

## Freedom Quilts & the Underground Railroad

### Background:

Prior to 1560, America captured and enslaved about four million Black people from Africa. Slavery came about because Americans needed workers to do the difficult labor on the sprawling plantations that stretched across the South, and because slave-traders saw an opportunity to make a great deal of money buying and selling slaves.

From the beginning, slaves tried to escape from owners. But attempting an escape, or helping someone else to escape, was dangerous and could result in severe punishment or death. The Underground Railroad is the name for the secret route fugitives took to escape to freedom. It was so named because fugitives who traveled on it just seemed to vanish as if traveling underground. It was, of course, not a real railroad, but rather a series of safe hiding places called "stations." The people who helped the fugitives travel from one station to the next were known as "railroad workers." The people who helped fugitives get food and places to sleep were known as "station masters."

People who worked and traveled on the Railroad used secret codes to learn the routes from one safe place to the next. Researchers recently learned that an Underground Railroad Quilt Code existed to guide fugitives to freedom. Because it was illegal in slave-holding states to teach slaves to read, slaves could not communicate with each other in writing. But, because slaves of all backgrounds shared an oral history of storytelling coupled with a knowledge of textile production and African art—an art form which embodies African symbolic systems and designs—they discovered they were able to communicate complex messages in the stitches, patterns, designs, colors and fabrics of the American quilt. To memorize the code, researchers believe fugitives used a sampler quilt, with blocks arranged in order of the code. The patterns told slaves how to get ready to escape, what to do on the trip, and where to go.

Once stitched, the coded quilts were "aired" out the windows of slave cabins, acting as secret maps for slaves brave and desperate enough to make the dangerous trek from South to North, from slavery to freedom. Researchers today are excited about unraveling the mysteries behind the Underground Railroad Quilt codes.

Ready to learn more? Here is your chance to explore secrets of the Underground Railroad...



Complete the following activities to learn more about freedom quilts and the Underground Railroad.

1. Read the following books:

*Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt*

*Under the Quilt of Night*

*Show Way*

And "Follow the Flying Geese" article

2. Discuss the following in your group:

What new information did you learn?

What new questions do you have?

Where could you find more information about this topic?

Which picture book did you like best? Why?

How would the system of the Underground Railroad have been different if slaves had been able to read?

3. Read about the different quilt patterns and their meanings then create your own quilt square with hidden meaning. Colors, patterns, textures, "stitches" and "knots" (drawn on with a fine line marker), can each indicate a coded symbol. Write a paragraph describing the symbolism present in your quilt square.

4. Visit the following web site

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/features/99/railroad/>

You will journey along the Underground Railroad making several choices along the way. Will you make it to freedom? Once you have completed the journey explore the rest of the site and write down five important new facts you learned.