Points of contact: Nineteenth century visual rhetoric of the Underground Railroad

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POINTS OF CONTACT: NINETEENTH CENTURY VISUAL RHETORIC OF THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

by

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Bachelor of Science
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
1999

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Arts Degree in Communication Studies
Department of Communications
Hank Greenspun College of Urban Affairs

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ABSTRACT

Points of Contact: Nineteenth Century Visual Rhetoric of the Underground Railroad

by

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Just as eighteenth century master seamstress Betsy Ross implemented more meanings and messages into the first American flag than what is obvious at first glance, so too did African American seamstresses weave messages into quilt patterns used on the Underground Railroad. Similar to the way themes of freedom and liberty in the Declaration of Independence were reinterpreted to include disenfranchised groups, Biblical themes such as heaven and the Promised Land were reinterpreted to include slaves. This study examines the visual rhetoric of nineteenth century textiles used by the Underground Railroad. From the evidence examined, I argue that the visual texts of quilting during the nineteenth century were complete multimedia devices used not only by African Americans but other disenfranchised groups such as Abolitionists, Native Americans, Woman Suffrage Activists and Freemasons. Nineteenth century visual rhetoric was significant both historically and rhetorically to many American subcultures.
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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

"Thank God you made it back safely!" In 1977, Helen Ozella Ransaw said these seven words as she gave my mother and myself two heirlooms, two matching handmade textiles she quilted herself. One was given to me, the other to my mother. The quilts were welcome back gifts, as we had just arrived from two years living in England. The quilts functioned as a tangible symbol that I, Theodore Ransaw, and my mother, Marilyn Ransaw, recently married into the family, were both now officially full members of the Ransaw family. The textiles, string quilts, were made according to African, African American and Native American traditions of which she was a part. The quilt given to me is shown below. It is one of the first patterns a quilter learns and was known to be most popular during the nineteenth century (Fry, 1990).
Simple to construct — a piece of cloth folded around another piece of cloth then sewn together — the string quilt is a design that experienced seamstresses often return to because it is so easy to use (Fry, 1994). This Ozella Ransaw string quilt is 82 ½ inches wide and 65 inches long. If you look closely, you can see that it is made up of two alternating patterns that resemble an X or a cross and another pattern made up of small triangles with the top points connected. These two patterns are called the Crossroad or Cross and Bow Tie. Artistically, the Ozella Ransaw string quilt is brightly colored, functional and decorative. The Ozella Ransaw string quilt simultaneously communicates cultural and religious meanings.

Based on African and Native American traditions, the exchange of a quilt serves as a time marker to signify accepting a new member into the family that is not an immediate

Image 1. Ozella Quilt
blood relation (Downs, 2000). Like most family heirlooms given to a young family
member, both the quarter and the quilt were prudently put away for safekeeping, hidden
but not forgotten. Taken out of storage at special events such as family gatherings and
other social events, the quilt was a well-known family conversation piece. Years later, I
discovered the design of the string quilt, which incorporated the Crossroad and Bow Tie
quilt patterns, was based on similar designs used to relay hidden messages during the
nineteenth century by operatives on the Underground Railroad. Regions that had well-run
underground networks in the nineteenth century, according to some writers, developed
signals based largely on Freemason symbols to communicate. They even used strips of
cloth tied to trees (Hudson, 2002, p. 64). These textiles were often created by women
involved in secret societies such as the Eastern Stars, the female off-shoot of the
Freemasons of which Ozella Ransaw was also a member. Freemasons also present
textiles crafted by Eastern Stars, in the form of aprons, to new initiates to represent
acceptance in the group (El-Amin, 1990).

This paper began as an examination of how African Americans used textiles like
the quilt patterns found on the Ozella Ransaw quilt as a form of visual rhetorical
communication on the Underground Railroad. These quilts and quilt patterns served not
only functionally as clothing, but also as discursive tools that persuaded disempowered
audiences to preserve their cultural identity. On this reading, quilts served as well to
convey messages of support and assistance to fugitive slaves. But this reading and the
purpose of the thesis alike required revision following an early meeting of my thesis
committee. One committee member went on line to seek guidance on primary source
material regarding quilts and the Underground Railroad. The responses to his inquiry
were immediate, divergent in their views, and strongly argued. Any effort to explore the rhetorical functions of quilts in the Underground Railroad therefore requires attention to this controversy.

In a one-week period, from Tuesday October 18th to Wednesday October 26th, the online query generated responses from all across the United States and as far away as Haifa, Israel and Senegal, West Africa. The responses were in the form of e-mails and three scholarly Internet chat rooms, H-Amdsty, H-Slavery and H-Afro-Am. I was given additional stories to check into, others asked additional questions and some even gave research advice. Pedagogical observations were offered as well. Most of the responses centered around the lack of primary source material, and some of the respondents encouraged me to keep looking. The fact that quilts were used to facilitate operatives on Underground Railroad, and whether quilt codes were used at all during the nineteenth century was heatedly debated. Much of the controversy stemmed from the notion that quilts being used as codes in conjunction with the Underground Railroad was just a myth.

Based largely on theory, the quilt code pattern looks something like this:

![Image 2. Monkey Wrench](image)
The Monkey Wrench pattern told fugitives slaves to gather tolls needed to escape or to fight for freedom.

Image 3. Wagon Wheel

The Wagon Wheel pattern told operatives to look for hidden compartments in wagons or to be on the lookout for new arrivals.

Image 4. Log Cabin

The Log Cabin pattern indicated that shelter was nearby.
The Bow Tie pattern announced to fugitive slaves to dress in disguise.

The Cathedral Church pattern was an indication to look for safety in graveyards or safe houses in the form of a church, like the A.M.E. Church.
Image 7. Double Wedding Rings

The Double Wedding Rings pattern was a message to break the shackles of slavery.

Image 8. Flying Geese

The Flying Geese pattern described to operatives and passengers on the Underground Railroad to follow the direction of Geese to freedom.
The Shoofly pattern told fugitive slaves that it was time to flee.

The Tumbling Boxes pattern directed operatives and passengers to hide in wagons carrying goods.
Image 11. Bear Claw

The Bear’s Paw warned pattern served as a warning to follow animal trials but to avoid dangerous animals.

Image 12. Crossroads

The Crossroads pattern was a meeting place for God and liberating mind and body.
The North Star pattern was used in conjunction with the song, *Follow the Drinking Gourd*. When a fugitive slave looked up on a starry night and found the North Star, the handle of the Big Dipper shaped like a drinking gourd was nearby pointing to the North and freedom.

These quilt codes were recreated from various sources. They summarize most of the online discussion about how quilt codes were used as a form of visual communication on the Underground Railroad. The following is a brief synopsis of the online responses.

Reinforcing a theme of Freemasonry in my thesis, quilt historian Leigh Fellner, from Pensacola, Florida, mentioned celebrated quilter Harriet Powers was a member of the same female secret society my grandmother was in, the Freemason Eastern Stars. Ms. Fellner also stated that more about the history of the Underground Railroad needs to be told. She referred to a primary source Underground Railroad text code, the Lawn Jockey Code (L. Fellner, personal communication, October 25, 2005). The Lawn Jockey Code is a story about George Washington and how he wanted to mount a surprise attack on Trenton, New Jersey, on Christmas Eve during the Revolutionary War. Both slaves and non-slaves joined the attack. A slave boy Tom Graves was told that he was too young to fight, so Washington put him in charge of the horses. Graves was to hold a
lantern for the troops as they came back from crossing the Delaware so they could safely row back to shore. Graves was found frozen to death, the reins of the horses still in his hand, with the lantern in the other hand, still lit. Washington was supposedly so moved by his sacrifice that he commissioned a statue of Graves at his home, Mount Vernon. For operatives of the Underground Railroad, the idea was so popular a groomsman placed outside a home came to be known to be a safe house and part of a secret code. An unlit lantern held by the statue meant that slaves needed to keep on moving, a lit one meant it was safe to enter the house (Goings, 1994). A red cloth tied around the arm of the groomsman meant to keep going, a green one meant that it was okay to stay.

However, authenticated accounts like this only served to fuel the controversy of symbols facilitating fugitives on the Underground Railroad. For example, Kate Clifford Larson, Professor of History from Simmons College, wonders how and why textile patterns such as the Zigzag quilt pattern could lead slaves to freedom. “Wouldn’t it be just as effective and a whole lot quicker just to tell freedom seekers which way to go?” (K. C. Larson, personal communication, October 25, 2005). Kansas State University professor Wendy Fall, who calls herself an “Africanist,” gives a favorable response to researching quilt codes and symbols and asserts that just because no primary source material and artifacts have not been found, it does not prove that they did not exist. She implores scholars not to “throw the baby out with the bathwater,” because of primary sources (W. Fall, personal communication, October 24, 2005).

The most disapproving opponent of quilts used to facilitate fugitives and operatives on the Underground Railroad is Paul Finkelman, Chapman Distinguished Professor of Law at the University of Tulsa College of Law. In his research, Dr.
Finkelman counted at least fifteen conflicting versions of the quilt code pattern. He also posts three interesting facts about quilt patterns used as quilt codes and the Underground Railroad: “One, the impressive desire of people to believe this fantasy and propagate it. Two, the shrewd ability of some people to figure out how to make a profit from it (or at least attempt to do so). And finally, the declining standards of American publishers who are willing to put out books like *Hidden in Plain View,* that could not get a passing grade in high school history course” (P. Finkelman, personal communication, October 25, 2005). He does, however, acknowledge that slaves had codes, such as the Drinking Gourd. The Drinking Gourd is mentioned in the analysis section of the study. Anne Swartz, Professor of Art History at the Savannah College of Art and Design, says the theory of quilt codes has been debunked because of lack of primary sources (A. Swartz personal, communication, October 23, 2005). She too refers to quilt codes and the Underground Railroad as myths. Susannah West, Interpreter of the abolitionist John Rankin House, says that the controversy is based on not one but two myths. The first concerns the myth of quilts giving instructions to flee, and the second, is the myth that abolitionists (S. West, personal communication, October 23, 2005) were using the quilts at all. She also mentions that both myths are twentieth century fantasy. The Director of the David Blight Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance and Abolition at Yale, asserts, “Feeding this mythology in any way supports lore and not any real learning, except how such myths take hold and persist” (Gilder lehrman, personal communication, October 23, 2005).

