

A Guide to the Underground Railroad Quilt Collection, 2011

Underground Railroad Quilt Collection 2011
2011

A Collection in the Thomas Balch Library M 069, ART 0001
Thomas Balch Library
2006
Author: Laura Christiansen

History

Processed by: Laura Christiansen

Title Statement

A Guide to the Underground Railroad Quilt Collection, 2011

Subtitle: Underground Railroad Quilt Collection

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Author: Laura Christiansen

Publication Statement

Date: © 2006 By Thomas Balch Library. All rights reserved.

Publisher: Thomas Balch Library

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Profile Description

Creation: Machine-readable finding aid derived from MS Word, created by Elizabeth Preston, 23 December 2011

Language Usage: Description is in English

Revision Description

2013-11-21 Converted to schema conforming EAD by dtd2schema.vh.xsl.

Descriptive Summary

Collection number

M 069, ART 0001

Language

English

Abstract

This collection consists of one 36 x 36 inch, sixteen panel quilt created by Debra Pettit of Leesburg, VA in 2011. It also contains three folders of related information, including an explanation of the history and symbolism of quilts in the iconography of the Underground Railroad; a copy of an explanatory panel from the quilt; and photographs of the ceremony during which the quilt was presented to the Thomas Balch Library in 2011. Fifteen of the panels depict quilt patterns used to communicate messages along different points of the journey north to freedom; the sixteenth panel provides a textual explanation of each pattern.

Creator

Debra Pettit, Leesburg, VA

Repository

Thomas Balch Library

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

Collection open for research.

Use Restrictions

Photocopying is not allowed. Digital photography is available.

Acquisition Information

Debra Pettit, Leesburg, VA

Processing Information

Laura Christiansen, 21 December 2011

Preferred Citation

Underground Railroad Quilt, 2011, (M 069), Thomas Balch Library, Leesburg, VA.

Accruals

2011.0280

Alternative Form Available

None

Adjunct Descriptive Data

Related Material

Genius of Liberty (1817-1820) Database, (<http://www.balchfriends.org/Slaves/search.asp>). McElfresh Map Co. *Freedom's Tracks: A Map of the Underground Railroad*. 2005. (Map Drawer 8, Folder 17). Runaway Slave Advertisement, Leesburg, VA, August 1860 (OM012), Thomas Balch Library, Leesburg, VA. Souders, Bronwen C. and John M. Souders compilers, *Runaway Slaves: As Advertised in the Genius of Liberty published in Leesburg, Loudoun County, Virginia 1817-1843* [Waterford, VA], 2005 (VREF975.528 RUN).

Bibliography

Quilts from the Civil War: Nine Projects, Historic Notes, Diary Entries

Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Ante-Bellum South

World of a Slave: Encyclopedia of the Material Life of Slaves in the United States

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

Other Finding Aid

PastPerfect Finding Aid for Images

Technical Requirements

None

Historical Information

A symbolic term for numerous routes used to escape slavery during the first half of the 19th Century, the

Underground Railroad was a clandestine network of safe places and willing participants who aided with the dangerous journey to freedom. "Conductors" or guides led escaping slaves between places of refuge, also known as "stations." Often, those seeking freedom were required to make portions of the journey unaccompanied. Adding to the danger faced by all involved were the Fugitive Slave Acts, originally passed in 1790's and expanded throughout the first fifty years of the 19th century that enabled the capture and re-enslavement of fugitives in the North, and later, the punishment of any assisting slaves in attempted escape. To communicate necessary instructions and aid in maintaining the safety of the network, a number of systems of codes and symbols were created and used to identify places of safety and point out the right path to travelers.

One system, passed down through oral tradition, was the use of quilt patterns to provide directions and to issue important advice to escaping slaves. Due to a long quilting tradition among enslaved and free African Americans, quilts for personal and family use were already a medium for artistic expression and the communication of tradition, and were easily adapted for the transmission of symbols or mathematical codes. Although the ephemeral nature of quilts and the difficulty of locating and identifying quilts made by slaves for personal use make documentation difficult, some oral tradition and existing examples of quilts used along the Underground Railroad survive into the present. First discussed in-depth by historians Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard in their 1999 work *Hidden in Plain View: the Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*, the extent and use of specific patterns remains controversial due to the scarcity of documentation.

The patterns included in The Underground Railroad Quilt created by Debra Pettit in 2011 collected here, depict those passed down via oral tradition to Charleston, South Carolina quilt maker Ozella McDaniel Williams (1922 - 1998) and recorded by Tobin and Dobard in the mid-1990s. Recording one set of symbols in the order they may have been used, the explanation of the traditional meaning of each symbol also documents the thought processes and experiences of the Underground Railroad as escaping slaves may have encountered them along the journey to freedom.

Scope and Content

This collection consists of one 36 x 36 inch, sixteen panel quilt created by Debra Pettit of Leesburg, VA in 2011. It also contains three folders of related information, including an explanation of the history and symbolism of quilts in the iconography of the Underground Railroad; a copy of an explanatory panel from the quilt; and photographs of the ceremony during which the quilt was presented to the Thomas Balch Library in 2011. Fifteen of the panels depict quilt patterns used to communicate messages along different points of the journey north to freedom; the sixteenth panel provides a textual explanation of each pattern.

Arrangement

Box: Folder

Contents List

Box 1

Folder 1: "The Underground Railroad Quilt" explanation of quilt symbolism

Folder 2: "Story of the Underground Railroad" (fabric transfer, copy of one included on quilt)

Folder 3: Photographs of 2011 presentation of the Quilt to the Thomas Balch Library. (copies)

Item: Quilt, rolled in tissue, 2011