] came from Southern states from Florida to Mississippi....Whether made before or after leaving the South, whether made for family or friends, **all of the quilts recorded used well-defined blocks, familiar designs, and careful workmanship, rather than being of the "improvisational" style with the spontaneous and irregular construction** that scholars and museum exhibition curators have sometimes presented as the "African-American style" of quilting.*

A collection of [quilt tops](#) made by a black Texan from about 1890 through the Depression is equally "mainstream". Does the artistic vision of such black women somehow not count? Compare [these quilts](#) made by blacks and whites in the 20th century, all but one before WWII. Based on appearance alone, can we safely assume a quilter's race? If we cannot, how can we reliably assign to a quilt's pattern or aesthetics a particular ethnic identity - or particular symbolism?

African textiles

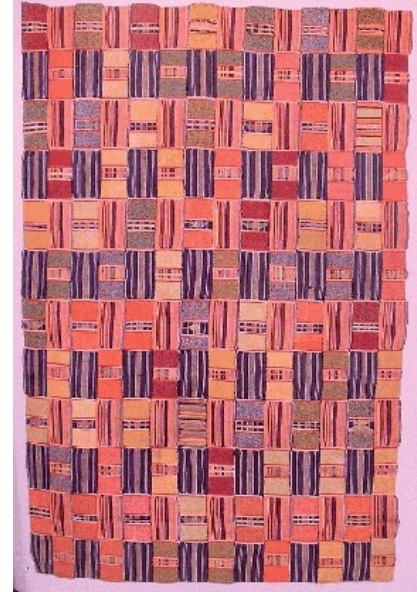
Wahlman says that African-American quilts can be identified by their "strip" or "bar" arrangements; this, she claims, is a dim memory of African textiles such as *kente*, made

by the Asante and Ewe of Ghana by joining long strips of fabric into irregular, asymmetrical patterns. But in *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African-American Identity* (in which four pre-1850 kente are pictured), Doran Ross notes such asymmetry is

not a universal feature in kente. It is actually a particular style called *mmaban*; equally common are kente whose visual effect is that of a checkerboard or tartan, achieved by careful matching.

And sometimes the asymmetry is the result of a repair: damaged strips in a symmetrical kente would be removed, and the remainder reassembled, sometimes with less than perfect results.

It is also worth noting that not all the indigenous textiles from this region are made of narrow strips: "[women's cloth](#)" is made by and for women on a different, wider loom, and generally consists of one or two comparatively wide panels which are striped lengthwise. And other strip-woven African fabrics are printed with overall designs that completely ignore how the cloth is assembled.



Mid-20th century Ewe "kente" cloth made from vertical strips of fabric.

The universal presumption today seems to be that kente was used throughout West Africa and looks the same now as it did centuries ago. But it originated in just one region as the property of royalty, and neither developed in a vacuum nor remained static in design. The earliest kente are believed to have been indigo and white; they got their later, vivid colors by trading with North Africa, then with Europeans. Ghanaian kente weavers - all male - would unravel the imported fabric (ironically, often received in exchange for slaves), then weave its exotically-colored threads into their own textiles.

Not until the late 19th century were kente worn by average people. Even in the 20th century, an authentic kente can take months to create, and are quite expensive; they are reserved for special occasions, the Asante and Ewe version of the tuxedo. Outside those regions in Africa, broad familiarity with kente dates to the 1950s, when Ghanaian Kwame Nkrumah (who was neither Asante nor Ewe) began deliberately wearing them as a symbol of Ghanaian independence; between 1952 and 1966, *Ebony* magazine published 77 pictures of people wearing kente in 34 different issues.

All but one of the quilts in Wahlman's book are vividly multicolor, like modern kente cloth. But as Wahlman herself notes, traditional West African textiles were monochromatic - indigo on white, black on cream, or the combination of

russet/brown/black on cream seen in kuba and mudcloth. (The everyday Yoruba *kijipa*, for example, is simply striped in indigo and white.) Wahlman argues that African-American quilts echo what she claims is the "high contrast" of such traditional West African textiles; they are, she says, "best seen from a distance," compared to "New England quilts," which she says are both "meant to be inspected in intimate settings" (as opposed to African-American quilts?) and - inexplicably - "pastel". If she is right, why is only one of the quilts in *Signs & Symbols* monochromatic, and why are the block patterns of so many of the multicolor quilts obscured by prints or similar tonal values?

All but one of Wahlman's African textiles (when she bothers to provide a date at all) were made in the 20th century. But can we really get a good idea of 18th and early 19th century aesthetics - the ones enslaved Africans would have brought to America - by looking at West Africa more than a century and a half after they left? During the years of slave trade to the US, how common were multicolored strip-pieced textiles among those who ended up enslaved? Even presuming they were the norm, their appearance seems to have evolved as, beginning in the 16th century, African weavers obtained new products from other cultures - just as intercontinental trade had a dramatic effect on European textiles and clothing.

It has been centuries since West Africans produced their textiles in isolation. In *The Art of African Textiles*, author Duncan Clarke notes they have a long history of exposure to fabrics from other regions and continents. In fact, as early as the 17th century, European dealers complained they were having trouble keeping up with market trends: by the time they brought a new shipment of European fabrics to Africa, fashionable West Africans had moved on to some other design. And in a cultural fusion that sounds positively 21st century, by the 1800s Manchester, England was producing imitation Madras cloth for sale to West Africans as a substitute for the genuine Indian Madras originally brought there by British merchants.

The "[Dutch wax](#)" prints we associate today with African clothing also began as [imports](#) in the mid-19th century. Dutch textile mills started producing a fabric they hoped approximated Javanese batik for export to Indonesia - only to discover that Indonesians preferred the home-grown product. So Dutch traders tried marketing it on the Africa's Gold Coast, where Indonesian batik had been popular for years. The new look was an instant hit. One of the Dutch fabrics reproduced a stylized Javanese design of Garuda, an Indonesian sacred bird with long, curling tail feathers. West Africans adopted it as their own, renaming it "Bunch of Bananas".

Other changes in West African textiles and costume during and after the Diaspora include:

- ▶ *Adinkra* cloth's hand-printed designs are claimed by the authors of *Hidden in Plain View* as models for the "Quilt Code". But according to the Asante themselves, *adinkra's* production dates only as far back as 1818.
- ▶ *Adire* is a patterned indigo fabric made by the Yoruba; some draw a connection between its elaborate resist and stencil designs as resembling American patchwork. But *adire* produced with those techniques date to the 20th century, after the introduction of machine-woven imported cotton; before then, *adire* were made in simple tie-dye patterns on loosely-woven, locally-produced "country cloth".

A final problem in comparing quilts and clothing textiles is the aesthetic image everyday users mentally record of them. Can we really compare a textile intended to be viewed on a smooth, horizontal surface with one designed be draped and gathered around a body? This draping significantly obscures or changes both symmetry (or lack thereof) and pattern. So do the colors typically used in modern West African textiles: while they are often vivid, complementary hues, their tonal value is so similar that whether "seen from a distance" or up close, the effect is less one of discernible pattern than a sweep of sparkling color.

Construction method

Another hurdle for Wahlman's assertion is that strip-piecing quilt tops was hardly limited to Americans of African descent. Many of the earliest Anglo-American quilts were made of long strips or "bars" of fabric, a technique they brought from England, where it still can be found. (These were the first quilts the Amish saw; conservative Amish communities retained the style, while more liberal ones eventually adopted piecing.) Seam allowances use up precious fabric, an important consideration when fabric is scarce or expensive. Quilt historians note that in the 20th century, the strip format (and related "string" piecing) seems to be evidence of hard-times frugality more than of race. In 1984, historian John Rice Irwin interviewed white quiltmakers in rural Appalachia for his book *A People and Their Quilts*. Three born between 1885-1913 describe the quilts they made when they were young:

I didn't make no patterns like people does now. I'd just get me some cloth and tear it in strips, maybe that wide, and as long as I wanted the quilt to be; and I'd change colors and sew them strips together

They call them comforts - they're tacked in. Well they wasn't no pattern to them, just sew them in strips.

All the old clothing that we had, we'd get down and tear it up, you know, and save ever little piece, and then we'd separate it into different piles, you know. And then like if we had enough to make a whole strip for the quilt, then we'd make strips.

Second-guessing, and a tin ear for popular culture

Rather than treat the work of her artists as the creation of individuals, Wahlman persists in dehumanizing them in exactly the way contemporary African artists complain the West has treated their work: as products of "the tribe" rather than of an individual. Olu Oguibe angrily writes in *Reading the Contemporary: African Art in the Marketplace*:

The figure of individual genius, that element which more than any other defines enlightenment and modernity, was reserved for Europe while the rest of humanity was identified with the collective, anonymous production pattern that inscribes primitivism. Until recently, works of classical African art were dutifully attributed to the "tribe," rather than to the individual artist, thus effectively erasing the latter from the narrative spaces of art history. In contemporary discourses....novel strategies are employed to anonymize African art by either disconnecting the work from the artist, thus deleting the authority of the latter; or by constructing the artist away from the normativities of contemporary practice.

As noted earlier, *Signs and Symbols* had earlier incarnations as a paper, then as a 1986 article (*African Arts*, vol. XX, 1: 68-76, 99). Among the ideas it contained:

- ▶ In an interview in William Ferris's *Afro-American Folk Arts and Crafts*, octogenarian Pecolia Warner talks at length about her deep Christian faith. Born and then living in rural Mississippi, she had also lived in three large US cities including Chicago in the 1960s. Like rural Southern whites her age, she has two styles of quilts: "plain" (utility) quilts assembled "real quick," such as "string quilts" made of every available scrap, and "fancy" quilts, such as her favorite star, whose piecing must be precise. Some of her designs she has "kept in her mind" after borrowing quilt books: "That's why I knew how to name them." Others are her own: "You make it up by looking at something and imitating it."

She describes how she designs and names her quilts:

And like that [tape recorder] wheel going around there - I can look at that wheel and imagine a quilt from it. I can take me some paper and cut out a pattern and piece me up a quilt just like that...I guess I'd call it a Tape Recorder quilt. That would be my name of it, since that's it's name, ain't it? Many of my quilts I've pieced up just by looking at things that way. Now I did one of the initial of my

name, Pecolia. I was just sitting around one time and didn't have nothing else to do. So I said, "I just believe I'll make me a piece that will be the start of my name." I call it a P quilt.

Warner makes what she refers to as a "US flag quilt"; she says she dreamed of the design after seeing the flag at her post office. But this explanation is insufficient for Wahlman:

In her hands it has become an Afro-American version of the protective Haitian mayo, featuring strips, asymmetry, large designs, asymmetry, at least two patterns, and stars resembling the Ejagham symbol for speech.

Elsewhere Wahlman explains that the *mayo* is a striped shirt worn in Haiti "as a protection against evil magic", citing one line in an art curator's brief description of a 1962 painting (the shirt is particolor, not striped, and the word *mayo* is never used).

I have searched in vain for any other reference to this custom; it appears "mayo" may simply be a generic term for any casual shirt, a Kreyol word derived from the French *maillot*. Worth noting is that according to a 2001 [Observer](#) article, in 1960 the US disposed of several million yards of outdated US flag fabric by selling it to Haiti. Resourceful Haitians stitched it up into shirts - and bedsheets, dresses, and tablecloths. Perhaps the "protective charm" Wahlman sees was simply an exercise in practicality.



Pecolia Warner's flag quilt

- ▶ The yo-yo was known in the US as a "whirligig" until 1928, when manufacturer Pedro Flores sold a dozen of them labeled with the name they had in his native Philippines. Within a year Flores was employing 600 workers in two factories. Capitalizing on America's latest fad, in 1932 the W.L.M. Clark company issued a pattern for a "[yo-yo](#)" quilt, made of gathered circles of fabric. Wahlman barely nods at the toy's existence, then suggests that for African-Americans, the name and the quilt are vestigial memories of "a 'Mojo' charm", the *mayo* referred to above, or the incantation "Go, yo devil! Yogo!"

- ▶ Dolly Dingle first appeared in magazines in 1912 as a paper doll. In 1981, 87-year-old Pearlie Posey made a quilt containing figures which bear a striking resemblance to [Dolly Dingle](#). That is how museum catalogs refer to the quilt, presumably (as with her other quilts) because that is the name Posey gave it. Wahlman spells the name "Dolly Dimple," oblivious to the possibility that Posey was inspired by the doll popular in her youth. Instead, she declares the quilt's figures "imply the survival of the form" of Kongo *mbaka* (or Haitian *baka*) and what she refers to as the American "Vodun" or "voodoo" doll which is "activated by pins".

But by all accounts *mbaka* and *baka* are not interchangeable; neither are *Vodun* (a West African religion) and *Vodou* (sometimes written "voodoo"), which is Haitian, rooted in *Vodun* but incorporating Catholic and Amerindian components. (A *very* rough analogy: Roman Catholicism's connection to Judaism.) I can find no reliable source that says either religion uses the dolls Wahlman describes. *Hoodoo*, on the other hand, does; it is a form of folk magic, not a religion, and originated in the Protestant southern US. It draws from both the Congo in *central* Africa, and from Europe, whose medieval "poppet", say practitioners, is the source of the dolls. Some claim the word "voodoo" originated among whites as a disparaging catch-all for *Vodun*, *Vodou* and hoodoo. It seems that as far as practitioners of *Vodou* and hoodoo are concerned, "voodoo" is the purview of Hollywood, and attributing the dolls of hoodoo to *Vodun* or "voodoo" is akin to claiming that Americans who wear a Sicilian "evil eye" charm are expressing their Christian faith. Wahlman's failure to distinguish among these beliefs, or demonstrate that Posey was familiar with any of them, raises questions about how she determined they were the real inspiration for Posey's quilt.

Further demonstrating her limited knowledge of quilt and textile history, Wahlman asserts that the "bold colors and large designs of Afro-American textiles" derive from African textiles whose "strong color contrasts...insure [sic] a cloth" readability at a distance and in strong sunlight", compared to "pastel New England quilts meant to be inspected in intimate settings". Thus in one sentence, Wahlman reduces two centuries of "New England" quilt history to the decades of the Great Depression, when "pastel" cotton fabrics first became available. Also notable is that what Wahlman describes as "strong color contrasts" are not that at all; they are different hues of the same value. At a distance, the quilt's patterns become a blur of color; they are not "readable" at all.

How can we trace cultural retentions?

It would be unreasonable to say people express *none* of the aesthetic norms of the culture their ancestors left two centuries earlier; that would demand we ignore this nation's regional differences. But claiming to have found evidence of an ancestral culture

by comparing a selected group of modern, exceptional examples with modern examples in the ancestral country, or to examples in other Diaspora cultures with radically different histories, runs contrary to the rules of careful methodology. Such analysis would require we look at *all* documented African-American quilts. We might then ask, for example:

- ▶ What do African-American quilts look like before the conscious revival of African culture among American blacks in the mid-20th century?
- ▶ Can any differences *among* these quilts be correlated to age, socioeconomics, education, rural vs. urban, source of quilting knowledge, or prevailing quiltmaking fashion at that time?
- ▶ Can any examples be found of quilts made by successive generations of the same family? What differences in such a group can be traced to changes in fashion? Which are the result of personal creativity, and which can be traced to family custom?
- ▶ What did quilts of whites in these same regions look like? Do any differences correlate to age, socioeconomics, education, etc.? Do their quilts have anything in common with quilts made in their ancestral countries of origin? What about quilts made by whites and blacks in other regions?
- ▶ What similarities exist between quilts made by blacks and whites from similar regions, socioeconomics, etc.? Did these quilters have significant contact with each other?
- ▶ Are there features that appear *only* in pre-1950s African-American quilts that cannot be explained by socioeconomics, etc.?
- ▶ What did West African textiles look like during the time slaves were brought to America? What did the *average* West African wear?

But Wahlman never asks these questions. Instead, she repeatedly (and mistakenly) assumes commercial quilt patterns are original designs expressing a quilter's African roots. She presents a quilt as African-American *even though she knows* doubts were raised about its maker's race. She ignores documented African-American quilts that do not fit her stereotype in favor of those that do: overwhelmingly, those less than 30 years old, many made by professional "fiber artists". She appears unaware that what she considers "African-American" attributes are also common to other, non-African traditional quilting cultures - one of which has no history of contact with Africans. She claims deep, African meaning in objects their makers insist have none, and sets aside their makers'

descriptions in favor of her own interpretations (which, not surprisingly, support her claims). She apparently either disregards or is unfamiliar with the popular culture in which her subjects lived, or perhaps believes they were somehow impervious to it. She repeatedly suggests a connection between quilts and the Underground Railroad, but never offers any evidence. And all of the African textiles in *Signs & Symbols* are 20th century; they date to more than 150 years *after* the ancestors of American slaves were last taken from their homeland.

As eye-appealing as Wahlman's book is, it is hard not to see in it the kind of work a distinguished scholar once described as consisting of "poor methodology, a tendency to leap from unwarranted assumptions to foregone conclusions, and assertions stated without substantiation, many of which are contradicted by actual examination".

Tobin claims *Signs & Symbols* as a critical source for the premises in her own book, gushing that "without it, *Hidden in Plain View* could not have been written."

Misquotes, conflations, and semantic games

I soon noticed that there's a downside to debunking fraudulent people or claims. The people who make them up -- and most of those who agree with them -- simply don't care. Because the characters and claims are invented to support what they already believe fervently, debunking them does not 'count.' Lies presented in furtherance of a greater 'truth' are not really considered to be lies, at least not in the moral sense. The idea is to persuade people, and if fictional people or incidents have to be used, that's OK, as long as it's in the interest of the greater truth. The problem I have with this approach is that I don't like being lied to. Even when I agree with the cause the lie is intended to support. I don't find lies emotionally fulfilling because they pollute the process of thought.

