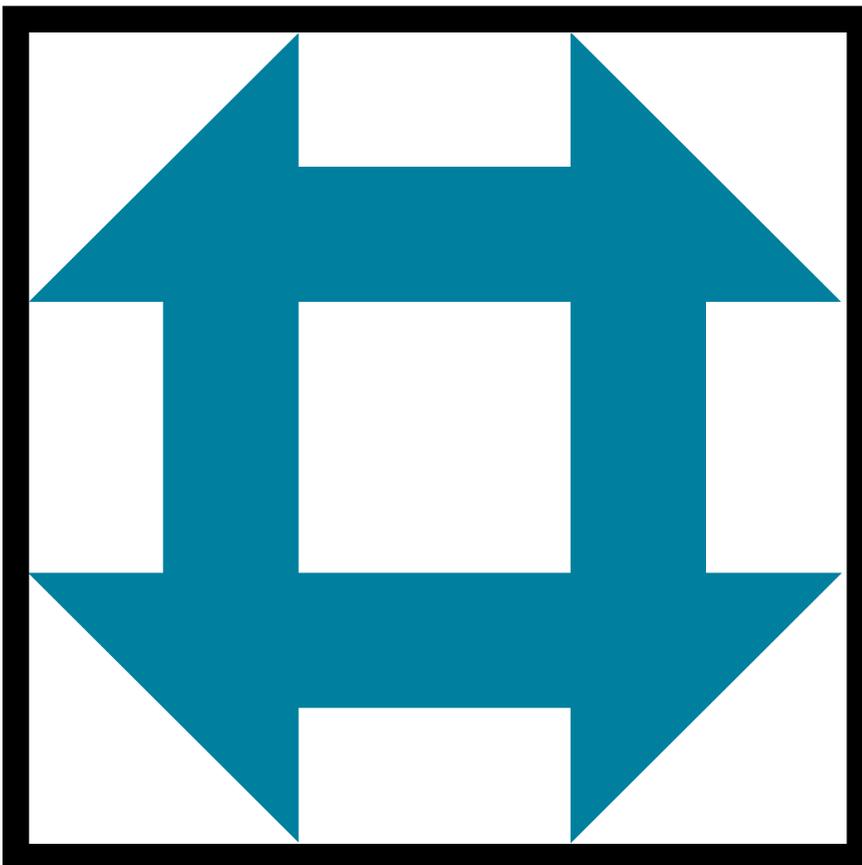


Underground Railroad

There is a story about a slave owner chasing a runaway who swore the man vanished as if he had stepped on some kind of underground railroad.

This quilt pattern was published under the name Jacob's Ladder, in the first known quilt book by Marie Webster in 1915.

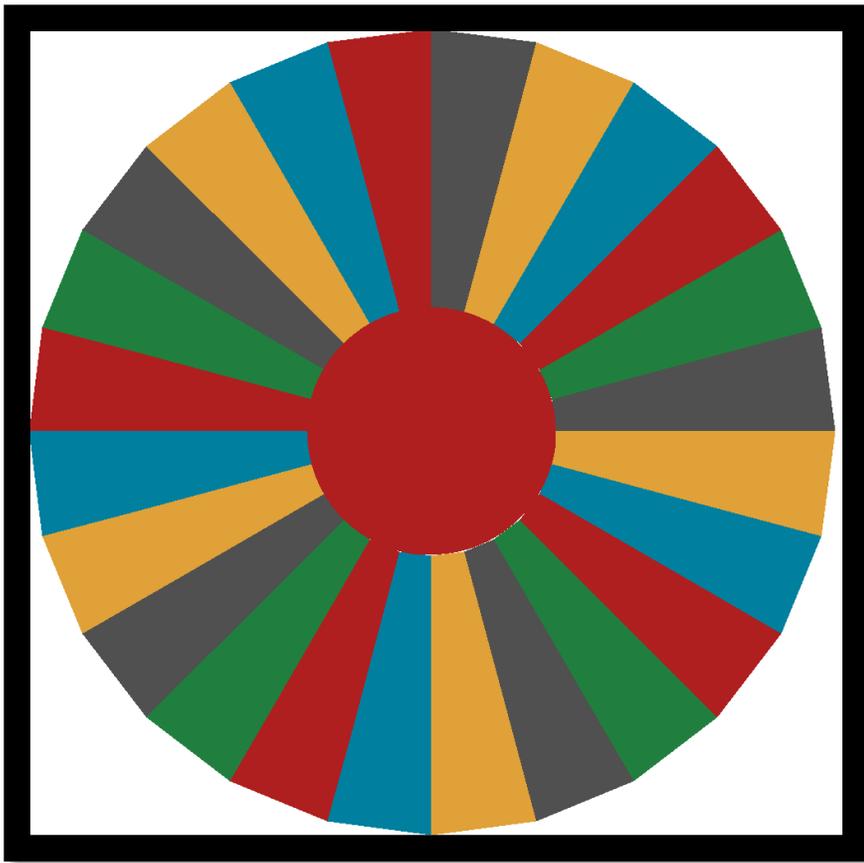
Ruth Finley, another quilt book author, named it the Underground Railroad in 1930.