Douglass Deal, Professor and Chair of the History Department at the State University of New York at Oswego, explains the perils of confusing two different
enterprises, history and heritage (D. Deal, personal communication, October 25, 2005).

Speaking of history, Director of English and Language at Tarleton State University in Texas, Marcy Tanter, states that “slavery is discussed very little at her children’s school and only occasionally” (M. Tanter, personal communication, October 25, 2005).

Professor of History Kate Clifford at Simmons College says that teachers are not teaching students about the horrors of slavery and why slaves wanted to run away. She says, “Telling those [quilt code] stories will reveal just how demeaning it is to fill students’ heads with pretty quilt designs as a substitute for that very real important history” (K. Clifford, personal communication, October 25, 2005).

Acting Dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, at Delaware State University, Bradley Skelcher, states, “There are other areas of research associated with the Underground Railroad that need serious attention such as explaining why so many did not run away” (B. Skelcher, personal communication, October 24, 2005). Clifford, suggested that I look into why the quilt myth has become so popular (K. Clifford, personal communication, October 25, 2005). Jo Mace, from the Casa Grande Valley Historical Society, suggested that I try to explore and contrast African American and European quilts (J. Mace, personal communication, October 24, 2005). Boston University Professor of Art History, Patricia Hills, asked me to share any evidence that I might obtain (P. Hills, personal communication, October 21, 2005).

Jon-Christian Suggs, professor of English at John Jay College/CUNY in New York, and M.J. Devaney from the University of Nebraska Press, suggested that I consult one of my most heavily used sources, Hidden in Plain Sight, by Tobin and Dobard (J. C. Suggs and M. J. Devaney, personal communication, February 18, 1999). Deborah
Grayson from the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta, Georgia, suggested that I read *Hidden in Plain Sight*, and also *Stitched from the Soul*, by Fry (D. Grayson, personal communication, February 18, 1999). Harold Forsythe, Visiting Fellow of the Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University, suggests that *Hidden in Plain Sight* needs to thought of as a, “pioneering but flawed hypothesis about the language of visual representation is slaves’ and freedpeople’s political, social, and cosmological existences” (H. Forsythe, personal communication, October 24, 2005). Email correspondent J. L. Bell mentions that the woman who gave Tobin and Dobard the information they used in their book might have made up information just to sell more quilts (J. L. Bell, personal communication, October 24, 2005).

All of this finally lead to one fruitful posting by Dale Ducatte who attended an exhibit about the Underground Railroad and quilt code patterns in Atlanta, and suggested that I contact the exhibit presenters (D. Ducatte personal communication, October 24, 2005). After a telephone conversation with Theresa Kemp, curator of the Underground Railroad Quilt Code Museum in Atlanta, Georgia, I learned one of her ancestors, Peter Sarrow, used quilts to communicate and bring slaves to freedom on the Underground Railroad (Theresa Wilson, 2005). Ms. Kemp has an authenticated first hand account of Sarrow’s narrative on file at her museum, but because it is primary material in an upcoming book, and because it will be the first official scholarly document of its type, it is not available for reprint at this reading.

The controversy surrounding quilts and the Underground Railroad underscores the fact that both are relevant topics, culturally and academically. In fact, the only thing that scholars do agree on is a definition of the term Underground Railroad. The Underground
Railroad is defined as a loose, informal organization of groups and individuals that aided slaves in their search for freedom (Hudson, 2002). The Underground Railroad began in 1526 when the first group of Africans initially brought to what is now South Carolina escaped and settled with Native Americans (Katz, 1997). The Underground Railroad ended in 1865 when a group of African American horseback message couriers spread the news of the abolition of slavery at the end of the Civil War. These riders were called Lincoln’s Loyal Liberty League.

Textile symbols became important to African Americans in 1739, when a slave revolt in South Carolina led by a former slave named Cato resulted in drumming, the prime method of communication among Africans, being outlawed. The 1800’s in America was also a time when slaves were forbidden to learn to read or write. Consequently, African Americans were forced to find other ways to communicate. Fortunately, they did have another method to transfer messages to one another — quilting (McNaughton, 1988). Placed along fences, hung over clotheslines and sometimes hand carried, the use of quilts in conjunction with the Underground Railroad served as an entire multimedia communication system based on symbols that incorporated music, religion and instructions for escape from slavery. Fugitive slaves often had to leave their families and possessions behind in their escape towards freedom. African American quilts became points of contact for African Americans who had no real homes or place in society.

In this regard, quilting became a tangible connection for African Americans who had lost loved ones. More than just a method of persuasion to encourage slaves to escape slavery, quilting on the Underground Railroad was used to communicate self-reliance,
and independence, and to promote the spirit of hope in adversity. Quilting became a way for people to connect across large distances. Culturally, quilting in the nineteenth century was a point of contact.

The power of quilts as a cultural resource gained national attention in 1988 at the Democratic National Convention when Jesse Jackson described how his grandmother used quilts to keep his family warm in the winter (Fry, 1990). Before and after the 1988 Democratic convention, scholars examined cultural artifacts critically. What made Jesse Jackson’s statement so influential is that it helped stimulate interest in examining African American quilting more than just aesthetically, but as a unique practice and means of cultural distinctiveness.

To amplify this perspective, this project starts with a brief overview of the principles of visual rhetoric and follows with an interlaced and interwoven literature review that incorporates a combination of two critical methods. The first method borrows ideas and concepts from David Zarefsky’s, “Four Senses of Rhetorical History.” Specifically, Zarefsky’s insight will be applied to quilting and the use of symbols as a form of historical rhetorical practice. The second method includes ideas found in Charles Hill and Marguerite Hemler’s book, Defining Visual Rhetorics. Visual rhetoric is defined as both the object that individuals create to communicate, and the scholarly perspective of the visual artifact (Hill and Helmers, 2004). It is concerned with symbols as a communicative artifact. Visual rhetoric scholars look at the role of symbols as text and how they serve the same purpose as traditional rhetorical artifacts, as a device for persuading an audience. In short, Hill and Hemler suggest that visual rhetoric is concerned with symbols as a communicative artifact. Combined, Zarefsky’s application
of the practice of rhetorical history, and Hill and Hemler’s understanding of visual rhetoric may “alter the ongoing social conversation” (Zarefsky, 1998, p. 29) of communication research.

Such efforts, Zarefsky continues, “will help to articulate the rhetorical climate of an age: how people defined the situation, what led them to seek to justify themselves or to persuade others, what storehouse of social knowledge they drew upon for their premises, what themes and styles they produced in their messages, how their processes of identification and confrontation succeeded or failed” (p. 32).

Thus, an analysis of a quilts and quilt patterns using the practice of rhetorical history and visual rhetoric will bring a new perspective of how people use objects to help define themselves and communicate with one another. To that end, this project follows a series of recurring facts that Ozella Ransaw conferred to me when she gave my mother and me three gifts. She was born of both African American and Native American ancestry (an African Native American), she was an Eastern Star, as well as a member of the Methodist church. All three groups were found to have influenced African American textiles. To provide a more complete understanding of how these themes and visual rhetoric are related, the following section offers a brief overview of visual rhetoric and follows with a summary of the project in its entirety.

Visual rhetoric: A brief overview

In the words of Edwin Black, “Whatever else the nature of rhetorical discourse, it is assuredly not to be confined exclusively to the spoken word” (1978, p.11). The Latin phrase *dicere ad persuadendum accommodare* describes rhetoric as a speech designed to persuade. Aristotle, called rhetoric *peithous demiourgos*, or a craft of persuasion. Visual
rhetoric borrows from these traditional views of persuasive communication. Specific to
this study, visual rhetoric in the form of quilts was one form of media used by nineteenth
century operatives on the Underground Railroad. Quilt symbols not only relayed
information, they also helped unify African American culture and fostered antebellum
spirit.