-- Eric Scheie

Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt

Tobin and Dobard resort to yet another 20th century children's book as "proof" when they point to *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt*, a children's book published in 1993 - coincidentally, the same year Ozella first approached Tobin with her "quilt code" story. The authors devote nearly four pages to *Sweet Clara* and recount the story in detail as if it were history, noting that in it "we find all the elements that are referenced in the Underground Railroad Quilt Code". *Sweet Clara's* origins appear shrouded in mystery. Say the authors of *Hidden in Plain View*:

Personal conversations and correspondence with Hopkinson and the book's illustrator, James Ransom, revealed that neither has any idea where the story originated, though Hopkinson remembers hearing a true story about the Underground Railroad on the radio, on which she based the story....Is the illustrator...[a descendant of slaves]...betraying his knowledge or remembrance of special stitches [such as those in Elizabeth Scott's quilt]?

The authors' careful choice of words leads the reader to infer that Hopkinson's book is not only based on "a true story about the Underground Railroad" she heard on the radio, but is the product of some vague, retrieved memory on the part of the illustrator. (Apparently such memories did not also include accurate representations of antebellum textiles or slave clothing; his characters cheerfully pick cotton fully dressed in sparkling new clothes, carrying a sack about as big as a mailbag.)

Yet when I wrote Hopkinson, she promptly stated exactly where "the story" came from - a news (i.e., "true") story and a book:

*I wrote it after hearing Elizabeth Scott interviewed on NPR on June 15, 1989. There is no documented historical evidence for escape routes in quilts, however, and much controversy among quilt historians. I used books such as Gladys Marie Fry's *Stitched From the Soul*. *Sweet Clara* is fiction.*

It seems all that Hopkinson "has no idea" about is where the "Code" story itself "originated".

In fact, what Hopkinson heard was a news story about *Stitching Memories: African-American Story Quilts*, an exhibit of contemporary African-American art quilters. National Public Radio never made a transcript it, and reporter Phyllis Joffe died a few years later. But NPR does have a record of all the persons interviewed for the report: exhibit curator Eva Ungar Grudin, art quilter Faith Ringgold, and "artist and singer" Joyce Scott, Elizabeth Scott's daughter. Since the exhibit catalog quotes Joyce Scott as claiming *her mother said* quilts were used as maps, it seems to be Joyce whom Hopkinson actually heard. NPR says Elizabeth Scott wasn't even interviewed for the segment.

Hopkinson's book is discussed at length in a 1998 *African American Review* [article](#) called "The rhetoric of quilts: creating identity in African-American children's literature". In it the author describes Hopkinson as an African-American writer who "employ[s] the quilt as a symbol of resistance to control and dominance" and in whose book "cultural identity is created by the symbolic tradition of the quilt and its representation of Afrocentric motherhood". Hopkinson described herself to me as "an Irish girl from Lowell [Massachusetts]".

What did Elizabeth Scott actually say?

Having discussed *Sweet Clara* at length, *Hidden in Plain View* then points to the work of African-American art quilter Elizabeth Scott as one of its three sources confirming the existence of a "Code". (The other two "sources" appear to be *Sweet Clara* and Ozella McDaniel.) Tobin writes that Scott

weav[es] her stories in textiles and encod[es] her memories on fabric in appliqued symbols, enclosed objects, and stitching...The hand stitching on [her "Plantation Quilt"] forms a topographical map in patches...Reminiscent of Sweet Clara stitching a topographical map onto her quilt....We liken Mrs. Elizabeth Scott to a "fabric griot", one who preserves and passes on the stories of her family and her ancestors.

By calling the quilt "reminiscent of" *Sweet Clara*, Tobin suggests the connection between the two is a strange coincidence - rendering a certain independence and legitimacy to the book. But Scott's quilt predates *Sweet Clara* by almost a decade, and despite *Hidden in Plain View's* obfuscation about the book's "origins," Hopkinson is clear about her inspiration. Is Tobin guilty of sloppy writing - or is she playing semantic games?

Scott's [biography](#) also suggests that her quilts have only a tenuous relation to what her family taught her about that craft. She abandoned quilting in the 1940s:

*[i]t wasn't until the 1970's, when her [artist] daughter Joyce headed off to grad school, that Elizabeth began quilting again in earnest. **But this time it wasn't the traditional craft she practiced.** She expanded her designs, skills, and use of materials until she created a completely new direction and **an extended vocabulary all her own.***

Thus, while (as her bio states) Scott's remarkable works "incorporate memories of her childhood and draw upon her religious and spiritual beliefs," her stitching patterns and designs would seem to be less a quilting tradition passed down from her forebears than a radical move in a new direction. In fact, her use of mixed media caused Scott to "[join] the ranks of a very select group of pioneers who changed the face of quilting in this nation and in history." This is not to say that [Scott's quilts](#) do not express her feelings about her heritage. By virtue of the objects Scott incorporates in them - "stones, shells, pine cones, beads, buttons, men's ties and other scraps and objects that held special meaning to her family and friends" they are indeed historical records - *for and about the artist*, just as any "memory box" or scrapbook would be. That does not make them a reliable source of information about quilts made by slaves before the Civil War, or even about quilts Scott's own grandmothers may have made. To find evidence of a "Code" in

Scott's *Plantation Quilt*, Tobin has to set aside *the artist's own* detailed description of the quilt as personal expression, in favor of the secondhand interpretation of two other individuals whose language overflows with arty hyperbole and metaphor.

The catalog accompanying the exhibit which featured one of Scott's art quilts contains a lengthy quote by the artist - an explicit, detailed description of the meaning of and the motivation behind her 1980 mixed-media "[Plantation Quilt](#)". It is based, says Scott, on recollections of a childhood quilt lost half a century earlier, the hard life of her foremothers, and the stars seen from the family porch. Once again Tobin engages in semantic tricks. She repeatedly claims Scott's work "replicates...from memory" the one made by her ancestors. To "replicate" is to make an exact copy; the implication is that Scott's quilt faithfully reproduces some sort of "coding" learned from her ancestors. But Scott's own description of the quilt shows otherwise:

This quilt calls up for me memories of the slave and farm women on the plantation who worked so hard. At six o'clock in the morning they'd be out in the fields. After they worked so hard all day, they'd work hard at night too. That's when they'd sew and make the quilts. By night they sat out on that porch and talked and pieced and sang. I recall that often the moon and stars would be so bright it would be like daylight out there.

The stars on the quilt look the way you'd see them on some of those clear nights. In the center of the quilt there's a special star. I call it a shootin' star. My parents used to call it a devil star. Every ten years this star would come through, but you couldn't see it with your naked eye. You had to look through wax cloth to see it.

These stars back home were very precious to me. They gave us so much light. They even seemed to give off heat and warm us.

Scott never mentions quilts in any way as escape maps; for her this quilt concerns sitting out on the porch at night, enjoying the stars while her overworked relatives quilted.

Tobin reinforces the idea of "coding" by claiming Scott told her the stitching "represented the rows of crops on the plantation." But in the catalog, those words belong to curator Eva Ungar Grudin (also apparently not a quilter):

Around the stars the quilting stitches become very congested. These tightly packed rows simulate the contours of the farm fields.

Grudin has not said the lines literally represent the rows in the same way a red line on a map indicates an interstate highway. She has drawn the sort of poetic analogy common

to art critics (and similar to the way "amber waves of grain" suggests the prairie resembles the sea). Moreover, Scott's lines of stitching either echo the shape of the stars or [weave, curl, and cross](#) ; if this is a "topographical map" of a South Carolina field, it belonged to an unusual farmer indeed. If Scott's quilts "represent" anything, do they do so the way a map does? (If so, why would slaves have to make a map of fields with which they were intimately familiar?) Or is this Scott's artistic imagery - like "seeing" shapes in clouds?

When Scott recalls that different families would quilt in different ways, Tobin dramatically pronounces these are "distinctive stitching styles" "passed on" to the next generation. But Tobin is neither a quilter nor familiar with quilt history, and she imbues the merely practical with deep meaning. (She also is unaware that this style of quilting seems to have originated no earlier than the 1890s.) A little knowledge of quilt history might have curbed Tobin's frenzied literalism. In the first half of the 20th century, quilting on everyday quilts was almost always done in parallel rows, either along the quilt, or in concentric arcs or a large "L" whose size was determined by the length of the quilter's forearm. This "fan" or "elbow" quilting is the fastest way for a group to finish a quilt. Each quilter works on an easy-to-reach area, the pattern does not need to be marked, and the desired overall consistency of workmanship can be achieved *if all the quilters use the same style and technique*. And because the rows of stitching are parallel, they look like "rows of crops" whether the quilter intends it or not.

The only mention anywhere (including the NPR segment) of quilts-as-escape-maps comes from Scott's daughter [Joyce](#) - a flamboyant, university-trained "fiber artist, jeweler, sculptor, printmaker and performance and installation artist" who creates "controversial" art "based on statements about racism, sexuality, violence and stereotypes". Says Joyce Scott in the catalog:

My mother was told...that slaves would work out a quilt piece by piece, field by field, until they had an actual map, an escape route. And they used that map to find out how to get off the plantation.

Why doesn't Scott ever say this *herself*, either in the catalog or *Hidden in Plain View*, or anyplace else?

Tobin attempts to legitimize Joyce's statement by finding evidence of a "map" in Scott's childhood recollection: sitting underneath the quilting frame 70 years earlier, she says she heard her relatives argue about where various landmarks were while pointing to different places on the quilt. Presumably Tobin has never sat around the dinner table watching male family members arrange silverware, salt and pepper in formation to settle an argument about a football play.

In 2000 a [fourth-grade](#) teacher questioned Tobin's lengthy discussion of Elizabeth Scott in *Hidden in Plain View*. Tobin reiterates her original assertion that the quilt was a "replica" and says she personally interviewed both Scotts in 1994. She states that Elizabeth Scott herself was "adamant that her relatives stitched so as to indicate the contours of the various fields." (Considering *Hidden in Plain View's* habitual and sometimes flagrant misinterpretation of its sources, the reader might be forgiven for questioning the accuracy of Tobin's recollection.) Tobin added that an (unnamed) "museum planetarium astronomer" had since asserted the stars on the quilt "represented certain constellations" (which she declines to identify).

Tobin has carefully chosen her words. It is easy to miss that neither in the book nor in her reply does Tobin ever claim *Elizabeth Scott herself* has ever said anything about being taught slaves made map quilts to be used in escape.

But presume that the quilts-as-escape-maps claim does originate with Scott rather than her daughter. It seems remarkable that in (at that time of the interview) a quarter century of revealing her family's lives in art quilts, neither woman ever thought this fascinating subject was worth addressing in their work. This exhibit - which came on the heels of both *Hearts and Hands* and *Stitched from the Soul* - appears to be Joyce's only mention of it.

Rewriting the history of the Coates quilt

On page 113 of *Hidden in Plain View*, the authors discuss a pieced silk quilt made by Deborah Coates, wife of outspoken Pennsylvania abolitionist Lindley Coates. Citing *Hearts and Hands*, they state the quilt strongly suggests evidence of a "Code" hidden in the arrangement of a few pieces - as revealed by the "family oral history":

*If one looks closely at the quilt, one can see that there is a section in the pattern distinctly different from the quilt. While the triangles point down in the majority of the quilt, **in one small section in the middle of the quilt on the right-hand side, a group of triangles point northward.** We believe Deborah Coates intended the triangles to be a visual nod to the Underground Railroad. **The only reason we know the significance of this quilt is family oral history that has finally been written down.***

In reality, the only two oddly-placed triangles are on the right edge of the quilt near the bottom corner.) But none of the sources Tobin and Dobard cite even mentions this "group of triangles".

Tobin and Dobard seem to be resurrecting the debunked post-WWII "[humility block" myth](#), ascribing intention and meaning to a simple error in piecing that the quilter couldn't bother to correct.

Would such a signal be visible? Would a silk quilt reasonably be displayed outside? How do Tobin and Dobard know which way is "north"? And why would Deborah Coates merely "nod," when her husband was an outspoken abolitionist himself?

Historian Christopher Densmore notes that the Coateses lived



The Coates quilt from Hearts and Hands.

.in the middle of a hotbed of documented Underground Railroad and anti-slavery activity. Even if we had clear evidence that the Coates quilt was intended to symbolize the U[G]RR and that the triangle was some sort of code, the idea that Lindley Coates was directing freedom seekers by quilt when he more easily could have shown or drawn them a map is highly unlikely.

What do Hidden in Plain View's sources actually say?

According to *Hearts and Hands* (p.71), the "oral history" concerns the quilt being cut in half after the maker's death. With that information, the present owner of the two halves could know they were parts of the same quilt. When she removed the binding to rejoin the halves, the quilter's "message" was revealed:

*What we know of Coates's wife's role and her abolitionist sentiments has been recorded in a very subtle, indeed fragile, manner: it has come to us **quietly and directly, sewn into the center** of her elegant quilt. Were it not for a family which has kept the oral history of the quilt alive, we might have missed Deborah Coates's message altogether. **According to the family**, two granddaughters of the maker could not agree on who should inherit the precious quilt, and so, with the Quaker sense of equality, **it was decided to cut the quilt exactly in half. When the raw edges were bound over, the small central image was almost***

*totally obscured. Finally the two halves came down together to a single descendant, along with the story of **what lay within the seams**. Recently, under the direction of a conservator, the bindings were opened and the fractured image was brought together... The "small central image" that was split in half by the division of the quilt was that of a kneeling slave in chains, with "Deliver me from the oppression of man" printed below it, stamped in black ink.*

The significant discrepancy between the two stories is best illustrated by the quilt itself.



In other words, the quilt's abolitionist "secret" was not a code hidden in oddly-positioned blocks along an outside edge. It was literally spelled out in words and pictures, right in the middle of the quilt. (Densmore notes that similar motifs were publicly displayed by abolitionists not only on quilts, but on medallions, as seals, in books and leaflets, and even on dinnerware sold at abolition fundraising "fairs".) It became a "secret" only by accident *after the maker's death*.

Are Tobin and Dobard merely correcting an error in *Hearts and Hands*? If so, why does *Hidden in Plain View* repeat that book's erroneous assertion that the Coates house was "Station No.5" on the Underground Railroad? (The number is a post-WWII invention by historian Charles D. Spotts, who used it solely for purposes of enumeration.)

Certainly *Hearts and Hands* is unreliable. But here it has supporting evidence: a closeup of the reassembled, formerly "fractured" image which would have indeed "la[in] within the seams" of a new binding. That information is repeated by Patricia Herr in her discussion of Quaker quilts in *Pieced by Mother* (1987). Dobard cites both Herr and *Hearts and Hands* when referring to the Coates quilt in his 1994 *International Review of American Art* article "Quilts as Communal Emblems and Personal Icons". Even though some paragraphs later he speculates (without evidence) that oddly-positioned pieces in a quilt may be intentional, he never mentions the Coates quilt as an example.

Hearts and Hands, Herr, and Dobard's article are the only sources about the Coates quilt in *Hidden in Plain View*'s bibliography. What about the Lancaster Quilt Museum, which houses the quilt?

Wendell Zercher, the Museum's curator, confirmed the *Hearts and Hands* version, but pointed out that its reference to a "family story" regarding the Coates is something of an overstatement. Apparently what existed was more like fragments of information: that the quilt had been cut in half, and possibly a vague notion about Coates's Underground Railroad activities. Zercher says that the Museum has a "thick file" on the quilt, but that nothing known about the quilt lends credence to the claim it contains any kind of code. And Densmore observes that considering what is known about how Coates and his colleagues operated, a "coded" quilt would not have been necessary. If anything, the Coates quilt is evidence that Underground Railroad participants did *not* use quilts as signals.

Why does *Hidden in Plain View* recite a story about the quilt that supports its claims of a "Code" - but which differs materially from what *every one of its own sources* actually says, and from the museum's own research? When asked why her book included a picture of the 20th century Dresden Plate pattern, Tobin said it was an error made by "graphics editors" - even though it was Dobard who supplied the photograph. Are "editors" at fault here as well? What other such editorial "errors" does *Hidden in Plain View* contain?

The Ransaw thesis

On October 18, 2005, University of Nevada/Las Vegas professor Donovan Conley posted to the H-Amstdy email list concerning his Masters candidate advisee, Theodore Ransaw. A [Communications](#) instructor at UNLV whose students gave him less than enthusiastic [ratings](#)([screenshot](#) here), Ransaw is the author of [The Sexual Secrets of Cleopatra](#), which

asserts among other things that Viking culture came from Egypt, the Pope wears a pharaoh's hat, and that yoga and tai chi spread to China from Africa.

Conley explained that Ransaw's Master's thesis concerned "the communicational and political uses of quilts throughout the underground railroad," but since Ransaw had been unable to find any primary sources on the "Quilt Code," Conley wondered if anyone might help. On October 23, Conley's query was cross-posted to [H-Slavery](#), a scholarly email list focusing on the study of slavery, abolition, and the Underground Railroad whose regular participants include the nation's leading historians.

After an H-Amstyd listmember mentioned having "a sketchy memory" of visiting Kemp's "Quilt Code" museum, Conley received more than two dozen H-Slavery responses pointing out flaws in the "Code" story and suggesting Conley discourage Ransaw from treating it as fact. The comments of [David Blight](#), director of Yale's Gilder-Lerman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance and Abolition, sum up the H-Slavery consensus:

The reason your student is not finding primary material on quilting in the Underground Railroad is because in all likelihood there isn't any. This is "myth" of the softest kind that serves the needs of the present for people who prefer their history as lore and little else.Feeding this mythology in any way only supports lore and not any real learning, except about how such myths take hold and persist.

