

African-American Quilt Traditions

and The Legend of the Underground Railroad Quilts

February 2026

Quilt Block Party



Wesley Hall

Community Educator | Owner, Quilts by Big Wes

*We stitch together quilts of meaning to keep us warm and safe,
with whatever patches of beauty and utility we have on hand.*

- Anne Lamott

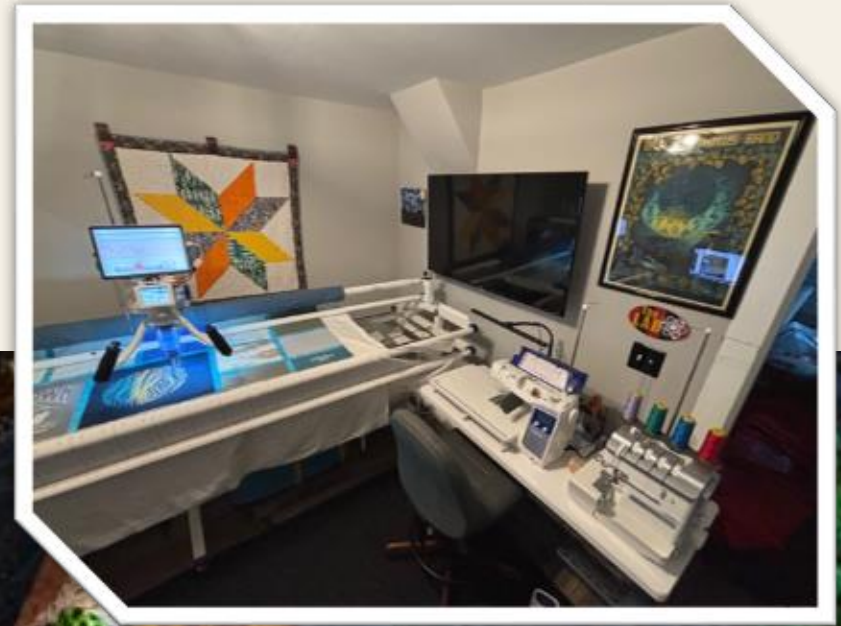
A Little About Me:

- I've been quilting professionally for over ten years.
- I specialize in memory quilts that tell personal stories.
- I am an overly enthusiastic Atlanta United, Nottingham Forest, and Pittsburgh Steelers fan.

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What is **your**
quilting
experience?



Our Agenda

1. African-American Quilt History and Traditions
2. African-American Quilt Pioneers
3. The Legend of the Underground Quilt Code
4. Block Party!



African-American

Quilt History and Traditions

History

Enslaved women created quilts out of necessity using scraps of fabric, but they also infused their work with aesthetic sensibilities rooted in African design principles - bold colors, asymmetrical patterns, large shapes, and improvisational piecing that emphasized movement and rhythm over rigid geometric precision.

Traditions

The "strip quilting" method, where fabric is pieced in vertical strips rather than blocks, has direct parallels to textile traditions from West and Central Africa and became a distinctive hallmark of African American quilt design.

The Roots of a Tradition

A Heritage Born from Resilience

African American quilting is more than craft. It's a living archive of history, creativity, and resistance. Enslaved Africans brought textile traditions from their homelands, adapting them to new circumstances with remarkable ingenuity.

"Quilts are the stories we wrap ourselves in."



Image by:
The Mandela Institute for
Developmental Studies

West African Textile Heritage

Kente Cloth

Ghana's strip-woven fabric with symbolic colors and patterns representing proverbs, history, and social status.



Adinkra Symbols

Visual symbols from Ghana conveying concepts, proverbs, and wisdom - a language in pattern.



Appliqué Arts

The Fon people of Benin created elaborate appliqué banners telling stories of royalty and history.



These traditions traveled across the Atlantic, shaping the distinctive aesthetics of African American quilts.