Monkey Wrench

The Monkey Wrench quilt was a signal for slaves to begin their escape preparations by collecting tools they would need for their journey North.

These tools consisted of a compass, materials to build shelters when necessary, and weapons to protect themselves. It let them know it was time to go, and they needed to be prepared for the long, treacherous journey ahead.



Wagon Wheel

The Wagon Wheel quilt alerted slaves to pack provisions for their journey as if they were packing a wagon. Considering limited space and weight, they should pack supplies that would be essential for the trip.

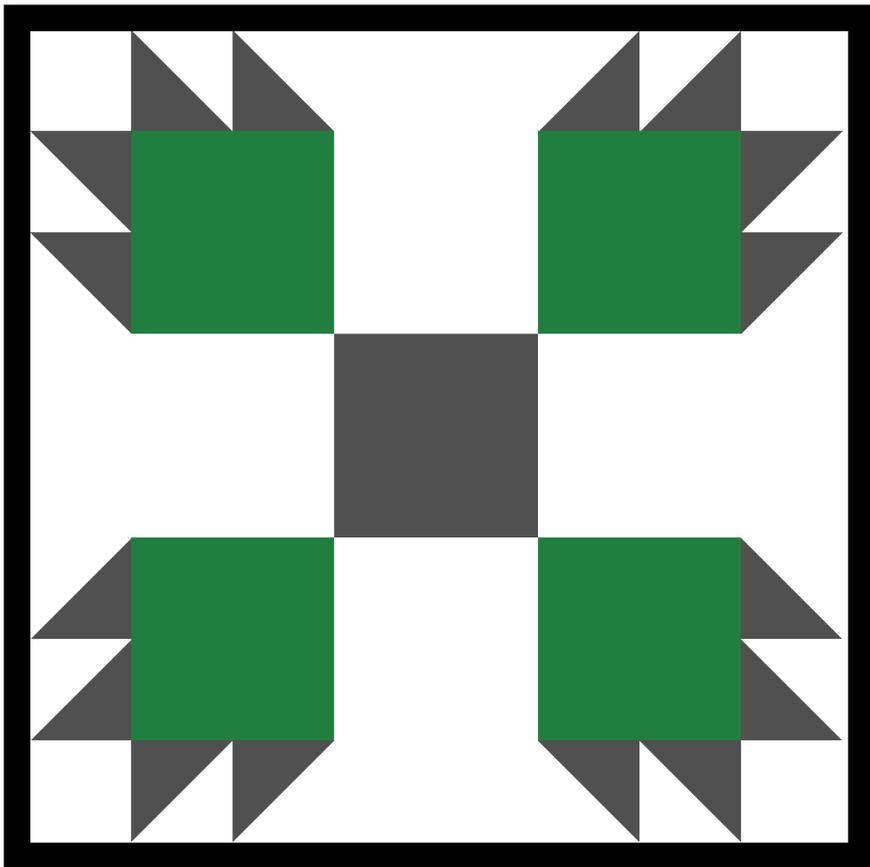
Wagons with hidden compartments were one of the primary means of transporting escaping runaways.



Carpenter's Wheel

To a slave, the master carpenter in their lives was Jesus. As they worked in the fields, they sang the well-known spiritual *Swing Low Sweet Chariot* (Comin' for to carry me home.)

