

The New York Times**JULY 5**

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January 23, 2007

In Frederick Douglass Tribute, Slave Folklore and Fact Collide

By NOAM COHEN

At the northwest corner of Central Park, construction is under way on Frederick Douglass Circle, a \$15.5 million project honoring the escaped slave who became a world-renowned orator and abolitionist.

Beneath an eight-foot-tall sculpture of Douglass, the plans call for a huge quilt in granite, an array of squares, a symbol in each, supposedly part of a secret code sewn into family quilts and used along the Underground Railroad to aid slaves. Two plaques would explain this.

The only problem: According to many prominent historians, the secret code -- the subject of a popular book that has been featured on no less a cultural touchstone than "The Oprah Winfrey Show" -- never existed. And now the city is reconsidering the inclusion of the plaques, so as not to "publicize spurious history," Kate D. Levin, the city's commissioner of cultural affairs, said yesterday.

The plaques may go, but they have spawned an energetic debate about folklore versus fact, and who decides what becomes the lasting historical record.

The memorial's link between Douglass, who escaped slavery from Baltimore at age 20, and the coded designs has puzzled historians. But what particularly raised the historians' ire were the two plaques, one naming the code's symbols and the other explaining that they were used "to indicate the location of safe houses, escape routes and to convey other information vital to a slave's escape and survival."

It's "a myth, bordering on a hoax," said David Blight, a Yale University historian who has written a book about Douglass and edited his autobiography. "To permanently associate Douglass's life with this story instead of great, real stories is unfortunate at best."

The quilt theory was first published in the 1999 book "Hidden in Plain View," by Jacqueline Tobin, a journalist and college English instructor from Denver, and Raymond Dobard, a quilting and African textiles expert. It was based on the recollections of Ozella McDaniel Williams, a teacher in Los Angeles

who became a quiltmaker in Charleston, S.C. "Ozella's code," the book says, was handed down from slave times from mother to daughter. Ms. Williams died in 1998.

According to "Hidden in Plain View," slaves created quilts with codes to advise those fleeing captivity. What looked to the slave master like an abstract panel on a quilt being "aired out" on a porch in fact represented a reminder, say, to be sure to follow a zigzag path to avoid being tracked when escaping. In Ms. Williams's account, there was a sequence of 10 panels to guide an escaping slave, beginning with a "monkey wrench" pattern meaning to gather up tools and supplies and concluding with a star, a reminder to head north.

The authors say that people have tried to make too much of the book, which they intended to be one family's story. "I would say there has been a great deal of misunderstanding about the code," Dr. Dobard said. "In the book Jackie and I set out to say it was a set of directives. It was a beginning, not an end-all, to stir people to think and share those stories."

Even before the book was published, the codes in "Hidden in Plain View" got a boost from "The Oprah Winfrey Show," which had Dr. Dobard, a quilter himself, as a guest in November 1998. The show was rebroadcast on Martin Luther King's Birthday in 1999, the day before the book was published, according to Janet Hill, who edited it and is now a vice president of Doubleday. That same day, Ms. Hill wrote in an e-mail message, the book was featured in USA Today. "The book seemed to take off from there," she wrote.

There are currently 207,000 copies in print, she said. The codes are frequently taught in elementary schools (teachers have been eager to take up the quilting-codes theory because of its useful pedagogic elements -- a secret code, artwork and a story of triumph), and the patterns represent a small industry within quilting.

Algernon Miller, who designed the memorial site, said he "was inspired by this story line," which he discovered in the library. His was a re-interpretation, he said, noting that he was "taking a soft material, a quilt, and converting it into granite."

"Traditionally what African-Americans do is take something and reinterpret into another form," he said.