(Transcript of H-Slavery posts [here](#).) Several individuals recommended my website, and on October 30 [Ransaw contacted me](#). We exchanged about a dozen emails discussing the reliability of Kemp's claims, which he agreed "seemed speculative," and problems with the "Code" family's genealogy.

According to Ransaw (thesis, p.3), Conley's query was the result of an early thesis committee meeting which caused Ransaw to revise the "purpose" of his project. Remarkably, less than six weeks after the H-Slavery exchange, Ransaw's [thesis](#) was not only complete but had been accepted by the committee. In it Ransaw unquestioningly embraces the existence of a "Quilt Code", and while admitting he has never seen the "authenticated first hand account" Kemp claims to have, he takes her word it exists.

Throughout his 80-page document, Ransaw repeatedly gets his principals' and sources' names and professional standing so wrong they cannot be excused as typographical errors. He refers to *Hidden in Plain View*, "one of [his] most heavily used sources"(thesis, p.13), as "Hidden in Plain Sight". His illustrations for several "Code" designs bear no relation to the actual quilt blocks they are said to depict. He lifts a [phrase](#) verbatim from my website and credits it to another individual (thesis, p.12).

Disorganization and reading comprehension problems might be blamed for these inaccuracies. But others are harder to explain. Ran saw (p.10-14) describes the H-Slavery response to Conley's request as a heated but uninformative "debate" about the Code's existence which culminated in "one fruitful posting" suggesting Ran saw visit the "Quilt Code museum". *This is false*. Although Ransaw's account certainly has more dramatic effect, it completely reverses the chronology. H-Slavery archives show the suggestion to visit Kemp's "museum" is what prompted more than two dozen responses from 15 individuals arguing that the "Quilt Code" is a myth. Apparently Ransaw decided these were neither persuasive nor "fruitful."

Ransaw's thesis is so filled with basic factual inaccuracies concerning quilt history and Underground Railroad history that the informed reader is left wondering whether he actually read any of the sources he cites before claiming they support his conclusions. But in claiming support for the "Code," he goes beyond simple error into outright falsehood.

- ▶ He writes that "reinforcing a theme of Freemasonry in" his thesis, I "mentioned celebrated quilter Harriet Powers was a member of the same female secret society my grandmother was in, the Freemason Eastern Stars". *This is false*. I have said exactly the reverse - that that [Dobard](#) and [Wahlman's](#) claims of a Powers/Eastern Star connection are without foundation and appear to result from ignorance about Freemasonry.
- ▶ He writes that I "referred to a primary source Underground Railroad text code, the Lawn Jockey Code (L. Fellner, personal communication, October 25, 2005)" and goes on to describe the story as an "authenticated account". *This is false*. Ran saw first contacted me [October 30](#). We never discussed the jockey story he recounts - which, rather than being "authenticated" or supporting the existence of a "Quilt Code," is itself a myth.

How does such flagrant misrepresentation occur? Are poor researching, reading comprehension, or writing skills to blame? Does critical analysis succumb to wishful thinking? Or, when faced with no evidence supporting their belief in a "Quilt Code," will proponents resort to deliberate fabrication?

Family history

The stories of those now teaching the "Code" based on family oral history share one surprising feature. Logically, they should claim the "Code" was passed down from an ancestor who escaped north - someone who might plausibly have personal experience using the "Code". *But none of the "Quilt Code" families ever left the South.*

- ▶ Ozella was a South Carolina native.
- ▶ Wilson, Ozella's niece, says she was born in the same South Carolina town where her grandfather was sired by a white plantation owner.
- ▶ Boswell was born 40 miles south of the Kentucky plantation where she says her family was enslaved from the time they were brought from Africa until Emancipation.
- ▶ Elizabeth Scott, whose 1980 quilt was Deborah Hopkinson's inspiration *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt*, was born on the same South Carolina plantation her grandparents had worked as slaves.

In other words, *none of those who might claim the remotest connection to a "Quilt Code" ever personally used it to escape.*

Hopkinson makes clear that she uses artistic license to create the connection between Scott's quilts and a "Code". But Boswell says her ancestors suffered cruelly under slavery for generations. The plantation where they lived was just 75 miles from the free state of Ohio and the town of Ripley, one of the most famous hubs on the Underground Railroad. Just south of the plantation was one of the Union's largest recruiting stations for the US Colored Troops, and a huge refugee camp for fugitives; it even included a freedmen's school with more than 100 pupils. Eli, her great-great-grandfather, knew the way to Ripley: he had transported a fugitive to the border, and had regular access to a wagon and mules. Boswell explains that the couple never tried to escape, with or without a quilt code, because they were afraid that if they were caught, the family would be broken up. But despite their good behavior, just six months before the end of the Civil War Eli and his wife Leah learned that was exactly what was going to happen.

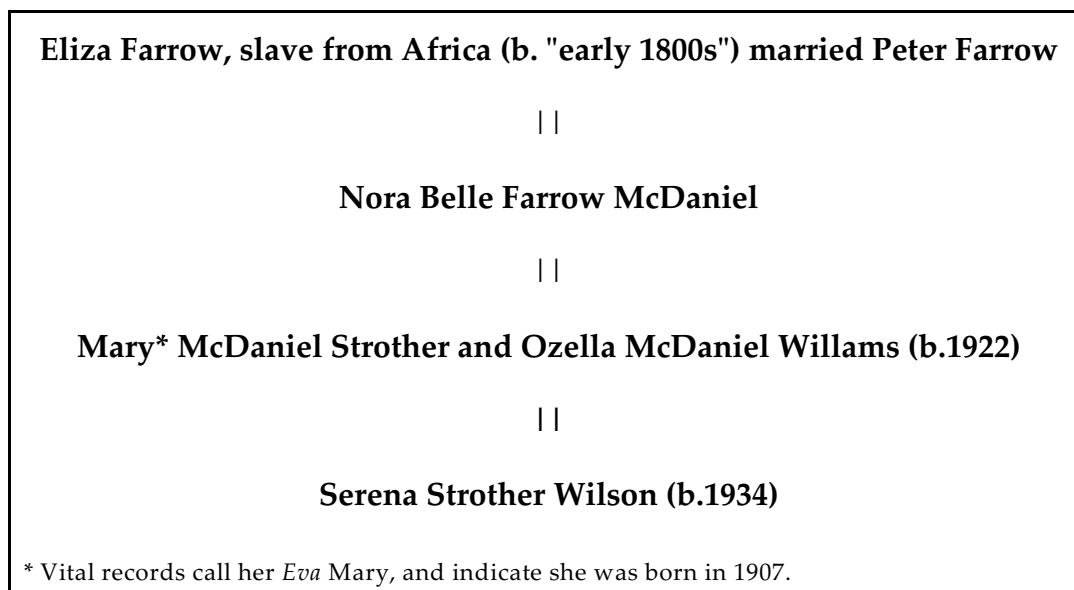
Even so, they meekly packed their belongings into their new owner's wagon, and left with him for Tennessee, leaving their devastated young daughter Delcy behind. Equally strange is that at the time Boswell says this took place, Tennessee had been under Union occupation for two years; although the Emancipation Proclamation did not cover Tennessee, Union officers were forcibly emancipating slaves, and according to many

historians the slave system had completely fallen apart. What slaveowner in his right mind would invest in more slaves at that point - just a few months before the end of the Civil War?

Wilson attempts to explain her ancestors remaining in South Carolina by claiming they were freedmen who chose to stay there *with their children* to teach the "Code" to slaves.

In fact, the family history Wilson details is mathematically impossible. *Hidden in Plain View* is circumspect about the origin of the "Code"; it says simply that Ozella learned it from her mother, who learned it from her own (unnamed) mother. But Wilson gives specific names and details about her family tree and even names the ancestor she says used and taught the "Code" to slaves planning to escape.

The line of descent Wilson recounts looks like this:



In her magazine article, Wilson says that her mother "lived in Edgefield, South Carolina, with my father Milton Strother and their three children - Benjamin, Viola, and me". She has also reportedly claimed in at least one [lecture](#) that she was born in Williamson, West Virginia (a [press release](#) calls her a "West Virginia native") and that her father or grandfather was named David, the white son of an Edgefield plantation owner whose property was adjacent to that of the Strom Thurmond family. (A [review](#) of another lecture describes Wilson showing photographs of what she says is the family plantation.)

In July 2004, Kemp wrote to complain that her mother's statements at the West Virginia lecture were "misquoted" and asserted that Wilson said neither that her father's name is David nor that she was born in West Virginia. Kemp did not dispute any of the other statements her mother was described as having made at that lecture, nor did she discuss

the "Quilt Code" except to say that "There are people who do not believe in Jesus, or that people have been to the moon. I do not publicly debate their views".

Just two days later, Kemp wrote me that her mother, now 70, "was born in WV". Eventually I learned from Kemp that although Wilson, now 70, was born in South Carolina and has spent the past 36 years in Ohio, she is to be considered a "West Virginia native" because she lived there at one time.

While Wilson's birthplace is immaterial, it is notable that she seems permanently to have left South Carolina sometime after her father's death in 1943. That would suggest that if she learned the "code" from her grandmother Nora, whatever she recalls is from childhood memories at least half a century old.

Wilson writes in her 2002 magazine article that she, her sister, and her aunt Ozella learned the "Code" from her maternal grandmother Nora Farrow McDaniel (although the 2004-2005 versions of [Wilson and Kemp's website](#) call Nora Wilson's great-grandmother). Nora learned it directly from *her* mother, Eliza Farrow, the slave who Wilson says brought the "Code" from Africa. Wilson provides considerable detail about Eliza, who according to the Wilson and Kemp's now-defunct Geocities website was brought over from Benin, Africa "as a young girl" in the "early 1800s" with "knowledge of textiles, cotton, herbs and basket weaving". (The 2004-2005 version of the website described Eliza as both "[a child](#)" and "[a teen](#)".) From the old Geocities site (screenshot [here](#)):

She was brought across the Atlantic Ocean on a slave ship. The ship stopped in South America to provide goods and slaves for the banana plantations and in the Caribbean to provide goods and slaves for the sugar cane plantations. The ship also needed to get provisions to continue to America. Finally, with other captives she was quarantined for two weeks at Sullivan Island off the Coast of South Carolina. Next, they were auctioned in Charleston, SC to the highest bidder at a slave market, along with other goods the ships brought

Wilson says that Peter Farrow, a free black man who was an itinerant blacksmith and preacher, saved for seven years to buy Eliza's freedom, and the couple married. But, Wilson says, "[r]ather than fleeing to the North, they chose to stay behind and continue to work, raise their family, and help more slaves." (Yet one [review](#) describes a slide show in which Wilson traveled from South Carolina to Canada to "retrace her ancestors' escape route".) So Eliza, a "seamstress, midwife, and medicine maker," traveled with her husband from plantation to plantation, where she would show slaves a sampler quilt and teach them the "English translation of Quilt Code patterns" which, says Wilson, had been developed by mathematicians in Africa. While he preached to the slaves, Peter would teach them the "code" in an African language which, according to Wilson, the

slaveowners would presume was religious "speaking in tongues" - as she said in a January 3, 2002 [article](#) in the Columbia, S.C. *State* newspaper:

Slaves always wanted to be free, my grandmama told me...So they'd get together whenever they could in the woods and share information. Sometimes the preacher would tell them if the Holy Ghost hits them, they could speak in unknown tongues. That allowed the slaves to communicate in their African tongues....

This is a moving story with obviously Biblical overtones (Jacob, the future leader of Israel, has to labor for 7 years before he can marry Rachel and be free of her father [Gen.29:14-20]). It suggests a very short line of transmission that leaves little room for the error. But on close examination it contains many incongruities with recorded history, including antebellum South Carolina law, and simple genealogy.

Peter Farrow is described as a free black man, a blacksmith and preacher who traveled from plantation to plantation, in a November 2005 [email](#), Kemp also said he was brought from Africa. South Carolina kept careful records of freedmen between the ages of 16 and 60, requiring them to pay a special tax each year; failure to pay, or failure to provide documentary proof of manumission before 1820, would result in enslavement - and in Eliza's case, enslavement of her children as well, since children inherited their mother's status. Absence from the list of freedmen allowed an individual's status to be challenged; in fact, the census was considered prima facie evidence of a black person's free or slave status. After the Denmark Vesey uprising in 1822, freedmen who left South Carolina were barred from returning; those who did would be enslaved. Vesey had not only been a freedman but a minister, so black preachers were monitored with particular care. Several times the state legislature even debated re-enslaving all freedmen. The law also required every free black male to have a white guardian who had to appear before the court clerk and, in writing, attest to the freedman's character and accept the guardianship. Similar laws were enacted in Georgia.

I have been unable to find either Peter or Eliza Farrow among the free blacks in any antebellum South Carolina or Georgia records. .

While it is commonly believed that worshipping, praying, and speaking in tongues was the usual practice in the slave quarters, [WPA slave narratives](#) (see also [here](#)) and more than 200 slave autobiographies tell quite a different story. On many plantations slaves were [forbidden](#) to practice any faith - most particularly Christianity, with its egalitarian notions, stories of deliverance, and promise of at least spiritual freedom.

Former slaves recount stories of being barred from even saying "God" or "Lord" when they were whipped - all they could say was "Pray, Master!" (reinforcing the idea of their owner and no one else as God). Slaves who crept away at night to pray in makeshift chapels called "[brush arbors](#)" did so in fear of their lives. More than one [former slave](#)

described his mother fearfully praying in the cabin at night, whispering into a cooking pot to muffle the sound. [Burials](#) were often hasty, sudden, in a shallow grave, with no prayer, marker or mourners permitted; a funeral might suggest the dead slave was something other than property. In this atmosphere, the slave that dared to sing a spiritual was truly brave - not because of any message of escape on the Underground Railroad, but simply by voicing the Bible message it contained.

On plantations where religion was permitted, slaves could not join a church, or even be baptized, without their owners' permission, and worship was usually [strictly supervised](#). Nondenominational preachers of either race were rare; a black itinerant preacher would have been looked at with suspicion. And while being filled with the Holy Spirit, jumping and shouting were not unusual in certain denominations in the border states in the very early part of the 19th century (including among whites, although most churches soon abandoned the practice), the modern practice of "speaking in tongues" (glossolalia) dates from the Pentecostal movement, which is commonly understood to have begun in 1906 in (of all places) [Los Angeles](#) . Such an unusual outburst would have drawn much attention in the antebellum South. Wilson does not explain how Peter, who by her account (like the slaves he would have come in contact with), was at least second- or third-generation American, could communicate in a single "African language" to the descendants of the many tribes of West Africa. (For example, more than 50 languages are spoken today in Benin alone; most also have dialects.) By 1860, 99% of the 4.4 million African-Americans in the United States had been born here, not in Africa. But if according to Wilson's article "[e]nslaved Africans were prohibited from...speaking in their native languages," using an "African language" in the manner she describes would seem to be only slightly more prudent than using Yiddish to pass messages at a Nazi rally.

In fact, in South Carolina where Peter Farrow is supposed to have preached, both free and enslaved blacks were legally barred in 1800 from congregating (including for worship) from sundown to sunup - their only free time. Punishment was 25 lashes. The situation was so bad that [in 1833](#) South Carolina and Georgia Presbyterians officially stated

The negroes are destitute of the gospel, and ever WILL BE under the present state of things. In the vast field extending from an entire State beyond the Potomac [I. e., Maryland] to the Sabine River, [at that time our South-western boundary,] and from the Atlantic to the Ohio, there are, to the best of our knowledge, not twelve men exclusively devoted to the religious instruction of the negroes. In the present state of feeling in the South, a ministry of their own color could neither be obtained NOR TOLERATED. But do not the negroes have access to the gospel through the stated ministry of the whites? We answer, No. We know of but five churches in the slaveholding States, built expressly for their use. These are all in

the State of Georgia. We may now inquire whether they enjoy the privileges of the gospel in their own houses, and on our plantations? Again we return a negative answer....If the master is pious, the house servants alone attend family worship, and frequently few or none of them.

Methodists responded by appointing *one* (white) missionary to all the blacks in South Carolina. He was quickly forced to desist because even

[v]erbal instruction...will increase the desire of the black population to learn.... We consider the common adage that 'Knowledge is power,' and as the colored man is enlightened, his condition will be rendered more unhappy and intolerable. Intelligence and slavery have no affinity with each other..

If even a white, ordained minister was barred from preaching to not only slaves, but free blacks, how likely is it that slaveowners would permit an unordained, free black temporarily employed on their plantations to hold spontaneous services for their slaves?

Wilson claims alternately that Eliza was from Benin and a member of the Igbo tribe. Setting aside the fact that Igbo land is far southeast of both the country of Benin and Benin City in Nigeria, most Igbo were brought to the US *before* 1800, and [after 1790](#) , most were male. After 1800 South Carolina [banned](#) slave importation (the ban was imposed nationwide in 1808). Between 1804-1807 the state lifted the ban, but between 1803-1808, only six documented slave ships from the Bight of Biafra (which would carry Igbo slaves) arrived in any US port, and among those Igbo only *nine* are described as "children".