African-American Quilt Pioneers

Early Pioneers

Rural communities across the South became incubators for quilting traditions, where geographic isolation allowed unique regional styles to flourish. Generations of quilters in these tight-knit communities developed signature approaches that were passed down through families, with techniques evolving organically over decades.

Modern Pioneers

When the broader art world eventually discovered these quilting traditions in the twentieth century, it sparked new appreciation for the artistic sophistication that had existed in these communities all along. Today's African American quilters build upon this foundation, honoring the pioneers who came before while continuing to push the art form in new directions- ensuring that this living tradition remains vibrant and evolving.



Harriet Powers

1837–1910 • *The Mother of Story Quilts*

americanhistory.si.edu



Born into slavery in Georgia, Harriet Powers created two surviving masterpiece quilts that are now in the Smithsonian and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Her Technique

- Appliqué figures on pieced backgrounds
- Biblical narratives and local legends
- Each panel tells a complete story
- Echoes West African appliqué tradition.

Her Legacy

Powers' Bible Quilt (1886) was the first quilt by an African American woman to be acquired by the Smithsonian.



Gee's Bend

Quilting Community • Boykin, Alabama

geesbend.org



In a remote bend of the Alabama River, generations of African American women created quilts unlike anything seen elsewhere.

The Gee's Bend Aesthetic

- "Wrong" becomes right - unexpected shifts in pattern
- Work clothes recycled into art
- Multiple generations quilting together
- No two quilts alike, even from same pattern

Recognition

- Quilts now in major art museums worldwide
- U.S. postage stamps (2006)

The Tradition Continues

Contemporary Black quilters carrying the legacy forward through **narrative quilts**.

[Faith Ringgold](#)

Story quilts that combine painting, quilted fabric, and narrative



[Bisa Butler](#)

Vibrant fabric portraits celebrating Black life and history

[Michael A. Cummings](#)

Narrative quilts exploring African American culture and history



[Gwen Magee](#)

Political and social commentary through quilted art



BISA BUTLER

Bisa Butler's "**I Go To Prepare A Place For You**" (2021) depicts Harriet Tubman and is one of her most powerful pieces. The quilt portrays Tubman in her iconic determined pose, rendered in Butler's signature style.



The Legend of the Underground Railroad Quilt Code

The Story

According to this legend, quilts displayed on fence lines contained coded messages for freedom seekers. Specific quilt blocks indicated directions, warnings, and instructions for those escaping slavery via the Underground Railroad.

A Living Tradition

Whether historically documented or not, this legend celebrates the ingenuity of enslaved people and honors the quilting tradition as a potential vehicle for resistance and survival.

