

# Underground Railroad Rug Map



African-American bed rug with symbols possibly associated with the UGRR.



View of the "leaves/path" in the center of the rug.

The Underground Railroad is the name given to the system developed by African-Americans to escape slavery by fleeing to Canada. On route to the north, runaway slaves were assisted by abolitionists who provided supplies, shelter, and directions for the journey. A complex system of communication developed that allowed runaway slaves, railroad "conductors" or guides, and sympathizers to relay messages that would not draw the attention of plantation owners and other members of free society. Many of these symbols were sown on quilts. According to Tobin and Dobard (1999), quilts and bed clothing were regularly hung over fences on the plantations to air during the daytime. Consequently, slaves began using quilts with particular symbols to indicate when a group of slaves was planning to escape. Another quilt with different symbols would be used to indicate when the party of runaways would leave. Still other quilts and textiles were decorated with stylized maps drawn from the knowledge of slaves that had traveled to surrounding towns and plantations or that had overheard conversations between members of the plantation family. Since slaves could neither read nor write, visual representations were the only means of relaying information that could be easily remembered. In addition, the mnemonic aids had to be abstract enough to escape detection. Some of the information about escape routes was even put into the form of songs.

Recently we obtained a very unusual and early bed rug that we suspect may represent early African-American craftsmanship from the Central Savannah River Area. Even more interesting is that some evidence exists that this unique piece might even hold an encrypted code relating to the Underground Railroad. Most African-American textiles that have survived from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries are in the form of quilts. Other textiles were likely also used for relaying coded messages, however, such as this rare example of a bed rug. The lack of symmetry, the seemingly haphazard design of the rug, and some of the symbols suggest African American folk art.<sup>1</sup> The interpretation of "rug" in the 18<sup>th</sup> century is misleading here. "Rugg" is actually the correct spelling at this early period of time. A bed rug was often placed across a bed or to hang on a wall to keep out drafts. One expert has told us, "Rug hooking as we know it really took off around 1840s once jute feedbacks were widely available. Before that homespun linen was used. The jute or burlap has the ideal spacing of the interstices for rug hooking, so that the craft literally bloomed from the 1850s on. Burlap and jute feedbacks are still the preferred backing for hooked rugs."



Close-up of the “gourd” surrounded by the letters “A” and “B”.



Unknown designs and symbols on the rug. Note the blue lines on the base cloth.

We have had a quilt specialist and an expert in textile conservation inspect the piece and both date the rug to around the 1850's. It was noted as consisting of unprocessed, vegetable-dyed wool yarn hand-hooded on a single piece of loom-woven utility cloth such as a flour or feed sack. The base cloth features regularly spaced blue lines of the oldest variety. The piece is in excellent condition with only a few areas where the wool fibers seem to have broken down from chemical instability. The rug does not appear to be dirty or worn as might be expected if it were a true rug.

Another expert wrote, “the "hit and miss" stripes in this mat [are] typical of rugs made by people who have to make the most with the little they have.... The various colored stripes, often alternating light and dark colors, offer an efficient way to create an attractive rug or mat using every available scrap. In Canada 'hit and miss' designs are usually worked out in very strict geometrical patterns. The almost haphazard approach of this mat is reminiscent of quilts made by [African-Americans] and of the raffia work made in Africa, where the embroiderer or patchworker seems to have started in one corner and let the design work out as she goes along. There is however a plan in this rug: the Central field with the 'winding trail' and the border in which the initials are featured. Many women created a 'family memorial' in their handywork names or initials of the members of their family, or parents and siblings can be incorporated in their quilts or mats, sometimes with little symbols such as a flower or other object that may be associated with the person. It is of course quite possible that this rug commemorates something else than a family. Usually the larger the project, the more likely that some commemorative information is incorporated.”

The rug is especially a mystery due to the “codes or symbols” it contains. We have studied them and believe they possibly represent a drinking gourd, a quail, a night rug sign, and a river path. Some of the symbols seem to relate to the Underground Railroad song, "Follow the Drinking Gourd."

*When the sun comes back and the first quail calls,  
Follow the Drinking Gourd.  
For the man is waiting for to carry you to freedom,  
If you follow the Drinking Gourd.”*

*The river bank makes a very good road,  
The dead trees show you the way,  
Left foot, peg foot, traveling on  
Follow the Drinking Gourd.*

*The river ends between two hills,*





Close-up of more symbols.



Close-up of the back-side of the rug.  
Note the hand stitching used.