While slaves were smuggled in after the importation ban, it was rare, and almost nonexistent along the Atlantic coast. South Carolina also limited to 10 the number of slaves an owner could bring from another state. Slaveowners did not appreciate a market flooded with "imports" bringing down the value of their property, and quite naturally feared adding to an already considerable black population (58% of the total by 1860). If the "young girl" Eliza were one of these few smuggled slaves, in order to participate for a significant time in the Underground Railroad (which ran from about 1835-1861), she could not have been born any later than 1825; but few historians would characterize a c.1830 arrival as "the early 1800s". Moreover, if she were born that late and we believe Peter saved for seven years to "buy her freedom," we face the disconcerting idea that he must have chosen her for a wife when she was less than 10 years old.

In 1820 the South Carolina Legislature barred the manumission (freeing) of slaves except by direct petition to, and proclamation by, the Legislature. Over the next 40 years, less than two dozen such petitions were granted. Unless Eliza and Peter are listed among these few, while nominally free, by law Eliza *and all her descendants* would have remained slaves. If Peter died or went into debt, his family could be seized and sold. So

for Peter to have purchased and freed Eliza, this manumission would have to have occurred before 1820, and she would be listed among the free blacks in the census. And if Eliza was brought to South Carolina legally, when she was old enough to know not only about "textiles" but a complex code developed by African mathematicians, she could not have been born any later than 1792. In either case her childbearing years would have been well over by 1845.

Whether Eliza was a freedwoman or remained a slave, a problem remains: When was Eliza's daughter Nora Bell born? Nora Bell is, after all, supposed to have taught the "Code" to both her daughter Ozella (born 1922) and her granddaughter Wilson (whose mother Mary was born in 1907). Wilson's article includes what appears to be a 1930s photo of Nora as a relatively young woman (adding more doubt Nora is Wilson's *great-grandmother*), and a picture of a quilt made by Nora Bell "in the early 1950s".

In 2002 Kemp ignored my questions on the subject (rather than blaming the editors, as Tobin has about inconsistencies in *Hidden in Plain View*). But in July 2004 Kemp wrote me that it was not her *mother's* great-grandmother, but her "*maternal grandmother's* great-grandmother" who used the "Quilt Code." That certainly seems more reasonable. But it also contradicts Wilson's *Traditional Quiltworks* article, every report of her lectures, her own brochure, and her and her daughter's website; and it means that she inexplicably omitted an entire generation (probably Eliza's daughter) from her story of how the "quilt code" was passed down in her family.

Repeated attempts to obtain clarification from Kemp were unsuccessful.

Tracking down Peter and Eliza Farrow

Does all this mean that Peter and Eliza Farrow are figments of Wilson's imagination? Not at all. In fact, records show that a married couple by that name really did exist - and in exactly the same South Carolina communities along the Georgia border where both Ozella and Serena Wilson say they grew up.

Census records are loaded with information. They record not only a person's name (sometimes oddly spelled), age, and marital status, but his race, employment, other people in his household, who his neighbors are, where he and his parents were born, and his native language. A survey of such records shows that during the 19th and early 20th century, virtually all of the Farrowes and Strothers (of both races) in Georgia and South Carolina lived in a handful of counties along the border between the two states,

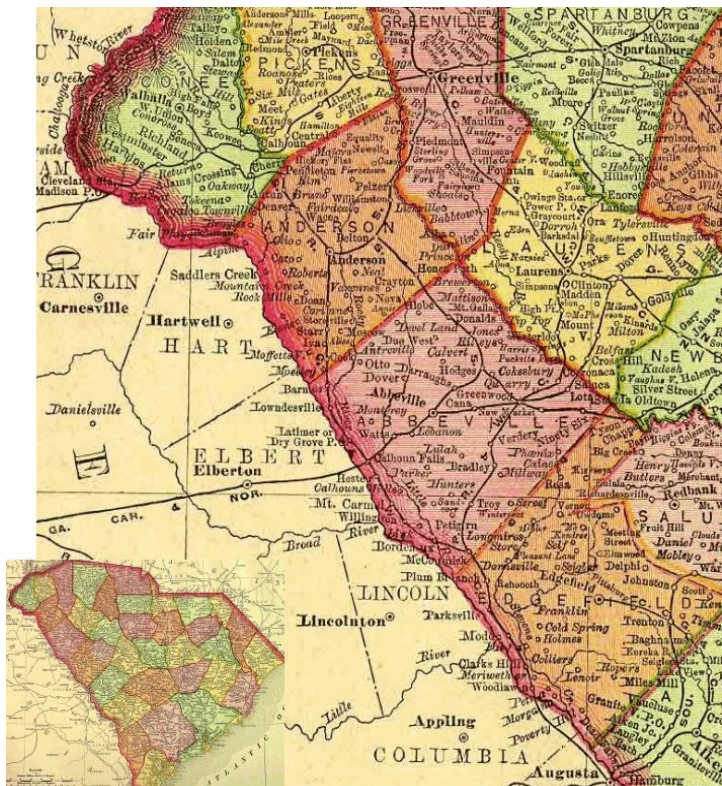
north of Augusta.(Unless otherwise noted, all location names in this section are counties.) In Georgia, these were Franklin, Lincoln and Columbia counties; in South Carolina, they were Abbeville, Newberry, Laurens and Edgefield.)

A handful of free blacks appear in those counties' antebellum censuses (including three in Edgefield who are themselves slaveowners) but none are named Farrow.

The only Peter Farrow (or any variation of that name) in Georgia or South Carolina records first appears in the [1880](#) Lincoln, Georgia census.

Peter is described as a single black "farm laborer," age 21, boarding with Lucius Jennings; he says he and his parents were born in Georgia. So does the woman who appears to be his mother, Aggie Cartledge (all the other Farrows in Lincoln live with her and are described as her children, and in the [1900](#) census she lives with grandson Fred Farrow).

It is unlikely the census taker merely assumed Peter and Aggie's birthplace, since their neighbors are described as having been born in Maryland, South Carolina and Africa.



Farrows and Strothers lived along the northwest border of Georgia and South Carolina..

The next county over, Columbia, is where Peter and Liza "Pharrow" are renting a farm in [1900](#) , along with their children Thom, James, "Jency," and [Nora](#) .

Who might Eliza have been? We can surmise that since Peter is single in 1880 and Thom was born in 1883, Peter and Eliza probably married between those years. Only three single, black "Elizas" or "Lizas" are in Peter's vicinity in 1880: Liza Williams (age 25, born about 1855); Liza Gullat (age 16, born about 1864), of Columbia, and [E]liza Gola (age 22, born about 1858), from Washington County.

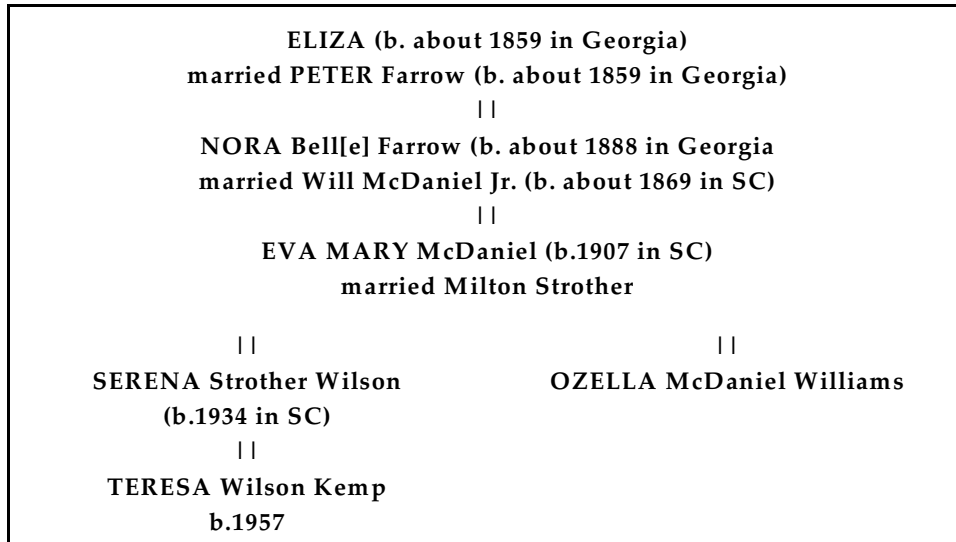
All were born in Georgia to Georgia natives. The first two live with or near members of the Cullars family; in 1900 Aggie lives with her grandson, Robert Cullars.

Peter and Eliza are still in Columbia in [1910](#) ; Peter reports he is 55, Eliza says she is 50. They share their home with three adult children: Thomas, James, and Jessie (or Jennie) and her husband and son. Kemp also seems to have [traced](#) Peter and Eliza Farrow to post-bellum Georgia. Yet in a July 2004 email to me she insisted the couple in these census records is "not my family".

By [1920](#) , Peter and "Lizza" Farrow, their son [Tom](#) and his wife, and their daughter [Nora](#) and her husband (William McDaniel, probably born 1869 in Edgefield, South Carolina) have all rented farms in Edgefield, 35 miles northeast of Columbia. Among the [McDaniels'](#) five children are Eva and "Sfan" (Stan?); all but the youngest were born in Georgia. Also in the 1920 Edgefield census are [Milton Strother](#) and family. (Eva, a/k/a Eva Mary, became Milton's second wife; Serena Strother Wilson is their daughter.)

The two Farrow families are still in Edgefield in [1930](#) , and Peter and Eliza's age is stated as 72. The [McDaniels](#) have moved to adjacent McCormick County, possibly to join some of his relatives two doors down the road. Among the children are Eva, "Sfan," and Ozella. (Ozella is misidentified as a "son", but her age corresponds exactly to the [birth date](#) given in her Social Security death records, and Tobin reports Ozella says she lived in McCormick County.) Vital records show Peter [died](#) in 1946; his age was estimated to be 89.

Thus the only Peter and Eliza Farrow in Georgia and South Carolina records are just the right age to be Wilson's great-grandparents, precisely as she has stated. (Kemp even stated in a November 2005 [email](#) that her "great grandmother" [sic] was born in 1859.) In fact, it would be remarkable indeed if this couple - whose daughter Nora married to a McDaniel and had children named Eva and Ozella, the latter born in 1922, and lived *in the county where Wilson says she grew up* - were somehow *not* the Peter and Eliza Farrow whom Wilson claims as hers. Based on census and other vital records, the "Quilt Code" family tree Wilson originally described should look like this:



But this presents another problem for the "Code" and its proponents: Multiple, independent, primary- source documents spanning five decades indicate that **contrary to Wilson and Kemp's claims, Eliza Farrow was *not* born in Africa in the "early 1800s", but in Georgia, to Georgia natives, in about 1859.** Eliza Farrow could not possibly have passed down a "quilt code" she personally used or witnessed being used - for the simple reason that during the entire time the Underground Railroad was in operation, she was either a toddler or not even born yet. When the Civil War started, Peter and Eliza Farrow would have been only *two years old*.

Thus even if a "Code" manuscript surfaces which can be shown to have been written by Eliza, at best it would be a secondhand account of somebody else's claims of what is supposed to have occurred in the decades before Eliza was even born.

I emailed this information to Kemp in November 2005. She never addressed the issue.

Claims, but no evidence

When we consider the conflicts both *Hidden in Plain View*, Wilson's article, and the claims of every other "Quilt Code" proponent have not only with firsthand data regarding slavery, the Underground Railroad, and quilting, but even with each other, and the lack of evidence of such a code from any other reliable source, we must wonder how accurate these stories can possibly be. This is particularly the case when those who make a point of promoting them as historical fact either cannot or will not provide reliable supporting evidence.

In [November 2005](#) Kemp claimed to have "seen two textiles that were used in conjunction with the McDaniel- Farrow quilt code" - but she has never produced any evidence these textiles exist, let alone that they were used in the way she claims.

Kemp told me in 2002 the family has "extensive collections of artifacts and books" supporting their claims, but although she said she gives about 10 "quilt code" lectures a year, she was unable to provide any titles, authors, or other source information.

In May 2002 she also said her family has additional "documents and other written information" which they have not made public so that "we can tell if someone says their ancestor participated with mine in the development or spreading of the codes. In July 2004 she stated that the documents in her collection are "birth and death certificates, family bibles, military records and church records and Masonic records and much much more", including

copies of originals received from Historical sites between SC and Canada. Others are books that were written and published in Africa. Historians gave me copies of books that would refute the Daughters of Confederacy claims that the patterns were Civil War patterns. They were African patterns and just because American historians did not bother to check or get other information does not make it true.

However, just as in 2002 when she was "waiting for photographs and other documents to prove the oral history," three and a half years later in [November 2005](#) she was still "looking for information before we felt our work is complete enough to release to the public". (She has not provided a source for her accusation about the DoC.)

In several emails she offered to fax copies of her documents to me. In hopes of getting some idea of their authenticity, I asked for scans instead, and offered to publish them here so that she could set the record straight. She then replied that she would not provide this information until "after we go to print". I have emailed her several times since, but after promising once more to send them, Kemp has ceased responding. Could it be possible that the "documents and other written information" was in fact the story of

the "Quilt Code" that Wilson copyrighted in early 2000? If so, they are modern, and written by her; the writings of an ancestor cannot be copyrighted by her descendants.

In May 2002 I asked why she has never presented such valuable data to any historians, even privately; such information, if authentic, would not only silence critics but would be an important resource for those studying the Underground Railroad. She replied that she does "not need someone to validate what was passed down in my family" and does "not owe historians anything," later stating that nobody with "good intentions" had asked for the documentation.

Yet for the past several years in lectures at schools, in television appearances and in magazine articles, she and her family present the "Quilt Code" story as historical fact.

Since April 2004 this article has received over 50,000 unique visits (and nearly three quarters of a million "hits"). No one has ever contacted me with evidence of a "Code". I have also contacted many "Code" proponents myself to ask where their "firsthand evidence" can be located. The only source ever cited is *Hidden in Plain View*.

The "Quilt Code" industry: Betsy Ross redux

Teresa Kemp, Wilson's daughter and Ozella's great-niece, maintains her family is very private, and in 2002 claimed they only went public because "some writer in NY made the comment that our family was not smart enough to have passed down the history." She also complained that although Ozella "was a principal in CA and a college graduate with a law degree they left those items of information out and showed her looking like a slave, not a LA socialite." This seems to echo Tobin; according to historian [Wright](#), Tobin (who is white) has claimed that the only people to question *Hidden in Plain View* are "angry white quilters" who goaded Wright (who is African-American) into publicly debunking the "code". (Consider also Kemp's assertions about the Daughters of the Confederacy.)

In a later email, Kemp gave me a somewhat different explanation, indicating that early on the family had collaborated with Tobin but then parted ways:

it was not our decision to go public. [HIPV author] Jackie Tobin selected my Aunt to write about. Once the book came out then she and Ramond [Dobard] were under attack for what everone said was a made up story. My aunt was deseased! I have always know the information but never went public.

We then let Jackie know she is not the Griot for our family but my mother is and knows everyone, where the are what the did, where they lived, their children and their children's children. She did all the research on the oral history and had documented a lot. Most middle aged people want to know about their families and some younger ones also. Anyway after Jackie seemed to become the voice for our family it became necessary to call the authors and the publishers and publist for them and let them know we were alive and quilting.

We were asked to attend press conferences and some of the appearances they were making since they did not even have all the infomation or know how the code fit. They talked with my aunt 3 time and did some research and wrote the book! We agreed. That was also one of the ways we could take control of our family story and be sure it was accurately told. Also Jackie was not the keeper of the sacred Quilt Code for the Black Race as had been portrayed in some articles that are still available on the internet for your review!

We could have taken them to court but we chose to be supportive and we truely are honored that a Women's history professor selected my aunt to be the subject of her book. It was unfortunate that they waited until she passed to publish.

We have heard a lot of negative information about some people who find older African-Americans buy their "art", have their friends buy the folk art, video tape them, and when they pass they are the owners of Original Folk Art and do books, videos write grants for world tours. It had been told to me that it is a form of sharecropping. The elderly live on their land and in exchange they give them pieces of their art.

I am not saying that is what Jackie did but that is one of the topics my co-workers told me about when the articles about hidden in Plain View came out. They did not know it was my family. I just listened. That is when I had to decide what to do. As I met these collectors on a buying trip. Some stopped in Atlanta and asked to see my quilts. They wanted one of the quilt squares my daughter made but I explained it is part of a 5 generation quilt we are making.

They purchased 14 quilts in Alabama for 200.00! All hand made originals I could not believe it.

Well that began my immediate family having to be more public with exhibits and programs or it would have been taken over by these other groups.

It is Kemp's position that her family has never attempted to profit from the book. But in fact her extended family has a thriving cottage industry centered around the Quilt Code. According to [Ohio records](#), like Ozella (who sold her quilts in a Charleston tourist mall), Wilson began making and selling quilts under the name "Plantation Quilts and Gifts" in 1993 - the same year Ozella first approached Tobin with her story. But Wilson did not register that business name until six weeks after the release of *Hidden in Plain View* in January 1999. (Their 2006 website, whose domain they registered in 2003, inexplicably carries a copyright date of "April 1998" - nearly a year before Kemp says the family knew Ozella had spoken to anyone about the "Code". She said she displays the book with quilts she has for sale at her stall in an antiques and crafts mall. While Tobin told me in 2002 that she is a "programmer analyst," in a May 2004 request for help with a grant application she describes herself and her parents as "researchers, historians, lecturers and curators." Wilson has made numerous television appearances, and stated that her granddaughter was preparing a quilting series for cable TV in conjunction with her son-in-law, who I understand is connected with television or video. (Kemp says her husband is a television director but is not working on her daughter's project.) In 2002 Tobin emailed me that a "quilt code" documentary was scheduled to be released in early 2003. In early 2004 I contacted the production company to find out the status of the documentary. They said it was still being edited, and welcomed further questions. However, when I asked what historians were consulting on the project, I never received a reply. I later learned that at least one well-known quilt historian and appraiser had raised concerns about the film's premise, which may explain the delay in its release.