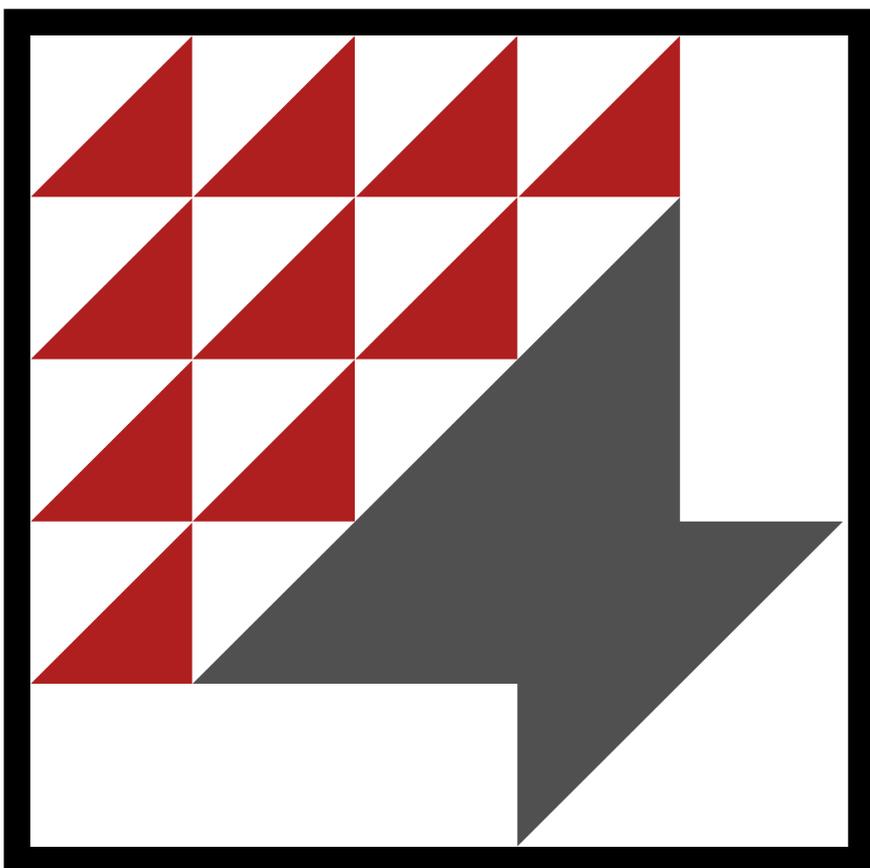
Plantation owners thought slaves were singing about joining Jesus in Heaven, but the song held hidden messages. Run-aways recognized this as a signal to follow the Carpenter's wheel to the west-northwest.



Bear Paw

Runaways were directed to follow the actual trail of a bear's footprint. Animal footprints would indicate the best path, just like a road map, through the mountains. Following the bear's paws would also lead tired hungry slaves to food and water.

Most escapes took place in the spring. With spring rains, it would be easy to follow a bear's paw to food and safety.

