

# NorthStar Resistance Contextual Underpinning

## Historical Context & the Sawtooth Star

### Roots of Quilted Resistance

The NorthStar Resistance Quilts stand in a long lineage of textile-based resistance.

Stories have circulated suggesting that certain quilt patterns carried coded signals of safety and solidarity during the Civil War era. While historians largely regard these claims as unverified, the endurance of this narrative reveals something important: textile practice has long been imagined — and at times demonstrably enacted — as a space of covert agency and collective resistance.

Textile history provides many documented examples of collective quilt-making functioning as political, social, and economic infrastructure. In the nineteenth century, abolitionist fundraising fairs mobilized quilts as tools for movement-building — raising money, circulating political messages, and sustaining networks of resistance.

Fundraising quilts also appeared across other reform movements, where communities stitched together to support schools, mutual aid efforts, and local organizing. In the twentieth century, quilting cooperatives such as the Freedom Quilting Bee of Gee's Bend in Alberta, Alabama transformed domestic skill into economic autonomy during the Civil Rights Movement. Across time and geography, communal quilt-making has created space for solidarity, survival, and collective action, particularly for communities whose civic power was otherwise restricted.

The NorthStar Resistance Quilts situate themselves within this documented lineage of collective making as witness and resistance.

### The Sawtooth Star

Every block in these two quilts is a Sawtooth Star — a form documented in late eighteenth-century quilts, including R. Porter's 1777 example (now held at the *American Museum & Gardens* in Bath, England) and later printed in *Farm and Fireside* (1884). Its structure — a grounded center held by sharp, directional points — has been used for more than two centuries to communicate guidance, protection, and collective resolve.

## Symbolic Associations

- **Guidance & Navigation:** The star has long been associated with orientation and direction — a visual reminder of bearing, moral alignment, and movement toward freedom.
- **Protection & Honor:** The geometry resonates with Native American star quilts used in ceremonies of life, war, and remembrance, where the star functions as a symbol of relationship, continuity, and respect.
- **Political Expression:** Star quilts and other quilt forms have appeared in abolitionist fundraising, suffrage organizing, labor movements, and peace activism, demonstrating the recurring role of textile practice in civic life.
- **Regional Identity:** The Minnesota state flag features a star form, placing this geometry at the center of the state’s visual identity.

## Cultural Continuity Under Erasure

During the residential school era, many Native and First Nations quilters stitched stars into their quilts as a quiet act of survival — a way to hold onto identity, memory, and connection to family. The star carried the reminder that even across forced distance, people lived beneath the same sky. Similar acts of cultural continuity can be found in other quilting traditions, including African American communities such as Gee’s Bend, where textile practice became a means of preserving lineage, creativity, and collective strength in the face of systemic erasure.

During and after the residential school era, Indigenous communities sustained cultural practices despite systematic efforts at assimilation and erasure. In Plains cultures, star quilts hold enduring ceremonial and communal significance and have become powerful symbols of identity and continuity — a place where solidarity, care, and resistance can be held together.

Textile practice has repeatedly functioned as a medium for memory, witness, and cultural continuity in contexts marked by displacement and systemic harm. During and after the residential school era, Indigenous communities sustained cultural practices despite institutional attempts at assimilation and erasure. In Plains cultures, star quilts hold enduring ceremonial and communal significance, operating as symbols of honor, relationship, and continuity across generations.

Contemporary projects demonstrate how textile work continues to serve as a vehicle for collective remembrance and empowerment: the Social Justice Sewing Academy’s Remembrance Project, documented in Stitching Stolen Lives, mobilizes quilt-making as a

means of amplifying marginalized voices and creating spaces of shared witness. Across different historical and cultural contexts — from Indigenous star quilts to community memorial quilts — textile practice becomes a way to carry threatened histories forward and to transform private acts of making into public acts of record.

## A Living Lineage

Known historically as the Sawtooth Star — also referred to as the North Star, Evening Star, Aunt Eliza's Star, as well as other names — this block carries a long lineage of guidance, continuity, and collective meaning. As these quilts are stitched together — across Minnesota and far beyond — the form becomes a contemporary act of witness.

Through many hands and many stories, the Minnesota Star emerges not as myth, but as living practice.

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