Wilson says the family gave over 150 lectures in 2001 alone. At these lectures, Kemp says that the family sells "Quilt Code" T-shirts, tote bags, books, and gifts. In 2000 the family offered a 5-day "Underground Railroad Quilt Tour" on their now-defunct website (screen capture [here](#)) Kemp told me that for a one-hour lecture and a discussion period she charges a speaking fee plus hotel, meals and air transportation for the up to 4 generations of her family who participate. She would not reveal the actual speaking fee itself, but offered to waive the transportation if I could schedule the lecture to coincide with a tennis tournament her children had in my area.

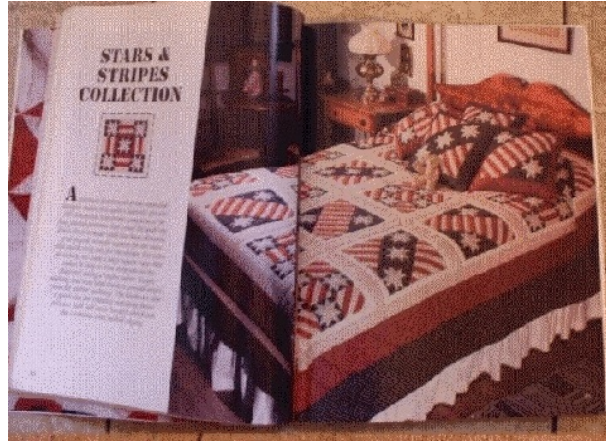
Wilson and Kemp's now-defunct, Geocities-based website (screen captures [here](#) , [here](#) and [here](#)) stated variously that it was sponsored by "Plantation Quilts & Gifts along with the Underground Railroad Family & Friends Foundation". When asked about this foundation, Wilson said it was a nonprofit Georgia organization run by Kemp, who could provide the tax ID number for tax-deductible contributions. But in 2002 Georgia state officials said they had no record of any such organization, tax-exempt or otherwise. I also found no such organization registered in Wilson's home state of Ohio.

The Geocities website described the family's "[traveling museum exhibit](#)" (screen capture [here](#)) as "the greatest human relations event & conversational dialogue that your community has ever experienced"; the [new website](#) (screen captures [here](#) , [here](#) , [here](#) and [here](#)) goes into much greater detail.

When questioned in a phone conversation about this "museum exhibit" (also described in her magazine article), Wilson admitted it was simply the collection of quilts, fabrics, dolls, gourds, masks and ship models the family brings to its lectures and sometimes displays afterward. She could not say whether any of the quilts she uses in her lectures are in fact from the Underground Railroad period, but pictures and her 2006 website [advertisement](#) of "over 20 hand stitched quilts, 9 from the 1800's" suggest otherwise. The quilts displayed with other objects used in "Quilt Code" lectures are clearly less than 50 years old; prominently featured on the 2004 site is a quilt in [red, white and blue](#) whose unusual star pattern was taken directly from the 1996 Leisure Arts book [Quick Method Liberty Quilts](#).



The artifacts display from the 2003 "Code" family website, above; the 1996 Leisure Arts pattern book, right.



Overstatement seems to be something of a habit. On August 27, 2004 Kemp emailed educators, museums, and federal organizations that

..on Monday evening my Parents (Howard & Serena Wilson and my daughter Kir Kemp) are going to be on television CBS with Harry Reasoner and Scott Frazier. OUR families story along with Lori who is Levi Coffin's decendant will be discussed.

Readers would be forgiven for thinking this was a prime-time interview with a leading news anchor and founder of *60 Minutes*, until recently a program known for in-depth investigative reporting, and therefore presuming that Wilson's claims were being taken seriously. But Reasoner has been dead for 13 years. As it turns out, the week *before* Kemp sent out her email, Wilson (without her husband or granddaughter), sporting what appears to be a Nigerian *buba dress* over her Western clothing, briefly appeared in a [segment](#) on the CBS early-morning "lite" news show hosted by Harry Smith. There was no interview or "discussion" of the "families story"; Wilson has no connection with the Museum and was not appearing at its behest.

Both Wilson (in Ohio) and Kemp (in Georgia) applied for inclusion in the National Parks Service's UGRR "Network to Freedom" program. Both were turned down.

In May 2004 Kemp emailed Tagger asking for help obtaining letters of interest for a Department of Education grant. (Such letters, which come from prospective service users, are a critical part of a grant application since they demonstrate a need for the service being proposed.) Kemp's proposal: to obtain "an 18-wheeler semi-truck like the Lewis and Clark traveling exhibit that would be a traveling interpretive laboratory that would be a museum that comes to you". She also wrote that "If anyone has matching grants for Historical, Cultural (Gechee-Gulla), African Studies, African-American, Women Studies, UGRR, Mathematics or Science we would like to discuss to see if we are

a good fit. Our programs and exhibits cover all of the above topics, diversity workshops and more." Tagger forwarded the email to fifty-one individuals and organizations, but states the NPS's position on the "Code" is noncommittal.

In February 2005 Kemp announced in an email:

I have been so busy working on a dream! I have gotten an UGRR Quilt Museum Open to honor my families envolvement [sic] in the Underground Railroad!

This a note to invite you to visit my Underground Railroad Quilt Code Museum at Underground Atlanta. You are welcome to post information on your website or distribute information any way you would like. Let me know if you would like me to mail you more information. Mention this e-mail and you can come for free and your guest can have \$2.00 off the \$76.00 [sic] admission fee. Please forward this e-mail and help me get the word out.

An antiques dealer toured the museum later that year, but was unable to find any 19th century quilts; the documents were photocopies of e.g. advertisements for runaway slaves. Although the quilts were displayed in full light without any UV protection, he was not permitted to take any photographs because this "might damage the quilts." The family's [new website](#) contains two images of the displays; enlargements can be seen [here](#) and [here](#). All the textiles are clearly 20th century. Products from the museum's gift shop are also available [online](#). In late 2006 Zambian handicrafts were also offered, although no slaves are known to have been brought to the US from that part of Africa

Not on display is the firsthand, written account of the "Code" that Kemp persists in claiming she possesses.

"Fakelore"

The McDaniel/Wilson family story and those of its imitators, appearing just when schoolteachers began searching for a creative way to teach Underground Railroad history, bears a remarkable resemblance to that of the descendants of Betsy Ross in 1870, when Philadelphia began planning celebrations for the nation's Centennial.

In that year, several Ross descendants suddenly filed affidavits claiming that Betsy had told them she had made the first American flag. These affidavits - made more than 90 years after the event, by people who were young children when Betsy died in 1836 - were the first mention of the flag story. No independent record exists of Betsy having anything to do with the first flag, and much evidence, including contemporary documents, completely refutes the Ross family claims. But donations were solicited nationwide (amid considerable [controversy](#)), and 1898 the building where Betsy *might* have rented a room was purchased and turned into the "Betsy Ross House" museum.



1890s Betsy Ross embroidery. Image courtesy The Women's Cooperative, Davistown Plantation, Maine

Generations of American schoolchildren have been taught the Betsy Ross myth as historical fact, and more than a quarter million people visit the "Betsy Ross House" each year, where the myth is perpetuated.

[Nell Irvin Painter](#), retired Edwards Professor of American History at Princeton University points to another example of how tenacious pop-culture myths can be. In 1971, screenwriter Ted Perry wrote the [voiceover script](#) for a film on pollution, based on a speech he had heard at a 1970 Earth Day rally. Perry thought the speech had first been given by Chief Seattle in 1854, but in fact it was written 20 years after Seattle's death.

Perry's film was a hit, but to his horror his "Chief Seattle Speech" was universally misattributed to the long-dead chief. Despite Perry's efforts, that of historians such as National Archives archivist [Jerry L Clark](#), and even statements by members of Seattle's own tribe, in the 1990s both an award-winning "nonfiction" children's book and Al Gore's *Earth in the Balance* were [quoting](#) "Chief Seattle's" environmental wisdom. The children's book is in its 12th printing and is often suggested as a Social Studies teaching tool. The author, who specializes in self-help books, refuses to accept that Chief Seattle never said what her book claims he did.

[Eliot Singer](#) calls such stories "fakelore". A specialist in Native American oral history, he is often asked whether "what matters [is] providing children with interesting and pleasurable material to read that exposes them to other times and other cultures." Singer replies that such an argument

*beg[s] the ethical question. At the risk of sounding puerile, misrepresentation, false advertising, **feeding children misinformation, is unethical, however ordinary in textbooks and commercials....**Consistently, parents, teachers, and children accept fakelore as the real thing, for whatever purpose it is used....**Fakelore makes a mockery of teaching diversity.***

Sources should always be cited, and sources that are secondary adaptations and undocumented claims that "I heard it from..." should not suffice. ...

It is time authors, parents, educators - even publishers - accept that you cannot teach about other cultures by assimilating them into a safe, homogenized curriculum or by substituting well-intentioned misconceptions for demeaning ones.

Reasonable people asked to accept the "Quilt Code" as historical fact deserve answers to three basic questions:

- ▶ If "code" proponents so often disagree about how it originated, what blocks it included, what they meant, and how the quilts were used - what can we possibly say we know, or can even imagine, about this "code"?
- ▶ If we know nothing about the "Code," have no firsthand evidence of it, and historical research about quilts, slavery, and the Underground Railroad directly contradicts the claims made about the "code", on what basis can we be expected to believe it existed at all?
- ▶ Most important - why should a story for which no evidence exists be chosen to supplant the real, documented life stories and achievements of 19th century African-Americans, both slave and free?

In her [biography](#) of Harriet Tubman, author Catherine Clinton observes

Earlier accounts of Tubman's life] are more folkloric than analytical, more riddled with inaccuracies than concerned with historical facts. Much like Sally Hemmings before her, Harriet Tubman has been subjected to more fictional treatments than serious historical examinations, a reflection not of her place in the American past

but a failing on the part of the academy. This absence of scholarship must be recognized as a form of "disremembering". While Tubman was alive in the imaginations of schoolchildren and within popular and underground culture, she was a mystery to professional historians, who consistently mentioned her but failed even to set the record straight about her role and contributions....Tubman's life demands more than pop culture projections...

Likewise, the story of all those who participated in the Underground Railroad deserves the care of scholarly research. No matter how appealing the "Quilt Code" story may be, until such research uncovers significant, specific corroborating evidence from firsthand sources, people genuinely interested in quilt history, the history of the Underground Railroad, and that of African-Americans cannot take it any more seriously than the story of Betsy Ross: a modern-day symbol with no basis in fact. But while the Betsy Ross myth involves only an historical footnote - the maker of one flag - the "Quilt Code" myth attempts to rewrite an entire, critical chapter of American history.

Selling slavery: "Quilt Code" as marketing gimmick

Since the 1999 publication of *Hidden in Plain View*, a number of individuals (most of them white) have used the "Code" to market all sorts of questionable objects. Following are the stories of some of these attempts.

The "Underground Railroad Bed Rugg"

In early 2002 a retired antique dealer purchased a yarn hooked rug for \$10 at a yard sale near Augusta, Georgia. Her son and daughter-in-law, who had started an archaeological survey company a few months before, arranged for a query about it to be posted on an [astronomy website](#) .

In it they claimed to have discovered the rug contained an Underground Railroad "code" and asking for "additional historical information or comments":

Although we realize that we are not experts on African American arts or the Underground Railroad, we believe that there is more to this piece than just meets the eye. At the least we believe it is a rare form of African American art. At the most, it is another clue into the Underground Railroad. Either way, we are excited at the privilege [sic] of conducting research and sharing it with the real experts.

Three months later the owners, the rug and their claims about it were featured in the online newspaper in the area where the couple do business. They also placed the rug and their claims also appeared on their [company website](#) , where it is listed on the title page as a "recent project".



The owners of this rug claim it contains an UGRR "code".

Because the owners claim its motifs relate to the song *Follow the Drinking Gourd*, the rug

caught the interest of Joel Bresler, who has been researching the song's history and whose website, www.followthedrinkinggourd.org, is scheduled to debut in early 2007. Although it is widely assumed to be a coded spiritual from the Underground Railroad period, Bresler has located no documentary evidence it dates any earlier than the very late 19th century. The first mention he has found dates to 1928, when it was published by H.B. Parks, a white man who claimed he first heard the song in 1912 (like the Quilt Code, only in the South rather than among northern blacks who might be descendants of successful fugitives). But Bresler notes that by that time, the abolitionist relatives Parks claimed had confirmed the song's coded meaning to him were likely long dead. Bresler has uncovered a number of other problems with the song's provenance and ostensible message of escape north; even the phrase "drinking gourd" as a term for "Big Dipper" seems not to be used until after the song was published. Tubman biographer Kate Clifford Larson also points out that no connection between *Follow the Drinking Gourd* and Harriet Tubman exists; Tubman worked along the east coast, while the song is supposed to concern the Tombigbee River watershed from lower Alabama to northeastern Mississippi.

Bresler sent me the link, asking my opinion and offering to forward [my comments](#) to the owners.

To me, it appeared the rug is around a hundred years old, made from vegetable-dyed yarn in a central medallion design reminiscent of the Log Cabin quilt (introduced in the North in the mid-1860s). The "drinking gourd" looked an awful lot like the flower between the "NB" at one end of the rug; what the owners describe as "trees" and a "river" strongly resemble the vining borders first popularized in 19th century applique quilts. Neither I, nor my colleague, nor anybody else I asked saw a quail or a disembodied leg; nor could I imagine what messages they might convey on a map. I also noted several problems with the owners' assessment, including a lack of any provenance that indicates the piece was made before the Civil War or even that it originated in the South, let alone that it was slave made. I also noted that the materials used were not limited to the time period claimed, and wondered whether the technique were even possible during that era. Meanwhile I contacted two respected experts in hooked rugs and bed rugs to be sure my conclusions were reasonable.

Bresler forwarded my opinion. The owners were not pleased, and responded to my colleague, CCing me and another person on their email, published verbatim [here](#) .

[Tracy Jamar](#) has been restoring 19th century hooked rugs in both private and museum collections for a quarter century, and for many years headed the restoration department at one of the nation's most highly-respected American primitives galleries. She has

handled countless antique hooked rugs of every technique and type, is herself a rug hooking artist, and has written and taught extensively on the subject. A summary of her comments after viewing the owners' pictures of the rug:

- ▶ Since "to spin wool is to 'process' it", the yarn cannot be described as "unprocessed". In any case, the way it has worn, its uniformity, and loose twist indicate it was most probably not hand-spun.
- ▶ Vegetable dyes are not a reliable indicator of age.
- ▶ The foundation fabric does not appear to be feedsack, but some sort of linen or cotton yardage, possibly monk's cloth.
- ▶ The foundation's not being the more fragile burlap, rather than the rug being used on a bed, may account for its being in generally good repair.
- ▶ However, yarn is missing in "not an inconsequential amount", and the rug shows evidence of either regular wear, some sort of chemical instability, or aggressive cleaning with a brush (since it looks unusually clean, almost bleached). In her experience, this rug would not be described as being in "excellent" condition.
- ▶ The term "hit and miss" refers to the practice of using up odds and ends of hooking materials. This rug is made with all the same yarn and the color palette is uniform throughout, so she does not consider it done in a "hit and miss" style.
- ▶ The photos indicate the technique used is needle-punching, the tool for which was not developed until 1881. Thereafter, needlepunch was the method commonly used by cottage-industry rugmakers. She has never heard of a pre-1880s needlepunched rug.
- ▶ The appearance of both the yarn and the foundation remind her of "the cottage rugs made by different industries from the late 1800's into the 1930's".

She found the rug "very appealing and interesting" with a "wonderful folkyness" typical of "a free and open expression of a technique". She recognizes this habit in her own work: "often I just start out and go where it takes me design-wise and colorwise. When I'm done with the latter ones I can see things I didn't know I was putting in and I had no intention to suggest, they just happened." She also confirmed with another rug historian the date needlepunching was introduced.

I shared Jamar's comments and my own thoughts on the owners' most recent statements (summarized below) with the owners and the others to whom they had sent their email. *In the sections below, the owners' statements appear in block quotes.*

Technique

Jamar's remarks on needlepunching are corroborated by Helene Von Rosenstiel in *American Rugs and Carpets from the 16th Century to Modern Times* (1978, William Morrow & Co., New York). Von Rosenstiel describes the first punch needle, developed by Ebenezer Ross, "...who had devised a new "Novelty Rug Machine"....This was the earliest of the punch-hooks, adapted to use either narrow-cut rags or yarns....In the early 20th century, the old craft of rug-hooking became a fairly widespread cottage industry throughout the eastern United States and Canada...."

The author includes pictures of ads for both Ross's first punch needle, patented on December 27, 1881, and for his second model, patented a decade later.

The US Patent Office database reaches back to 1795. A search for needlepunch rugmaking tools revealed that no patents for such tools were issued before 1881, but dozens of such tools were patented thereafter. Most patents were issued between 1885-1890, suggesting inventors were capitalizing on a new trend in crafting. If the technology used to produce it was not available until 1881, how can the owners' rug date to c.1850?

It is a well know [sic] fact that hooked rugs were quite difficult to translate into symbols visually on their surfaces. As a result, it is difficult to obtain the intended "picture" which often is blurry and questionable what was really intended in the designs. This is the designing flaw of these types of primitive rugs.