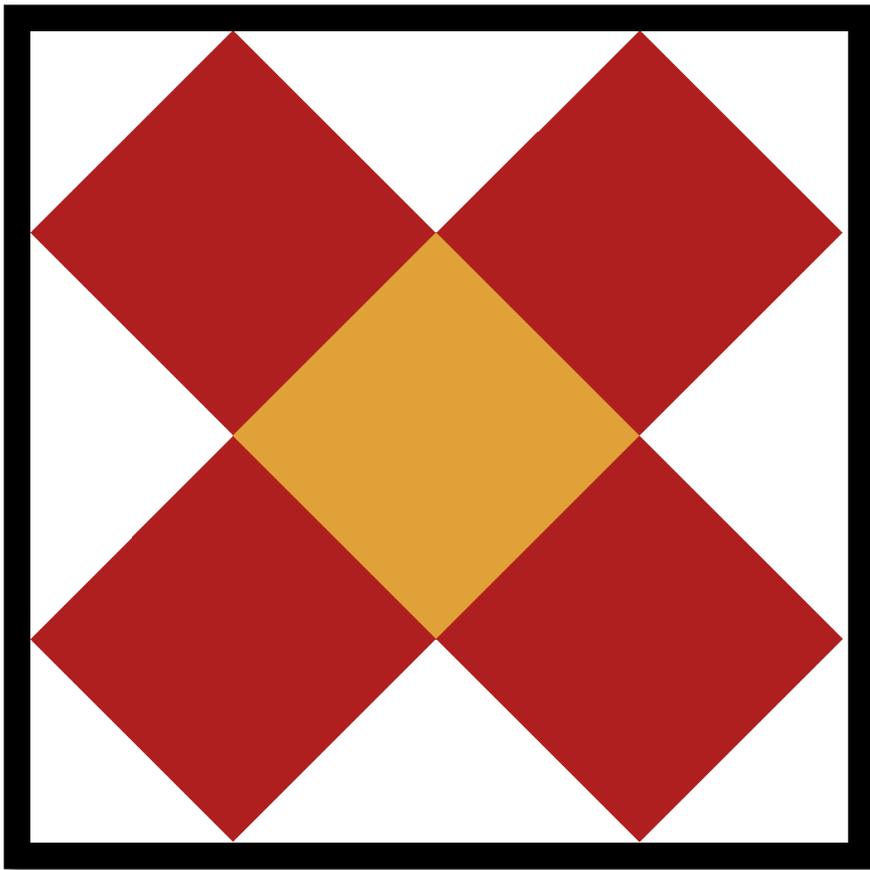


Basket

The Basket is a symbol of the provisions need for the long journey.

Since slaves couldn't walk into most towns and buy food, they often depended on safe houses or friends along the way. Abolitionists would give them baskets of provisions and tools, such as flit, to aid them in their flight.

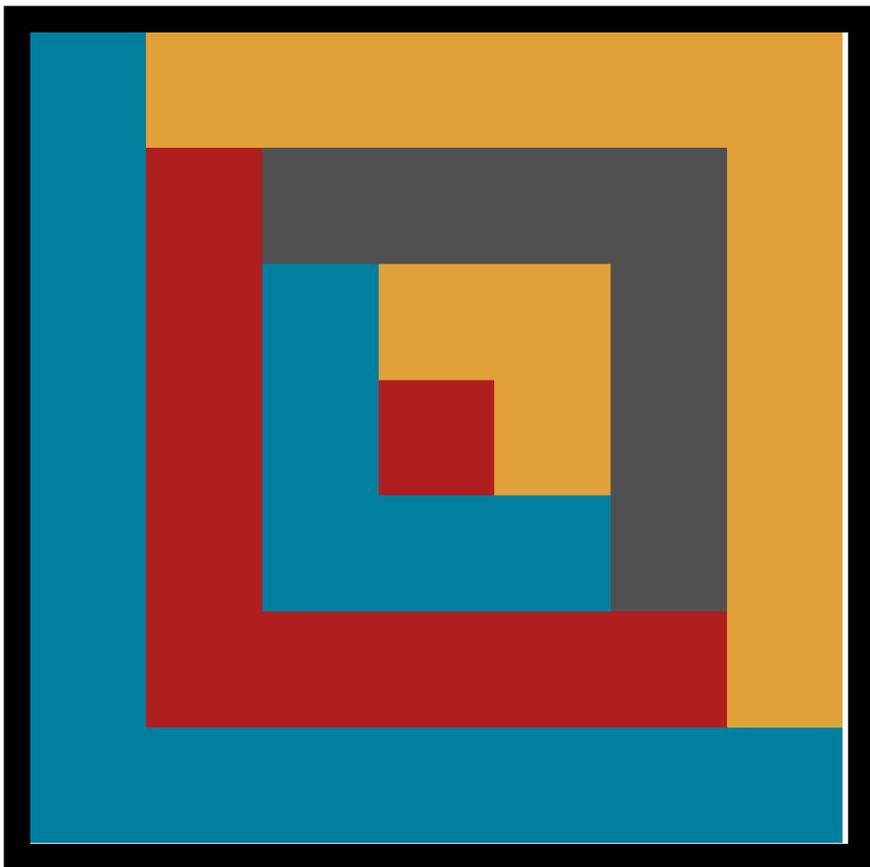
One-way provisions were carried was in a sewing or laundry basket.



Crossroads

Once fugitives made it safely through the Appalachian Mountains, there were to travel to the “crossroads,” or a city where they would find protection and refuge. The main crossroads or terminal was Cleveland, Ohio.