However, a visual artifact is not rhetorical simply because it is visual. For a visual
text to be rhetorical, it must have three characteristics. It must be symbolic, it must
involve human interaction, and it must be presented to an audience (Hill and Helmers,
2004). Quilt patterns used in conjunction with the Underground Railroad exemplify
these requirements. The symbolic expression of ideas, thoughts or needs requires human
social interaction to learn and to interpret the symbol’s intentions. For that to happen, the
text must be presented to an audience for evaluation and discussion. Visual rhetoric is a
continuously rhetorically responsive action. This rhetorical response often takes form in
the shape of past and present shared experiences that help shape commonly understood
meaning. These common experiences create culturally responsive reactions that may not
be understood by members outside the group. The challenge for scholars is to look at the
way visual rhetoric persuades audiences without looking through the eyes of one’s own
culture. This may be difficult, as “rhetoric is culturally self-reflexive, because rhetoric is
meaning centered, and meaning is derived from culture” (Jackson, 2000, p. 36). In other
words, scholars must be careful to analyze an artifact with more than one’s own cultural
perspective. One such common cultural bias to avoid is the belief that only words and
not object are rhetorical. The idea that objects can serve as texts is gaining scholarly
attention.
In her summary of Charles Hill and Marguerite Hemler's book, *Defining Visual Rhetorics*, Sonja Foss identifies three exigencies that have shifted scholarly attention from discursive rhetoric to visual rhetoric. The first exigence is the impact of visual images on present-day culture. Discussions about objects such as quilts and how different cultures used them to communicate on the Underground Railroad influences scholars to reexamine American history from a multicultural aspect. This is a far more gentle way to approach American history than from a slave and slaveowner perspective. The second exigence is the emerging idea that human communication is not a linear function, but a nonlinear one. Often signs, symbols, music and songs are interconnected and inseparable from one another, especially in cultures that practice oral traditions. Incorporating other forms of media besides print has more advantages that are rewarding for educators and historians looking to understand the complete and entire meaning of different cultures. Finally, the last exigence is that contrary to popular belief, visual symbols can be more comprehensive and inclusive than dialectical symbols alone (Foss, 2004). One example of how a visual text can influence society is George Catlin's 1832 portrait of the Native American Mandan chief Four Bears. Catlin's depiction of Four Bears wearing feathers on his head that were specific only to his tribe became so popular that a few Native-American tribes incorporated it into their own traditional costumes. This illustrates how an object can transfer meaning – in this case a circle of feathers – from one group to another. This portrait was so influential, that to this day, many Americans assume that Native American leaders wear war bonnets. This belief persists even though the majority of Native Americans do not have a position of leader in the traditional European sense of the term and do not wear feathered war bonnets.
Architecture and the use of space can also serve as a text of visual rhetoric (Hill and Helmers, 2004). Tall arches serve as motivators for congregations to look up towards the heavens. Stone and marble columns of courthouses imply that justice is the foundation of society. Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell serve as symbols of freedom and independence to both nineteenth century and twentieth century Americans. Plantation architecture can also be studied for its rhetorical messages. Common plantation mansions are easily identifiable by their large two-story foundations with many rooms, large windows, tall white columns, wide-open spaces, and small servants’ quarters. Small, single story, single room, single window slave shacks, closely built with no open spaces, underscore the overwhelming message of exactly which race and cultures were valued most. Anyone, Black or White could be emotionally persuaded by images and the use of space alone. Architectural designs such as lighthouses and steeples were often depicted as symbols on African American textiles such as quilts, and used as visual messages to persuade fugitive slaves to seek refuge and never give up hope.

*Heuristic value*

This project shows how culture was created and preserved through visual rhetoric in the nineteenth century by disempowered groups such as African Americans, Native Americans, Freemasons, and how power or lack of power such as political forces influences culture. “By examining and writing about how power functions on cultural situations, the average person will learn how to resist forces of power and oppression” (Martin and Nakayama, 2000, p. 10). Learning how disenfranchised groups hold their cultural identity and relay information in adverse conditions has value and meaning for everyone.
In addition, by tracing the rhythmic and tonal history of Africans, and examining the origins of rhetorical criticism, this study shows the interdependent relationship between and among images, shapes and language. A study of nineteenth century African American visual rhetoric in the form of textiles contributes to a richer understanding of the rhetorical power of cultural visual practices.

**Terms**

This study uses the term ‘fugitive’ instead of ‘runaway slave.’ Runaway does not give justice to the consequences associated with risking your life for the sake of freedom. Runaway gives the reader the impression of something akin to a mischievous child who left home at an adolescent age when kids seek their parents’ attention. Fugitive connotes a much more accurate description of someone who is fully aware of the situation and is determined to risk everything for a better life. Fugitive is also a term that points out the fully recognizable dangers that supporters such as conductors undertook to aid escaped slaves.

At this point, it is necessary to note that not all Americans of European descent identify with the term European American. However, since the nature of this study involves cross-cultural as well as intercultural communication, identification of specific cultures is necessary. For this study, the term European American will be used to identify those with shared practices and norms and who share a commonplace of origin, and are by no means inclusive of all the diverse cultures of the continent of Europe. Although Blacks in America were not recognized as citizens until President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, this study uses the term African American to refer to non-Cuban, West Indian or South American people of African descent. Native American
is a term used to describe aboriginal peoples of the Americas and includes upper and lower parts of North America including Canada and Mexico, and not just Native Americans of the United States.

Although the term disenfranchised group is a common definition about persons being denied the right to vote, causing a lack of political power, the term disenfranchised groups as applied to the nineteenth century requires more amplification. With over two million slaves of African descent and 320,000 freed slaves by 1820 (Katz, 1990), African Americans are the groups most commonly referred to as disenfranchised during the nineteenth century. However, they were not the only group to be deprived of voting and political power during that era. Other groups such as “Native Americans were not exempt from slavery until well after the American Revolution” (Katz, 1997, p. 33). Women were not allowed to vote until the 1920’s. Even newly arrived European Americans were kept from political power during the nineteenth century. New ethnic groups like the Irish immigrants in Richmond, Virginia, were viewed as socially inferior to other European Americans and were sometimes called dirty, and even niggers (Rives, 1983). In fact, “White people were sold in the United States up to 1826” (Rogers, 1). In addition, the Anti-Mason movement in 1826 forced many politicians that were favorable to Freemasonry sentiments out of office (Rives, 1983). All these facts combined add up to the fact that the term disenfranchised means more than just African American. The term disenfranchised applies to all Americans—slave and free, male and female—who lacked freedom and equality.

Chapter Overview
The next section of this study will offer a literature review of African and African American internal aspects of quilt patterns, tonality and order and external aspects of quilt construction and the implementation of textiles. It will also examine how quilts relay hidden messages such as directions and timing of escapes, where fugitive slaves should look for aid, and the best techniques for escape such as what specific clothing to wear as a disguise. Chapter three analyzes three distinct quilt patterns – Crossroads, Bow Tie and North Star and how they functioned as textual communication devices. Chapter four will synthesize the findings, relay the limitations of the project and suggest recommendations for future research.
A search of scholarly texts, biographies, memoirs, and narratives of African American history shows that four distinct themes recur in textiles as a rhetorical form. These themes are based on musical terms that explain how quilts function as methods of communication. It is critical to understand here that scholars such as Aristotle have always “borrowed from the principles of one art — music — to help explain other arts — rhetoric and poetry” (Medhurst and Benson, 1997, p. 287). Contrapuntal tones form the first musical theme applied to textiles. The colors, the rhythm and the style of African-American textiles are based on West African rhythmic tonal language. The second recurring musical theme is in the intended order or orchestration of those symbols. Different tones can convey different meaning depending on the sequence. The third theme is in the construction or the sequencing of the textiles. Organization of African American textiles required group cooperation that had a social meaning in both its creation and its use. The fourth recurring theme is in the implementation of those symbols. The placement of finished textiles suggests a message all its own.

**Contrapuntal Tones**

At first glance, nineteenth century African American textile patterns seem haphazard and strewn together, presumably because of a lack of resources. Yet, these seemingly jumbled shapes and designs served not only a specific purpose, they
constituted an intelligent and symbolic language similar to European contrapuntal musical forms. Contrapuntal form, which is similar to a musical counterpoint, is the presence of two or more independent melodies combined in an artful way. "Each of these melodic lines may recur several times in a musical composition in company with different combinations of other themes that come and go" (Hill and Helmers, 2004, p. 304). This musical contrapuntal form is similar to African textiles that use recurring independent shapes and designs that appear and disappear in a way that appears to be sporadic.

The contrapuntal language of symbols found in African textiles is based on the same rhythmic tonal quality of African speaking languages. Author Kalamu Salaam states that, "When West Africans talk, it's almost like singing" (p. 354). One African tribe's name, the Kung, is most accurately written with the use of the exclamation mark (!Kung) as an indicator of the click when they speak in their native tongue" (Owusu, 2000). Because of slavery, most African Americans during the nineteenth century were of West African descent. It is natural that they would create textiles based on their native language. Robert Thompson, professor of Afro American history at Yale University, talks about the meaning of African Textiles in his book, Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro American Art and Philosophy. Mande, a west-African tribe, influenced textiles characterized by rich and colorful changes in pattern are designed to be read vertically in metrical increments (Thompson, 1983). European musical notation is written in much the same way as West African textiles, but horizontally with increments that are called beats or measures. Shown below, each vertical line serves as a beat in time between each note. Each horizontal line serves as an indicator of pitch or tone.
Image 14. European Notation

Here each individual tone is similarly separated by vertical increments.

Image 15. West African Musical Cloth
The preceding European musical notation and West African cloth both clearly convey tonal messages to those able to decode their meaning. For the musician, the European notation tells what notes to play and at what cadence. The West African cloth 50 inches wide and 39 1/2 inches long also describes a melody and tempo of how to speak and to read the message. European notation is written horizontally with solid black lines that relate time and space for the musician. West African cloth is constructed vertically but also with solid lines or breaks in the design that also forms a musical language. The pattern in the cloth is found in the beat, phrasing and melody of Afro American music and is similar to the rhythm or language of Africa (Thompson, 1983). This interrelated language and music of Africa has a changing rhythmic and tonal swinging quality.

Patrick McNaughton in the Department of Art History, School of Fine Arts, at Indiana University describes swinging qualities:

The term 'swinging quality' is important to understand and recognize as a defining characteristic of African rhythm. Whereas European music tends to accent the first and third beat of a bar of music, or accent all beats equally, African rhythms tend to accent the second and fourth beat. This gives the feeling of a rebound, as if the second and fourth beats were an answer to the first and third beats. It is a bounce, like a bouncing ball, that rebounds and continually renews the energy of the beat (McNaughton, 1988, p. 278).