The team of Mr. Miller and a sculptor, Gabriel Koren, were selected in January 2003, from six proposals in a competition organized by the Studio Museum in Harlem. While the project, which involves rebuilding roadways, will cost more than \$15 million in city, state and federal money, the 15,000-square-foot plaza and sculpture were commissioned for \$750,000. It's unclear how much it would cost to redesign it now. The memorial, at 110th Street and Frederick Douglass Boulevard, is expected to be completed in fall 2008.

Professor Blight raised his concerns shortly after reading an editorial column in *The New York Times* in November praising the project and treating the quilting codes as fact. He posted a message at an online discussion group for historians of slavery. "Unfortunately, this UGRR quilt code mythology has also managed to make its way onto the very permanent and very important Frederick Douglass Memorial," he wrote, using initials to refer to the Underground Railroad. "Douglass never saw a quilt used to free any slaves in his day. Why do we need to pin this nonsense on him now?"

Dozens of postings later, one commentator this month posted a note cautioning that the discussion was threatening to "degenerate into an episode of 'Historians Gone Wild.' "

"We are watching in real time an unfolding of belief in a story," said Marsha MacDowell, a quilting expert and an art professor at Michigan State University. "It will take years to undo. It's like Washington chopping down the cherry tree. It has finally been written out of the history books."

Giles R. Wright, director of the Afro-American History Program at the New Jersey Historical Commission, rattled off the historians' problems in a telephone interview: There is no surviving example of an encoded quilt from the period. The code was never mentioned in any of the interviews of ex-slaves carried out in the 1930's by the Works Progress Administration. There is no mention of quilting codes in any diaries or memoirs from the period.

Mr. Miller responded to critics: "No matter what anyone has to say, they weren't there in that particular moment, especially something that was in secret."

John Reddick, who works for the Central Park Conservancy and helped shepherd the project through its financing and community board approval, noted that in less than a decade "Hidden in Plain View" had become "a touchstone to creative people" and compared the quilt code to the coded language in Negro spirituals. "Take 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,' " he said, "the slave master thinks you are talking about dying, and the slaves are talking about getting away." He also noted the paradox of historians demanding written evidence when slaves were barred from learning to read and write.

On Ms. Winfrey's show, Dr. Dobard appeared with the black descendants of Thomas Jefferson. That relationship was preserved in oral history across the centuries, even as historians of the past generally dismissed the claim. DNA tests published in 1998 are considered to have confirmed Jefferson's paternity.

A spokeswoman for Harpo Productions, which produces the show, had no comment on the controversy.

A historian, Christopher Moore, who is research coordinator at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, was consulted on the printed material in the memorial, which includes many quotations from Douglass.

In an interview, Mr. Moore said that as an unpaid consultant reviewing the project, he focused on the Douglass material, and gave cursory attention to the quilts.

When told of the historians' objections, Mr. Moore said "it was a mistake" to include the text explaining the codes. He said he has since been asked to write a historically accurate text for the memorial.

Ms. Levin said she thought the memorial's larger quilting theme was appropriate. "Something can inspire an artist that is not based in fact," she said. "This isn't a work of history, it's a work of art."

Photo: An eight-foot-tall sculpture of Frederick Douglass, by the sculptor Gabriel Koren, is included in the \$15.5 million project honoring Douglass. (Photo by Department of Cultural Affairs)(pg. B4)

Drawing (Drawing Courtesy of Algernon Miller)(pg. A1)

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Douglass, whose mother was a black slave and whose father was an unidentified white man, possibly his master, was born around 1817 in Tuckahoe, Maryland, as Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey. He was separated from his mother in infancy and raised by his maternal grandmother on the estate of his master, Captain Aaron Anthony.Â Robert G. O'Meally points out that Douglass drew on the tradition of the African-American sermon, itself grounded in folklore, and that the Narrative was meant to be preached as well as read.Â In *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*, edited by Eric J. Sundquist, pp. 84-98. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.Â â€œFrederick Douglass' Narrative and the Subtext of Folklore.â€ Griot 14, no. 1 (spring 1995): 48-53.