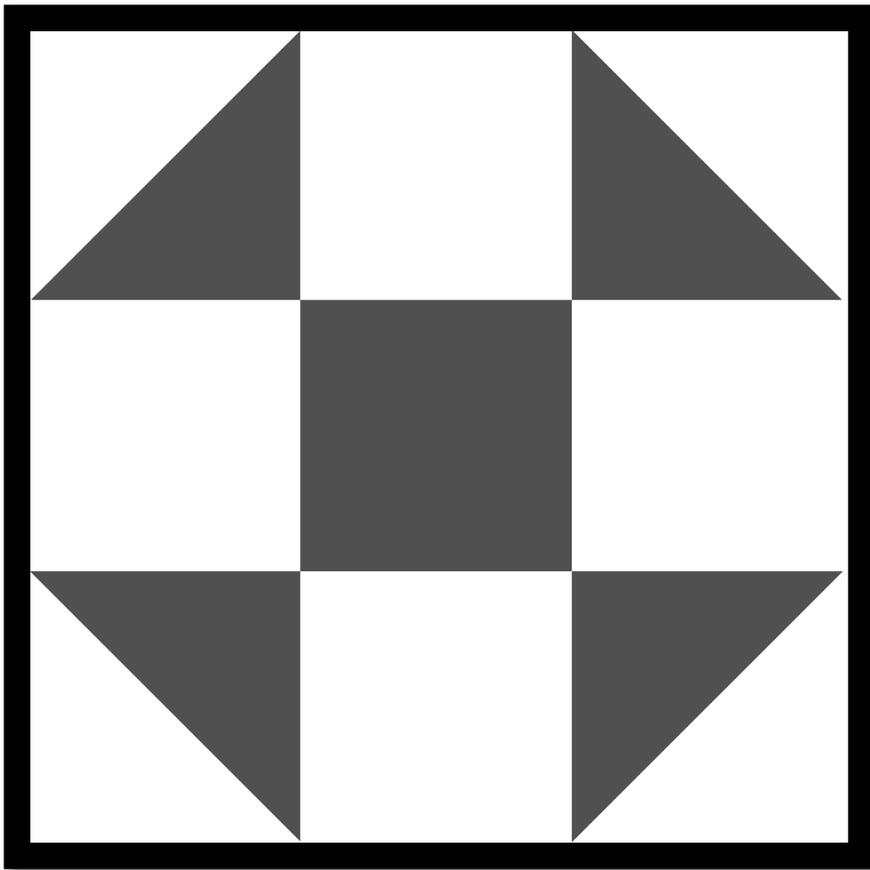
As part of their secret languages, fugitives referred to Cleveland as Hope. Detroit, Michigan (another crossroads) was referred to as Midnight.



Log Cabin

This block may have indicated a specific log cabin in Cleveland that was used as a safe house. It also may have directed runaways to build a log cabin to weather out the winter and establish permanent residency in a “free” area.

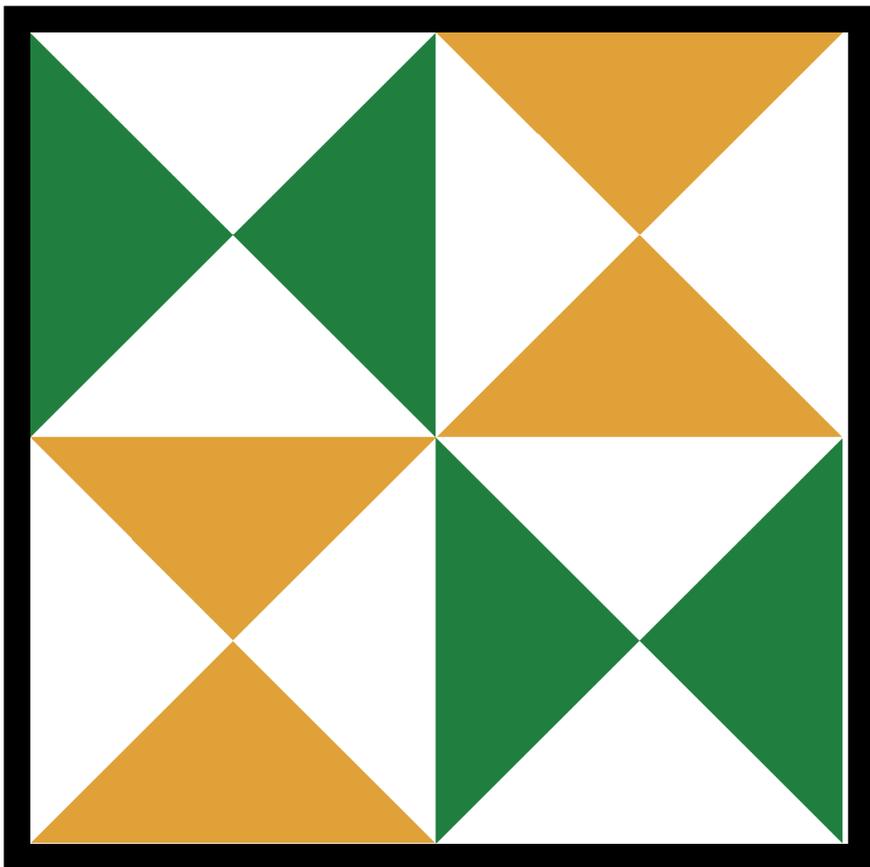
The usual center of block was red, representing the heart or fire of the cabin. It has also been suggested that a black center indicated a “safe” house.