This swing or change of pattern is not accidental, but part of West African rhythmic language. Just as rhythmic drumming in Africa is used to send messages, so do the rhythmic changing of patterns in textiles send messages. It is important to understand that a set pattern of beats does not represent a code or phrase. Because of the tonal
rhythmic nature of African language, and the way tones can change by manipulating the membrane of the drum while playing, the specific drum sounds are identical with the specific words of the phrase. This is true of African textiles as well. The change of tones and patterns of the textile is the actual language and not just an artistic representation of the language.

Image 16. West African Hour Glass Cloth

The 69 inches wide by 47 ¼ inches long West African hour glass cloth shown above is one such example of how African phrases can be incorporated into textiles. The hour glass shapes are also found on African textiles such as baskets and shields, and signify stability and protection in chaos (Owusu, 2000; Thompson 1993). Notice that at the bottom of each individual hour shaped pattern, there are alternating patterns of white and yellow. These are silent markers similar to rests in European music notation. Their primary purpose is to represent visually a dramatic pause before or after an important
event (McNaughtnon, 1988). This method of changing tonal patterns not only has an African oral connotation, it also has a religious connotation. Seemingly, evil spirits travel and are attracted to straight lines. "The seemingly suspended or unexpected pattern in clothing, as well as quilts is known to keep the jumbie, or spirits away" (Thompson, 1983). As Hill and Helmer mention in Visual Rhetorics, "colors, lines, textures, and rhythms in an artifact provide a basis for the viewer to infer the existence of images, emotions, and ideas" (p. 306). From this view, jagged patches and changing shapes do not just represent the phrase, "evil spirit stay away," they convey the dialectical tonal and rhythmic message, "Evil spirits, stay away!"

Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard, award winning quilter, and associate professor of art history at Howard University in Washington, D.C., respectively, in their book, Hidden in Plain Sight: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad, describe African American quilt patterns and how they were used on the Underground Railroad. Tobin and Dobard also suggest a connection between quilt patterns and Freemasonry symbols, but offer no proof. The focus of their research details and explains a sampler quilt. Displayed just before an escape, a sampler quilt was used to teach fugitive slaves specific code patterns to watch for during their journey. Sampler quilts functioned as a lexicon, a visual key to deciphering quilt pattern messages (Tobin and Dobard, 2000). By taking individual symbols and putting them in specific order, a quilt can serve in much the same way as a sentence. This indicates that a textile that includes a premeditated arrangement of individual images can express a complete message.

Sequencing
There were at least twelve distinct patterns found in a sampler quilt that could be combined in different combinations. These include the Monkey Wrench, Wagon Wheel, Log Cabin, Shoofly, Bow Ties, Cathedral Church, Double Wedding Rings, Flying Geese, Drunkard's Path, Tumbling Boxes, Bear's Paw, Crossroads, and the most famous the North Star (Tobin and Dobard, 2000).

Two different ways of putting together quilts were stitching and knotting. African American quilt stitching and knotting had a hidden Masonic influence based on numbers that represented topographical information about the plantation and bordering areas. Knotting, usually viewed as shoddy technique or carelessness, often served as an aide-memoire (Hill and Helmers, 2004), a mnemonic device. This made a grid like pattern on the back of the quilt that was easily identifiable as a longitude and latitude coordinates on a map. A quilt stitched in five block squares, or tied with five knots on each side, often represented safe houses and resting places that were spaced apart in five mile and twenty-five mile increments (Tobin, and Dobard, 2000).

This seemingly innocuous recurring pattern of bricks would have specific meaning only to operatives of the Underground Railroad. Every fifth brick of the Jonathan Ball house in Lexington, Virginia, a nationally recognized historical site and a known Underground Railroad safe house, was painted white. It was later discovered to have a secret room to hide not only fugitive slaves, but also to hold secret Masonic meetings (Wilson, Leslie, 2004). A Fifth Degree Freemason had special meaning and could be easily recognizable by the aprons that masons wear (El-Amin, 1990). The five block squares on the back of a quilt, or the five knots that tie a quilt together seem to
correspond directly to the safe house code where every fifth brick is painted white, and to
the apron and knots that a Fifth Degree Freemason wears.

William Siebert, Associate Professor of European History at Ohio State
University during the 1850’s, wrote the first scholarly book about the Underground
Railroad, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom*. Professor Siebert’s work
is known as the industry standard for research on the Underground Railroad. Siebert
describes how a Scottish Freemason named Alexander Ross visited plantations
pretending to be an ornithologist. Plantation owners would let him wander around
unattended as he did his research. When he would get to the slave quarters, he would
teach slaves how to escape and give them his codes based on the Freemason numbering
systems (Siebert, 1868).

The Freemason Underground Railroad connection appears throughout African
American research in abolitionist history. The African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.)
Church Mother Bethel, in Pennsylvania, a registered historical landmark and known safe
house, marked bricks the same way. Many A.M.E. churches were Underground Railroad
safe houses. The first 50 years of the A.M.E. church was concentrated in the North.
“During this period many of the churches were active in the ‘Underground Railroad,’ and
much of the actual work of receiving and transporting escaped slaves was done by them”
(Wright, 1947, p. 11). The founder of the A.M.E. church, Richard Allen, was a known
abolitionist. Before becoming the A.M.E. church’s first bishop, he was not only a
member of the black African Lodge, No. 459, in Pennsylvania of the Prince Hall Masons,
he was also the treasurer. The *Encyclopedia of African Methodism* 1948 mentions the
involvement of Freemasonry in the A.M.E. Church.

31
Orchestration

Visual rhetoric also involves human interaction of some kind in the creation of an image and the conscious discussion about the choices of color form, medium and size (Hill and Helmers, 2004). The religious and other methods used to construct a visual image are rhetorical. For example, it was considered bad luck to start something on a Friday and not finish it on the same day. That included making a quilt or making good an escape (Fry, 1990). Any visual medium that was not completed on the Friday it was started would have certain negative rhetorical meaning, based on its construction. For African Native Americans, finishing a rug at night was supposed to cause blindness (Lamb, 1992). When groups of people get together to construct an artifact, interactions between the artists, as well as any methods they employ in the artifact’s construction are rhetorical. They are rhetorical because human interaction is rooted in symbols, is learned by watching others and is social. For example, African Americans would meet in secret sewing circles to avoid unfriendly slaveowners. They would flip over a pot or tub at the beginning of a meeting (Fry, 1990). It was believed that this would muffle the sound of voices and was an indicator of a secret meeting (Rives, 1999). This supports Zarefsky’s claim that sometimes artists, in this case slaves, “took familiar materials and arranged them in new ways for telling impact” (Zarefsky, p. 22, 1998). An overturned pot as an object by itself had little meaning to slaveowners or passersby who saw it through a window. But to slaves who were looking for the next meeting, it had a specific connotative message.
The placement of a quilt had other meanings as well. Tossing a quilt over a roof was considered good luck (Fry, 1990). Not only were the actions involved in the moving of a quilt rhetorical, even the placement of the quilt when stationary had rhetorical meaning. Depending on how it was hung, a quilt not only told when it was safe to leave a plantation, but it also marked in which direction to run for freedom. Other textiles such as clothing had the same potential for being helpful to fugitive slaves. For example, clothing left hanging in a specific way on a clothing line told the direction that enemies were moving (Fry, 1990). This indicates that even the placement of a quilt had selected and intentional meaning.

Implementation

Zigzagging is a common pattern or method used by people trying to evade capture and is a common pattern for both African Americans and Native Americans of African decent, known as African Native Americans as well. A literature review of African Native American history shows that African craft and textiles were so interrelated to Native American tribes, the two were almost inseparable. Archeological evidence of African craft production in North America asserts design exchanges between Africans and Native Americans as early as the seventeenth century, specifically in the Chesapeake Bay region and in South Carolina and Virginia (Harris, 2000).
The African Native American Zigzag quilt pattern above is a combination of African, Anasazi, Navajo and Hopi Native American tribes and is 72 inches wide by 96 inches long. Its was constructed by strip piecing or strip sewing. Marcilene Wittmer, in Dorothy Downs' "Art of the Florida Seminole and Miccosukee Indians," suggests that Native American patchwork may have been a variation of African strip-sewing or quilting techniques from Blacks living with Seminoles (Downs, 1995). "Patchwork is the process of sewing pieces of solid colored cloth together to make long rows of design, which are then joined horizontally to other bands of cloth to form the body of a garment (Downs, 1995, p. 88). This is similar in construction to the way that West Africans sew..."
together strips of cloth to make shirts and mud cloths. Zigzag patterns of different colors helped fugitive slaves not only remember to change direction continuously to evade slave catchers, it also helped reinforce cultural identity by using the West African symbol of zigzagging for good luck.


