

This is the story of the Quilt Code

This is how the Quilt Code worked as far as we know it: African American slaves combined common quilt patterns and sewing methods with traditional African symbols and images to make bed quilts that would display messages. The messages themselves were part of a language that held meaning only for people who had somehow learned it from any of a number of teaching methods – in worship services, through storytelling or in secret sessions with elders.



Slaveholding families and white supervisors had no cause to suspect anything unusual about slave women making quilts, either for white families or for themselves. Likewise, it was common practice to hang quilts outdoors during daylight to freshen them in the air, especially during the spring and summer months when most escapes occurred so that slaves could reach Canada before cold weather. The quilts acted as billboards, sending encoded messages to slaves intending to flee as well as to those on the run. Slaves who did not know the code most likely traveled with guides who did.

Ozella McDaniel Williams was a descendant of slaves and claimed that her ancestors passed down the secret of the quilt code from one generation to the next.

According to Ozella, a Black plantation seamstress would sew a sampler quilt containing different quilt blocks. Slaves would use the sampler to memorize the code. The seamstress then sewed ten quilts, each composed of one of the code's patterns. As Ozella Williams told it, the first message in the Quilt Code was “The monkey wrench turns the wagon wheel toward Canada on a bear’s paw trail to the crossroads.” Slaves who knew the code would know this phrasing as well as the four symbols within it: the Monkey Wrench, the Wagon Wheel, the Bear’s Paw and the Crossroads. And each of the four symbols is a quilt square pattern.



The seamstress would hang the quilts in full view one at a time. Since it was common for quilts to be aired out frequently, the master or mistress would not be suspicious when seeing quilts displayed in this fashion. In this way, the slaves could nonverbally alert those who were escaping.



Only one quilt signaled a particular time dual meaning:

escape, and, second to give clues and indicate directions on the journey. As Jacqueline Tobin says, quilts displaying the Code served as road maps on the route to freedom. They flashed visual messages “hidden in plain view.” Along the several routes of the Underground Railroad, enslaved blacks in the South and free blacks in the North knew the Code and hung quilts to

report local conditions to the runaways who they knew would be traveling in certain seasons. One message was to seek shelter, another to continue to a church, another to take on a disguise. The well-known five-pointed Star quilt pattern told fugitives to follow the North Star. Even the stitching on the reverse side of a quilt contained a secret road map code, indicating, for example, the number of miles between safe houses along the route.

Ever since Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard interviewed Ozella and wrote about her understanding of the quilt code in their 1998 book, *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*, the quilt-code theory has been controversial.

Quilt historians and Underground Railroad experts have questioned both the study's methodology and the accuracy of its findings. One expert, Giles R. Wright, a New Jersey-based historian, points to a lack of corroborating evidence, noting that quilt codes are not mentioned in the 19th century slave narratives or the 1930s oral testimonies of former slaves. Other historians claim that quilt patterns named in the code did not exist prior to the Civil War.

As academics debate whether Ozella's quilt code theory is fact or folklore, it remains an engaging view of the past, and a credible extension to the well-documented use of dance, song and oral traditions that allowed the slaves to communicate with one another. Though maybe not documentable in any scholarly way, the idea of a quilt code provides a vehicle through which many people believe we can begin to better understand this period in our history.

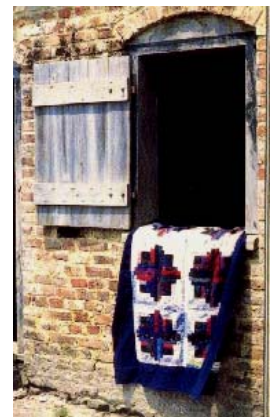
Furthermore, quilts are universally accepted symbols of comfort. If the romantic and fanciful stories of escapes on the Underground Railroad have somehow lessened the painful memory of that time, then these tales will have served a very useful purpose.

It is on the premise that, despite the historical debate around the quilts, the educational value of the quilt construction, as it relates to Black slaves, is a worthwhile resource for children to study. At the very least, the use of mathematics in the creation of the quilt codes is truly impressive.



This photograph (left) is a *sampler* quilt in that it contains 12 different quilt blocks representing the code blocks believed to have been used to guide travelers and keepers of safe houses.

