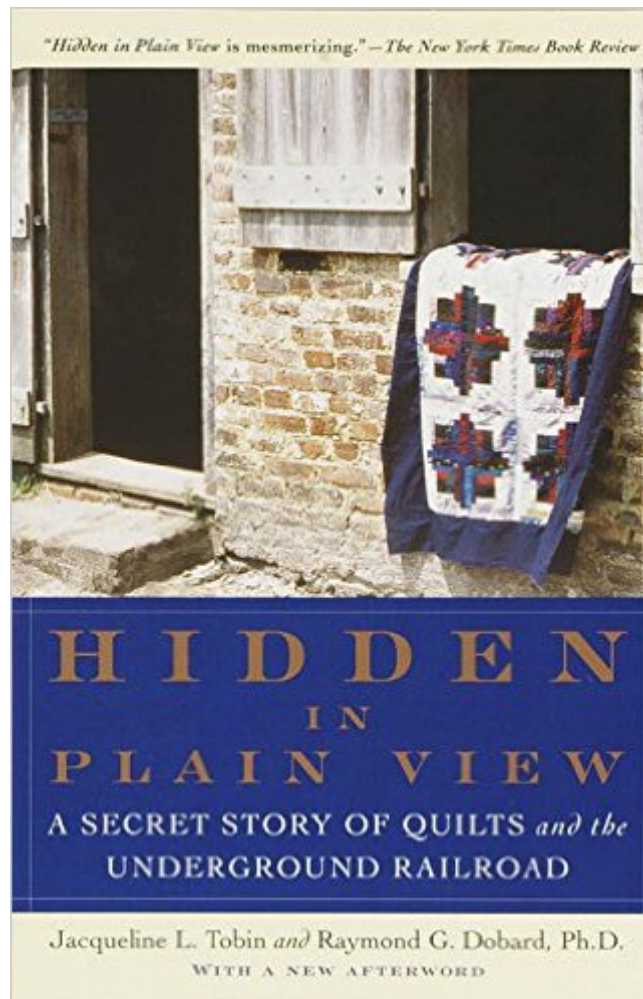


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# Hidden In Plain View: A Secret Story Of Quilts And The Underground Railroad



## Synopsis

The fascinating story of a friendship, a lost tradition, and an incredible discovery, revealing how enslaved men and women made encoded quilts and then used them to navigate their escape on the Underground Railroad. "A groundbreaking work."--Emergeln Hidden in Plain View, historian Jacqueline Tobin and scholar Raymond Dobard offer the first proof that certain quilt patterns, including a prominent one called the Charleston Code, were, in fact, essential tools for escape along the Underground Railroad. In 1993, historian Jacqueline Tobin met African American quilter Ozella Williams amid piles of beautiful handmade quilts in the Old Market Building of Charleston, South Carolina. With the admonition to "write this down," Williams began to describe how slaves made coded quilts and used them to navigate their escape on the Underground Railroad. But just as quickly as she started, Williams stopped, informing Tobin that she would learn the rest when she was "ready." During the three years it took for Williams's narrative to unfold--and as the friendship and trust between the two women grew--Tobin enlisted Raymond Dobard, Ph.D., an art history professor and well-known African American quilter, to help unravel the mystery. Part adventure and part history, Hidden in Plain View traces the origin of the Charleston Code from Africa to the Carolinas, from the low-country island Gullah peoples to free blacks living in the cities of the North, and shows how three people from completely different backgrounds pieced together one amazing American story.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Hidden in Plain View should not be accepted as solid history. The book contains many errors of fact

large and small. To cite a few: William Wells Brown was not a sea captain, but was employed on boats in the Great Lakes (116, 118); George Rawick, born in 1929, did not record interviews with ex-slaves in the 1930s (62); the American Revolution was not over by 1776 (57); the 54th Massachusetts was a regiment, not a brigade, and certainly was not stationed in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1863 (175); Robert Purvis was head of the Philadelphia, not the New York, Vigilance Committee (173). These are only a few examples from many. The book also contains many speculations with little or no evidence. We are told that the Prince Hall Masons may have traveled to South Carolina to conduct business prior to the Civil War (105), which suggests that the authors are unaware of the legal restrictions against free blacks coming to South Carolina from out of state. We are told that there were many abolitionist Masons, but none are identified, nor is there any evidence given that Prince Hall Masons traveled to slave states. The book has a romanticized view of the Underground Railroad. It suggests that there was a regular network leading from South Carolina to Ohio and Canada. In fact, very few enslaved people escaped from South Carolina, and most of those by water along the coast, not overland through the mountains. For a realistic study, see John Hope Franklin's *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (1999). An elaborate ten part code, using quilts as signal flags is very unlikely. It requires having access to many quilts or the time required to make them. Enslaved people living on the same plantation had easier ways to communicate with each other.

The book, *Hidden in Plain View*, is based on the oral testimony of Ozella McDaniel Williams shared with one of the co-authors, Jacqueline Tobin, shortly before Mrs. Williams died of cancer. When first published, this book was immediately seized upon by the popular press and apparently, embraced by many people as the "Gospel Truth". Page 33 of the book shares the author Raymond Dobard's own statement that the book is conjecture on his part. No collaborative evidence was provided nor sought by the books' authors, and since neither of them are quilt historians, they surely did not realize the inanity of what they proposed. In my opinion, this book is a major insult to intelligent people everywhere yet it has been picked up to be shared as "fact" in Social Studies classes across America, instead of the "fiction" that it is. The book does not jibe with what we (quilt historians and Underground Railroad historians) know about African American history. Most certainly, the depiction of quilt blocks is not in tandem with known and documented quilts and/or quilt block history. Members of the American Quilt Study Group, a group that is comprised of university professors, professional writers/book authors, appraisers, publishers, and many others associated with the quilt world, have privately and publicly condemned this book. For interesting reading, you

may like to read the introductory remarks that Marsha MacDowell shared in the year 2000. Marsha is a researcher and faculty member of Michigan State University, and her thoughts are available to read in Vol. 21 of the Research Papers of the American Quilt Study Group "Uncoverings 2000." From a quiltmaker's point of view and also that of a quilt historian, several of my articles about Hidden in Plain View have been published by major magazines. This book, Hidden in Plain View, is scholarship at its worst.

I agree with most of the reviews of this book that the material is indeed fascinating. It just doesn't happen to be true. Sadly, the "quilt code" myth has been invented by a couple of vendors who sell quilts, and now also sell books, speaking engagements, memorabilia, etc. This isn't the place for a "debunking", however. If you're interested in seriously evaluating the facts of the issue, and comparing this book's unfounded (indeed unique) claims against real scholarship on the Underground Railroad and the history of quilting, a good place to start is the research of Leigh Fellner, which appears in the March 2003 issue of Traditional Quiltworks magazine as well as the Hart Cottage Quilts website.

I recommend this book only if the reader understands it is complete fiction, being peddled as fact. I will not address the many historical inaccuracies that other reviewers have already mentioned, but instead will state that most of the quilt patterns the author says were used as symbols for the Underground Railroad were not being made until after the end of the Civil War.

I bought this book at an historic site in Savannah, GA and assumed it was factual. The deeper I read into the book, the more I questioned what the authors wanted me to believe. There was a lot of supposition and I began to wonder if they were 'reaching' to explain something they desperately wanted to believe. I found the book difficult to read (the references made sticking to the storyline challenging). This story is based on an oral history and I think that is the major redeeming quality of this book - I do believe in the importance of ancestral history, however, it needs to be substantiated in some fashion. I bought this book thinking it was fact, and I finished the book wondering how much of this was surmised. A very slow read.

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