The textiles above—the West African Mud Cloth 69 inches wide and 47 ½ inches long and the Zigzag pattern dashiki 40 ½ inches wide and 37 ½ inches long—are both West African and include the zigzag effect. Mud cloths are made up of individual strips sewn together to make a whole, just as Native American patch work and strip cloth do. African shirts, such as the dashiki shown above, and Native American shirts are often made in the same way (Thompson, 1983, and Wolf, 1983). Alternating patterns produced on looms such as the ones that create African mud cloths were the inspiration behind an early form of machine communication, the punch card (McNaughtnon, 1988). Implementing a repeating zigzag pattern on cloth indicated some African tribes’ beliefs that it helped to keep evil away (Thompson, 1983). It allowed African Americans the
opportunity freely to convey messages that held cultural significance as well as other meanings, such as keeping the spirits away (Thompson, 1983). “Nelly Bragg, an old black woman of Warrensville Heights, Ohio, was asked ‘Why one red sock and one white sock worn deliberately mismatched?’ to which she replied, ‘to keep the spirits away’” (Thompson, 1983, p. 221). There is also a recurring theme of a spirit line in the form of a Native American superstition that compels textile craft makers to leave a spirit line or a path for inspirations and blessing to enter a textile (Lamb, 1992). Individual creativity was seemingly inspired by the need to include spiritual meaning in a seamstress’s work. Colorless cloth was considered unattractive and uncreative. If a slave was given a piece of cloth that was plain white, it was seldom left that way and was often it was dyed with bright colors by slaves and used as patches for quilts (Fry, 1990). The creative use of color in a quilt is an example of a woman’s wit and cunning (Thompson, 1983). Blankets were hardly offered by slaveowners and slaves were usually given only two shirts, a pair of pants and one pair of shoes for the year. Clothing was a commodity and could be traded as a resource (Gluver & Lennon, 2003). Slaves had to work year round, including winter, with only Sundays off, with these meager clothing supplies. Conditions were so bad that it was not uncommon for clothing such as hats to be made of pine or oak leaves (Fry, 1990). Therefore, elaborate dress and brightly colored cloth was considered a mark of status among free blacks and slaves in urban cities (Hazzard-Gordon, 1990). Marshal Butler, a Virginia slave tells how he cried and carried on so much when he was given a pair of untanned shoes by owners they had to take the shoes back to the store. It would seem that Marshal enjoyed his reputation as, “The most dude’ish dressed nigger in these parts” and would not settle for clothing that portrayed him as anything else (Butler, in
Hazzard-Gordon Unchained Memories, 1990). This illustrates how the placement of color and cloth had cultural significance to the wearer. Just as symbols, colors and cloth were used to convey messages and served as spiritual protection on quilts, they served the same function when patched and stitched into clothing (Wahlman, 1993). However, not all the cloth used were discarded patches, some were expensive pieces of cloth. African American textile makers used fine cloth as a tool to help escape slavery as well.

Expensive clothing was so uncommon for a slave that it was possible to escape in broad daylight if a fugitive could acquire some. In 1856, Charlotte Giles and Harriet Eglin from Maryland dressed as elegant grieving mourners and boarded a train to escape detection. Their slave masters even spoke to one of his former slaves not recognizing her in her fancy veils and white gloves instead of the rags he was used to seeing her in (Chadwick, 1999). A European American woman in Cincinnati dressed two slaves in her finest clothes, including a parasol, and placed a bundle of rags into a blue blanket and shaped it like an infant to help the women evade slave captors (Chadwick, 1999).

White abolitionists to wishing to help fugitive slaves also used colorful textiles. In fact, safe houses were kept and operated by both blacks and whites. Judge Benjamin Piatt, a white abolitionist, refused to break the law by harboring fugitive slaves. Consequently, he had his wife do it. She raised a flag on their home so fugitive slaves would know when Judge Paitt was not at home and that it was safe for them to enter. If the flag was down they knew to move on (Chadwick, 1999). Sometimes ribbons or strips of cloth were tied to branches, trees and even statues. “Green ribbon marked safety, red ribbons meant to keep going” (Joseph, 2004, para. 8). In other words, not only were the origins, the order of the symbols, and the social rhetorical construction of the visual...
artifact important in African American textile communication, but so too was the orchestration and use of the artifact itself.

Many disenfranchised groups during the nineteenth century, such as African Americans, Native Americans and Freemasons manipulated these messages rhetorically. Themes of religion, music and lyrics were also incorporated in the use of communicating with quilts and quilt patterns. The following section is a detailed analysis of three such quilt patterns, Crossroads, Bow Tie and North Star based on the most current and updated information.
CHAPTER 3

THE ANALYSIS

This section will be an analysis of three specific quilt patterns: the Crossroads, the Bow Tie and the North Star. It will examine how they most likely functioned as communication devices. Special attention will be given to the origin and use of religion in the symbols found in the quilt patterns, the relationships between quilt patterns along with Negro spirituals and Christian hymns, and the implementation and the application of the quilt patterns themselves. It will follow the practice of rhetorical history as explained by David Zarefsky, combined with the theory of visual rhetoric as explained by Sonja Foss in terms of nature and function. Zarefsky asserts the practice of rhetorical history "helps to articulate the rhetorical climate of an age: how people defined the situation, what led them to seek to justify themselves or to persuade others, what storehouse of social knowledge they drew upon for their premises, what themes and styles they produced in their messages, how their processes of identification and confrontation succeeded or failed" (p. 32). The historical practice of quilts and the Underground Railroad are interlaced and interwoven throughout this section. Sonja Foss originally described the theory of visual rhetoric in three different ways, "scholars tend to study visual objects with a focus on one of three areas—nature, function, or evaluation" (Foss, p. 307). Since firsthand accounts have proven to be rare, it is difficult if not impossible to
evaluate a quilt or quilt pattern based on how successful it was. Thus, only two theoretical perspectives, nature and function will be used.

**Nature of an artifact**

Sonja Foss suggests the nature and function of the artifact, in this case quilts involve two components, presented elements and suggested elements (Foss, 2004). The rhetorical nature of an artifact is based on two components, presented elements and suggested elements. “Identification of the presented elements of an artifact involves naming its major physical features, such as space, medium and color. Identification of the suggested elements is a process of discovering the concepts, ideas, themes and allusions that a viewer is likely to infer from the presented elements” (Foss, p. 307).

Besides the applied meaning, the analysis will also look at the persuasive ability of quilts and quilt patterns. This integral section of rhetorical theory is termed function.

**Function of an artifact**

Foss writes that, “a second focus for scholars who adopt a rhetorical perspective on visual symbols is the function or functions the visual rhetoric serves for an audience. The function of an artifact is the action that it communicates” (Foss, p. 308). This means the persuasiveness of a spoken word function in the same manner as quilts and quilt patterns. Let us now begin to analyze how quilts and quilt patterns most likely served as historical practice and as visual rhetoric on the Underground Railroad.

Quilting is a process that can best be described as two pieces of cloth filled with a stuffing or batting, such as down, cotton or wool, and stitched with pieces of cloth to keep the filling in (Fry, 1990). This means that many quilts crafted by African Americans in the nineteenth century were functional and too worn out from use to be available for study. In the book "Stitched from the Soul," Dr. Fry establishes that slaves
made intricate, highly crafted quilts of European design for their masters. Some African American quilters were so popular they fed both themselves and their slaveowners when times were hard (Keckley, 1968). However, the quilts slaves made for themselves were often less stylized and featured wide-ranging textiles and unconventional patterns. Few of those original quilts remain. They were used until they fell apart (Cooper, 2003). Finding original African American quilt artifacts for study is thus almost impossible. Many of the quilts that were depicted in the literature review were in decaying condition when the books were first printed more than twenty years ago, or they were from private collections not open to the public. Some of the photographs in books and articles were pictures of present-day quilts that were representational of quilt patterns of the past. The pictures of original quilts that were in museums such as the Smithsonian, were taken from outside a Plexiglas protective container. Studying a cultural artifact — motionless, untouched and removed from its environment — is like looking at a digital television screen in black and white. Something in the overall picture is obviously missing. For this reason, the object of discussion will be the Crossroads and Bow Tie patterns found on the Ozella quilt below because it is easily tangible and clear to see.
Although not from the nineteenth century, the string quilt pattern in Image 1, the Ozella Quilt, is stitched quilt similar in construction and design to string quilts used in the nineteenth century. The string quilt pattern is a combination of the Bow Tie and Crossroads patterns discussed in the literature review. Crafted by Helen Ozella Ransaw and given to the author in 1977, this quilt serves as the main textual artifact for this section.

This text was chosen for several reasons. It is the author's personal property, it is modeled on quilts associated with the Underground Railroad, and it is also in good condition. Helen Ozella Ransaw's husband, my grandfather M.L. Ransaw, was a Prince Hall Freemason. Prince Hall Freemasons were found to be significant in the creation of the codes, symbols and messages fugitive slaves used to escape slavery. Helen Ozella Ransaw was a member of the Eastern Star, the female branch of African American Freemasons that implemented the secret messages and codes of masonry by sewing them directly into Underground Railroad quilt patterns.
In nineteenth century America, the African American Crossroad quilt pattern that is similar to the Ozella Crossroad quilt pattern, signaled fugitive slaves to head to Cleveland, Ohio, to escape slavery. Known as the City of Hope, it was a meeting place for trains and places for departures for fugitive slaves (Tobin and Dobard, 2000). Crossing the Ohio River meant that a fugitive had crossed the border into the Free States. Similar in design to the Christian cross, the Crossroad quilt pattern had the religious connotation of being a place where spiritual things happen, spiritual things such as a fugitive slave finally finding freedom. As both a physical symbol and an intangible mental symbol, the cross has historical West African and Christian religious meaning. West Africans view the crossroad as a place where magic happens (Owusu, 2000), just as Christians view the death of Christ on the cross as a place where spiritual things happen.
Specifically, the cross symbol in slave quilts is related to the African Bakongo people (Cooper, 2003). The African American Crossroads quilt pattern also has symbolic meaning found in Negro Spirituals and Christian hymns. It is a tradition in West Africa to intermix cloth and music into a language that is based on symbols, just as African Americans did. In the case of the Crossroads quilt pattern, the fusion of cloth and song is found in the form of the Christian Hymn, *At the Cross*. In the song both the African and African American symbol of the cross, reinforce the cultural and religious meaning of a symbol that means more in total than the parts of two strips of cloth sewn together.

