

Comforter of slaves bound for freedom 2  
women unraveled the code in quilts

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Jacqueline Tobin, a teacher of writing and women's studies at the University of Denver, knows the value of recording personal histories before they melt from memory.

She had a moment of epiphany at her mother's deathbed. "As she stared at me as she lay dying, I realized I didn't know her stories," says Tobin, 48. "I vowed never to let that happen again."

So Tobin was more receptive than most would be to an aging woman, a quilter who entreated her in 1994 to preserve a tale told in her family for generations, but never written down.

The story from Ozella McDaniel Williams related how quilts made by slaves were encoded with secret messages and hung in plain view to be used as guides by black fugitives.

Tobin was prepared to believe a black woman who chose a white woman -- and a total stranger -- to preserve an endangered piece of black American history. Recording oral histories, especially the stories women tell one another, had become "the direction of my life."

The book that resulted is out today: *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railway* (Doubleday, \$27.50). The larger message, Tobin says of the work co-authored with Howard University's Raymond Dobard, is that from the beginning of slavery here, many captives actively resisted by communicating about freedom secretly. "They were not just waiting for white abolitionists to save them," she says.

Tobin first met Williams in the Old Market Building in Charleston, S.C. A center of commerce since 1841, today the marketplace is mostly the turf of craftsmen and vendors.

As Tobin prowled the quilting section, Williams showed off her own handmade quilts and then stopped Tobin with this question: "Did you know that quilts were used by slaves to communicate on the Underground Railroad?" Williams was referring to the cooperative system that developed among antislavery activists who helped spirit fugitive slaves northward from about 1830 to 1865.

After she went home to Denver, Tobin couldn't shake off the question Williams had tossed at her in the marketplace. Using Williams' business card, Tobin telephoned her. Williams would not give her tale up easily. She told Tobin, "Don't worry. You will get the story when you are ready."

Tobin says now that Williams required a waiting period based on African tradition, a "ritualistic initiation. One has to earn the right to receive information or knowledge."

Getting Williams' story became something of an obsession for Tobin. The job was made harder by the fact that very few original slave quilts exist: They were washed repeatedly in lye-heavy soap, which weakened them; the original materials were humble and did not wear well.

First, Tobin contacted experts. "I traveled down the Mississippi from St. Louis to New Orleans, stopping to visit quilters and scholars. I

toured plantations and slave quarters, looking for clues," she writes. In 1996, after almost three years of study, she went to see Williams again at the Charleston market.

This time Williams was ready to talk: She was terminally ill. And she had no children to inherit her message. "She made this ritualistic space for me among her quilts," Tobin says. "I was literally sitting at her feet." Williams' command to Tobin was clear: "Write this down."

Tobin eventually learned that Williams had gone to graduate school at Howard University in Washington, D.C. Williams could have brought her story to any professor, Tobin says. But the two women developed a profound relationship, and Williams chose Tobin as her conduit.

There was, Tobin says, "an emotional and spiritual connection. I do not think she would have talked to a scholar. It was a woman-to-woman thing." Tobin says Williams became "a griot, a storyteller." The two spent three hours bridging a gap between generations and race, transcending "age, stereotypes and boundaries."

The "code" Williams passed along included a number of quilting patterns, accompanied by a terse, enigmatic proverb assigned to each. Ten quilts were set out in succession, Williams said, beginning with a "monkey wrench" design indicating it was time for the slaves to gather their tools. When the "wagon wheel" appeared, it was time to pack for the dangerous journey.

Colors, designs and the types of knots used were all significant, Williams said. Blue and white was a protective combination, a blessing for a long trip, for example. The spacing of knots might indicate a grid with a suggestion of distances.

It fell to Tobin to fill in the blanks and decipher what the full code might mean. She turned to Raymond Dobard, a professor of art history at Howard University and an accomplished quilter himself. The two collaborated by phone, fax and e-mail.

Dobard describes himself as an African-American quilter whose heritage is "a patchwork of Creole, French, Spanish and German blood." He was elated to work formally on the project. "Nothing like this had been done before." Dobard had been one source for Tobin's scholarship from the beginning.

He cautions that their interpretation of Williams' story, buttressed by their research from Africa and the southern USA, does not result in "some type of Rand McNally map" used by fugitives. And he suspects it will be challenged by scholars who are "doubting Thomases."

He is satisfied the two have an accurate understanding of Williams' references to the monkey wrench and to the bear's paw trail, which exhorted escapees to follow the track a bear would take on a journey north.

Dobard is less sure about other instructions in the code, such as the need to "exchange double wedding rings." He believes that might refer to breaking both the mental and physical bonds of slavery.

Rather than proclaiming some final word, he says, "We've established some good groundwork. We have started the dialogue, developed a vocabulary."

Other experts who have written forewords for the book agree there will be opposition. "The oral testimony of this woman is going to generate a great deal of controversy because it is the custom of scholars to look askance at oral tradition, at anything that can't be proved by the written word," says St. Louis quilt historian Cuesta Benberry.

"As with any kind of research," Benberry says, "in the future there may be further clarification, but basically I think they got it right."

Maude Wahlman is an expert on African-American textiles and quilts at the University of Missouri. This new book is important, she says, because it illuminates "an aspect of American history that has not been documented or explained."

It also shows that enslaved Africans brought with them "a terrific amount of information. A lot of it went underground, was kept secret because it was a threat to the establishment."

Wahlman believes the authors' interpretation of Williams' story is correct. "They studied it thoroughly, from every angle."

Tobin hopes the book will inspire others to "become connected to their family stories" while they still can. Dobard hopes it will show that the image of the passive slave "has no place in reality. From the time ropes were first tied to the hands of Africans, they were trying to be free."

The last time Tobin saw Ozella Williams was two weeks before her death on May 17, 1998. "It is extremely important for me to have honored her story and to have honored Ozella," she says. "I want to make her live."

Cutline from photo(s) printed with this story:

'Hidden in Plain View': Quilts like the one at top, airing in a slave cabin window, signaled instructions to Underground Railroad fugitives.

Historian Jacqueline Tobin holds a 'bear's paw trail' quilt. 'Flying geese':

This pattern points North, East, South and West, but the darker triangles in the upper left promote a westerly direction. 'Drunkard's

path': This encouraged following a zigzag pattern like that of a staggering drunk. Africans believed evil traveled in straight lines.

Williams: Passed down her knowledge to Tobin