

Sampler Quilt for the Underground Railroad

The idea of enslaving human beings was not acceptable to many people and so the Underground Railroad came into being. This was network of abolitionists who helped slaves escape to Ohio and Canada. Safe houses, hopefully no farther than 10-11 miles apart, were called "stations", those who guided the escapees were known as "conductors" and the runaways themselves were called "passengers".

Reaching a "station" in the North meant food, clothing, and a place to hide if capture seemed imminent. Estimates are that as many as 100,000 people escaped slavery between the American Revolution and the Civil War.

The blacks were not allowed to learn to read and write so the abolitionists had to devise a way to silently communicate directions to escapees, thus the idea of quilt patterns with meanings for those wanting freedom came into being. These quilts with special patterns could be hung on a line, out an open window or other places and not arouse any suspicions. They looked simply like a housewife airing her bedding.

We have put together 15 different quilt blocks each with its own meaning to show how this plan worked. Of course, the slaves had to learn the meanings ahead of time.

#1 is Jacob's Ladder - It has an alternating path of dark and light that can be used to show a direction. The slaves could know which way to go by the angle at which the quilt was placed outside the home of the abolitionist.

#2 is the Monkey Wrench - It was heavy metal tool used by the blacksmith. As a rule, the blacksmith was the most knowledgeable person on the plantation and was known as the "Monkey Wrench". He could travel around without anyone thinking anything suspicious and therefore pass any information needed. In other words, the Monkey Wrench was the person or a group of people who got things moving, or - turned the wagon wheel.

When this quilt was displayed it meant it was time collect tools needed on the journey north to freedom. There were physical tools needed for constructing shelter, for defending themselves, and determining direction. Along with food, and a few coins, they were to wrap these tools in a bandana bundle.

#3 is the Wagon Wheel - Not only was the wagon wheel symbolic of a "chariot that was to carry them home", but wagons with hidden compartments were one of the primary means of transporting escaping runaways. The quilt was a message to pack provisions as if packing a wagon, keeping in mind packing only what was essential.

#4 is the Carpenter's Wheel - This was a secondary code pattern. To the slave, the master carpenter in their lives was Jesus. They would sing the "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" and the plantation owner thought they were singing about going to Heaven, but actually it was message to follow the directions to the west northwest - to Ohio.

#5 is the Bear Paw - With this quilt the runaways were directed to follow an actual trail of a bear's footprints. The animal footprints would indicate the best path, just like a road map. Most escapes took place in the spring and with the spring rains it would be easy to follow a bear's paw trail to food and safety.

#6 is the Basket - Symbol of provisions needed for the long journey north. One of the most difficult things faced by the escaping slaves was feeding themselves along the way. They took what they could carry and then had to depend on safe houses or friends to help. Abolitionists would give them baskets of provisions and tools such as flint and compasses. So one of these quilts hung outside a house would mean a basket of provisions could be had there.



#7 is Crossroads - Once escapees made it safely through the Appalachian Mountains, they were to travel to the "crossroads" meaning a city where they would find protection and refuge. The main crossroad, or terminal, was Cleveland, Ohio. There were four or five overland trails connected with Cleveland, and numerous water routes, crossing Lake Erie into Canada and freedom.

#8 is the Log Cabin - The block may have indicated there was a specific log cabin in Cleveland that was a safe house, or it may have directed the runaway to build a log cabin to weather out winter and perhaps establish a permanent residence in a "free" area.

The usual center color of the block was red, representing the hearth or fire of the cabin. If the center block was black it indicated the home it hung in front of was a safe house. If the center block was yellow it meant to watch for a light, or lantern.

#9 is Shoo-Fly - This pattern represents an actual person who would help escaping slaves. His responsibility was to secretly aid and harbor fugitives. Sometimes the slaves hid out in churches, or caves referred to as cathedrals. Graveyards were frequently the hiding place, especially if they were located on the outskirts of town, or were close to rivers.

#10 is Bow Tie - A quilt of this pattern was a directive for them to dress in a conventional manner. When they first escaped their clothes were those of the slaves under a master. On the journey

they became tattered and torn, so free blacks would often meet them in a safe place and give them fresh clothing so they wouldn't stand out among the city folks. This way they could walk through town undetected to ships waiting to take them across the Great Lakes to Canada and freedom.

#11 is Flying Geese - With this quilt the slaves learned they were to take their direction, timing, and behavior from the migrating geese. Since geese fly north in the spring, it was also the best time for slaves to escape. Geese have to stop at waterways along their journey in order to rest and eat. Especially since geese make loud honking noises it was easy for runaways to follow their flight pattern.

#12 is Birds in the Air - This quilt is also symbolic of flight or migration. The clever quilter would make one block with one color dominant so it gave the direction in which to travel depending on the direction the quilt was displayed.

#13 is the Drunkard's Path - This is known by a number of different names depending on whether or not the owner was a teetotaler. No matter what it was called, in the Underground Railroad, it meant that the escapees should travel in a staggering fashion to confuse any slave hunters who might be following them.

#14 is the Sailboat - This pattern was the symbol of safe water passage to freedom. Free black sailors and ship owners helped many slaves escape directly, hiding them on board ships and spiriting them away to Canada.

#15 is the North Star - This is also known as the drinking gourd (the Big Dipper). The North Star was the guiding light because it always points to the north. It was an important navigational tool for the ship owners who took the slaves from Cleveland or Detroit to Canada.

The North Star is the last block in the Underground Railroad Sampler quilt. The quilt top was finished into a lightweight quilt, raffled off for the benefit of the Edwards Historical Association and won by an appreciative teacher at Edwards-Knox Central School, Chris Backus, who plans to use it in her classroom.

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