At the cross at the cross, where I first saw the light,
And the burdens of my heart rolled away,
It was there by faith I received my sight
And now I am happy all the day (The African American Church Hymnal, 2002, p.139).

Written in the eighteenth century by Isaac Watts, and set to music in the nineteenth century by Ralph Hudson, this song can still be found in A.M.E. Church hymnals today. A quilt hung on a line to dry could quite possibly represent nothing at all except a convenient place to hang laundry. However, a quilt hung shortly after a minister led a congregation in a Christian hymn such as, *At the Cross*, would have more compelling meaning. The verse, “at the cross at the cross where I first saw the light,” has religious meaning for Christians who know that Christ was crucified on the cross. In the Christian religion, Christ’s spirit was liberated from his body on the cross. What gives the hidden meaning to the words stems from the mental and physical symbol of the cross. To many Christians, the cross represents a physical place where Jesus Christ crossed over from the
earthly realm to the spiritual realm. Crossing the Ohio River meant that a runaway slave had found another type of liberation – freedom from slavery.

The Ohio River was a coded symbol of physical liberation to those on the Underground Railroad. The River had a lighthouse visible from the shore, maintained by stationmasters from the Underground Railroad. Conductor Arnold Gargston describes how he made over 34 trips a month to the North rowing fugitive slaves over the Ohio River. He said he touched, but never saw the people he saved. It was so dark, rowing with only the light of the moon or the stars; his only other guide was a tiny light at the top of stairs near a home by the river. The Ripley Lighthouse served as a lighthouse for direction to travelers on the Ohio River, as well as a symbol of freedom for fugitive slaves (Thomas, Bagwell, & Bellows, 1990). The Ripley Lighthouse was adjacent to an Underground Railroad safe house in Ohio that overlooked the Ohio River. The Lighthouse was known as a tall structure with a window that often served as a lighthouse for river travelers (Thomas, Bagwell, & Bellows, 1990). Fugitive slaves rowing on the Ohio River were told to look for the light, the light of the Lighthouse. In addition to the literal meaning, to look for the light to gain direction from Christ, it also involved opening one’s eyes to look for freedom as the first step to find emancipation and to gain inspiration from Christ. Here the Crossroads quilt pattern may have functioned in two ways. The first function was as a directional symbol for fugitive slaves traveling north on the Ohio River. The second function was as a mnemonic device to help fugitive slaves remember specific instructions from a song to look for a place of refuge near the light when they arrived.
Many Negro spirituals and Christian hymns were used in conjunction with quilt patterns for slave communication on the Underground Railroad. Slaves could sing spirituals and hymns while doing fieldwork out in the open for spiritual inspiration, occupational motivation and subversive communication while slave owners were oblivious to other meanings. It also allowed communication by people who were forbidden to write or to learn about the Bible.

Just as field song leaders were limited only by melody, rhythm and the need to be creative when they created work songs, the seamstress was limited only by time and cloth and able to express herself using technique and selection of color and style. Any color could work to make a quilt, but the combination of certain colors and patterns would have much more rhetorical meaning than others for use on the Underground Railroad. Triangles, like the ones found in a Bow Tie quilt, signified prayer. Black was known an indicator that someone might die. Blue was considered a protective color (Fry, 1990). "Green ribbons were tied to the arms of the statue to indicate safety; red ribbons meant to keep going" (Joseph, 2004, para. 8). In a way, the quilter or speaker was available to choose the right combination of symbols and colors of cloth to form the text in much the same way a rhetor chooses the right words and phrases to express ideas. One such expression of ideas in the form of colors and shapes was the creation of the Bow Tie Quilt pattern.
The Bow Tie, or hourglass pattern, is an often repeated design of both African Masi and Ashanti patterns that represent stability (Owusu, 2000). As applied to the Underground Railroad, the bow tie could be read as a descriptive symbol that instructs fugitive slaves to dress in their best clothes as if for a funeral. Slaves often avoided capture by hiding in coffins placed in wagons that were in funeral processions. Henrietta Bowers Duterte in the 1850’s was an undertaker who hid fugitives inside coffins (Chadwick, 1999). The Baptist Church, Mt. Zion, even built an aboveground burial vault to hide fugitive slaves (Chadwick, 1999). African Native American Daniel Hughes transported fugitive slaves and concealed them in his home near Freedom Road Cemetery in Williamsport, Pennsylvania (Blockson, 1994). The A.M.E. Church was famous in Philadelphia for the way they organized and handled dead bodies from the yellow fever epidemic in the 1800’s (Wright, 1947). Since burying and transporting the dead was considered a job strictly for African Americans in the nineteenth century, many African American churches found it convenient to hide fugitive slaves pretending to be dead inside coffins (Blockson, 1994).
Since the limited clothing that slaves had quickly wore out, slaves were often only given one or two pieces of clothing a year. Elaborate dress was so rare for slaves it was considered a mark of status among free blacks and slaves in urban cities (Hazzard-Gordon, 1990). Among poor African Americans, formal attire was reserved for special occasions or funerals. The Bow Tie pattern was also known to be an indicator for fugitive slaves to dress their best as if they were going to a funeral or in a coffin as a disguise to avoid detection. In 1856, Charlotte Giles and Harriet Elgin from Maryland dressed as grieving mourners and boarded a train to escape detection. They sat next to and even talked to one of their former owners, who never recognized his former slave in fancy veils and white gloves, instead of the rags he usually saw her in (Chadwick, 1999).

In this role, the Bow Tie pattern functioned as a symbol that was also a message that told fugitive slaves to hide in coffins, another message interconnected with lyrical messages found in Negro Spirituals. For example, in conjunction with the call and response song, *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, sung in a church or in a cotton field just before placing the Bow Tie quilt on a line to dry, held specific meaning.

Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home;

Coming for to carry me home.

I looked over Jordan, and what did I see,

A band of angels coming for to carry me home


*Swing Low Sweet Chariot* was, and still is, a popular funeral song. It can be found in the A.M.E. Church Hymnal as far back as the 1800's. A.M.E. Church founder Richard Allen was one of the first African American publishers in the United States. The
A.M.E. Church Hymnal was his earliest publication. Heavily active in assisting and transporting fugitive slaves on the Underground Railroad,

A.M.E. church sermons often contained hidden messages for fugitives as well as conductors (Payne, 1998). However, not all of the quilt patterns were associated with secular songs; some were popular contemporary songs of the day.

*North Star*

![Image 13. North Star](image)

The last quilt pattern in this examination, Image 26, is representative of the quilt pattern the North Star, and is associated with the song, *Follow the Drinking Gourd*. The pattern was popular with women who were members of quilting parties of the nineteenth century. "Quilting, accompanied by eating, story telling, games, and singing, offered the slave unique opportunities to socialize without supervision" (Cash, 1995, p. 32). Quilting
parties are also places where one would learn Underground Railroad songs like *Follow the Drinking Gourd*:

When the sun comes up and the first quail calls, follow the drinking gourd

For the old man is a' waiting to carry you to freedom,

If you follow the drinking gourd

The riverbank makes a very good road

The dead trees show you the way,

Left foot, peg foot, traveling on

Follow the drinking gourd

The river ends between two hills

Follow the drinking gourd

There's another river on the other side

Follow the drinking gourd

Where the great big river meets the little river,

Follow the drinking gourd

For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom,

If you follow the drinking gourd

Shaped like a big pot (Detroit News)

The drinking gourd in this song stands in place of the Big Dipper. The Big Dipper is a star constellation that is shaped like a big spoon and can be found by looking at the North Star. When a fugitive slave looked up on a starry night and found the North Star, the handle of the Big Dipper was nearby pointing to the North Star. One can follow the North Star north to free States or onward to Canada. The North Star pointed to the road
of freedom. Peg Leg Joe, a person who may or may not have actually existed, was said to be waiting in the woods to guide fugitive slaves, or to leave messages on bits of cloth on trees for direction. Peg Leg was said to have traveled around plantations teaching his secrets for escaping north as a song to help slaves to remember the instructions. The phrase “look for Peg Leg Joe” was an indicator to look for stationmasters, conductors or signs that would assist a fugitive slave to freedom.

On the first day of winter, migratory birds such as quails travel north. The verse “When the sun comes up and the first quail calls,” told fugitive slaves that it was time to leave for the Northern territories. A trip from the South to free country on foot would take almost a year. A fugitive slave leaving in the summer would arrive at the Ohio River in the summer when the currents were too strong to swim across. In the winter, the Ohio River was known to freeze over, making travel by foot easier than swimming across (Detroit News). Eliza Harris, in Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous abolitionist novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was modeled after a fugitive slave who crossed the ice of the Ohio River in winter with bare feet (Blockson, 1984). The verse, “the dead trees show you the way, left foot, peg foot, traveling on,” was an indicator for fugitive slaves to look for pieces of cloth on broken branches in the forest for night when it was too overcast to see the sky. Near the Ohio River is the Tombigbee River that empties into Alabama's Mobile Bay on the Gulf of Mexico. It originates in northeast Mississippi. Approximately 200,000 enslaved people lived near that river, many of them members of the Underground Railroad. “The river ends between two hills, follow the drinking gourd. There's another river on the other side follow the drinking gourd. Where the great big
river meets the little river, follow the drinking gourd” are verses that describe the Tombigbee River.

A quilt symbol that looked like the easily recognizable star constellation the Big Dipper would have been too obvious to slave catchers. The symbol of a decorative star was not. The quilt pattern, the North Star, most likely had dual meaning similar to the other quilt patterns. It represented a northerly direction that indicated heaven or Canada (Tobin and Dobard, 2000). It also served as a mnemonic device to follow the star constellation the Big Dipper, to which it pointed.

