

Freedom Within Quilts
By Erika Garcia Gonzalez

The Underground Railroad is known today as a secret system that slaves used to escape their owners in the early to mid 1800s. African American slaves went through decades of suffering and oppression with no hope of a free future. The Underground Railroad was the beginning of hope for many slaves and one of the first organized systems which led thousands to freedom. Since the Underground Railroad was kept a secret, many different codes and signals had to be used. These codes gave slaves cues on where to go and what steps to take to safety. Some of these codes lied within handmade quilts. According to “The Underground Railroad and the Secret Codes of Antebellum Slave Quilts,” Raymond Dobard mentions in his book, *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*, that “secret codes were incorporated into quilts that were used by slaves to help them find their way to freedom along the Underground Railroad” (44). A “Flying Geese” Pattern Quilt made in 1861 resides at Houston Baptist University’s Museum of Southern History. This quilt might seem like a simple artifact with interesting colors and shapes; however, it symbolizes freedom and was part of a secret code that guided slaves in the Underground Railroad to escape the Antebellum South.

The “Flying Geese” Pattern Quilt from the Museum of Southern History is an off-white quilt that consists of squares. Each square on the quilt consists of a large isosceles triangle. That triangle is located on the bottom right corner of the square, splitting the whole square down the middle diagonally. Within these larger triangles, there lie smaller triangles, three solid and three patterned triangles, facing opposite directions. Each square has a unique pattern and color in the smaller triangles than the one next to it. These colors included different shades of red, pink, orange, blue, and green. However, in this particular quilt, the direction of the triangles seemed to

hold the most importance, not their colors. As previously mentioned, this quilt was made in 1861, the year in which the American Civil War and the fight for slavery began. The quilt won four 1st place prizes in the Louisiana State Fair due to its importance in the Underground Railroad. This quilt was one of many that helped get slaves to safety. An African American quilter, Ozella Williams, was one of the first to confirm the myths that these quilts were indeed used in the Underground Railroad (“Quilts to Freedom” 6). Before Williams, there was no knowledge about the actual importance of these quilts. Apparently, quilts were suspended or displayed outside either on fences or windows. Once they were seen by slaves, they were supposed to have “memorized the order in which patterns were displayed,” which ultimately taught them “when and how to escape” (“Quilts to Freedom” 6). These quilts held immense significance for these fleeing slaves. Aside from the direction these quilts provided slaves with, they also served as a beacon of hope. The “Flying Geese” Pattern Quilt is one of the many quilts that are known today as the Freedom Quilts.

The “Flying Geese” Pattern Quilt is one of the many quilts tied to historical periods and events. Quilts have been involved with the history and culture of “Native Americans, western pioneers, slaves escaping through the Underground Railroad, and immigrants from Europe and Asia” (McCoy 46). However, for the “Flying Geese” specifically, the Underground Railroad is the most important historical event. The Underground Railroad itself was not an actual railroad. It was a “strategic line of farms running zigzag northward” (Buckmaster 142). These farms and houses brought the slaves from the south into the northern states and all the way up to Canada. The people who organized the Underground Railroad consisted of a group of men and women of all skin colors. The main goal of the Underground Railroad was to gain “universal freedom for mankind” (Buckmaster 142). However, true freedom that disregards gender, race, and religion is

something unknown -- even in today's society. Nevertheless, back in the 19th century, African American oppression, slavery, and abuse was at its prime. People seemed to finally begin understanding the immorality of slavery. The entire United States was approaching its Civil War era, in which slavery was a major concern. People such as Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass are known today for being formerly enslaved prior to joining the Underground Railroad. They were only two of the many who helped conduct this system. People of white color were also part of the Underground Railroad. They were called abolitionists, people who were against slavery and yearned for its abolition. It is evident that society was changing in the 19th century. People were becoming aware of the racial oppression in the country, making the Underground Railroad one of the most monumental systems in the history of the United States. It was the first time that change was seen, and risks were taken towards freedom. Due to the system being a secret, slaves being illiterate, and the grave danger associated with the Underground Railroad, the quilts and secret codes were crucial to the entire operation. For the safety of all of the parties involved, it was necessary that the operation stay confidential. Therefore, "rigid discipline was maintained, and no latitude allowed for failures" (Buckmaster 143). Quilts were hung outside, and even illiterate slaves were aware that when these quilts were displayed, it was a safe house for them to sleep and eat, or that the end was near. No words were used, no signs hung up, only a set of patterns and colors on quilts symbolized freedom for these fleeing slaves.

This artifact being displayed on a museum wall is incredibly important. African American history is showcased in many ways. Primarily, it is commonly known that quilt making is a popular hobby in African cultures. Within these quilts, "African textile techniques, aesthetic preferences, and religious symbols" were all portrayed (Wahlman 68). Not only did these quilts form patterns that symbolized freedom, they also gave a glimpse of the culture of the

African American slaves. The decades of oppression that African Americans went through, along with the ongoing racial discrimination that is occurring in today's society, makes the display of artifacts such as this quilt immensely important. If this quilt were to be seen in the mid-1800s, most people would not know its meaning. However, most people then did not understand the injustices of slavery. Today, people are more aware of human rights and the racial injustices of the world. This quilt is so important today because it provides a glimpse of the horrors of the past and prolonged hope for the future.

The fight for freedom has been an ongoing issue for centuries. Since early civilizations, people have been fighting for basic human rights. The Underground Railroad was only the beginning of the fight for freedom from slavery. Officially, slavery was not abolished until 1865 after the American Civil War. However, that did not mean it was the end of the fight for equality. The fight against segregation followed slavery and lasted about one hundred more years. Even today, the fight against racial injustice continues. The "Flying Geese" Pattern Quilt found in the Museum of Southern History is a monumental symbol. Not only did it help slaves find safety and allies, it was a symbol of hope. Ultimately, they could have been the hope that slaves needed to survive the trials of the Underground Railroad.

Works Cited

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