

# THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD:

## Non-Written Modes of Communication, and Confronting History's Erasures

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### OVERVIEW

#### THESIS:

This research examines the role that non-written forms of communication by African Americans played in the conducting of the Underground Railroad – the abolitionist network that helped lead slaves to freedom in pre-Civil War America. Non-written communication like quilting, African music, and secret encoded messages help to complicate our understanding of the myths, legends, and realities constructed around the Underground Railroad.

#### RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

- If slaves had no access to reading and writing, what were other forms of communication used through the Railroad?
- What new insights can we learn from non-written forms of communication about slavery?
- Could these non-written pieces be considered alternative narratives of the past?

#### BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

- Referred to as the Underground Railroad, in the 1800s networks were formed to assist slaves from bondage and inhumane treatment at the hands of their owners. The Underground Railroad, however, was not a railroad itself, but rather a network that helped runaway slaves get from slavery to freedom.
- Since anti-literacy laws prohibited slaves from learning to read and write, secret encoded non-written forms of communication included symbolic imagery sewn in quilts, music lyrics and tones, and codewords. These assisted runaway slaves on their journey.
- In the publication, *Hidden in Plain View* (2011), the authors reiterate that non-written forms of communication (quilts, African songs, and codewords) were significant because they contained secret forms of meaning.
- Non-written forms of communication such as quilting, codewords, and African music create new avenues for thinking about the Underground Railroad. Such primary source evidence complicates existing narratives by accounting for the historical agency of African Americans, including slaves' strategies for escape.

### FURTHER INSIGHTS

- The Underground Railroad can be viewed as a documented history with rich and numerous stories as well as one of myths and legends. These non-written forms of communication—quilting, secret codewords, and African music—bring another angle in studying the Underground Railroad.
- These primary sources can help to construct alternate narratives about the Underground Railroad: unofficial testimonies and accounts of escape versus the past dominant histories that largely ignored the voices of African slaves and their descendants.
- Kate C. Larson mentions that “early to mid-twentieth century authors chose to promote a nearly all-white and mostly Quaker dominated story filled with hidey holes and tunnels (2-3),” leaving slave knowledge oppressed, hidden, if not erased from official history.



Figure 5. : Emulation of Escaping through the Railroad.

### FORMS OF NON-WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

#### QUILT MESSAGES:

- North Star – Guiding light in the night sky, especially to boats navigating slaves to freedom
- Sailboat – Code that a boat was awaiting in port for safe passage to freedom.
- Wagon-Wheel – Slaves should pack-up everything that fit in a wagon as it was time to go!
- Since it was common for slaves to air out quilts, this was an opportunity to communicate through secret messages sewn into quilts to help guide the runaway slaves to freedom.



Figure 1. Quilt Example: "The NorthStar as a Navigation Light." Figure 2. Quilt Example: "A Boat is Waiting in Port."

Figure 3. Quilt Example: "Pack up everything and Let's Go."

#### MUSIC

- Slaves escaping the South through the Underground Railroad also utilized tones and lyricism brought from Africa. Songs contained coded lyrics.
- Figure 4 – This song was used just before an escape to let all who wished to go that the time was near so get ready. Other songs communicated directions, when, where, and how to escape, warned of dangers and obstacles that could be encountered along the route.



Figure 4. Song of Freedom: "Get on Board"

### CONCLUSION

- Overall, non-written forms of communication are valuable sources of knowledge in understanding the Underground Railroad.
- While they may not be considered official historical documents that fall under the parameters of documenting and historicizing the past, they are still significant alternative narratives that (1) expose the atrocities of slavery and (2) show strategies of slaves' escape and survival.
- Though there is much mythology and legend surrounding non-written forms of communication regarding the Underground Railroad, the main fact prevails. The railroad was a network to freedom for black human beings trying to escape from being owned and commonly abused by white human beings.
- As historian David Blight mentions, myths and legends can be a passage into the story of slavery and anti-slavery: "It's a passage into our understanding of slavery that is sometimes gentler and sometimes more savory than it is to look at slavery itself."

#### REFERENCES:

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