Not only were quilt patterns such as the Crossroads, the Bow Tie and North Star known to communicate hidden messages to assist Underground Railroad operatives, the actual creation of quilts relayed messages as well. Quilting parties called “frolics” (Katz, 1997) often served as opportunities to reinforce cultural and social messages. For example, frolics served as a time marker for slaves who could not read or write (Fry, 1990). Quilting parties were important social gatherings where gossip and news were relayed. Sometimes people cooked, danced and played courtship games. During these frolics, young African American boys and girls would try to throw quilts over each other. If a player was captured by a quilt, they had to freeze until somebody gave them a kiss (Fry, 1990).

In the South, with the exception of Native American women, African American women did most of the quilting (Fry, 1990). Men were not allowed to participate in quilting parties. However, afterwards, the festivities were open to everyone including children. Sometimes even the slave owners would participate. A few slaves, like Elizabeth Keckly who was Mrs. Abraham Lincoln’s dressmaker, were known to sell their
quilts to purchase their freedom. In the North, quilting parties served yet another function, one of abolitionism.

Black and white women in the North used their quilting skills to support moral, political, and reform issues. They held fairs and bazaars to raise funds for the Underground Railroad, anti-slavery newspapers, and female anti-slavery societies. Handmade quilts were popular items at fundraising events for Female Anti-Slavery Societies (Cash, 1995, p. 32).

This section of the study examined both the internal aspects of quilt patterns' tonality and order, and the external order of the quilts' construction and implementation by analyzing three quilt patterns the Crossroads, Bow Tie and the North Star. Quilts relayed hidden messages such as directions and timing of escapes, where to look for aid, and the best technique for escape such as what clothing to wear as a disguise. Since music has historically had such a strong influence in African and African American language, this paper also analyzed how hidden messages in the song lyrics of Negro spirituals and other Christian hymns were used in conjunction with symbols found in African American quilts. It argued that disenfranchised groups of the nineteenth century such as African Americans, Native Americans and Freemasons used quilts as a form of visual rhetoric.
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

This study began with a short narrative describing how Ozella Ransaw gave family heirlooms to my mother and me. The gifts were two handmade textiles influenced by nineteenth century quilt patterns. Both giving a quilt and the quilt patterns themselves was inspired by her African, African Native American, and her Eastern Star-Freemason traditions. All three disenfranchised groups were participants in quilting symbols that were used on the Underground Railroad. Next, the study presented a short synopsis of an online debate regarding the lack of primary source material to demonstrate the use of textiles by the underground Railroad. Following this on line conversation, I located primary source material at a museum and that source material will soon be published in an upcoming book by the museum’s curator, Ms. Kemp. The introduction also mentioned a brief overview of the principles of visual rhetoric and followed with an interlaced and interwoven literature review of African, African American and African Native American textile traditions based on a combination of two critical methods. The first method borrowed ideas and concepts from David Zarefsky’s *Four Senses of Rhetorical History*, and the second method was adapted by Sonja Foss from Charles Hill and Marguerite Hemler’s book, *Defining Visual Rhetorics*. The literature review described the visual rhetorical practices of textiles in the form of quilts, and explained how musical terms underscored the intertextuality of African language and African

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textiles. Four distinct recurring themes of visual rhetoric are delineated in the literature review: Tones, Sequencing, Orchestration and Implementation.

What followed was an analysis of three quilt patterns based on how they may have functioned as a rhetorical form during the nineteenth century, in conjunction with the Underground Railroad. To facilitate this study, I used my grandmother’s the gift, the Ozella String quilt that was based on two known quilt patterns, The Crossroads and the Bow Tie, and a computer generated representation of another well-known quilt pattern, the North Star. Special attention was given to the patterns’ African and Freemason origins, and to the use of religion in the symbols found in the quilt patterns. The relationships between quilt patterns and Negro spirituals, and Christian hymns, and the implementation and application of the quilt patterns themselves, also received attention.

I asked these specific questions: What were the inherent meanings behind the visual symbols used to communicate on the Underground Railroad? What other cultural resources were drawn in creating those messages? I also searched for the religious themes of messages in textiles produced by African Americans in the nineteenth century. In short, the project studied how textiles can function as a visual rhetorical device.

From the evidence examined, clearly visual texts revealed a potential for rhetorical use by nineteenth century disenfranchised groups such as African Americans, Native African Americans, Abolitionists, and Woman Suffrage groups. Quilting in the nineteenth century became more than a means of communication, it became a cultural resource. As slaves and slave families were separated across vast distances after being sold, quilts and the act of quilting was a meaningful way to hold on to heritage in a strange land. This was done by continually including cultural and religious symbols in
the implementing and the applying the quilt patterns. West Africans and Native Americans traditionally interweave religion, textiles and music into a language that is based on symbols just as African Americans did. This was a way to communicate polysemic ideas of religion and freedom by people who were forbidden to write or to read the Bible. Negro spirituals and Christian hymns were used in conjunction with quilt symbols and secret codes for subversive communication on the Underground Railroad. Many of those codes were based on secret society codes.

Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard, in *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*, suggested a link between secret societies but do not find definite evidence. However, a closer examination does establish a connection between Freemasonry and the Underground Railroad. The brotherhood of Freemasonry broke the bonds of nineteenth century social ideas and embraced abolition. Many early church leaders of the A.M.E. church, known to assist fugitive slaves on the Underground Railroad, were Prince Hall Freemasons. Information gathered in the literature review found interrelated themes, codes and symbols of Masonic symbols of quilt patterns and in the architecture of homes used as station houses on the Underground Railroad. Also related to the A.M.E. Church, a connection between quilting and print media was discovered. Early A.M.E. publications of church hymnals often contained gospel songs that had words and phrases that were used in conjunction with Underground Railroad quilts. The A.M.E. Church was also responsible for printing abolitionist pamphlets and newspapers with the names and addresses of sponsors. Fugitive slaves merely had to pick up a recent issue to know the locations of safe houses. Tobin and Dobard’s book
served as a provocative place to start research, but the absence of primary source material remains problematic.

Limitations and Recommendations

There are at least four limitations in this study. First, there is the controversy over the historical evidence. Much of Tobin and Dobard's information is extrapolated and unauthenticated. Quilt historians have pointed out that many of the quilt patterns supposedly used in the "quilt code," such as the monkey wrench pattern were not even in existence during the time of slavery (Densmore, 2004). However, Tobin and Dobard do refer to a flat wrench crafted by ironsmiths in West Africa before the 1850's.

The second limitation is the ephemerality of the quilts themselves. Both practical and functional, most of the quilts of the nineteenth century deteriorated from use. In addition, many slave quilts were stolen by Confederate soldiers and many slave houses were often burned during the Civil War making surviving quilts hard to find (Fry, 1990). Therefore, a large body of surviving quilts in one accessible place was not found, contributing to the controversy surrounding the lack of primary material.

Many of the quilts that were used by other authors in the literature review were modern representations of nineteenth century quilts and not the original item. In fact, Ozella McDaniel Williams constructed the main quilt patterns used in *Hidden in Plain Sight* by Tobin and Dobard in 1986. A surviving and genuine textile used by members of the Underground Railroad would provide invaluable insight. Ms. Williams was also the primary source that Tobin and Dobard used to interpret many of the quilt patterns in their study. However, Ms. Williams' chief occupation was to sell quilts. She may have very well told the authors any likely story loosely based on hearsay or fact to sell more quilts.
These lead to the third limitation of this study, a lack of firsthand accounts of slaves and slave that mention the Underground Railroad or quilting. Slave narratives used in the literature review such as the Federal Writers Project that interviewed over 2,000 surviving slaves in the 1930’s, did not contain much information about the Underground Railroad. Many of the questions asked by the writers focused on unfavorable working conditions and slave memories, important to be sure but not relevant to this project. This fact combined with the need for secrecy for fugitive slaves and operators lead to many reports about the Underground Railroad that are unsubstantiated both past and present. In fact, one of the authors from the literature review, Frank Gara, suggests that secrecy and the need for a quilt code surrounding the Underground Railroad did not exist at all. In his book Liberty Line, The Legend of the Underground Railroad Gara says, “much of the Underground Railroad is a “Deep-laid scheme” (1961, p. 69). He says “scheme” because the information about, and the people that participated in the Underground Railroad, were not so hard to prove because it was not as secretive as believed. “Persons willing to aid fugitives sometimes advertised in the abolition press, and there was little or no attempt to preserve the secrecy which is so often associated with the Underground Railroad” (Gara, 1961, p. 143). In fact, abolitionist newspapers talked openly about the Underground Railroad. For example, “in 1854 the Chicago Tribune boasted the underground trains ran through the city’s streets regularly, and that its passenger business had increased, but that there were no reported speculation in its stock nor opinions as to its dividends” (Gara, 1961, p. 146). Besides names and addresses of subscribers, alerting those who could read where likely safe houses would be, some newspapers even had pictures of happy slaves riding an Underground Railroad
train. This is in direct contrast to the secretive nature scholars have assumed about the Underground Railroad. This dichotomy may have been because of different social concerns between the northern states and the south. The Father of the Underground, Railroad Levi, Coffin said:

I have always contended the Underground Railroad, so called, was a Southern Institution; that it had its origin in the slave States. It was, however, conducted on quite a different principle south of the Mason and Dixon’s line.... South of the line, money in most cases, was the motive; north, we generally worked on principle. For the sake of money, people in the South would help slaves escape and convey them across the line (Hudson, 2002, p. 159).