Jamar's [article](#) includes several examples of antique hooked rugs. Are the images "blurry"? Is it "questionable what was really intended in the designs"?

Materials

It might be believed that the vegetable-dyed yarns might have been introduced and reminiscent of similar items introduced in the North, has nothing to do with telling us about surfacing examples such as the rug in question. Especially if they happen to have originated in the South.

It is hard to discern what the owners are trying to say here, but as Jamar and many other textile historians have noted, vegetable-dyed wool was common in rural areas well into

the 20th century, particularly in the South.

A common misconception is present here when an assumption is made that 19th Century African-Americans only may used [sic] cut strips from wool fabrics because they were probably deprived of socioeconomic access and time to use spun woolen yarn. This has little basis in reality and is simply not true. Not only were these items probably readily available but not uncommon even with slaves in the antebellum south. The idea of depriving slaves of common items such as these are now recognized as a belief rather than factual. (New Archeological studies have shed light much on this fact).

While it would be interesting to see how "new Archelological [sic] studies" have "shed light much" on the standard of living of the average slave that contradicts first-person narratives, the question is moot: as has already been pointed out, the technique of yarn needlepunching with which the owners' rug is made has not been shown to date from before 1881.

Feed Sack is also a term that doesn't mean "Chicken Feed Sack" it was a fabric with many uses that started showing up more regularly in the 1850's and not just after the Civil War. It would have been more common near railroad routes of this time period.

Although 20th century housewives recycled feedsacks in many ways, the word "feedsack" describes not a "type of fabric with many uses" but a fabric sack. The [Bemis Bag Company](#) (founded 1858) claims to be the country's first producer of commercial sacks, but Bemis was preceded a decade earlier by the firm owned by Henry Chase, whose improvements to the Morley and Johnson chainstitch sewing machine quickly and inexpensively producing the strong seam a sack required. Both Bemis and Chase used cotton fabric, but during the Civil War, because of the interruption in cotton production, Bemis introduced jute sacks (commonly known as "gunny sacks") - what we now call burlap. Such sacks were used from everything from coffee to cotton, and were often recycled for use as the foundation for hooked rugs, although other fabrics continued to be used by those well-off enough to afford them. Since burlap, made from jute, was not in general use in the US until the middle of the 19th century, rugs made with a burlap foundation must date from after that date, but rugs (such as the one in question) with a foundation of another fabric may date from any time at all; the fabric could be decades older than the rug itself.

Bed Rugs

Also this was not a bedcovering!!!! A bed rug was a quite common item to travel with as an extra cloth for whatever might be needed (i.e. cover a draft on a window or on the feet). It was not the size of a bed!

Jessie Marshall, literally the woman who wrote the book on the history of bed rugs (*Bed Rugs: 18th and Early 19th Century Embroidered Bed Covers*), thinks otherwise. Marshall wrote me that based on the size, technique used (needlepunch rather than crewel embroidery) and design, the owner's textile does not appear to be a bed rug, and adds that "If you would recommend them reading my book on bed rugs they would realize that what they have is probably not a bed rug."

Such remarks - from people whose life work involves the study and restoration of hooked rugs and bedrugs, and documentary evidence of the history of the tool needed to make the owners' textile - raise significant doubts about the owners' claim that this is a bedrug dating from before the Civil War.

African-American textiles

But here [sic] are so few examples of anything like this from the South, that it could be argued strongly that no one has a clear understanding of textile creation in the south as far as African-American items are concerned. (this is because of several economic factors in the deep south that can't be denied). My point is that the period examples that can be drawn from for comparisons are just not there. Maybe in the better document [sic] north, but not in the south.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Among other things, of 585 documented African American quilts in American museums, at least two dozen date before 1865, and more than a hundred from between 1865-1949. Almost all originated in, *and remain in*, the South.

There is also a tremendous miscommunication and knowledge of many African-American crafts, symbols and textile creations. Anyone, "expert" or others, claiming anything to the contrary is just not facing facts or the lack thereof.

There is indeed much misunderstanding of African-American crafts - primarily in the subtly racist presumption that an object's maker can easily be determined just by looking at it. Studies of Southern and African-American textiles have shown that, despite the recent marketing of modern "Afrocentric" designs, before the 1960s a

craftswoman's aesthetic is as much a product of socioeconomics and region as race. For example, the "plain" quilts made before WWII by poor white women in the Ozarks are virtually indistinguishable from those made by blacks in Gee's Bend during the same period; "fancy" turn-of-the-century quilts made by better-off women of both races tend to be similar as well.

Research

If every item that surfaced was judged on provenances than [sic] we hardly have anything to study!

The very first question an historian or appraiser asks of an object - and the easiest to answer - is "Where was it found?" In any case, we are not talking about "every item," but this particular one. It seems strange that the owners omit entirely from their website and query (the venues they control) any information about where and how it was acquired. Did the family member (an antique dealer) who bought it at a yard sale not ask for the rug's history, or even notice the seller's race? Could the owners not go back to that home and inquire?

None of the four books the owners cite discusses rugmaking.

- ▶ Their primary source appears to be *Hidden in Plain View*.
- ▶ *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum South* was written by a folklorist, not a textile historian. Its only mention of the Underground Railroad and textile signals is a passing, unsourced reference to Log Cabin quilts, and the only rug in the book is braided.
- ▶ To my knowledge, no reference to any sort of "code" in quilts or rugs or any tangible object appears anywhere in Blockson's compilation of slave narratives, nor for that matter in any of the hundreds of known slave narratives.
- ▶ Of John Michael Vlach's *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts*, the publisher itself says it is "a survey...by no means the last word on the subject of traditional Afro-American art and craft. Rather, it will provide inspiration..." Vlach never mentions rugs. Only three of the 18 quilts pictured date before the 1930s (Powers's two c.1890 Bible quilts and one c.1910 sampler, maker unknown); most date from after 1969.

If I have learned one thing about this subject it is that a lot of people are not admitting the obvious....There is much to keep learning about and keeping our mind open about here....There is a lot of poorly based and learned knowledge out

there so we have to take the "experts" with a grain of salt.

As for the textile expert and others we have shown it to, I would have to compile the list which I will not do presently in this email. I agree this is a critical point. It seems to have passed every test so far....Whatever the origin and date of this rug is, it will continued to be shown to a variety of the best individuals we can find around the country.

Since the very first textile experts people I asked found the owners' claims wanting, and more than one museum has turned the owners away, it would seem "every test" has not indeed been passed. One wonders why the owners' first step was not to obtain a written appraisal from a reputable textile historian specializing in such articles, and why they are unable or unwilling to give the name of the person they say dated the rug to 1850. If the rug cannot be shown to be from the period claimed, then any other assertion about its place of origin, the maker's race, the Underground Railroad, or whether it lay on a bed or a floor is moot.

The "Code"

The drinking gourd is clearly present. (there is a flower type item on the rug which may be what Leigh is talking about). This is as good a depiction of the dipper as I have ever seen! A quail or a similar type item is also possibly present.

If more than one person says no such image can be seen, how can the owners describe it as "clearly present"? Is the quail a quail, or a "similar type item"? Is it there, or isn't it?

The rug in question is covered with all types of symbols whether you choose to see them or not. And they are definitely open to some debate....I was especially perplexed with the fact that some "experts" looked at this piece and claimed no African-American affiliation while other knowledgeable individuals were 100% sure that it was. Who is right?

In a single email, the owners insist the images are "clearly present"; a few sentences later they are visible only if the viewer "chooses" to see them. The owners claim the rug has "passed every test", then say "some 'experts'" clearly disagree with their assessment. Which is it? Are the images plainly visible to all (presumably a basic requirement for a signal flag), or discernible only by those who "choose" to see them? If they have been turned away by more than one museum, how has the rug "passed every test"?

How much does a desire for such symbols to exist, and for the maker to have been black, play into what the owners "see"? The owners say "several groups have offered to purchase" the rug, but that they want to find "a facility where it can be adequately

preserved and made available for research and viewing". The rug's value, both monetarily and in professional prestige, is many times greater if it is an antebellum, slave made, "coded" rug than if it is just a nice common turn-of-the-century rug whose origin is unknown. Can what the owners "choose" to see remain unaffected by this?

The owners sent me several more emails. None addressed even one of the questions raised, but all threatened to hold me "liable" - apparently for pointing others to their website.

A "Seat of Great Authority"

The Magazine: Antiques is a glossy, monthly publication filled with serious articles on high-ticket antiques and art objects; an air of legitimacy infuses every page. Among the articles on "Nineteenth-century paintings" and "Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century silver" in the January 2005 issue appears a lavish, two-page advertisement; the magazine's standard charge for such space is around \$10,000. The subject: "A SEAT OF GREAT AUTHORITY".



Perhaps the most important African American artifact yet discovered

An early Delmarva Peninsula Larkley Back Chair retaining its original tri-layered surfaces (the latter blackened) as well as its tri-levelled quilted seat coverings displaying an astounding fusion of West African and African American iconography suggesting an unbroken chain of noble Akan lineage, encoding their most sacred secrets, including a star map to freedom. Forensic evidence suggests a history of three separate and successive "enslavements."

TIMOTHY SMITH & SONS
Esoteric and Subterranean Americana
37 Market Street, Onancock, VA 23417
757-787-3733
timothysmithandsons.com

Described as "perhaps the most important African American artifact yet discovered," the chair, says the text, displays

...an astounding fusion of West African and African American iconography suggesting an unbroken chain of noble Akan lineage, encoding their most sacred secrets: including a star map to freedom. Forensic evidence suggests a history of three separate and successive "enstoolments."

(An "enstoolment" is the Akan version not of a chair or stool, but of the ceremony we would call a coronation.) A link to the dealer's website appeared in the magazine ad. The site featured one item: the chair.

Click on the "Soul of a Nation" link (screenshot [here](#)), and the website declares:

The Akan American Chair (Stool) achieves the remarkable transference of an entire body of West African culture, religion, cosmology, and the methods employed to safeguard these traditions within the hostile new world of American slavery. An understanding of the Akan-Ashanti sacred stools and their paramount importance in West African culture will assist in the comprehension of their only known American counterpart. The device, in its nearly untouched original condition, provides a treasure trove of forensic and interpretive data relative to the secret and forbidden underground webworks of early African American life.

The ad encouraged the viewer to check back for information on research and publication by "national and international institutions, scholars and journalists".

The chair was brought to my attention by a client with an extensive collection of American folk art. To her it looked like a nice, simple 19th century ladderback chair; she thought the cushion, which had a cat embroidered it, was "sort of cute", but was puzzled by the ad's claims. I was puzzled too.

The chair's embroidered cat motif was remarkably similar to those seen in other household textiles from 1890-1920, particularly in Pennsylvania and New England. And everything I'd read about Akan stools indicated that each was carved from a single piece of wood, shared a common basic form (a slightly crescent-shaped, usually backless seat set on a column which rested on a stepped, platform base), and rarely incorporated textiles.



A more prosaic view of the chair, from the auction catalog

I also found that to the Akan, a stool is a very personal object, believed to contain the owner's soul - so personal, in fact, that when a man dies, his stool is [retired to a special shrine](#) . The object in the magazine ad had four legs, no apparent symbolic carving, and a seat cushion, and was claimed to have been used in three separate "enstoolments." And it did not have the carving and nailhead embellishment of the Akan four-legged chairs called *asipim* and *konkromfi*. Who, we wondered, had determined that the chair in the ad was a royal Akan American "seat of great authority" - and how?

To find out more, I emailed Timothy Smith, the dealer, whose business is located on Virginia's "Delmarva" peninsula, and asked a colleague to do the same. [Kate Clifford Larson](#) also contacted him. Larson is the author of *Bound for the Promised Land*, a highly-acclaimed biography of [Harriet Tubman](#) , and is the consultant for the National Park Service's [Harriet Tubman Special Resource Study](#) . She also serves on the advisory board of the Historic Context on the Underground Railroad in Delaware for the Underground Railroad Coalition of Delaware - the very region where the chair is claimed to originate. What follows is a compilation of our conversations and correspondence with the dealer.

Smith (who may also have been the chair's owner - this was never quite clear) replied to my colleague with the following email:

I will refer you to The Magazine ANTIQUES (January 2005) for another concise description and more detailed photographs of the African American Chair (STOOL) As the info. on the website suggests one would need to appreciate the significance of West African sacred Stools to understand the multi-dimensional integrated communication involved. More strictly speaking the chair and all three of its needle worked coverings are a single documentary device, specific to time, person and place. The icons you see flashing on and off on the website are all on the second covering. The cat covering is the first and the third is not pictured on the site but you will see it in the magazine. A detailed presentation has been given at the National Geographic Society in Washington and a feature article will appear in that publication September 2005. Through the dimensions of form, color, number, texture and juxtaposition whole bodies of sacred esoteric information is being communicated. It is an ancient method of passing down sacred knowledge....

To me, he wrote only that there was "far too much going on regarding the chair (stool) to put it all in an e-mail" so asked me to phone him. Larson did so as well. In both conversations he seemed at once reluctant to discuss the chair in detail and unable to resist the urge to do so. After I identified myself, he told me he was good friends with the Keno Brothers (of *Antiques Roadshow* fame), lectured at Colonial Williamsburg, and owned "the biggest antiques restoration company in the country," "in business for four

generations." He asked what I knew on the subject, explaining that he didn't want to discuss things I couldn't understand. Then he began a remarkable one-hour description of the chair, asking early on whether I might have a buyer for it. He variously said the chair is insured for \$5 million or \$6.2 million; because of its historical importance, he hopes the buyer would agree to make it available for at least a year for further study and documentation. Smith said that he knows *Hidden in Plain View* author Raymond Dobard personally, but while he thinks Dobard is "on to something", he believes that the chair will "prove some things about the [quilt] 'code' and disprove others". Ozella (Tobin's source for the "code") is "too far removed" to know the "code" accurately - hence the importance of the chair.

"Authorities and universities"

In each conversation Smith emphasized that the chair had been "vetted" through various "authorities and universities" which he declined to name. He said a "detailed presentation" on the chair was given to the National Geographic Society in Washington, and that it would be featured in the September 2005 issue of *National Geographic Magazine*, which he said was doing a little follow-up research and taking photographs. When I asked him to assign a date to the chair he declined, then said it "could be as early as 1788". He later offered to Larson that it had been authenticated by Virginia's Chrysler Museum of Art as a typical c.1780-1840 ladderback chair from the Delmarva peninsula. He said that Colonial Williamsburg is doing the textile research and would soon present "an extensive writing on it" (although when asked later to confirm who was performing the fiber analysis or to detail exactly what Williamsburg was doing, he "didn't want to talk about that"). Since the chair is a post-Colonial, non-Williamsburg piece, I wondered why Colonial Williamsburg would be involved. He explained it is because Colonial Williamsburg is so well-funded and because although the chair dates from the early 19th century its style classes it as "Colonial". Most important, it would be a real tourist draw. "*African-American items are "hot" right now,*" he said, and Colonial Williamsburg does not have much in the way of such artifacts.

He became circumspect when I asked whether he knew anything about the original owner, and said he was "not going into that". I clarified that my interest concerned not who had legal ownership of the chair but the chair's origins, and he answered that he knew nothing other than that it was bought not long ago by its previous owner (recently deceased at age 45) in a \$2 boxlot at a local auction. He has not asked the auction house where that lot originated. He told Larson, however, that the chair was acquired from an unknown black person. Wherever it came from, and although he admits to having limited experience with antique textiles of any sort, as an "an expert in esoteric and underground" culture with "knowledge of ancient texts," as soon as he saw the chair, the dealer "knew what it was. You take what you believe and then pursue it."

He said that when the previous owner acquired the chair, the cushion was covered with "13 layers of 19th century cotton calico," an indication, he says, of the chair's importance. The former owner was, he said, knowledgeable enough to have removed them with care. Inside those 13 layers were found three successive covers executed in needlework of various types. He said that there is "nothing which suggests [the needlework cushion covers] couldn't be 18th century" although they "may not be", but finally stated he believes the newest of the 3 worked covers was made no later than 1840. Proof that the "enstoolments" took place, he claims, is that each layer of fabric on the cushion was covered while it was still in good condition. Why else would someone recover and refinish a chair in good condition, Smith asks, unless it was for an "enstoolment"?

Smith refused to answer any questions about dyes, yarn twists, or fibers used - the fundamentals of textile analysis. Instead, he repeatedly referred to "testing the chair's DNA", giving great importance to chemically analyzing the smoke he says was used to darken the chair in order to identify the kind of wood used for the fire. When asked whether he had shown the cushions to anyone in the quilt or textile history world and what their thoughts were, he said their opinions on it are "very diverse" and refused to give the name of anyone he consulted, finally dismissing them with the remark that "that crowd's pre-bias is so strong." He also said he was not interested in having the Smithsonian look at it because he "has a problem with them".



The cat cover, from the auction catalog.

The cat cover

The oldest of the worked covers can be seen in pictures of the chair. It depicts a cat (a "symbol of cleansing and purity") in what the dealer described as a "carefully-executed open X pattern" (which further questioning revealed to be counted cross-stitch), worked in black wool with red background on a base of "jute feedsack".

When informed that jute ("gunny") sacks were not in general use in the US until the Civil War, he said he didn't really know if the fiber was jute, but was using the word for convenience because "that's what our upholsterer calls that kind of fabric".

He then said the fabric was stamped with the name of a town in England which had a textile mill for just 20 years in the late 18th century, helping to date the fabric. He would not state the name of the town or the source of his information because "it took a long time to research," but "that's the only thing that stamp could indicate because it's an unusual name." Compare the cat embroidery with c.1910-20 New England examples [here](#) .)

