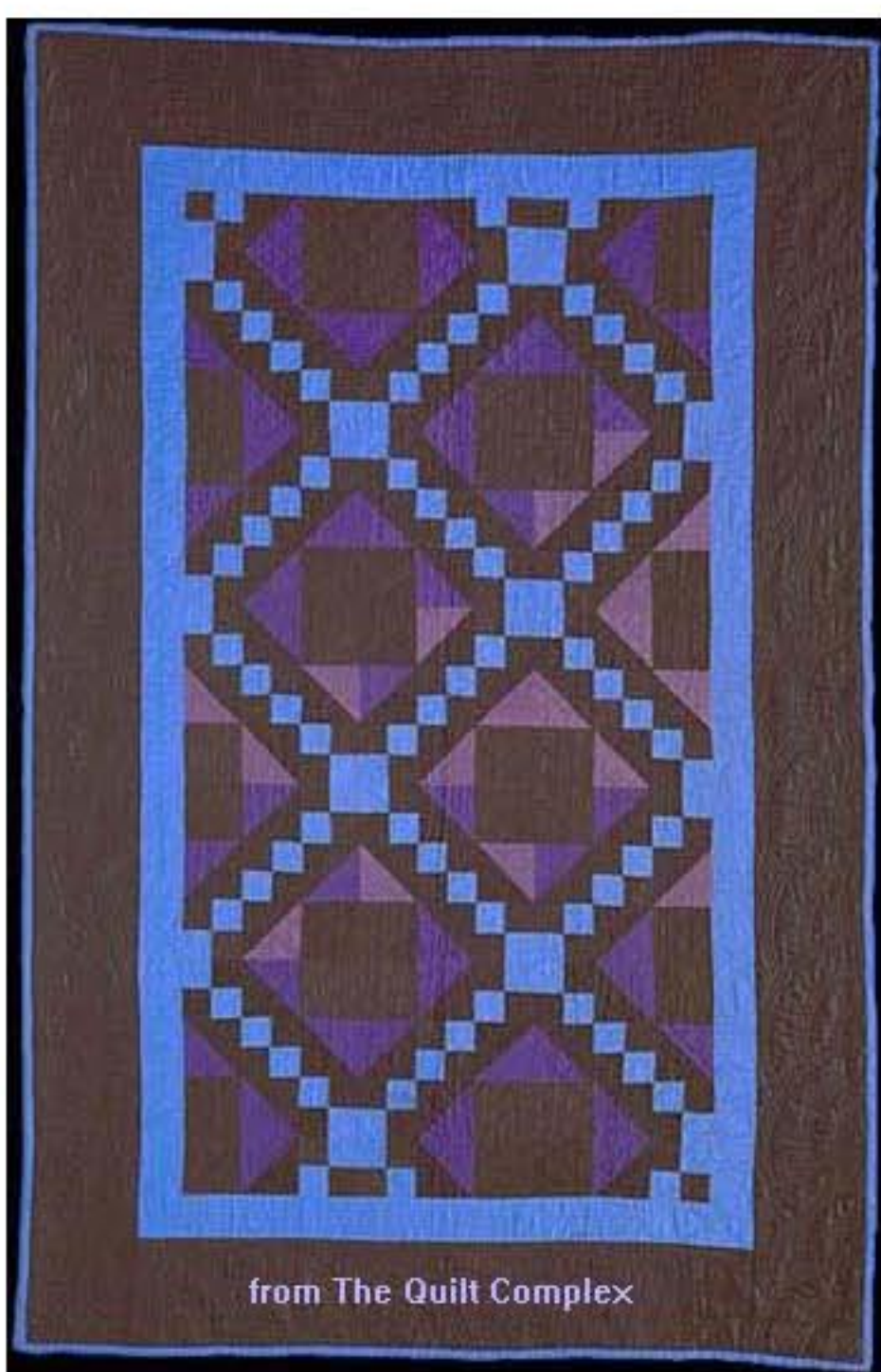


Seldom do we find a quilt pattern with just one name. This pattern has been called many. Just a few are Jacob's Ladder, Underground Railroad, Road to California, Off to San Francisco, Gone to Chicago, Stepping Stones and Trail of the Covered Wagon. ¹ All these names have one commonality; they all speak of going somewhere.

It's fun to imagine what might have inspired these names. It may be a trip through the garden using stepping stones or it might be the long journey west in a covered wagon. Women might well have dreamed of traveling as they were sewing on this quilt.

Inspired by the Bible and Uplifting Faith

When Marie Webster wrote the first known book on quilting in 1915 she referred to the Jacob's Ladder pattern in this way, "The bold and rather heavy design known as 'Jacobs Ladder' is a good example of a pieced quilt." She showed a black and white picture of this pattern with the caption, "One of the most striking quilts having Biblical names." ² Biblical names were often used for quilts in a time when reading the Bible each day was a part of family life.



from The Quilt Complex

The quilt block pictured just below is much like the example Marie Webster displayed in her book. In fact her caption notes that the colors were blue and white just like this one.

The Pattern's True Origins



Another writer, Ruth Finley, wrote a later book on quilting in 1929. Finley mentions the Jacob's Ladder pattern as being of "shadowy pre-Revolutionary origin" ³ but present day quilt historian, Barbara Brackman, points out that no example of a quilt in this pattern has been identified that was made before the beginning of the 20th century. ³ We need to be aware that during the early 20th century quilt history was often romanticized and people did not yet have the guidelines for

good quilt history research that we use today.

A Tribute to the Underground Railroad

Finley was the first to mention the same pattern was sometimes called the Underground Railroad. She further romanticized the name Underground Railroad by describing how it brings to mind a picture of, "Eliza of Uncle Tom's Cabin crossing the ice from Kentucky to Ohio, whence the underground railroad carried runaway slaves to the promised land of Canada." ³ We know that this pattern was unknown during the pre Civil War days of the Underground Railroad. But considering Finley grew up in Ohio she might well have heard stories of this pattern in connection with Ohio's part in assisting escaping slaves.

Quilt historian Barbara Brackman puts it so well in an article she wrote, "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."

Quilts like the one to the right were common during the Civil War era. The pattern used was one of four patches set on point in strips giving the sense of paths. ⁴ Perhaps the Underground Railroad pattern evolved from this earlier pattern.



In the end we must see the name Underground Railroad for this quilt block as one that remembers and honors the brave people who escaped slavery by traveling north and those who helped them. This does not make its historical significance any less. A commemorative pattern like this reveals the importance the Underground Railroad had to people not only during the time it helped slaves escape but for many, many years after the Civil War.

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Thank you to [The Quilt Complex](#) for giving permission to show you the quilt at the top of this page. Visit their site to discover the services they provide to museums, collectors, dealers, individuals, and quilt guilds.

References:

¹ p 214 "[Encyclopedia of Pieced Quilt Patterns](#)" by Barbara Brackman

² p 95 & fig 14 "[Quilts: Their Story and How to Make Them](#)" by Marie Webster

³ p 71 "[Old Patchwork Quilts and the Women Who Made Them](#)" by Ruth Finley

⁴ p 17 & p 20 "[Quilts from the Civil War: Nine Projects, Historic Notes, Diary Entries](#)" by Barbara Brackman