Levi Coffin reportedly assisted an estimated 2,000 fugitives to freedom conducting a safehouse out of his home. However, he did not know exactly what methods were employed by fugitive slaves to get to his house. It may well be the secrecy of the Underground Railroad is full of conjecture and myth.

In the period of slavery controversy, the Underground Railroad was more important as a propaganda device than as an aid to the fleeing slave. Far from being secret, it was copiously and persistently publicized and there is little valid evidence for the existence of a wide spread underground conspiracy (Gara, 1951, p. 193).

Accounts like those are found in, The Underground Railroad from slavery to Freedom, by Wilbur Siebert do not help to answer the veracity of secrecy about the Underground Railroad. Siebert was as Associate Professor of European History at Ohio State University in the 1860’s. His book, originally published in 1898, had information on safe codes and escape methods as well as over 3000 names of Underground Railroad
activists. Siebert became an established authority in his field after the original publication of his first book, but there were many contributors. Distinguishing fact from fiction is almost impossible.

Real or imagined, secretive or widely known, the Underground Railroad has become such a large part of American history that it has become a National myth. "National myths have unifying and legitimating power not because they are necessarily true but because they create a compelling political and historical motivation for collective action" (Gonzales, and Tanno, 1997, p. 53). Myth may often be larger than the truth. In some ways analyzing it takes away some of its magic.

Finally, a reinterpretation of African American textiles based on a non-Christian perspective would be valuable. In the nineteenth century, Islam was the main religion in Africa. Since the teachings of the Old Testament and the beginnings of the Quran are largely the same text, African Americans may not have reinterpreted quilt symbols, they may have just transported them. Muslims would have been already familiar with the story of Moses as the bringer of the law (Barry, 1994). Does the song, Go Down Moses, have a different meaning for Muslims than Christians? Examination from a perspective other than Christianity may produce different rhetorical conclusions.
APPENDIX A

QUILT PATTERNS

Bear Claw
Bow Tie
Cathedral

Crossroads
Flying Geese
Log Cabin

Monkeywrench
9 Patch 5 Square
North Star
Double Wedding Rings

Tumbling Blocks

Shoo Fly

Wagon Wheel

Ozella Bow Tie

Ozella Crossroads
APPENDIX B

TEXTILES

West African Cloth

Ozella Quilt

Mud Cloth

Navajo Zigzag Quilt

Bow Tie Shield

West African Hourglass cloth

Zigzag Shirt

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APPENDIX C

GLOSSARY

Abduction network, people that protected fugitives

Abolitionist, a person who demanded immediate emancipation of slaves

Accidents on the Road, fugitives slaves that were caught escaping

Agent, coordinator, one who plotted the course of escape and made contacts

Agent, a person who plotted the course of escape for fugitive slaves

Antebellum, events before the civil war

Ary, any

Aunt Rachel, Runaway slaves or Facilitators

Baggage, escaping slaves

Bear’s Claw, quilt code indicating that fugitives were to follow in the footprint of bears for easily travelable paths through mountains as well as trails most likely to lead to water

Big hat, conceited Negro

Bird in de air, escaping slave

Black Jack, a skirmish between a unit of the Missouri Militia and John Brown’s Army in 1856

Bush Arbors, secret churches often built out of arbors in the woods to hide from Pattyrollers

Bush Whacker, Confederate Soldiers

Burial Box, slave coffin
Bugs in de wheat, beware of Patrollers

Break down, slave dance

Breeding Room, an area of the John Crenshaw, used to facilitate the procreation of captive slaves

Black Grapevine, a method of communication in the black community

Blow Guills, playing the bones

Bow Ties, quilt code that told slaves to disguise themselves in fancy clothes for escape

Brakeman, person in charge of making contacts to fugitive slaves

Buzzard Lope, African-American dance that imitated a buzzard

Bypass or Runaround, diverted escape route

Cathedral Church, quilt code instructing fugitive slaves to be on the lookout for a church that was a possible safe house

Cake Walk, a dance where indeed their was a cake was the prize. Couples walked around in a square while music was playing, competing for style and grace

Calenda, African-American recreational dance accompanied with drumming

Chica, African-American dance where a female would perform an undulating and shimmering motion of the torso with feet planted firmly, waving a kerchief over her head, while a male performed similar movements in a vigorous fashion circling around the female.

Cross you, to whip a slave by cutting his back into squares with a whip

Crossroads, Cleveland Ohio, a intermediary place between slavery and freedom, also a quilt code
Cooling Board, board on which dead slaves were placed
Conductors, people who directly transported slaves
Chattel, a group of escaping slaves
Chignon, an elaborate cloth or silk handkerchiefs that free women wore, also called a Tignon
Church courtin,’ couples leave church to court while services are going on
City Watch, city slave catchers on the lookout for fugitive slaves
Confuddle, confuse
Cornstack Preacher, slave preacher who presided over secret meetings
Comboodle, everything (that takes place in whole comboodle)
Cotillions, a group dance with a set pattern
Cook shop, informal restaurant
Darkness, closer to slavery
Diaspora, scattering of a people with a common history or background
Double Wedding Rings, quilt symbol for a place that can remove slave shackles and chains
Draptomania, disease causing Blacks to run away
Drygoods, female fugitives
Drinking Gourd, Big Dipper and the North Star
Drunkard’s Path, quilt code pattern that told fugitive slaves to zigzag their route
Entry Ports, the passages into Canada identified using words of praise and thanksgiving
Flying Bondsmen, the number of escaping slaves
The Flying Geese, quilt pattern indicated fugitive slaves were to follow the seasonal migratory path of geese.

Forwarding, taking fugitive slaves from station to station.

Freedom Line, the route of travel for an escaped slave.

Freedom Train or Gospel Train, code name for the Underground Railroad.

French Leave, secret departure.

Friends, short for Friends of Liberty, Underground Railroad supporters.

Grand Central Station, in Farmington Connecticut, that had an active Underground Railroad network comprised of fifteen percent of it’s members from 1841 until the start of the Civil War – location for the Amistad trial.

God be Praised, Port Stanley.

Glory, closer to freedom.

Glory to God, Windsor.

Going at Large, slave without a pass or gathering without a White being present.

Hardware, male fugitives.

Ham and eggs, black Railroad Agents.

Heaven or Promised Land, Canada.

Hush Harbor, secret meeting place to hold church.

Jim Lane Trail, a small Underground Railroad that connected Nebraska city, Peru, Falls City and Nemaha City in Nebraska.

Juba, an African-American dance, also a female.

Jumbie, spirit.
Jumping off Place/Point, a place of shelter for fugitives

Jumpin’ the Broom, a slave marriage

Knecht, a white person who worked for burghers (citizens) and was often put in charge of slaves

Landdrost, the most important official in the government of a district

Liberty Room, a large room in Josiah Grinnell’s house in Iowa used to hide fugitive slaves.

Little Dixie, a base of operations for slave catchers in Missouri

Load of Potatoes, a wagonload of fugitive slaves hidden under the farm produce

Log Cabin, quilt code instructing decoders to make a shelter or look for a temporary hide out

Maroon, a person of mixed heritage usually of African or West Indian descent

Mandoor, a slave overseer who was put in charge of other slaves

Manumission, the freeing of slaves by their owners

Monkey Wrench, quilt code indicating that runaway slaves were to gather all of their tools and belongings necessary for their journey to freedom

Mother Hubbard’s Cupboard, safe house owned by Colonel William Hubbard

Mulatto, a person of partially European descent with a European father and slave mother

Miscongregation, Blacks, mostly male that had sex with Whites

Nigger Mountain, the Mount Jefferson area of Ashe county in North Carolina where fugitive slaves hid before heading North

Operator, a person who aided fugitive slaves on the Underground Railroad
Patter or Patty Roller, a bounty hunter often poor whites hired to capture runaway slaves

Pigeon Wing, African-American dance that imitated a buzzard

Pilot, a person serving as a guide for runaways

Preachers, leaders/speakers of the Underground Railroad

Putting on the master, fooling a slave owner

River, safe route

Rockett's Landing, a point of departure for fugitive slave in Richmond Virginia

Rondavel, Round houses with thatched roofs common in parts South American and Africa of African origin

Runaways, a negative term intended to depict escaping slaves as breaking the law

Sanctuary, a hiding place

Scattered Way Wagons, a number of hiding places

See the Queen, go to England

Shoofty, quilt code for someone who gave fugitive slaves directions

Society of Friends, Quakers

Shepherds, people who escorted or entice slaves to escape the slaves

Station, place of safety and temporary refuge, a safe house

Station Master, the keeper of a safe house

Stealin' a Meeting, African-Americans gatherings often spontaneous

Stockholder, donor of money, clothing, or food to the Underground Railroad

Stop and Start, a place of shelter and a course of escape
Tignon, an elaborate cloth or silk handkerchiefs that free women wore, also called a Chignon.

Travelers, Fugitive slaves

The Wagon Wheel, quilt code that signaled slaves to place items in a wagon for Transport.

Tumbling Blocks, quilt code that told the slaves it was time to depart.

Quindaro, a town and safe haven for fugitive slaves in Missouri built by John Brown.

Quadrilles, a group dance pattern.

Underground Railroad Codes and Phrases

"A friend with friends" - A password used to signal the arrival of fugitives with an Underground Railroad conductor.

"Load of potatoes," parcel, or bundles of wood - fugitives to be expected.

"The wind blows from the south today" - the warning of slave bounty hunters nearby.

"The friend of a friend sent me" - A password used by fugitives traveling alone to indicate they were sent by the Underground Railroad network.
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