The brickworks cover

The next-oldest layer is made from rectangles of dark wool suiting fabric in a brick-like pattern with seams embellished with featherstitching - identical to a type of quilt common in the 1900-20 period, when women collected tailor sample books for the purpose. Smith said the "color juxtaposition" was significant and that a West African scholar had suggested that computer imaging be used to determine the original colors of the fabrics, which was critical to their analysis.



*The brickworks cover and its
"Masonic snakes with eyes".*



Also typical of quilts of that period and style are the embroideries on some blocks: a spider web, a cross, an anchor and a dollar sign. About this Smith promptly corrected

me, saying that the dollar sign was "Masonic snakes with eyes," adding that he had carefully counted the "chain links" (chainstitches) from which they were made because the number of "links" is significant.

The anchor, he said, was not the common maritime symbol (also used by Christians to signify faith). He would not say what the "snakes" or other symbols meant, but vaguely referred to Masonic symbols and black Masons in Delmarva, noting that "a major book release" about the symbols' meaning would soon take place. (I understand Tobin, author of *Hidden in Plain View*, was then attempting to write a book on the "quilt code" and the Masons.) He observed that the red paint, which he called "blood wash" and said was significant, had dripped onto this cover. To him this not only indicates the cover was contemporaneous with the chair being painted with "blood wash"; it is evidence of the chair's important ritual symbolism. Every time a new leader was "enstooled," he said, the chair was redone. (Strangely this is not the practice among the Akan.)

The "star map"

One of the last two layers (it was never clear which) contains what Smith called a "star map". This is not pictured in the ad or on the website. The dealer stated in two separate conversations that when carefully studied the "map" points right to where Harriet Tubman lived in central New York. When he was told by Larson that Tubman did not live in the house until 1861 - more than two decades after he says the cushion was made - the dealer backpedaled, saying that he did not mean to imply that is what the signs show. In a later conversation, Smith claimed it was "just coincidental" that the "map" pointed to where Tubman lived. When asked why he then would mention Tubman's name at all in connection with the chair, he said that Tubman "came from the same culture". He also explained that the "map" contains the North Star because to escape from the peninsula "you can't just go due north, you have to follow the North Star" (except for satellite purposes, the North star *is* "due north") and that this path is the only way for slaves to escape the peninsula (which Larson says is known to be untrue). I asked why an escaping slave would have to be told by a map that to go north, he should follow the North Star. Smith replied that the map had different levels of meaning and that because it was on what in effect was a royal throne, it was at least in part symbolic.

The crazy cover

To the textile or quilt historian, the outer, newest layer looks like typical late 19th-early 20th century, mainstream American crazy piecing in wool with decorative embroidery on the seams. Not so, says the dealer; it is "absolutely African-American," and he has documented that the shapes are not random but have "deep roots in West African meaning". And since this layer, he says, dates to 1840 or before, this "revolutionizes the

whole idea of crazy quilts."

Describing himself as an "expert in ancient texts," Smith says he has determined that **the embroidered seams of the crazy-patch cushion cover are in fact Akan (or Adinkra) writing**, which he said he confirmed with an unnamed person who is "the only expert in Akan writing in the US." (This claim seems surprising. Akan is the [native language](#) of 44% of Ghanaians, more than 43,000 of whom [immigrated](#) to the US since 1980.)

When asked how Akan writing could appear on a 19th century Virginia object, the dealer claimed that significant numbers of Akan slaves had been transported to the Chesapeake during that period. Larson has researched this subject extensively, and states that while ships of enslaved Akan from Africa did drop anchor in the Chesapeake Bay, the region already had a surplus of slaves, so they were immediately transported to the Deep South. No evidence exists of an Akan presence of any note in the region where the chair was located. Even more astonishing: **Smith claims his expert can read the "Akan writing"**. (He would not tell me what the writing says.)

Smith's "experts"

One of just two "experts" Smith would name is Rachel Malcolm-Woods, a Virginia abstract painter and self-described "Africanist" who is a visiting assistant professor in the Cinema & Photography department at Southern Illinois University. Smith told Larson that Malcolm-Woods is the "expert" he consulted on the "writing," but although Malcolm-Woods was among the names he gave to me, he told me she is not his "writing" expert - only that she "has seen things like this before."



The piecing, fabrics and "Akan writing" embroidery of the chair's crazy quilt cover (above, right) is identical to early 20th century crazy quilts such as one known to have been made by a white woman in 1930 (above, left).

Woods [claims](#) to have found "a system of graphics that to the outsider looks like a decorative design....in African American quilts as early as 1750". (italics mine) In early [2004](#) Woods concluded that the geometric patterns on three or four gravestones at Peddler, Amherst County, Virginia, some produced as late as 1900, were nsibidi writing used by African secret societies - in [her words](#), "the only examples of an unadulterated cultural link to Africa."

The main marking on the gravestones is a rectangular symbol with two circles that Malcolm- Woods thinks signifies a journey. Other inscribed symbols on the slates are a star-like design that she believes means unity and a flower image that may signify two men loving the same woman. Several stones are blank. Two have words inscribed.

(What those words were, and Malcolm-Woods's interpretation of them, was not provided.)

Such a find would be quite an achievement, but apparently Woods simply presumed the dead were African-American even though the carving, chamfered edges, and dimensions of the "Nsibidi" panels bear an uncanny resemblance to the panels of slate and marble [mantels](#) in the [Eastlake](#) style (which originated in England) popular with the middle classes in the late 19th century. When a house was updated, the stone was often recycled. Malcolm-Woods's "[woman stone](#)" motif is almost identical to one found on such a mantel.

Even though at least one stone is inscribed with names, birth, and death dates, no research appears to have been done to determine the race of those buried; the motifs, apparently, simply "looked black". The reverse of one with these "African" symbols is faintly inscribed "In Memory of Mrs. Sa. Downey Born June 10th 1839 Died Jany 11th 1897." Malcolm-Woods says no census shows anyone by that name. But the Peddler censuses for 1870 and 1880 do indeed show a Susan Downey, wife of Samuel (hence "Mrs. Sa.").

Malcolm-Woods writes that Mrs. Downey's maiden name was Wood, that she wanted to be buried with her own family, and that the last owner of the cemetery property was C.E. Wood. Census records indicate that in 1870 Samuel's younger brother John lived in Peddler with William Wood, and in 1880 with William's son Zachariah, down the road from Charles H. Wood. Census records also confirm the birth date on Susan Downey's headstone, and indicate that by 1900 Samuel had remarried, which would be consistent with the stone's 1897 death date.

Update, November 2007: Charlotte Brown, whose cousin is Samuel Downey's great-great-grandniece, reports that the Downeys arrived in Peddler from Botetourt Co., Virginia around 1860. Samuel was the son of Pennsylvania coal miner Archibald

Downey and his wife Sarah (probably Haun), who settled in Alleghany Co., Virginia in the 1820s. All the Downeys - including Susan - and their descendants are white. Malcom-Woods's antebellum "Igbo" cemetery with "Nsibidi" carvings appears to instead be the late 19th century burial ground of the white Wood family, which contains headstones made of parts of an Eastlake-style slate mantel. She has not responded to questions about her claims.

The only other "expert" the dealer named is Hugh Nibley, whom he described as "a teacher of Comparative Studies." Nibley, who died in 2005 at the age of 94, was for many years the Mormon Church's chief expert in ancient writing, but was criticized not only by other [Biblical scholars](#) but even by [his fellow Mormon academics](#) for methodology so poor one Mormon scholar describes it as "work[ing] from the conclusions to the evidence".

In 1980 Nibley was brought in by church elders to examine the "[Anthon transcript](#)", a document covered with hieroglyphics which its owner, dealer Mark Hofmann, said was Mormon founder Joseph Smith's own copy of the characters found on the gold plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated. After examining it, Nibley stated that "This offers as good a test as we'll ever get as to the authenticity of the Book of Mormon...Of course it's translatable." According to the *Provo Herald*, "Nibley also said he counted at least two dozen out of 47 characters in the Demotic alphabet that could be given phonetic value. 'This offers as good a test as we'll ever get. **Nobody could have faked those characters. It would take 10 minutes to see that this is fake.**' " The *Herald* checked with Nibley again to see if he remained confident. Said Nibley, "I still say just what I said before. It can be translated.' The LDS bought the document for \$20K. The Anthon transcript was the first of many such rare documents which the LDS bought over the next few years from Hofmann, culminating in an 1830 letter from Mormon witness Martin Harris stating that Joseph Smith claimed when he went to get the gold plates for the Book of Mormon, a 'white salamander' in the bottom of the hole 'transfigured himself' into a 'spirit' and 'struck me 3 times.' Commonly referred to as the "white salamander letter", the document's controversial statements caused a flutter in the Mormon hierarchy, who arranged to buy it from Smith. Then things went awry; two people who had raised suspicions about Hofmann ended up brutally murdered.

Hofmann was convicted of the murders in 1986. He has since admitted to them, confirming that his motive was to keep anyone from finding out that all the documents he had sold the LDS were forgeries - **including the Anthon transcript, whose writing Nibley had said "nobody could have faked"**. Hofmann had written the "hieroglyphics" on an endpaper torn from an old book he found in the LDS library, then aged the paper with peroxide and a hot iron. Authors Jerald and Sandra Tanner observed, "That Dr.

Nibley could see ancient Egyptian characters on a document that actually contained the doodlings of Mark Hofmann throws a cloud of doubt over all his work."

Smith holds Nibley's expertise in high regard.

Responses from the Chrysler Museum, Colonial Williamsburg, and National Geographic

I contacted Gary Baker, Decorative Arts curator of the Chrysler Museum, who told me the museum does not authenticate objects, but does provide opinions. To prevent such opinions from later being misrepresented, the museum keeps a copy of the opinion with the recipient's signature on it. Mr. Bauer said he personally did not see the chair, had never heard of the chair's dealer, and could not find anybody else at the museum who had. I phoned Smith for an explanation. He told me Larson is "a liar", insisting that he had instead told her that the authenticator was Gordon Lohr, who wrote a book on 18th century furniture published by the Chrysler Museum. Later in that same conversation he said Lohr did not in fact authenticate it, but that after *personally inspecting* the chair had only given his "opinion" that it was a typical ladderback chair from the Delmarva Peninsula, c.1780-1840. A few minutes later Smith said there was no difference between "authentication" and an "opinion", and that my attempt to clarify which he meant showed my complete ignorance of antiques. Gordon Lohr wrote me that he had "only seen photographs" of the chair, which to him "appears to relate to other ladderback chairs from the Eastern Shore, circa 1820-70." He added that "It's an interesting chair; however, at his price, I don't know where you would go with it."

Larson spoke with Linda Baumgarten, Textiles curator at Colonial Williamsburg. Baumgarten stated that Williamsburg is not interested in the chair, and that they had voted to decline doing any chemical analysis of the fabrics because they all agreed that not only the fabrics, but the stitching and pattern, were probably 1880 and later - certainly post-Civil War. Baumgarten was very skeptical of Smith's claims. She said one of her assistants may decide to do the analysis privately, but that Williamsburg would not be involved, and that Smith had been informed of their decision. When asked for an explanation why his claims about Williamsburg's interest and participation differed from what the museum's own textiles curator had stated, Smith again said Larson was lying; "obviously" nobody had talked to Linda Baumgarten.

Larson contacted National Geographic, and was told that nobody in the Research Department had heard of the chair or Smith. A Research Department member then called Larson to obtain more information; Patrick McGeehan, a research correspondent for the magazine, then phoned to confirm they could not find anyone who knew

anything about the story. When asked for an explanation, Smith said it was obvious I was lying, because "you cannot just up and call National Geographic". He reasserted his claims, still refusing to give the name of any NG staffer because "you'll harass them". Finally he revealed his contact was Shelley Sperry, whose title he did not know, explaining that "everybody there wears a lot of hats". He "didn't want to give details," but it appeared he or others initially contacted the magazine about the chair, and Sperry eventually returned the call. What Smith described as his "presentation to the National Geographic Society" turned out to be a story pitch to Sperry alone. Smith said this "was the same thing" because "do you know how big the National Geographic Society is?"

Before Larson could call National Geographic again, she received a call from Sperry herself, who said she is on the magazine's research staff. Sperry said that while Smith had discussed an article on the chair with her, nothing firm had ever been established; she was still checking his story. She had not been informed of Colonial Williamsburg's decision or of Lohr's opinion. It was her impression Smith had no background in textiles, Akan stools, or the history of slavery, escape, and the Underground Railroad in the region the chair is supposed to be from, and that his claims might be the product of wishful thinking.

Epilogue: The \$5 Million "Enstoolment" Goes to Auction

In early January 2006, Smith consigned the chair with Brunk Auctions, a North Carolina auctioneer, who listed it on [Ebay Live](#) with 20 detailed photographs and an opening bid of \$15,000. It also appeared in the Brunk [online catalog](#). All but one of the other auction descriptions are about 200 words long and contain nothing more than dimensions, condition, and provenance. The description for the chair is nearly three times longer, and very detailed:

Lot # 392 -- Maple ladder-back side chair, retaining its original three-layer patchwork seat cover over a rush seat and a dry, old surface, probably African-American, Delmarva Peninsula, 19th century, 37-1/2 x 18 x 13-3/4 in. Surface accretion of early pigments and finishes, wear and minor abrasions to surface, seat covering with stains, repairs, loose stitches and wear, top two layers detached. Estimate: \$30,000 - \$60,000 Literature: The Magazine Antiques, January 2005, two-page color advertisement.

Extensive research into the history, surface and symbolic devices of this chair suggest that it is an African-American secret society chair. The three successive needlework seat coverings, each loosely stitched or tied to the seat frame, possess both stylistic and forensic characteristics highly suggestive of a secret society function. This example presents an array of numerical, symbolic and interrelated

design features associated with esoteric mnemonic devices. The predominant use of the esoteric number "three" is presented as follows: three seat coverings arranged on a three-stepped, three-rung ladder-back chair. The middle or central covering is arranged as follows: three sets of symbols with three icons in each set; three linear symbols utilize three lines each; three figurative icons; three twelve-pointed stars aligned up the middle with the third star hidden. The central covering is constructed with 26 patches and in presentation would conceal the 27th or primal covering. The number 27 ($27=3 \times 3 \times 3$) being highly important in esoteric numerology representing the greatest secret, i.e., "secrecy itself". The outer covering, or so-called "crazy quilt", represents the same function as the outer structure of esoteric groups, i.e., to cover, hide or give an otherwise meaningless front to the order. The final or third covering (the 27th square), is a black cat on a red background executed in an open-lattice relief pattern or an "X" pattern. This pattern is common in West African stools, granary doors, and particularly in royal robes and headdresses. The cat is associated with female purification societies and executed with the "X" relief pattern suggests at least a claim of royal connections. The three figurative icons on the central covering are the most blatantly West African. The spider (Ananse, the creator of the cosmos and dominant figure in Akan folk tales), the spider web (literally the cosmos itself), and the wheel (congress or authoritative gathering, also found on African-American gravestones). The three-lined symbols also have strong West African connections, the most obvious being that of primal male and female (the embedded sword and mother's cradle). The most enigmatic is the three entwined snakes in the appearance of a dollar sign. The \$ symbol was also used in early slave-holding account books to denote slave value. The chair surface was redecorated after the application of each covering with the final being a blackening in the West African tradition. The central covering seems to have been applied soon after the first covering (cat) with little evidence of fading to this primal covering. When the central covering was displayed, the wood surface was decorated in red (possibly a red blood wash). Given the chromatic and symbolic complexity of the central covering, this would have produced quite a stunning effect. Overall, the entire device displays a complexity of form, numerology, color, texture and iconographic juxtaposition which conveys a consistent spectrum of cosmology, religion, and specific organic esoteric information. Extensive research and technical analysis of the chair and its covering are available on request.

(The 13 layers of "19th century calico" apparently were either not included in the auction, or not deemed worthy of mention.)

Auctioneer Andrew Brunk stated that while his firm "stand[s] behind our cataloging of the chair as a 19th century ladder back side chair [emphasis added] - as to its importance

and interpretation, we leave that up to bidders." Brunk said that Smith was "very forthright" that "opinions" about the chair "vary widely", and therefore before bidding started, it would be announced that "there is disagreement about the interpretation of the chair and its importance, and bidders can make their own assessments and conclusions."

Andrew Brunk graciously mailed me copies of the "extensive research" referred to in the auction description; I received it 1/9/2006. It consists of the following ([email me](#) for scans):

- ▶ An outline of what appears to be a presentation on the chair (possibly Smith's pitch to Sperry at National Geographic).
- ▶ Photocopies of images of five African wood and bronze sculptures (unidentified as to source) in which Smith says appear the "open xxx pattern," "embedded sword" and "spider web" motifs he finds on the chair; plus a photocopy of one of the gravestones Malcolm-Woods claims is African-American.
- ▶ Copies of webpage articles:
 - ▶ One on [African art](#); the bottom of paragraph #11 is highlighted, and refers to the significance of blackening an Ashanti stool.
 - ▶ One on [African traditional religions](#) ; the bottom of the first paragraph of Section III (beginning "They grasp the cosmos) is highlighted, and refers to the African concept of the cosmos as "a three-tiered structure".
 - ▶ One on "[The Peoples of Africa](#) "; the bottom of the first and the second paragraphs are highlighted, and describe how Akan stools are used.
 - ▶ A section from another on "[The Akan Group](#) ," in which the third paragraph of that section is highlighted, and refers to who owned the Akan stool and its importance.
 - ▶ A [short summary of textile history](#) from a vintage clothing website. Nothing highlighted.
 - ▶ A portion of another paper concerning the [Akan concept of libation](#) . The following is highlighted:

Generally the 'abusuapanyin' (the family head) performs libation for the family

and the senior male member of the royal family officiates at the stool ceremonies.