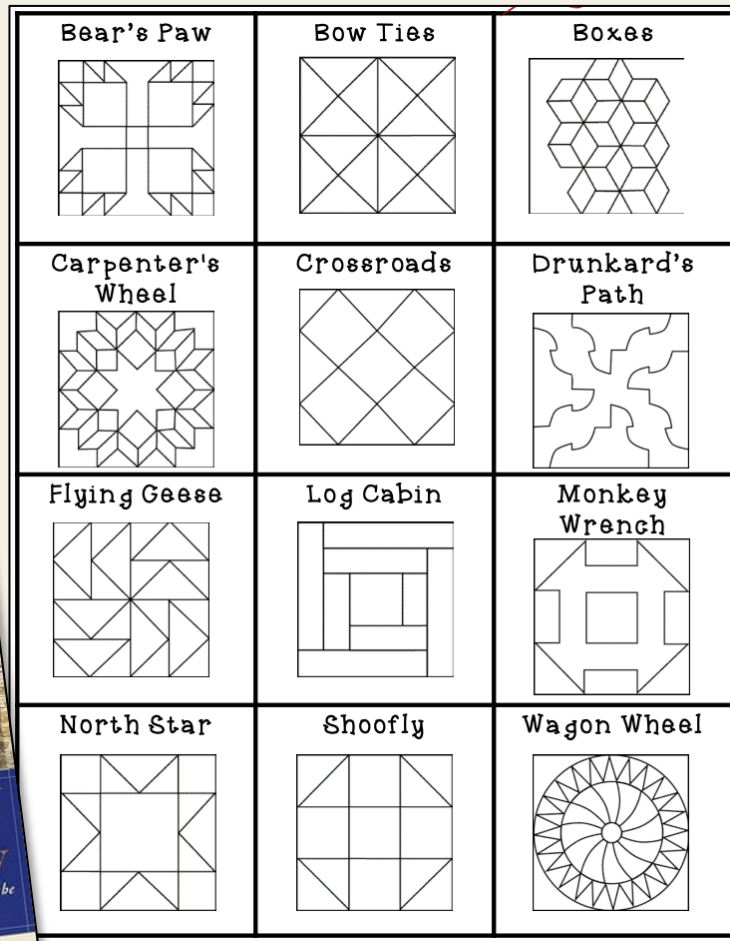
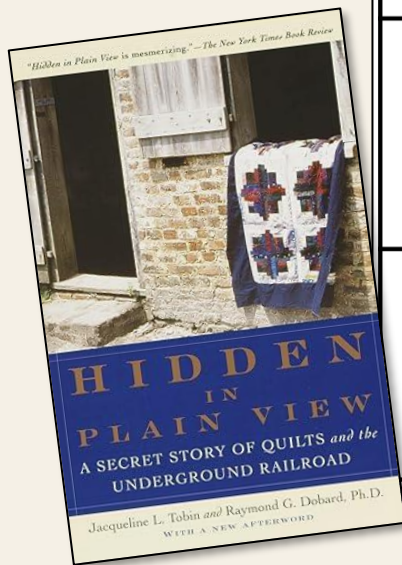
Freedom Blocks

Most of the quilt code legend comes from South Carolina quilter **Ozella McDaniel Williams** and the book *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*.



For a more in-depth analysis:

- [Underground Railroad Quilt Patterns and Their Stories](#)
- [African American Quilt Traditions and the Legend of the Underground Railroad Quilts](#)



Blocks for The Party

Crossroads



Journey to Cleveland

Flying Geese



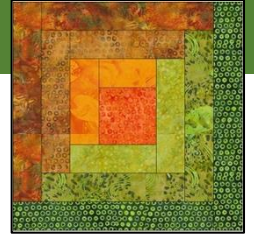
Direction & Timing

North Star



Follow the Drinking Gourd

Log Cabin



Safe House

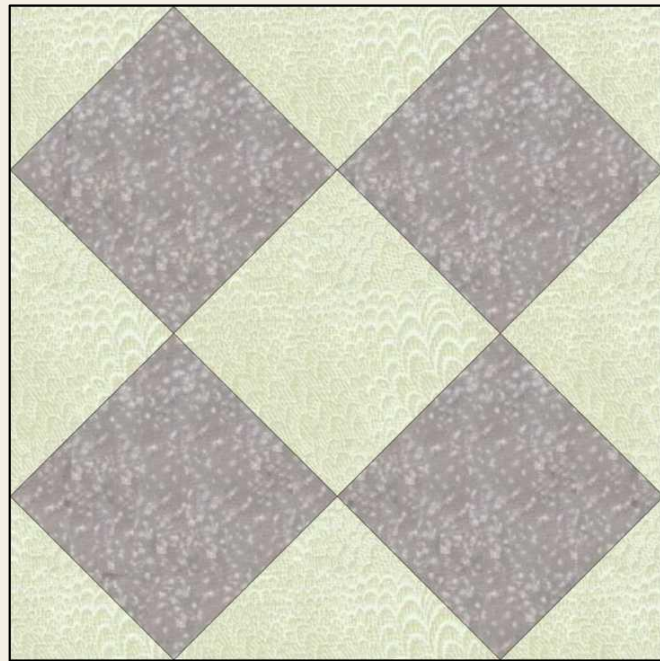
Crossroads

The Legend Says...

