

A war never really starts with the first shot. There are years of events leading up to it as well as years of recovery after. So when we think of Civil War era we are really looking at many years of quilting

The story of Civil War quilting is a mixture of fact and myth. The oral tradition may not give us absolutely accurate information but it often reflects a greater truth of our pride in our country and hopes for its future.

### Stories of the Underground Railroad



There are intriguing stories of how quilting was used to help the slaves escape through the Underground Railroad. A Log Cabin quilt hanging in a window with a black center for the chimney hole was said to indicate a safe house. Underground Railroad quilts, a variation of Jacob's Ladder, were said to give cues as to the safe path to freedom. We imagine women secretly sewing fabric pieces together to be used as signals.

It is disappointing to learn that research on the Underground Railroad has found no evidence that this actually occurred. But these stories have been told from generation to generation filling our imagination with visions of quilting being a part of the flight for freedom. <sup>1</sup> While we enjoy these stories it is important to be aware that it is unlikely that quilts were ever used in the Underground Railroad.

In her article on the Underground Railroad block Barbara Brackman tells us, "As a quiltmaker I've always loved the pattern and the secrets hidden in the name. But as historian I've come to realize that there are no known quilts in this pattern dating back to the days of the Civil War or to the decades before the War when the Underground Railroad flourished." <sup>2</sup> This block was first known as Jacob's ladder, another reason to wonder if it was simply renamed later in honor of the brave souls who ran for freedom and those who helped them.



### Block Pattern Names From the Civil War

Another area where the line between truth and myth is blurred is on specific block patterns with names like Lincoln's Platform, Sherman's March, Birds in the Air and Evening Star. These names all bring to mind the Underground Railroad and the Civil War had begun and the pattern wasn't really common until after the war. The Log Cabin may have become popular after the death of Abraham Lincoln. His leadership in freeing the slaves might explain the stories that the Log Cabin pattern was a part of the flight to freedom. Perhaps many of these favorite blocks were really made and named in memory of the Civil War and the freeing of the slaves

### Abolitionist Quilting for Fairs

What we are certain of is that in the north women made quilts sewing inscriptions on them indicating the evils of slavery. Some even included a sketch of a slave in shackles. The following antislavery poem was inscribed on one of them..

"...I'd sooner spend my days within  
Some dark and dismal cave  
Than to be guilty of the sin  
Of holding one poor slave." <sup>3</sup>



As early as the 1830s abolitionists were actively pushing for antislavery laws. They hosted many handicraft fairs over the years to raise money for their cause and to keep it in the public eye. Women used their sewing skills to make various items including clothing, decorative items, afghans and quilts of fine fabric for these fairs. "The first Anti-Slavery Fair was held in Boston in 1834, and it was so successful the idea spread to other cities and towns throughout New England, and then to other states such as Ohio and Pennsylvania." <sup>4</sup>

Female Anti-Slavery Societies were formed by freed black women and white women. These organizations circulated petitions, provided schools for black children and raised needed money. In 1834 the abolitionist journal, "The Liberator" reported on an Anti-Slavery Fair. The article mentions, "We are told the colored ladies of Salem particularly deserve thanks for the interest they took in the Fair, and the articles they sent." <sup>5</sup>

These abolitionist activities had a powerful influence on events leading up to the war.

### [NEXT > Union & Confederate Quilts for Fundraising & Soldiers](#)

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#### References:

<sup>1</sup> "The Underground Railroad and the Use of Quilts as Messengers for Fleeing Slaves", by Kimberly Wulfert, PhD

<sup>2</sup> Quilts and the Underground Railroad, by Barbara Brackman

<sup>3</sup> p 9, ["Quilts from the Civil War"](#), by Barbara Brackman

<sup>4</sup> p 72, ["Hearts and Hands: The Influence of Women & Quilts on American Society"](#), by Pat Ferrero, Elaine Hedges and Julie Silber

<sup>5</sup> p 31, ["Always There: The African American Presence in American Quilts"](#), by Cuesta Benberry

["Quiltmaking in America: Beyond the Myths"](#), Laurel Horton (Editor)

#### Web Pages:

["History of The Underground Railroad Quilt Pattern"](#)

["Underground Railroad Quilt Myth"](#) Your pathway to several informative articles about the Underground Railroad and quilts.