

Guide to the Underground Railroad Sampler Quilt

Joan Hyslop

Top Row, L-R:

- Carpenter's Wheel
- Log Cabin
- Drunkard's Path

2nd Row:

- Shoo Fly
- North Star (sits lower, as it is a centrepiece, flanked with four stars)
- Flying Geese

3rd Row:

- Crossroads
- Bear's Paw

4th Row:

- Bow Tie
- Monkey Wrench
- Tumbling Blocks



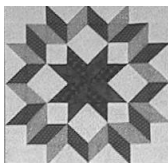
Underground Railroad Sampler Quilt on display at Grey Roots Museum & Archives

This 212.5 cm x 167 cm quilt was completed in 2003 by the Queen's Bush Quilters group of Markdale, Grey County, Ontario. The top had been pieced by Mrs. Ella (Winterburn) Hyslop (1916-2001). The pattern had been developed by the Quilter's Line quilting business at Markdale, Ontario, and copyrighted in 2000.

The function of the sampler quilt is to display examples of traditional quilt blocks known to have been used in the past by slaves or people working for the Underground Railway in the United States. Ordinary quilts (using only one of these symbols at a time) would be innocuously displayed on a clothesline or fence or rail to visually alert escaping

Black people as they travelled, or to serve as reminders of advice for how to escape successfully. This practice likely was used up until the American Civil War era.

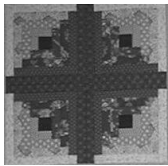
Secret Underground Railway quilt codes, using traditional quilt block patterns as symbols, helped communicate useful information to slaves. Slaves were not permitted to learn how to read and write, and also could not congregate, nor talk openly about escaping, without fear of punishment by their owners and others. The patterns, and sometimes knotted ties that were incorporated in the structure of the quilts, indicated when it was a good time to escape, the landmarks to look for, the direction to take, and other useful instructions to remember. Some of the patterns actually had African symbolic origins (Monkey Wrench, Nine Patch, Crossroads), while others, like the North Star, Dresden Plate, Flying Geese and Tumbling Blocks, provided directional suggestions.



Carpenter's Wheel

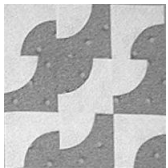
Jesus was a carpenter, steal away to Jesus... Circular patterns were traditionally used in Africa to denote the life cycle as well as freedom. Wagon wheel-like symbols re-minded people that one method of escape could be hiding in a wagon - the chariot "to carry you home" to

freedom.



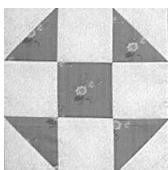
Log Cabin

Usually the central squares of this pattern were red to represent a home's fireplace hearth. When the central squares were a dark or yellow colour, they represented a "safe house" for fugitive slaves. Another possible meaning was "build yourself a log cabin in Canada".



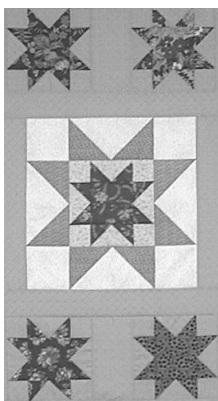
Drunkard's Path

To avoid capture, travel in a zig-zag pattern, back track sometimes, try to stay off main roads, and wade or swim through streams and rivers.



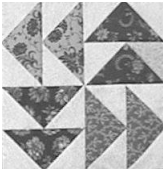
Shoo Fly

Dress up or disguise yourself. In Africa this pattern symbolized the maker of textiles or clothing.



North Star

Follow the North Star as it will lead you to Canada.



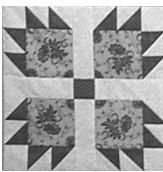
Flying Geese

The darker triangular "geese" symbolized escaping slaves. The geese were positioned like an arrow so that the viewer knew which direction to go next.



Crossroads

Make a decision that affects yourself and your loved ones. This pattern also symbolized Cleveland, Ohio.



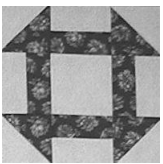
Bear's Paw

Follow bear tracks through the Appalachian Mountains in order to find water and fish. Perhaps hide in caves?



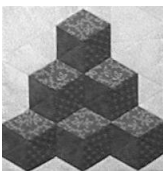
Bow Tie

Freemen in the Northern States often wear coats and shirts with bowties and you do not want to look different to avoid capture as a runaway.



Monkey Wrench

A monkey wrench was a tool that a plantation blacksmith needed to remove and repair wagon wheels. This pattern is also an African symbol for a person who guides people, using only the sun and stars as reference points. This symbol, often used by conductors on the Underground Railway, usually meant "gather up your tools and belongings for an escape".



Tumbling Blocks

This symbol meant that one should gather food and other items in readiness for escape. It also is a code for Niagara Falls, a landmark for people who intended to cross the Niagara River to get into Canada.

Resources:

Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard. *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*. Toronto: Random House, 1999.