



# Teaching with Historic Places Lesson Plan

## The Underground Railroad Hidden Quilt Code

**School:** Veterans Memorial School  
**Subject:** Art, Social Studies

**Contributors:** Diane Walsh  
**Grade:** K-5

### Introduction:

Although written documentation is rare, many historians believe a secret code existed in which quilt block designs were used to pass messages and/or directions to fleeing slaves. Oral histories relate stories of maps to freedom that helped travelers along the Underground Railroad routes. Particular designs were said to have been used by many to create guides disguised as everyday quilts. This lesson is a hands-on creative exercise used to encourage students to create a quilt using established designs or create their own designs that may help a traveler find their way.

This lesson plan has two variations. Older students can make real quilts while younger students can make paper quilts.

### Objectives:

- Students will have a better understanding of the Underground Railroad; the people that escaped and the people that helped them.
- Students will learn some of the basic concepts of quilting.



A display of quilts in the Saugus Town Hall during the biennial Hammersmith Quilters' Guild show.

### Materials:

The materials differ depending upon whether real or paper quilts are being created.

### For Younger Students:

- Paper (construction, scrapbook papers, wallpaper, wrapping paper, colorful magazines, and catalogs can also be used)
- Line drawings of quilt block designs
- Crayons and/or multi-colored markers
- Glue



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- Rulers (to make uniform geometric shapes)
- Graph paper (can be used for background so designs are straight)

## For Older Students:

- Fabric scraps and remnants (cotton is best; old clothes, t-shirts, denim, sheets, etc. all work, and quilting supplies are easily found in fabric stores)
- Plain material for backing and polyester (quilt batting)
- Scissors
- Needles
- Threads
- Knowledge of basic running stitch or use of a sewing machine

## For Either:

- Scissors
- Templates (optional, but makes the process easier)
- Chalk
- Six index cards with vocabulary words

## Initiating Activity:

Students will be shown pictures of various quilts from the quilting magazines of today. They will then be introduced to some of the most common block patterns used during the Civil War period like the Bear's Paw Block, the Crossroads Block, the Flying Geese Block, and the Star Block (see enclosed diagram).

## Activity:

The activity is relatively similar for both real and paper quilts, but there are some differences.



A Montgomery quilt block



An Ohio Cluster quilt block.



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## **For Younger Students:**

This activity will be used with students in grades K-2 and will involve the creation of paper quilts. The basic technique involves cutting the shapes of design out of the desired paper, gluing them onto the background to create a patterned quilt block, and then joining the individual quilt blocks together to complete the quilt.

## **For Older Students:**

This activity will be used with students in grades 3-5 and will involve the creation of cloth quilts. The basic directions are the same as above. Remember the desired finished size will dictate block size; 8", 10", 12" are the most popular. Keep in mind that geometric shapes are easiest. Students can choose from established patterns or create their own.

## **Secondary Activity:**

Divide the class into groups and give each group six vocabulary words previously printed on index cards that relate to the Underground Railroad. On the blackboard have six definitions listed in random order and have the students match each vocabulary word with the correct definition.

## **Culminating Activity:**

Invite Salem Maritime Museum Park Rangers to visit the class and make their presentation "Abolitionists and the Underground Railroad in Essex County." Using a large map of Essex County, have the students re-trace the routes mentioned by the rangers.

## **Assessment:**

Have the students share the story of their quilts with the class as an oral presentation.

## **Resources:**

### **Books:**

*A Picture Book of Harriet Tubman* by David Adler, Holiday House, 1982.

*Harriet Tubman* by George Sullivan, Scholastic, 2001.

*If You Traveled on the Underground Railroad* by Ellen Levine, Scholastic, 1988.

*The Underground Railroad for Kids* by Mary Kay Carson, Chicago Review Press, 2005.

*Wanted Dead or Alive* by Ann Mc Govern, Scholastic, 1965.

*Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky* by Faith Ringgold, Dragonfly Books, 1995.