Shoo-Fly

The shoofly represents an actual person who might have helped escaping slaves. His responsibility was to secretly aid and harbor fugitives.

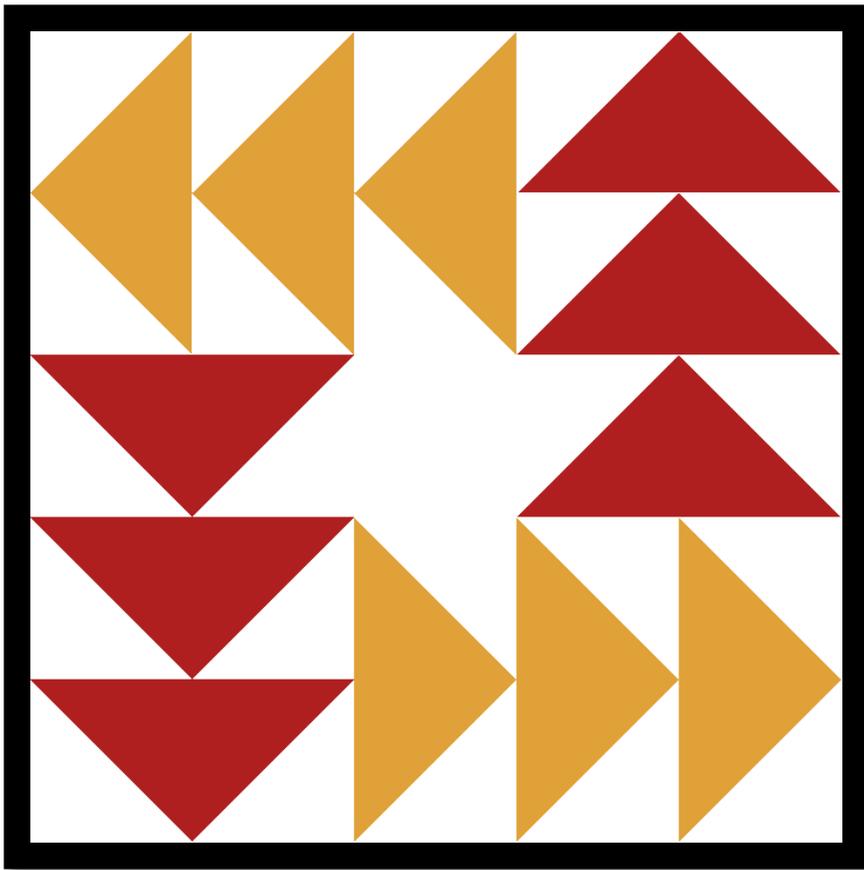
Sometimes the slaves hid out in churches, or caves referred to as cathedrals. Graveyards were also hiding place of runaways. They may have secretly hid behind gravestones, waiting for a signal from a lantern across town.



Bow Tie

The bow tie quilt was a directive for slaves to dress in a formal manner.