The Crossroads block signaled Cleveland, Ohio - a crucial junction on the Underground Railroad. Freedom seekers would reach a literal crossroads where they had to decide: continue north to Canada, or settle in a free state.

The Pattern

A plus sign or cross shape, representing intersecting paths. Simple construction makes it great for beginners. The four corners can represent the four directions of choice.



Crossroads Block
Intermediate Beginner

Crossroads (modified)

The Legend Says...

The Crossroads block signaled Cleveland, Ohio - a crucial junction on the Underground Railroad. Freedom seekers would reach a literal crossroads where they had to decide: continue north to Canada, or settle in a free state.

The Pattern

A plus sign or cross shape, representing intersecting paths. Simple construction makes it great for beginners. The four corners can represent the four directions of choice.



Crossroads Block
New / Beginner

Flying Geese

The Legend Says...

Geese fly north in spring. This block indicated both direction (follow the geese northward) and timing (travel when the geese fly, as weather grows warmer and days longer). It might also indicate the actual route geese follow over mountains.

The Pattern

Triangles arranged in a row, like a flock of birds in flight. Each "goose" is a triangle flanked by smaller triangles. A versatile pattern used in borders, sashing, and as a block on its own.



Flying Geese Block
Confident Beginner

North Star

The Legend Says...

"Follow the Drinking Gourd" - the Big Dipper constellation points to Polaris, the North Star. This block reminded freedom seekers to travel at night, following the star that never moves.

The Pattern

An 8-pointed star radiating from the center. This pattern requires working with triangles and precise points - a bit more challenging, but deeply satisfying when complete.



North Star Block
Confident Beginner

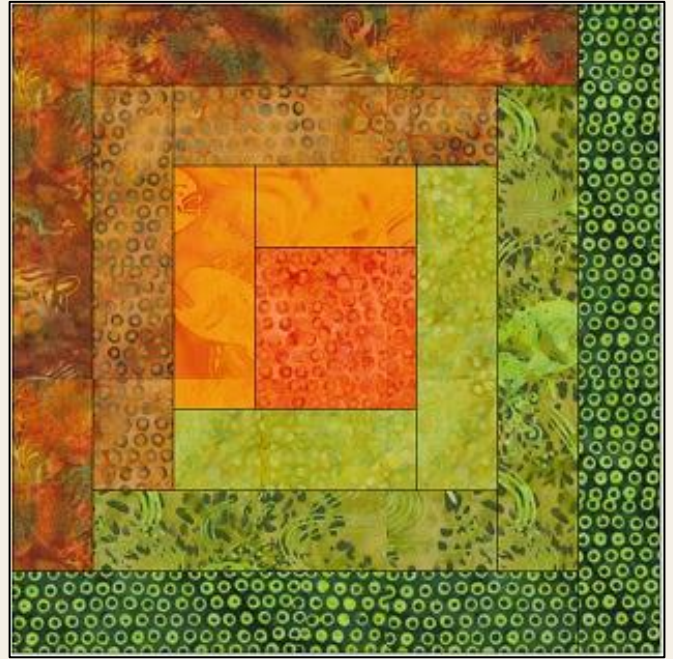
Log Cabin

The Legend Says...

A Log Cabin quilt displayed meant a safe house was nearby. The center square - the "chimney" or "hearth" - might carry additional meaning: a red center meant safety, while other colors might indicate caution.

The Pattern

Strips of fabric "built" around a center square, like logs stacked to form a cabin. One side traditionally uses light fabrics, the other dark - representing the interplay of light and shadow, or fire and ice.



Log Cabin Block
Intermediate Beginner

Let's get the party started!

Choose your block and join the tradition...

1

Pick your block.

2

Pick your fabric.

3

Lay the block out.

4

Make it happen!

Any Questions?

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Quilt Block Party

<https://bit.ly/quiltblockparty>