



Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad

Jacqueline L. Tobin , Raymond G. Dobard

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In **Hidden in Plain View**, historian Jacqueline Tobin and scholar Raymond Dobard offer the first proof that certain quilt patterns, including a prominent one called the Charleston Code, were, in fact, essential tools for escape along the Underground Railroad.

In 1993, historian Jacqueline Tobin met African American quilter Ozella Williams amid piles of beautiful handmade quilts in the Old Market Building of Charleston, South Carolina. With the admonition to "write this down," Williams began to describe how slaves made coded quilts and used them to navigate their escape on the Underground Railroad. But just as quickly as she started, Williams stopped, informing Tobin that she would learn the rest when she was "ready."

During the three years it took for Williams's narrative to unfold--and as the friendship and trust between the two women grew--Tobin enlisted Raymond Dobard, Ph.D., an art history professor and well-known African American quilter, to help unravel the mystery.

Part adventure and part history, **Hidden in Plain View** traces the origin of the Charleston Code from Africa to the Carolinas, from the low-country island Gullah peoples to free blacks living in the cities of the North, and shows how three people from completely different backgrounds pieced together one amazing American story.

Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad Details

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From Reader Review Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad for online ebook

Helena says

This book is informative, interesting all the way through, and a smooth read. Learn about the secrets stitched and knotted into these quilts, and the traditions that inspired this method of communication or the West African textiles that preceded them - this is an important book about an overlooked subject in American history, as well as textile arts.

Ms. Tobin provides solid 3rd party documentation, references and citations to support her efforts, valuable for any of us interested in studying this topic in more detail.

I didn't know much about the quilts other than they were used to signal whether a location was safe to stop at, or should be passed by. There's so much more to this story, and the Underground Railroad.

Kathy says

I loved reading this book and the authors' theories about clues given in slave quilts. They are working at a disadvantage at many reject their claims as they lack written corroboration. They explain the oral tradition and why written proof is highly unlikely from a population forbidden by law from reading or writing.

If you are interested in quilts or slaves, this is a great book for you.

Andrea says

Not at all what I was expecting. Don't waste your time.

Jen says

Hidden in Plain View is ultimately a book about a woman who meets a black quilter at a market in Charleston, SC and goes down multiple rabbit holes to break a secret code. The quilter, Ozella, draws in the author (Tobin) with an oral history of the meaning of quilt lore as used among slaves in the antebellum South. The bits of the book in between the first chapter and the epilogue are the authors' attempts to piece together what the quilting messages might mean and how they may have come about.

The biggest problem with the book is that it's trying to track down facts based on oral history. Not only is the information not written down, but it's typically only passed down to trusted family members. Freed blacks who experienced slavery were loathe to put their experiences into writing and were unlikely to share any of the of details about how they escaped or how the Underground Railroad actually worked -- especially since they often had to rely on other people (white people) write those stories for them.

Because of this, the authors have to rely on conjecture. Just because they're conjecturing, it doesn't mean that what the book posits is Wrong. Tobin and Dobard obviously deeply researched several academic avenues to try to piece the story together. Considering how little credence a modern American audience gives to any thesis that's devoid of "hard proof" and cited academic sources, it's no wonder that this book has received so much blow-back. However if you're willing to take oral tradition as a "true" source (at least as much so as an article in an academic journal), the book's enjoyable.

If nothing else, *Hidden in Plain View* got me thinking about how amazing it was that people were able to create these codes/plans, keep them hidden, and use them to escape their captors. Do I believe that the quilts were used to send messages about how to escape and what to do when escaping? I'm not 100% sure, but Tobin and Dobard make a good case for it.

Sarah says

Picked this up at the Baltimore Book Thing. I'm about a third of the way through, and thus far am frustrated with the way the authors seem to tease the reader with drip of information, but have yet to follow through with a well-laid out straightforward discussion.