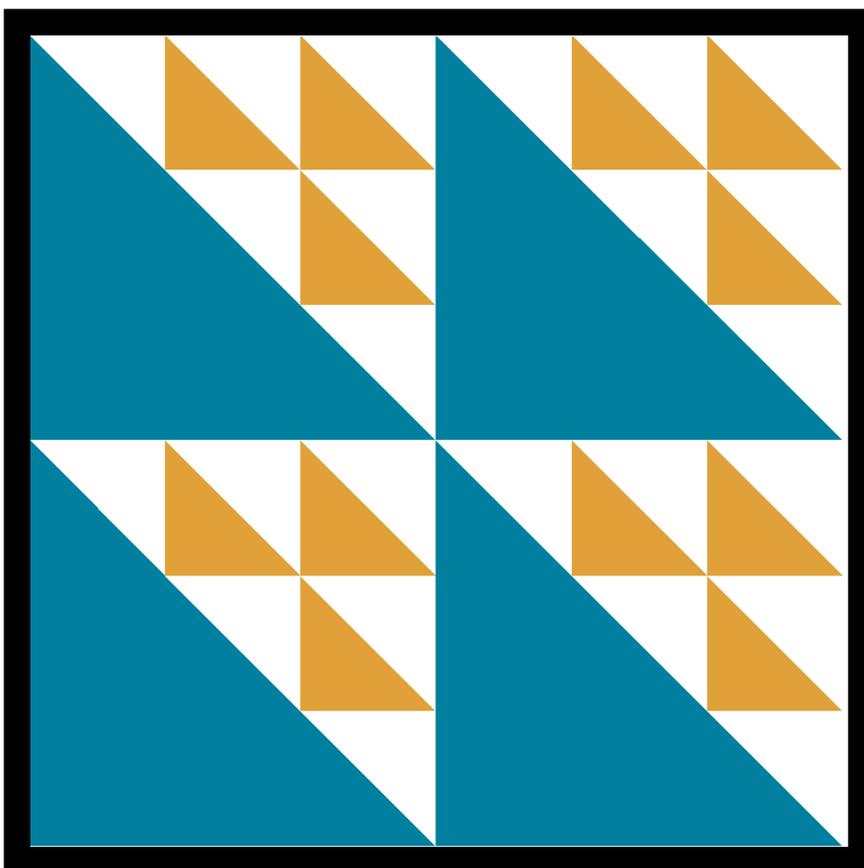
When slaves first escaped, they wore distinguishable garments that eventually became tattered and torn along their journey. Free blacks would often meet them in a safe place, and give them fresh clothing. In "satin bow ties", runaways wouldn't stand out among the city folk.



Flying Geese

With the appearance of this quilt, slaves learned they were to take their direction, timing and behavior from migrating geese.

Since geese fly in the spring, it was also the best time for slaves to escape. Geese have to stop at waterways along their journey in order to rest and eat. Especially since geese make loud honking noises, it was easy for runaways to follow their flight pattern.

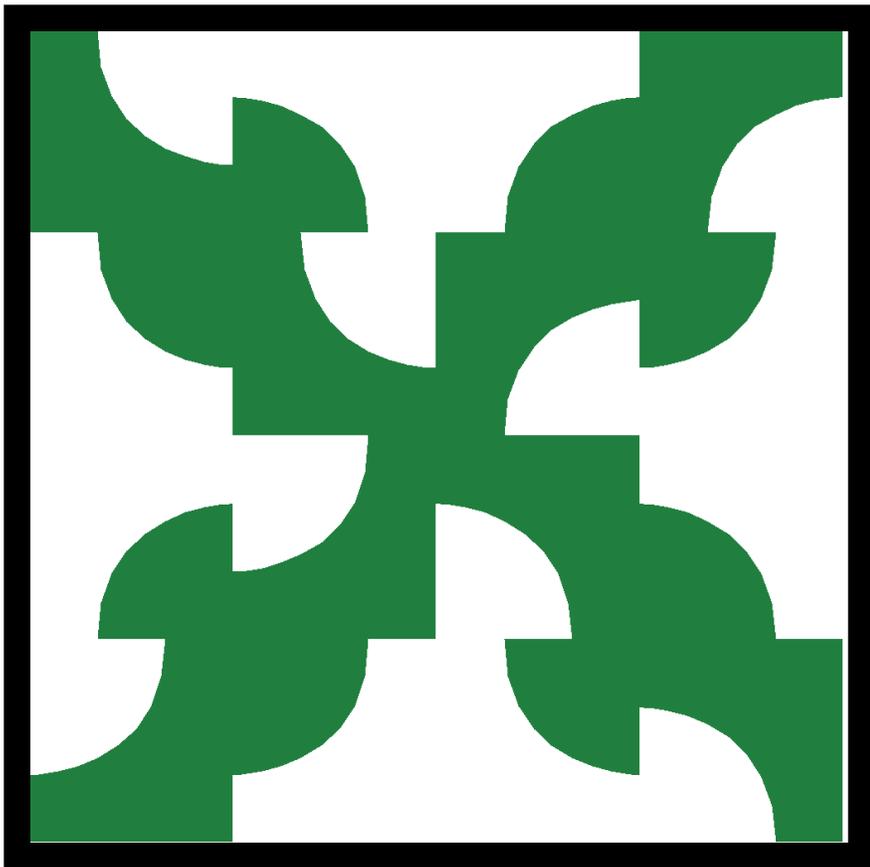


Birds in the Air

The Birds in the Air quilt is symbolic of flight or migration.