This photograph (right) is from the cover of *Hidden in Plain View*. It shows a quilt that contains a secret code – note that each quilt block is exactly the same. This is believed to be how information was passed to travelers on the Underground Railroad.



THE GREAT ESCAPE – QUILTS IN ACTION



The Monkey Wrench Turns...



...the Wagon Wheel...

...toward Canada on a

Bear's Paw Trail...



...to the Crossroads.



Once they got to the crossroads they...



...dug a Log Cabin on the ground.

Shoofly told them to dress up in...



...cotton and Bow Ties and go to the cathedral church,

... get married and exchange

Double Wedding Rings.

Flying Geese stay on...



...the Drunkards Path...

...and follow the Stars.



The Cairn

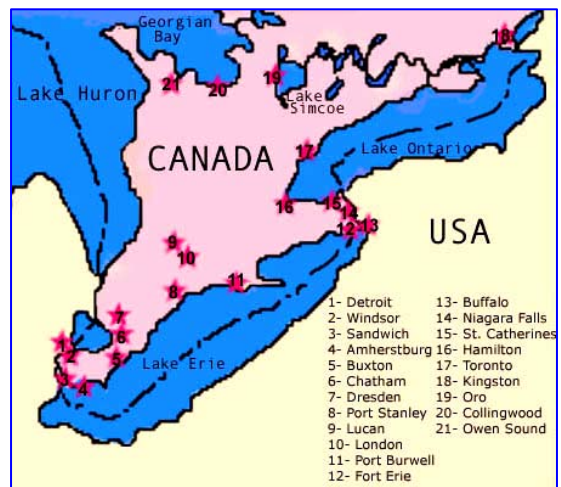


The Cairn is a monument to honour the Black slaves who traveled the Underground Railroad to its northernmost terminus at Owen Sound. The Cairn, situated on the *Freedom Path* faces north and overlooks the Sydenham River — appropriate because the escaping slaves viewed crossing a river and heading north as the road to freedom. It was designed by Bonita Johnson-de-Matheis.

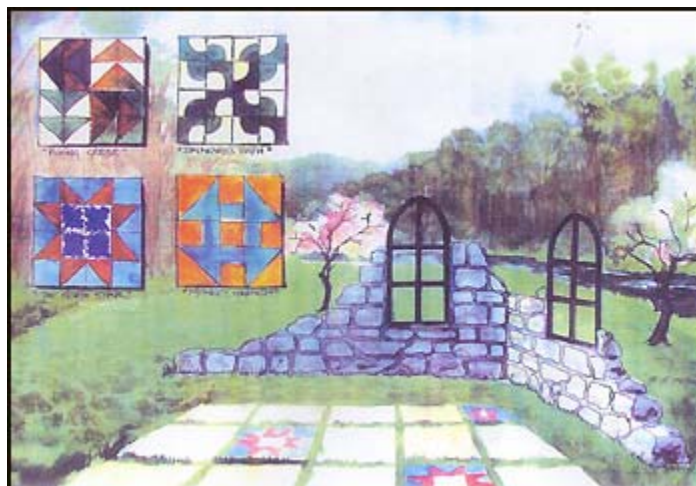
The Cairn was designed to give visitors a feeling of shelter and protection — which is what escaped slaves found in Owen Sound. The windows used in the monument are shaped from the original window frames of the ‘Little Zion’ church that was the first Black church in Owen Sound.

The stones that comprise the Cairn were donated by many of the former American slave and border crossing states, and also include black granite from South Africa and limestone from the Owen Sound quarry.

Apple trees line the site since slaves were told that if they followed the apple blossoms, they would be going north. The blossoming season is later as one moves north. The quilt patterns found in the stepping stones represent the secret messages that are purported to have been relayed to slaves in the form codes, symbols and designs within quilts.



The map (right) shows the known destination points of the Underground Railroad. Many black slaves found freedom on arriving at the last terminal of the Underground Railroad — the Village of Sydenham, now known as Owen Sound, a small city on the shore of Lake Huron.



What was the Underground Railroad?



The history books tell us that between 1440 to the late 1800s, **tens of millions** of Black Africans were taken away from their homes and boarded onto crowded ships destined for the United States to become slave labourers for the many sugar plantations in the south.

We know that about **15 million** Africans survived the journey but because of harsh living conditions and cruelty in their new homeland, many thousands more died from disease and exhaustion.

