

Underground Railroad Quilts

Colebrook most surely embraced the underground movement whereby slaves from the Southern states made their way northward towards Canada and Freedom. The problem that confronts us nowadays is that the one building that we have documentary evidence was a station on the underground railroad has long since been torn down and its site flooded by the waters of Colebrook River lake. Other buildings, mostly along the Old North Road and Smith Hill Road, have a spoken history as being stations, but we lack concrete evidence to that effect, and so we officially cannot lay claim to having been part of that great humanitarian movement.

One of the most critical components of the Underground Railroad was secrecy. The federal laws, as well as most state statutes expressly forbade the sheltering of runaway slaves, and there were stiff fines, some as much as \$50,000 levied against anyone convicted of such an offense. This huge sum would have spelled financial disaster for anyone, hence the need for airtight secrecy. There were some individuals who, by virtue of a sterling reputation or great political or financial wealth, were able to embrace the movement and thumb their noses at the rest of the world.

The Chamberlain and Rockwell families in Colebrook were two such families in Colebrook, but the inn in Colebrook River, as stated earlier, has long been submerged and there is a lack of firm documentation for the several Rockwell houses.

One aspect of the Underground Railroad that is imperfectly understood today was the use of quilts to aid the escaping refugees by acting as clandestine maps, hung out on clotheslines or fences in full view, but whose message was hidden except for the initiated. Basically, there were fifteen or so different patterns used in this secret language, all of which are still very much in use by modern quilters.

The Monkey Wrench Quilt was the first quilt displayed as a signal for any slaves who planned to escape. A monkey wrench is a metal tool used to turn nuts such as held a wagon wheel onto the axel. Hung out on display it symbolized the need to collect the tools that would be needed on the long and dangerous journey that lay ahead. Wagon Wheel quilts have a round pattern and during the era of the Underground Railroad, wagons with hidden compartments were one of the primary means of transporting runaways. This quilt was a message to pack provisions for their journey as if they were packing a wagon.

A quilt of secondary importance in the list of escape quilts is the Carpenter's Wheel Quilt, which symbolized to the slave their reliance on religion, specifically Jesus, the master carpenter in their lives. As they worked in the fields, they sang spirituals such as "Swing low, sweet chariot", which soon took on the hidden meaning of their coming escape attempt. The Carpenter's Wheel consists of patterns made of small triangular blocks, and by carefully placing the darker ones with the point aiming in a specific direction, gave the proper direction to safety.

The second quilt in the sequence of escape was the Bear's Paw, perhaps remembered by those who recall the Colebrook Quilter's 2006 quilt. Runaways were directed to follow the actual trails of the bears that populate the Appalachian Mountain range, and as most escapes occurred in the Spring, because with spring rains, the paw prints would be easily seen, and the same rains would minimize the ability of search dogs employed in capturing the runaway slaves.

The Basket Block Quilt is a symbol of the provisions needed for the long journey north. As provisions were the most difficult (and dangerous) commodity, safe houses would display this basket quilt signifying that food could be obtained there. Food and other necessities were often carried in clothesbaskets, which were not likely to raise suspicions.

Once fugitives made it through the Appalachian Mountains, the Crossroads Quilt signaled that they had to travel to a crossroad, or city where they could find protection and refuge. There were code words for these crossroads; Cleveland, Ohio was “Hope”, Detroit, Michigan was “Midnight”; men ready to be delivered were “hardware” and women were “dry goods”.

The quilts mentioned so far could be read as follows: “The Monkey Wrench turns the Wagon Wheel towards Canada on a Bear’s Paw trail to the Crossroads”.

The Log Cabin Quilt consists of blocks that all have a central square, surrounded by strips of material made up of various colors. On a regular Log Cabin block, the central square is often red, representing the hearth, or fire providing warmth to the cabin. Underground Railroad Log Cabin quilts often had a black center indicating a “safe” house. Another variation was a yellow central square, indicating a light or beacon in the wilderness.

Shoo-Fly Quilts are made up of small squares and triangles. They represented an actual person who might have helped escaping slaves. The slaves hid out in churches, caves or sometimes graveyards, waiting for a signal from the local facilitator.

The Bow Tie Quilt was the seventh quilt displayed on the fence or clothesline to teach slaves how to escape to freedom. It was a directive for them to dress in a formal manner. When they first escaped, they wore their work clothes, making them easy to identify. Friends would meet them in safe places and give them fresh clothing. In “satin bow ties”, runaways wouldn’t stand out among city folk, and on the final leg of their journey, they would walk undetected to the shops that would take them across the water to the safety of Canada.

When the Flying Geese Quilt made its appearance, it informed the slaves that they were to take their directions, timing and behavior from migrating geese. Geese patterns can be sewn together in four directions. A clever quilter could show direction simply by making one set distinct from the others

The Birds in the Air Quilt is symbolic of flight or migration, and like several of these quilts, could be made into an arrow that pointed in the correct direction.

The Drunkard’s Patch Quilt is next in the secret code. Slaves were encouraged to travel in a staggering fashion to confuse any following slave hunters. They were encouraged to even double back occasionally to throw off pursuers.

Sail Boat Quilts were a symbol of safe passage to freedom. Black sailors and boat owners helped many escaping slaves. When the Compromise of 1850 strengthened the Fugitive Slave Act, allowing slaveholders to retrieve slaves in Northern states and free territories, runaway slaves weren’t safe until they reached Canada. Many depended on ships and ferries to cross icy Lake Erie.

The North Star Quilt, when seen along the way indicated that they were on the right tract, as the North Star was the guiding light to Canada. It was also important to navigation, especially boat owners who crossed Lake Erie and Lake Ontario.