I've also found that there's a lot of question regarding the accuracy of this book; the number of factual errors made by the authors are dismaying. See:

A critique of the book by Giles R. Wright, director of the Afro-American History Program, New Jersey Historical Commission, Trenton

Quilts and the Underground Railroad Revisited: Interview with Historian Giles R. Wright by Kimberly Wulfert, PhD

The Underground Railroad and the Use of Quilts as Messengers for Fleeing Slaves by Kimberly Wulfert, PhD

Mary says

People have probably heard that quilts were part of helping slaves on the Underground Railroad. This book tries to substantiate that. It's hard to do, because the actual quilts that were used are probably fallen apart and thrown out by now, and because by nature the Underground Railroad was made up of secrets, so there's very few ways to substantiate secrets. But one of the authors speaks to a woman in Charleston, S. Carolina who has kept the verbal history, passed down from her mother and grand-mother, alive, and she passes it on to this author. Which quilts were used for which signals is fascinating to me. It even got down to how the quilts were "quilted" meaning how the three layers were brought together to create one blanket. European-American tradition has it that the hand-sewing, with the little tiny stitches, is the way to go, and "tying," which is to say, passing a thread through the three layers and tying a knot, and doing that at intervals through the quilt - was, and still is, looked down upon. However, the slaves would put messages into the tying. One knot meant one thing, two knots another thing, and three knots yet another. This is something that would go right over the heads of the slave owners, but to a slave who was filled in, it would hold great meaning. They also tied the knots at intervals (on the quilt), and the authors think those were mileage markers. So if a quilt with a certain pattern was laid out, seemingly casually, to dry in the sun, hanging from a window, it would really be sending a message.

One quilt pattern would mean, "gather your supplies. Get ready." Another would mean, "now's the time. Go." And then on the journey, another would mean, follow this trail, or some such. They also had a chapter on Negro spirituals and how the singing of them sent messages. All wonderful stuff for us to know - that the slaves who were brutally brought over here and treated horribly and inhumanely, - fought in every way they could to survive. Another book that I got out of the library on the same day, "quilting for Dummies" - has no knowledge of this important history, when it talks about how the quilt blocks got their names.

Lorie says

Unfortunately, books like this are written. I see now how myths and legends are passed down as truth, due to some tall tale being produced as fact. This book is fiction. Numerous historians, in many areas have debunked this book as a nice story, but nothing more. What really ignites my flame is that it is being taught in some schools as fact. If you are interested in what real scholars have to say about this there is more here.. <http://www.quiltersmuse.com/an-ameri...>

It's unfortunate that an amazing part of US history like the underground railroad has to be tarnished with piffle like this. Go elsewhere to get your real history.

Michelle says

Ok, I am redoing this review. There were things that disappointed me in this book. It seemed like there was a lot of conjecture. As I told a friend who asked me about the book it also reminded me of "Mutant Message Down Under" where some foreign white lady is given all the mystical secrets of aborigine society. I just wanted to ask, "What makes you so special that they pass this information to you but not their own children?" Because I felt not entirely able to back up my criticisms I didn't want to put out a really negative review. However, I have since come across the opinions of some folks much more knowledgeable than I am. The link below provides an interview between quilt historian Kimberly Wulfert, PhD. and African-American historian Giles Wright. Their critique addresses specific weaknesses in Tobin's book far better than I could.

www.antiquequilt dating.com/ugrrwright...

Audra says

This is an enlightening book about quilting and how it was used during slavery to help enslaved Africans escape to freedom. Not only does it talk about the names and histories of the quilting blocks, but it also talks extensively about the Underground Railroad and how it was not only limited to land, but train and sea as well.

It lays plain the debate surrounding quilts and whether or not they were actually used during the Underground Railroad and provides overwhelming evidence that they, indeed, were. There is also a wonderful timeline at the back of the book detailing when slavery began and the events involved in its evolution and, hundreds of years later, its dismantling.

A very, very informative read.

Katie says

I'm currently reading this for something I'm working on. However, it's amazing how so many people can actually believe this existed. It's also amazing how many read this book, and then still believe this can happen. With words of wisdom such as, "follow the bear tracks they will lead you to safety", or "head north" the author's seem to assume that slaves were completely lacking in any knowledge whatsoever. The fact that one of them, is in fact an African-American Fine Arts Professor at Howard University is mind-blowing. Seeing as how there is no circumstantial fact to back up any of the facts, it's hard to believe so many people fall for this on a daily basis. Also, if you check the citation, many of their facts come from children's books. Lastly, the connections it makes to past African traditions, and Masonic symbols is misleading and confusing at best.