As the slaves watched friend after friend and family member after family member, suffer and die, many began to dream about once again being free. This dream soon became a quest for freedom — what we now know as the Underground Railroad.

The Underground Railroad had no railcars or track and it was not underground. The Underground Railroad was a network of escape routes that were described using railroad terms. 'Passengers' were runaway slaves fleeing from the South. Their guides were called 'conductors' and they led them from one 'station' to another.

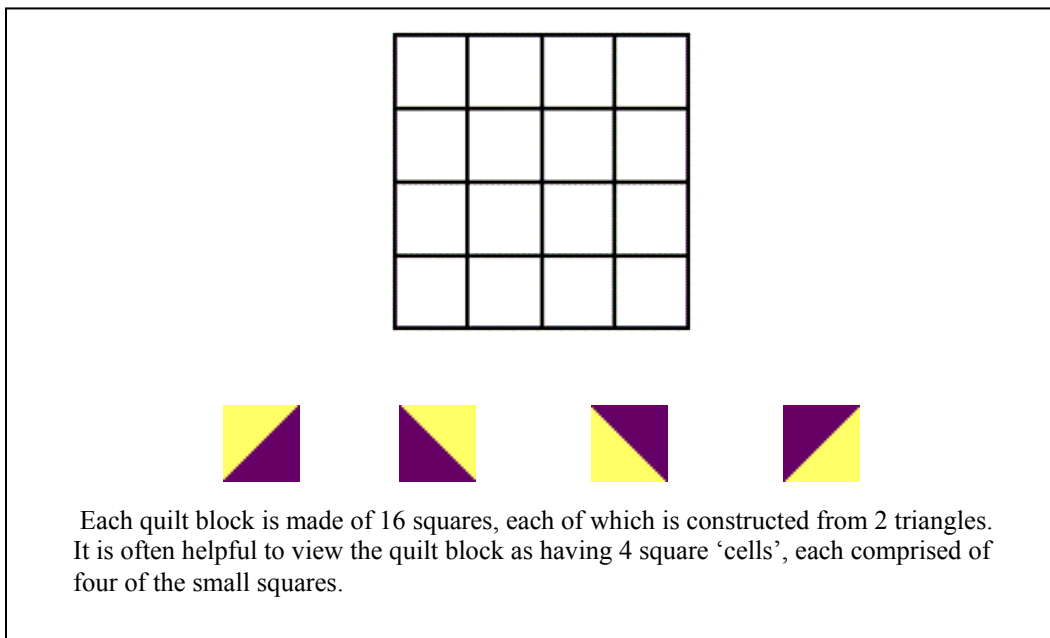
Escape routes stretched from the southern slave states into the North and on to Canada. Fugitives usually traveled secretly at night, and were hidden in 'safe houses', barns, and haylofts in the day. Thousands of antislavery campaigners, both black and white, risked their lives to operate the railway

The law prohibited teaching slaves how to read and write. Because of this, information regarding an escape had to be committed to memory and passed on only by word of mouth, using songs, signs and codes. By using quilts, items seen every day, slaves were able to communicate messages about plans to escape in front of their masters without drawing suspicion. This compilation of lessons and resources is intended to help you to learn about the elaborate quilt code that many believe guided thousands of slaves to freedom in Canada.



Where's the math????

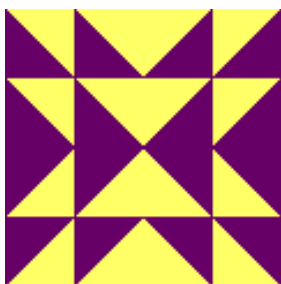
For the purposes of this activity, we use the following definition of a quilt block: A quilt block is made of 16 small squares. Each small square consists of two triangles. Each square has four possible configurations as illustrated in the diagram below.



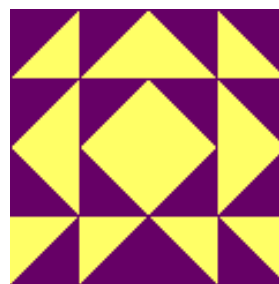
Use 2 different colours and the 4X4 template to make enough strips of each colour to produce 8 squares for each one. Cut each square along its diagonal to make 16 triangles of one colour and 16 of the other.