During the Underground Railroad in the 1840s to 1850s, a clever quilter could indicate a direction for fugitives to travel through the choice of fabric and placement of blocks.

In the quilt, notice the blocks in one area are light, creating an arrow pointing North.



Drunkard's Path

The Drunkard's Path quilt would remind slaves to travel in a zigzag pattern as they traveled to confuse those who might be following them.

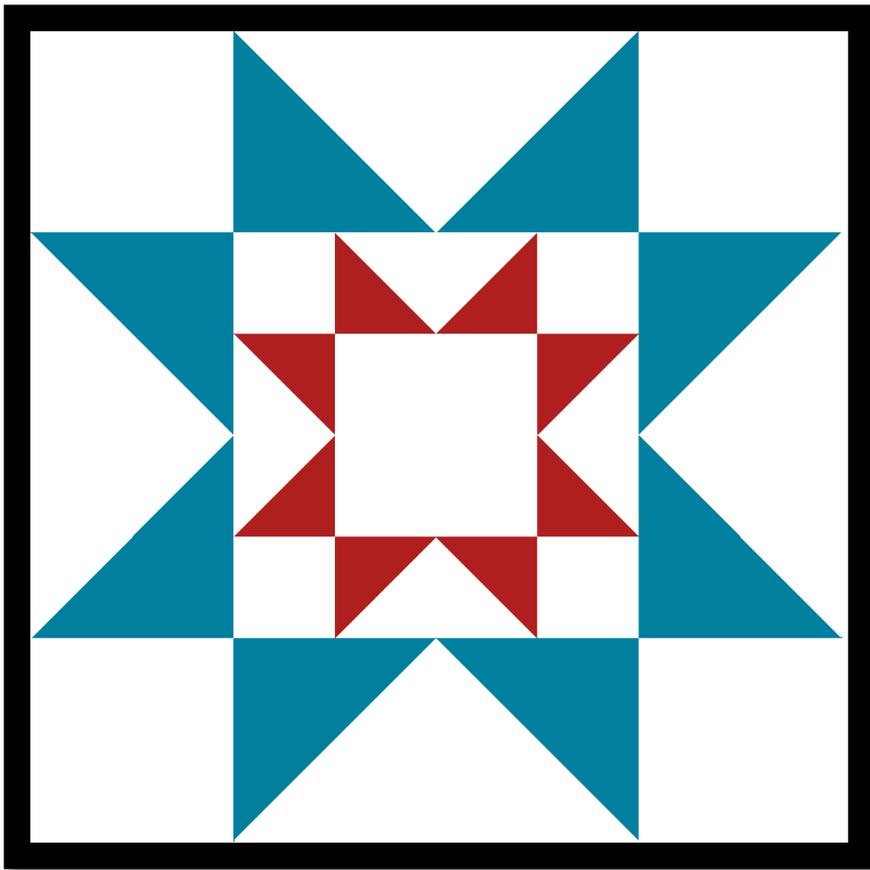
This patterned quilt may also have represented the placement of "stations" of the Underground Railroad in a certain area.



Sail Boat

The sail boat block is a symbol of safe passage to freedom. It also represents the importance of free black sailors to the Underground Railroad.

Beginning in the 1600s, Africans were imported to New England to work aboard whalers, fishing boats and trading vessels. The knowledge gained by black made them invaluable members of the Underground Railroad.



North Star

The North Star was the guiding light leading slaves to Canada and freedom.

The North Star was also important to navigation, especially to boat owners who took the slaves from Cleveland or Detroit to Canada.

The North Star Underground Railroad Museum at Ausable Chasm, New York, is located in the Town of Chesterfield Heritage Center.

Heritage & Art Exhibit

The heritage portion of this exhibit focuses on the oral tradition of the Underground Railroad Quilts, said to have been used as secret codes to guild runaway slaves to freedom. The primary source of the text used comes from the book, "Quilt in a Day: Underground Railroad Sampler," by Elanor Burns & Sue Bouchard.

Also suggested are two books of a more scholarly nature, which offer opposing views on whether quilts were used as coded messages in the Underground Railroad:

"Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad,"
by Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard, Ph.D.

"Facts & Fabrications: Unraveling the History of Quilts & Slavery,"
by Barbara Brackman.

The art portion of this exhibit features images of the Underground Railroad quilt blocks I created with *Electric Quilt* software, a four-square barn quilt I painted using the Monkey Wrench pattern, and two cloth blocks of the Monkey Wrench pattern.