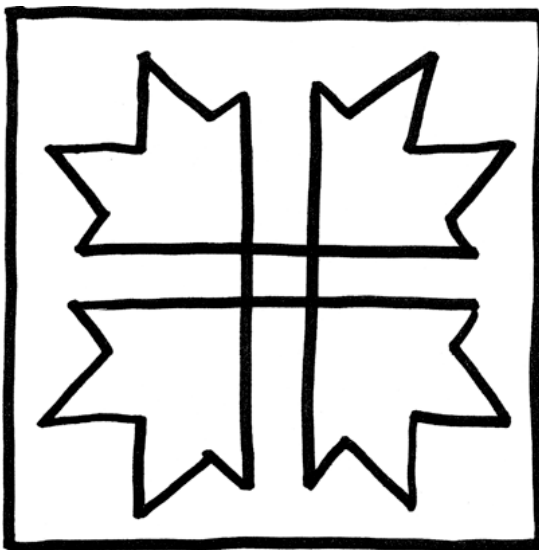
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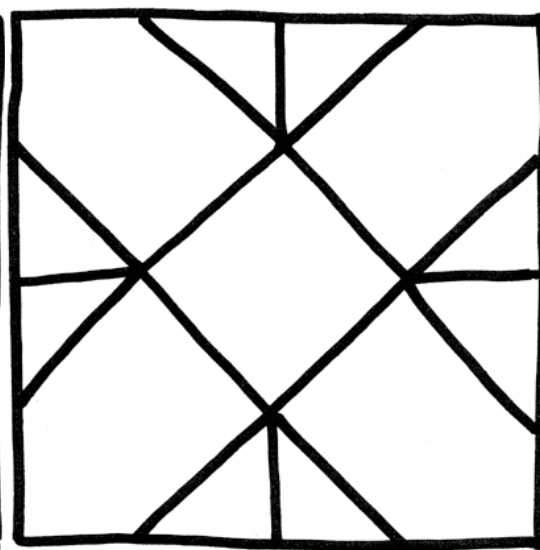
## Web Sites:

- <http://www.beavton.k12.or.us/greenway/leahy/ugrr/quiltsdebate.htm>
- <http://www.freedomcenter.org/>
- <http://www.quiltersmuse.com/>
- <http://www.saugus.net/Events/QuiltShow/>

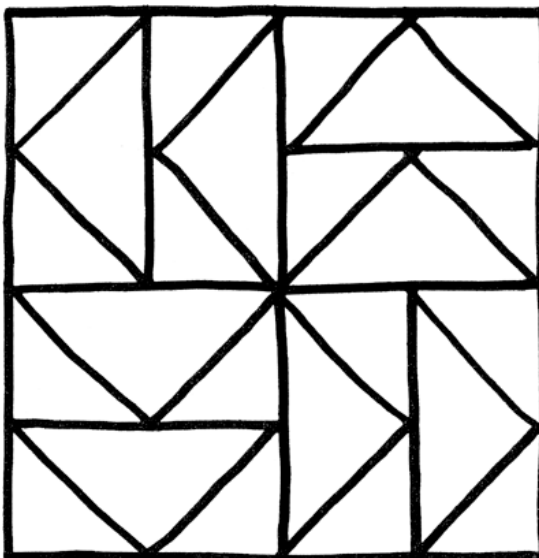
## Quilt Block Diagrams:



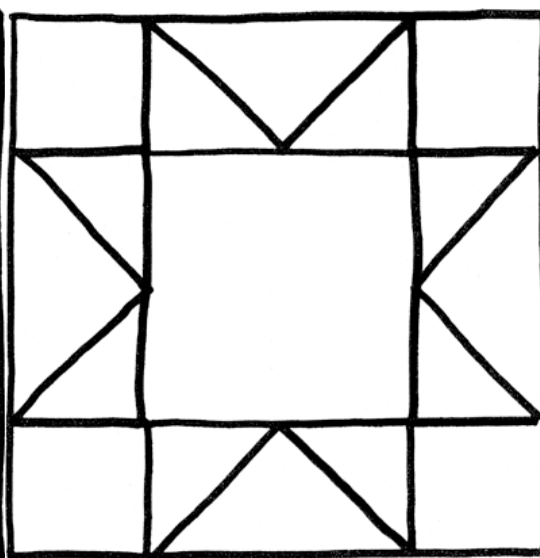
Bear Claw



Crossroads



Flying Geese



North Star