How many different quilt block designs can you create using just these shapes? (Hint: There are a few possibilities of quilt block designs on the next page.)

Can you use the two colours of triangles to make a square to show two equal parts? Four equal parts?



The right side is a mirror image of the left, and the top is a mirror of the bottom.



The right side is a mirror image of the left, but the top is not a mirror of the bottom.



There are no lines of mirror symmetry, but the figure is the same if you rotate it 180 degrees.

The top is a mirror image of the bottom, but the right side is not a mirror of the left.

You learned about **slides**, **flips** and **turns** in school. Can you use what you know about slides, flips and turns to describe the pattern in the 16-square block you designed? Use the examples above to help you.

Could you have created the same design with other moves?

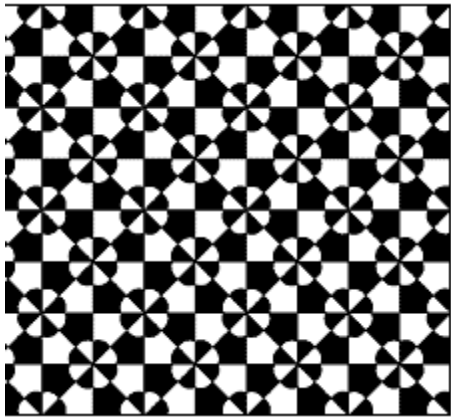
Can you use what you know about fractions to help you describe your quilt square to someone else?

If you want to try making your quilt blocks on the computer, you can download some free software at:

<http://www.quiltmakersoftware.com>



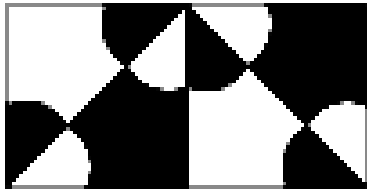
This quilt block is called Hearts and Gizzards.
Why might this be so?



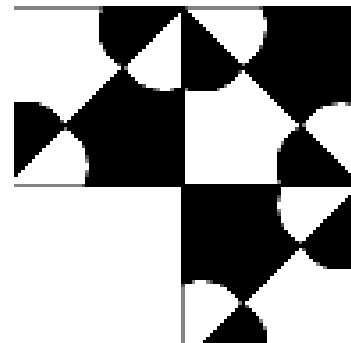
Look at one block. Find two triangles in this small square. (For help locating the triangles, find the line that runs from the upper right to the lower left.) What can you say about these triangles and their angles?



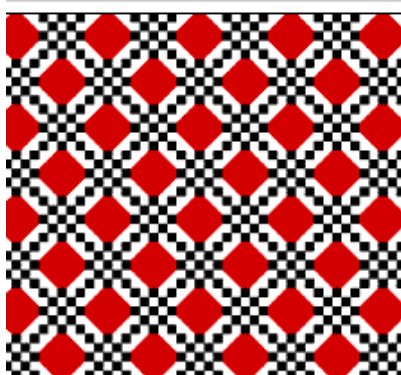
Rotating the block about a corner generates a second square, as in the example at the left. What happens to the pattern if you rotate the original block 90 degrees, either clockwise or counterclockwise about one its corners?



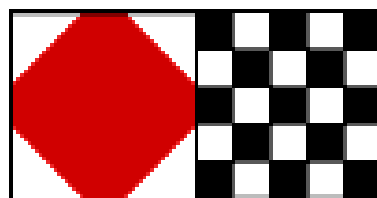
How many times do you need to repeat this rotation before you return to where you started?



The Irish Chain Quilt



For the Irish Chain quilt, the basic block consists of a checkerboard and a square with a rectangle inscribed in it. It looks like this:



Which transformation would you use to generate this pattern starting with the basic block: a translation, a reflection, or a rotation?

BEFORE YOU BEGIN MAKING YOUR QUILT BLOCKS ...

... you can experiment with these templates to decide on your colours and patterns. It is a good idea to use both the single block template and the mini quilt (with 6 blocks in total) to see how different the quilts may look when you use different colours and/or patterned paper, individually and collectively. Experiment with these quilt blocks to learn how you can change the appearance and therefore the meaning and/or message— communicated by the quilt block dramatically! Consider this example using a pinwheel quilt block. Aren't you surprised at how different the same pattern looks in each block? Try this yourself with all of the freedom quilt blocks.