Kris says

I was really disappointed with this book. I was expecting a scholarly work about a part of history that I'm interested in. I thought that a book written by TWO people with PhD behind their names would at least be organized and on point.

I was wrong.

The authors spend more time second-guessing themselves and positing questions they are unable to answer instead of focusing on the information they are confident in sharing with their audience.

In the first section, they spend too much time downplaying the use of oral history in contemporary historic studies. Oral history is one of the cornerstones of historic and cultural research, even predating the famous Margaret Meade.

The idea of symbols and codes sewn into quilts by either slaves or abolitionists or both is intriguing and I believe there is information and evidence out there to produce a well-written evaluation of the viability of this idea. I believe someone out there will be able to produce a better-organized work than this.

The only reason I would recommend this work for study is to take advantage of the authors' primary sources. They have an excellent bibliography that will allow other scholars to at least start their own research on the topic of African American textiles, symbolism, and the Underground Railroad.

Eva Nickelson says

The book's title is misleading. There are some quilts, there are escaping slaves, and the two slightly co-mingle. I think this book would have been better titled if it had left out the portion about the quilts.

As a theory for how slaves actively fled plantations and escaped to Canada, this book was poorly paced and out of order. As a "scientific" look at how slaves fled plantations, this book was very, very bad. Evidence was given based on a children's fictional book, which may have been based on a news story on NPR many

years back.

When I started this book, I was ready to discredit the theory placed forward by the authors for their terrible ordering and horrible evidence. But during the middle of the book, I was able to piece together enough information to get a look at how a slave would be able to leave the plantation, how they would prepare for the journey, how they could keep up lines of communication throughout the entire community. But the authors were emphasizing an entirely different point, and they were doing it poorly.

While this book increased my interest in how the Underground Railroad worked, it was so much work to read through and weed out the pertinent information from their "scientific" evidence. Not a good read.

Kathy Petersen says

In my work as a writer at the Missouri History Museum, I have to look at a lot of books (is this a cool job or what??). But merely seeking references and specific pieces of information, I seldom read one all the way through. I made an exception for *Hidden in Plain View* and was pleased that I did.

Anyway, this short story of the writer's education into the deeper meaning and hidden history of African American quilting and other codes is fascinating. The writers leave many open questions, understandably since the messages about the Underground Railroad had to remain arcane if not top secret to be effective. Still they may be stretching a point or two or more. Those who know for sure are long gone and have kept their pledge to their enslaved brothers and sisters.

Susan Ferguson says

When Jacqueline Tobin visited Charleston, SC, she met Ozella McDaniels Williams at the market. Ozella was selling quilts and began to talk to her about the use of quilts and their secret language during slavery. Jacqueline was not paying much attention, but when she got home and began to think about it, she called her using the business card from the quilt she bought. Ozella told her she would get the story when Jacqueline was ready to hear it. So Jacqueline began doing research on slave quilts. When she went back to Ozella, she visited her for 3 hours in the marketplace where Ozella told her some of the hidden language in the quilts - how different quilting designs meant different things for slaves escaping. The quilts were often aired in windows or on clotheslines and when certain designs were hung, accompanied by a spiritual, they were messages to other slaves about escaping. At least, to those who could be trusted and knew how to read the signs. Jacqueline and Raymond Dobard did further research into symbols and travel on the underground railroad. Ms Williams had told her there were 10 quilt designs and each was displayed in turn. They discovered that some quilts were a sign of a safe house - the log cabin - along the route and others warned of danger or to take a different route. They also covered some of the fascinating history of the underground railroad.

Quite an interesting book and very thought-provoking.

Nancy says

This is a good beginner's book for the meaning of quilts and codes used in the Underground Railroad.

I expected more about the meaning of quilt symbols and there was some repetition. The book includes pictures of the quilts described and a glossary of designs.

It was more informative on the codes of the Underground Railroad and how spirituals were used to guide slaves from the south through Ohio to Canada.

This book made me want to read more and learn more about quilt codes and Underground Railroad codes in general.
