

# Fact Sheet

## The "Quilt Code"

A hot topic in Black History is the story of quilts and the Underground Railroad. Americans eager to discuss slavery are fascinated by tales of quilts used as signals in the dangerous journey to freedom. The connection between an American folk art, a mysterious secret code and the adventure of the Underground Railroad has created an enduring tale that is fast becoming a part of American legend. The quilt code has joined other appealing but false stories like George Washington chopping down a cherry tree or Betsy Ross designing the first American flag.

Countless school curriculums include how-to instructions for a quilt made in the secret code. Museums feature symbolic quilts in exhibits dedicated to slavery. Historians often are asked questions:

- ◆ Is it true that quilts were hung on clotheslines to signal escaping slaves of a "safe house"?
- ◆ Were quilts read as maps to tell escapees the route to safety?
- ◆ Did runaways use quilt patterns with names like the Double Wedding Ring or the Drunkard's Path as code to communicate escape plans?

**The fact is that we have no historical evidence of quilts being used as signals, codes or maps. The tale of quilts and the Underground Railroad makes a good story, but not good quilt history.**

- ◆ The Double Wedding Ring, Sunbonnet Sue and most of the other quilt patterns supposedly used as code did not exist before the Civil War.
- ◆ While escaped slaves recorded signals such as whistles, songs and lanterns as useful in communicating on the run, absolutely no first person accounts of using quilts as signals exist.
- ◆ Women in slavery made quilts; we have much historical evidence and many surviving quilts. People remembered using quilts in escapes, but they were used to warm fugitives or protect them from view. They did not serve as code.

What harm can a charming yet false story do? You be the judge. But do realize that we are teaching a generation of children false history. And by focusing on this connection we ignore our national obligation to learn about the true and less charming stories of slavery.

*Feel free to photocopy this sheet to help spread the truth about the myth.*

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Author of *Facts & Fabrications: Unraveling the History of Quilts & Slavery*

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