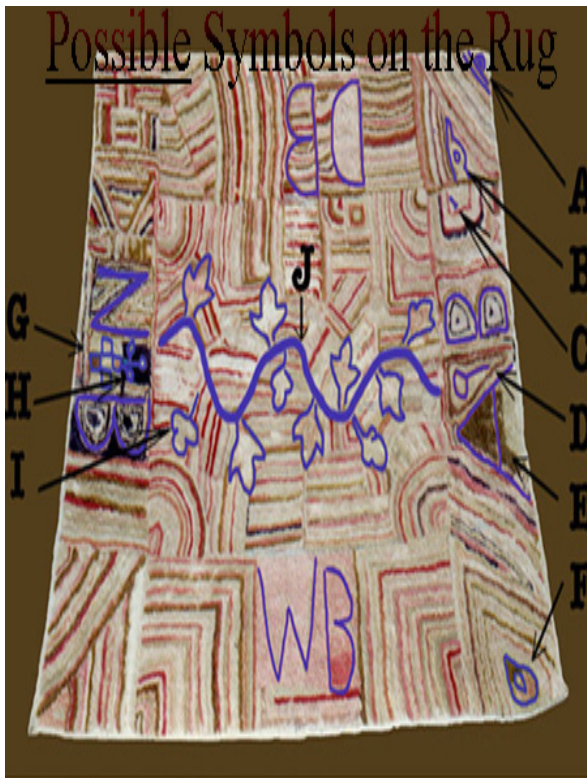
*Follow the Drinking Gourd.  
There's another river on the other side,  
Follow the Drinking Gourd.*

*Where the great big river meets the little river,  
Follow the Drinking Gourd.  
For the old man is awaiting to carry you to freedom  
If you follow the Drinking Gourd.*

The center of the rug features a meandering “river” or “path” type design surrounded by different types of leaves, (which might represent particular marked trees to follow along the path). This “path” ends at what may be a “drinking gourd” that could represent the constellation of “The Big Dipper” or North Star that guided many runaway slaves north toward Canada. These and other symbols are described in the figure to the left. Our list is not exhaustive, and other symbols are doubtless present.

As previously stated, the rug is unusual because most textiles of similar history and purpose are quilts. We have not found any other bed rugs that might represent these types of encoded instructions. According to at least some oral history, these special hand-made textiles would have been taken out when the individuals wanted to relay to others the escape route of the Underground Railroad. There are letters stitched on all four sides of the rug: NB, AB, DB, and WB. Were these the initials of Underground Railroad conductors or stops? Does it represent the members of the family who made it?

We have attempted to bring the rug to the attention of many experts on textiles and African-American symbols. This has usually involved sending pictures since we cannot always physically visit the locations of knowledgeable individuals. Some of these sources have provided invaluable comments and information as has been stated in the above paragraphs. Several unforeseeable problems have prevented us from receiving the maximum amount of input from other sources, however. First, some organizations have been unwilling to even look at the rug because they are plagued by financial and staffing problems that make an active search for more unusual African-American type crafts and cultural items difficult. Second, the shiny wool fibers and good preservation state of the rug have resulted in pictures that make the rug appear relatively new and comprised of synthetic fibers. This has caused some individuals to dismiss the sent photographs outright due to the “new” looking textile. The experts that have seen this rug in person can attest to the age of the piece. In addition, many African-American scholars search only for traditional African symbols in the patterns of the rug. This might be a mistake. The piece was likely made for a utilitarian purpose as a mnemonic map to aid in the



**A-sunrise or sunset**

**B-goose head**

**C-leg, perhaps representing Peg Leg Joe**

**D-Big Dipper star constellation or "Drinking Gourd"**

**E-initials representing conductors, safehouses, or the family members of the rug maker**

**F-quail**

**G-symbol of cross-road**

**H-flower symbol**

**I-various trees along the river possibly carved with symbols**

**J-path on the banks of a meandering river**

slaves' flight to the north. The symbols had to support the function of the piece and were not always consistent with traditional African symbols found on other cultural items. The translation of symbols into a medium such as rug hooking is often problematic due to the techniques that are required. Hooking a pattern is not like cutting out a pattern and sewing it onto a quilt. The symbols had to be modified to be stitched easily. As has been noted on early hooked rugs in general, the intended shapes do not always appear as well-defined as the maker intended. The resulting patterns may be difficult to interpret.

Although we realize that we are not experts on African-American art or the Underground Railroad, we believe that there is more to this piece than meets the eye. We have tried very hard to research this piece and will continue to do so. At the very least we believe it is a rare form of African-American art. At the most, it is a relic of the Underground Railroad. Either way, we are excited at the privilege of conducting some of this research. Any additional historical information or comments are very welcome. Cypress Cultural Consultants would prefer to see this historical piece find a worthy home that would further promote it's study and examination. Although several groups have offered to purchase the rug, we would prefer it to reside in a facility where it can be adequately preserved and made available for research and viewing. It is important for this African-American textile to be stored in the proper climate controlled and secure environment to ensure it preservation for future generations.

### Book References

*Hidden In Plain View, A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad.*, Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard, Phd.. 1999. Anchor Books, New York.

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Article in the *Carolina Morning News*:  
[Local News - 'Bed rug' might hold Underground Railroad map 08/21/02](#)

1 Marijke Kerkhoven, Curator Historic/Ethnographic Collection Textile Museum of Canada.