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❑ **The Underground Railroad and the Secret Codes of Antebellum Slave Quilts**

A Howard University scholar believes that slave-era quilts contained hidden messages that were used by fugitive slaves to guide them along the Underground Railroad.

From the early slave years, quilting has held a special place in the lives of African Americans. Even today, quilting is a popular pastime among many thousands of black Americans.

But Raymond G. Dobard, a professor of art history at Howard University, contends that in the days of slavery quilting had a role far greater than the pursuit of art. In his book *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*, Professor Dobard advances the thesis that secret codes were incorporated into quilts that were used by slaves to help them find their way to freedom along the Underground Railroad.

Dobard and his coauthor Jacqueline Tobin base their theory on discussions they had in the mid-1990s with Ozella McDaniel Williams, a now deceased quilt maker who lived

in Charleston, South Carolina. Williams told the researchers that she had memorized a secret code passed down by her ancestors that was used by quilt makers before the Civil War to offer discreet clues to slaves who were trying to escape to freedom in the North. Since the vast majority of slaves could neither read nor write, there is no written record of these quilt codes. Therefore there is no certainty whether they in fact existed or to what extent they played a role in helping slaves escape to freedom.

But Tobin and Dobard believe that particular quilt squares which showed wrenches in a particular pattern or pointed in a particular direction were hung outside of slave housing to signal other slaves that it was time to gather their tools and other belongings and try to escape. Along the route of the Underground Railroad, particular quilt images hanging outside the window of a slave cottage could signal to the passing fugitives that it was safe to stop by or that they should continue on their way. The authors believe that patterns of threads placed at measured intervals on the quilts were drawn to scale to show distances to the next safe house.



A quilt made by Harriet Powers, a black slave born in Athens, Georgia, in 1837. The quilt currently is displayed at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.