Although Smith refers to the chair's red color as a "blood wash," the author of this article explicitly states (in the paragraph right below the one highlighted by Smith) that "Blood is never used in libation."

- ▶ A short article from *The Magazine: Antiques* (undated), on which Smith has written "encoded decorative arts. The chain link symbol". The article concerns the meaning of the Latin motto on an 18th century Chinese export bowl; the author believes the motto refers to King George III.
- ▶ A Pediatric Aids Foundation webpage on "[The Meaning of Colors](#)". The site's purpose is to encourage quilters to make quilts for children suffering from AIDS. The site gives no source for the meanings it provides. Nothing highlighted.
- ▶ A list of Akan symbols and their meanings from the website of a [company](#) that manufactures doors. Nothing highlighted.

A page on the "[Origin and history of the word 'dollar' and dollar sign](#)". Smith has highlighted the section entitled "The Slave Theory," which reads:

There have been claims that the dollar symbol, \$, is derived from the words for "slave" and "nail" in Spanish (or in Latin, according to one version of this theory that posits an earlier date for the invention of the symbol). The shackles worn by slaves could be locked by a nail which was passed through the rings or loops at the ends of the shackle and bent while it was still hot and malleable. The Spanish for slave is esclavo and for "nail" is clavo. Therefore the "S" with a nail, \$, or S-clavo = esclavo or slave. Slaves constituted a store of wealth and as a result the abbreviation for slaves that slave-owners used in their account books came to represent money.

Smith has not highlighted the sentence that follows it, in which the author observes:

This seems like the kind of explanation that would be popular with conspiracy theorists.

- ▶ Another entitled "[What the Dollar Sign Signifies](#)" from a [white-supremacist site](#). (The views of the site's author on African-Americans can be viewed [here](#). Please note that these pages load very slowly.) The following is highlighted:

The dollar sign can be drawn with one pillar or two. As one Freemason explained to me, thinking I was "a member of the craft": the two pillars represent pillars of Solomon's Temple; the S figure is "the snake of Solomon." In the case of the single pillar dollar sign, we are looking at the snake which is superimposed upon The Tree of Knowledge.

The author of the website then refers to the Bible as "the jew-book" [sic] and concludes with this statement:

The only people who benefit from debt-based currency are the jews and their Zionist stooges. No nation can tolerate such a money system and survive, for it means sacrificing self-rule in exchange for alien slavery. OUR RACE IS OUR NATION!

On January 7, 2006 the chair sold for [\\$1,700](#) .

The "Ross Code"

*Christopher Densmore, Curator
Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College*

As evidence for the use of codes in the URR, Tobin cites the "Ross code" used by Canadian abolitionist and underground railroad agent, Alexander Ross. In this, Tobin does not cite Ross directly, but a description of the "code" described by children and young adult author Virginia Hamilton and writer Henrietta Buckmaster. These sources are given in full below.

Alexander Milton Ross, 1875:

One of these friends (a resident of the interior of New York State) had been my principal supporter, and active and unflinching friend from the commencement of my career as an abolitionist. The other, was a resident of Brooklyn, a prominent philanthropist, long identified with the abolitionists of the North. All my correspondence, while in the Slave States, was to be sent to them. Whenever a slave succeeded in making his or her escape I was to send them the information, and they in turn notified our friends north of the Ohio to be on the lookout for "packages of hardware" (men) or "dry goods" (females), and these Ohio friends concealed the fugitives for a time, if necessary, until they could be sent safely to Canada.

- Alexander Milton Ross,
Recollections and Experiences of an Abolitionist from 1855 to 1865. (1875)
Reprint, 1972. Northbrook, Illinois: Metro Books.

Comment: The system here described by Ross makes no mention of numerical or name codes for cities. Far from being proof of an elaborate system of communication used among enslaved people in the south, Ross maintained that southern slaves were ignorant of the means and methods of escape until he himself supplied them with information.

Alexander Milton Ross, 1893:

Before leaving Philadelphia, it was mutually arranged between my friends and myself, in respect to confidential correspondence, that the terms "hardware" was to signify males and "dry goods" females. I was to notify my friend in Philadelphia (if possible) whenever a package of "hardware" or of "dry goods" was started for freedom, and he in turn warned the friends in Ohio and Pennsylvania to be on the lookout for runaways."

- Alexander Milton Ross, *Memoirs of a Reformer*.
Toronto: Hunter, Rose and Company, 1893, 42.

Comment: The code remains the same, though in his earlier account Ross talks of informing friends in New York State, where here he speaks of "a friend" in Philadelphia.

Henrietta Buckmaster, 1958:

He [Ross] had developed a code which fugitives committed to memory. It led them safely from station to station. For example, Meadville, Ohio, was known by the number 10; Seville, Ohio, by 20; Media, Ohio, by 27. Cleveland was called "hope"; Sandusky, "sunrise: Detroit, "midnight"; and the ports of entry into Canada were all bursts of praise. Windsor was "Glory to God," Port Stanley, "God be Praised." So "Helpers work at midnight" was merely a poetry phrase except to the slave who held the key.

- Henrietta Buckmaster, *Flight into Freedom: The Story of the Underground Railroad* (NY: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1958), 138.

[Henrietta Buckmaster was the pseudonym for Henrietta Henkel]

Comment: Neither the numeric codes nor the fanciful names for cities is included in the *Recollections* (1875) or *Memoirs* (1893) of Alexander M. Ross. Unless Buckmaster has another source (not apparent from her citations), this seems to be an invention. In Ross, the code is a means of communication between him and northern associates. In Buckmaster, the code is taught to fugitives.

Virginia Hamilton, 1993:

In Ross's code, the number XX was the town of Seville, Ohio. Media, Ohio, was number 27. Hope was Cleveland and sunrise was Sandusky. Midnight was Detroit, Michigan. One can imagine one of Ross's messages: "We hope to rise at sunrise; they we will rest by midnight." The message marked the path of travel and the main towns where the slaves would be helped on the Railroad. "Going to Canada, a fugitive might enter the country from Glory to God, Ross's code for Windsor, Ontario, or God be praised, Port Stanley."

- Virginia Hamilton, *Many Thousand Gone: African Americans from Slavery to Freedom* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 117.

Comment: Hamilton's description evidently derives from Buckmaster's 1953 book.

Tobin and Dobard, 1999:

The Ross code used numbers, pious phrases, and the times of the day to instruct slaves in running away. He identified the number and the gender of the fugitives by referring to them as "hardware" for males or "dry goods" for females. These were the packages in the Ross system. The Ross code, like the Underground Railroad Quilt Code, was predicated upon memory, only the initiates would be able to discern the message hidden in what would appear to be a simple note or letter. Ross utilized numbers and poetic descriptions in formulating his code. We are told that Pennsylvania was recognized as number 20; Media, Ohio, was number 27; Cleveland, Ohio, was called "Hope"; Sandusky, Ohio, was known as "Sunrise," and Detroit, Michigan, was dubbed "midnight." The entryways into Canada were described by words of praise and thanksgiving to the Almighty: "Glory to God" meant Windsor, Ontario, and "God be praised," stood for Port Stanley (Buckmaster, p. 249). As such, one proposed message reads: " We hope to rise at sunrise; they we rest by midnight," (Hamilton, *Many Thousand Gone*, p. 117). Translated, the message states: Cleveland to Sandusky to Detroit. The final destination was Ontario ("Glory to God and God be praised"). Buckmaster and others missed a probable reference to the Buxton-Chatham area in Canada where several early Black settlements existed...

- Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard,
Hidden in Plain View: The Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad
(NY: Doubleday, 1999), 73.

Comment: The description of fugitives as "hardware" or "dry goods" comes ultimately from Ross, though the authors here cite only Buckmaster and Hamilton.

Real history: firsthand accounts of slaves and abolitionists online

University of North Carolina library Documenting the American South collection

The University of North Carolina (www.docsouth.unc.edu) has an extensive collection of 18th, 19th and early 20th century books by and about real African-Americans, fugitive slaves, slave life, the Underground Railroad, and abolitionists. Three hundred nine are firsthand accounts written or dictated by former slaves. All are fascinating reading! (No mention of quilts, however.) Use the site's search engine to keyword search thousands of original documents.

Slave autobiographies

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/chronautobio.html>

Slave biographies

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/chronbio.html>

Fugitive slaves

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/result.phtml?lcsH=Fugitive%20slaves%20--%20United%20States%20--%20Biography>.

Abolitionists

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/result.phtml?lcsH=Abolitionists%20--%20United%20States%20--%20Biography>.

Slavery general (scroll down)

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/subject/s.html>

African Americans general

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/subject/a.html>

Underground Railroad

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/subject/u.html>

Other firsthand accounts online

Selected narratives of ex-slaves from the WPA collection at the US Library of Congress

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>

More slave narratives at the University of Virginia

<http://web.archive.org/web/20010603132240/xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/wpa/wpahome.html>

Books and publications by 19th century African American women (NY Public Library)

http://web.archive.org/web/20010521140303/digital.nypl.org/schomburg/writers_aa19/toc.html

Additional sites on the "Quilt Code"

"Underground Railroad" Quilts - Another View

<http://www.historyofquilts.com/underground-railroad.html>

Interview with African-American historian Giles Wright

<http://www.antiquequiltdating.com/ugrrwrightinterview.html>

Historical background of the Underground Railroad

<http://www.quilthistory.com/ugrrquilts.htm>

Quilts' role with slaves disputed

<http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-118747016.html>

The Underground Railroad and Abolition Quilts

<http://www.womenfolk.com/historyofquilts/abolitionist.htm>

Review of Hidden in Plain View

<http://www.uta.edu/english/tim/lection/050607.html>

H-Slavery history discussion archives (search "quilting")

<http://www.h-net.org/~slavery/>

Just a few of the many excellent, well-researched books on the slave system, fugitive slaves and the Underground Railroad

Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman: Portrait of an American Hero

Bound for Canaan: A History of the Underground Railroad

Slavery and Freedom: An Interpretation of the Old South

The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders

Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation

Bullwhip Days: The Slaves Remember: An Oral History

The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad

19th century African American quilts in US museum collections

Following is a list, based on information in Kyra Hicks's *Black Threads*, of many of the 19th century quilts known or believed to have been made by African Americans which can be seen in American museums. Occasionally quilts are misattributed; I'd be grateful to hear of corrections and additions which should be made to this list.

CALIFORNIA

[Oakland Museum of California](#)

1000 Oak Street
Oakland, CA 94607
510-238-3404

Two c.1890 quilt tops by Elsie Preston.

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

National Museum of American History

Smithsonian Institution, Division of Textiles
Washington, DC 20560
202-337-1889

1886 Bible Quilt by Harriet Powers; late 19thc. Sugar Loaf quilt by Diana Degodis Washington Hine, said to have been born a slave at Mt. Vernon in 1793; c.1879 pieced cotton top with crosses, stars and triangles by Betty West of Washington, DC; c.1840 appliqued counterpane by Ann; late 19th c. Feathered Star quilt made by Texas slaves; c.1860 appliqued and embroidered quilt top by Frances M. Jolly (pictured above).

GEORGIA

[Atlanta History Center](#)

130 West Paces Ferry Road NW
Atlanta, GA 30305
404-814-4053

Two slave-made quilts c.1820-1865.

Chief Vann House Historic Site

82 Hwy 225 N
Chatsworth GA 30705
706-695-2598

c.1840 Turkey Tracks quilt made by slave on Carters Quarters (Rock Spring) plantation,
Murray Co., GA.

Columbus Museum

1251 Wynnton Rd.
Columbus, GA 31906
706-649-0713

Lone Star quilt made c.1875-1910 by Angeline Pitts

High Museum of Art

1280 Peachtree Street NE
Atlanta, GA 30309
404-733-4400

19th c. Snake quilt from eastern NC and c.1900 Bible Scene quilt by members of the
Drake family, Thomaston, GA.

LOUISIANA

Louisiana State Museum

751 Rue Chartres
New Orleans, LA 70116
504-568-6968

Late 19thc. silk Log Cabin quilt by Dolly Jackson, a Georgia slave.

MASSACHUSETTS

Museum of Fine Arts

465 Huntington Avenue
Boston, MA 02115
617-267-9300

c..1895-1898 Bible Quilt by Harriet Powers.

MICHIGAN

[Michigan State University Museum](#)

West Circle Drive
East Lansing, MI 48824
517-355-7474

Oak Leaf quilt block c.1850, probably from Alabama, attributed to an anonymous member of the Baker family. (Photo from *African American Quilting in Michigan*.)

MISSISSIPPI

Old Capital Museum of Mississippi History

POB 571
Jackson, MS 39205
601-359-6920

Six 19th c. Mississippi quilts.

NEW YORK

Metropolitan Museum of Art

American Decorative Arts Department
1000 Fifth Avenue
New York NY 10028
212-535-7710

c.1837-50 silk and cotton Star of Bethlehem quilt made by "Aunt Ellen" and "Aunt Margaret," slaves of Marmaduke Beckwith Morton family near Russelville KY.

NORTH CAROLINA

[Cape Fear Museum](#)

814 Market Street
Wilmington NC 28401-4731
910-341-4350

Four quilts or tops made between 1898-1952 by Ida Chestnut [sic] Mosley, as well as oral histories and photos of black quilters.

Historic Carson House

1805 Hwy 70W
Marion, NC 28752
828-724-4640

1880 The Marseilles quilt by Sarah Kadella, 1830 Blazing Star by Kadella's daughter, and 1839 Crazy Patch by Em, John Logan's slave.

Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts
924 S. Main Street
Winston-Salem NC 27108
336-721-7300

c.1880-1930 Courthouse Steps quilt by Ann Hester Isaac.

North Carolina Museum of History
4650 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, NC 27699 919-715-0200

1870 Log Cabin quilt by Patience White, c.1875-1900 quilt by Mary Barnes.

OHIO

Cincinnati Art Museum
953 Eden Park Drive
Cincinnati OH 45202
513-539-2995

1849 Star of Bethlehem quilt by "Aunt Peggy".

Kent State University Museum

Rockwell Hall
Kent State, OH 44242-0001
330-672-3450

c.1850-75 silk quilt by Elizabeth Keckley (Mary Todd Lincoln's dressmaker); can also be viewed [online](#) .

PENNSYLVANIA

African American Museum in Philadelphia
701 Arch Street

Philadelphia PA 19106
215-574-0830

Three quilts dating 1850-1900.

SOUTH CAROLINA

Avery Research Center for African American History

125 Bull Street
College of Charleston
Charleston SC 29424
843-727-2009

Quilt c.1845-1853 by Johanna Davis.

Charleston Museum

360 Meeting Street
Charleston, SC 29403
843-722-2996

18th c. trapunto dresser cover, 18th c. unfinished trapunto piece, and 1828 chintz mosaic with trapunto piece, all slave made.

TEXAS

[Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum](#)

2401 Fourth Avenue
Canyon, TX 79016
806-651-2244

c.1860 slave made Ship's Wheel quilt.

[Witte Museum](#)

3801 Broadway
San Antonio, TX 78209
210-357-1889

1850 Ohio Star or Lone Star attributed to slave owned by Jane Greer Jackson of Lebanon, TN.

TENNESSEE

Tennessee State Museum

505 Deaderick Street
Nashville, TN 37243
615-741-2692

Circa 1850-60 slave-made Princess Feather variation quilt.

VIRGINIA

Valentine Museum

1015 E. Clay Street
Richmond, VA 23219
804-649-0711

Three quilts attributed to slaves; two are said to be c.1850. The third is dated by the museum "circa1800". On inquiry the museum stated it was "very likely made on a plantation by slaves, possibly Beaver Dam plantation [in Hanover County, VA]" because the fabrics "appear to be handwoven and would probably have been woven on the plantation by slave weavers and then made up into this quilt"; one is "crudely block printed".

The quilt was donated to the museum in the 1950s; ownership is traced only as far back as Sallie Terrell (1856-1910), a white woman whose ancestors were among the early Quaker settlers of Hanover County, many of whom were abolitionists (one helped found the freedmen's colony of Liberia). The [1800 Virginia tax rolls](#) appear to indicate that while the five Terrell households in Hanover collectively owned more than 1,300 acres, they owned only 13 slaves, most of whom were aged 12-16. (Sallie's grandfather Pleasant Terrell (1778-1847) owned only 42.5 acres and no slaves.) The same was true of the Terrell holdings in adjacent Caroline County, where in [1789](#) Pleasant owned 790 acres but no slaves, and the remaining Terrells owned more than 2,000 acres but only 13 slaves over age 16. The [1820 census](#) shows Pleasant owned 17 slaves, 12 of whom were under age 14; in [1850](#), when nearly 8,400 slaves lived in Hanover County, Sallie's father Joseph owned only 12, of whom four were younger than 16.

Whether the fabrics were slave-woven or not, the quilt's medallion format and fringed edge do follow the style of quilts made in America and Great Britain in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Unfortunately the museum's records do not indicate whether the fabric, fringe, and thread were examined to determine whether they are cotton, linen, wool or silk (this can help determine age). It would be prudent to obtain more information on the quilt's fabrics and construction and ascertain whether at the time the

quilt was made, any of Sallie's ancestors owned property where slaves were employed in either weaving or needlework.

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