

Really Good Stuff® Activity Guide

Underground Railroad Quilt Guide

Introduction

The Underground Railroad is an important part of American history—yet it is difficult for children to understand what the Underground Railroad was and how African slaves, known as fugitives, “rode” it to freedom. This quilt poster and guide is packed with ideas for helping children study the Underground Railroad by learning about the quilts—and the secret escape codes quilters stitched into them to guide their people to freedom.

Included in this Really Good Stuff® kit you will find:

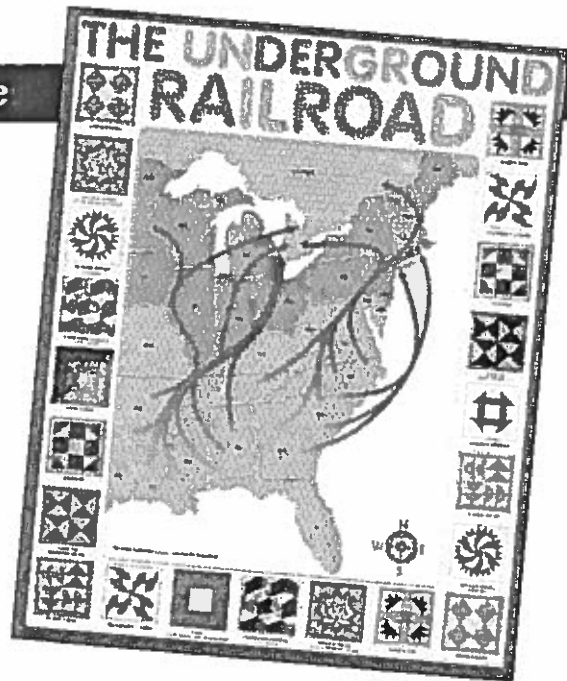
- Full-color poster, 19" by 24", featuring the Underground Railroad map and Quilt Patterns
- Reproducible quilt patterns
- This Really Good Stuff® Activity Guide

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Prior to 1860, 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. And your students will be excited to use this kit to help design their own coded quilt squares. Twelve quilt patterns were used to direct the slaves to take particular action.

Directions for Creating a Coded Quilt Map

1. Begin by sharing this poster front, plus read-aloud books and background information about the Underground Railroad and coded quilts with your class. Here are some resources to consider exploring:
 - *The Secret To Freedom* by Marcia Vaughan (Lee & Low Books, 2001). A young slave girl and her older brother, in the days before the Civil War, help slaves escape to freedom using the Underground Railroad quilt code.
 - *The Patchwork Path* by Bettye Stroud (Candlewick Press, 2005). This book tells how Hannah and her Papa escaped from slavery along the Underground Railroad. The quilt that Hannah and her late mother made together offers clues in the quilt blocks.
 - *Almost To Freedom* by Vaunda Micheaux Nelson (Carolrhoda Books, 2003). A tattered rag doll named Sally relates how a young girl and her parents embark on the dangerous journey along the Underground Railroad in their quest for freedom.
2. Copy a supply of quilt square patterns in this kit. These represent some of the most common quilt blocks used in coded quilts.
(Tip: To make squares more sturdy, mount squares on construction paper before cutting apart.)

All activity guides can be found online:

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3. After reading together the information about each quilt block:

- Offer children art supplies (crayons, markers, assorted paper, wrapping paper, fabric scraps and scissors).
- Have them trim the squares along the lines, then fill in the squares with color, patterns and textures.
- Tell children to create quilt squares with hidden meanings. Remind them that colors, patterns, textures, "stitches" and "knots" (drawn on with a fine line marker), can each indicate a coded symbol.
- Children can create individual squares which may be taped or quilted together as a class quilt, or they may create individual quilts by gluing a number of completed squares to lengths of craft paper which can then be displayed on walls and hallways.

4. Invite children to write essays describing the symbolism present in their quilt square(s).

QUILT PATTERNS & THEIR MEANINGS

Monkey Wrench

This meant the slaves were to gather all the tools they might need on the journey to freedom. Tools meant: something with which to build shelters, compasses for determining direction, or tools to serve as weapons for defending themselves.



Wagon Wheel

This was the second pattern to be displayed, which signaled the slaves to pack all the things that would go in a wagon or that would be used during their journey. This was a signal for the slaves to think about what essentials they needed to survive the trip.



Carpenter's Wheel (Wagon Wheel variation)

This pattern would have particular significance to slaves skilled in a craft—such as carpentry. (Other such patterns might be: an Anvil, Circular Saw, Square and Compass.) It was also a symbol to "steal away"—a visual equivalent to the popular spiritual "Steal Away", which many slaves knew and sang. The pattern told slaves to "run with faith" to the west—northwest territories.



Bear's Paw

It's believed that this pattern was sometimes used to help fugitives follow the path of the bear, and to identify landmarks on the edge of the plantation.



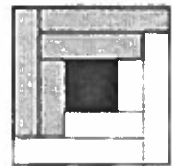
Crossroads

Once through the mountains, slaves were to travel to the crossroads. The main crossroad was Cleveland, Ohio. Any quilt hung before this one would have given directions to Ohio.



Log Cabin

This pattern was used to let the slaves know where safe houses were. People who helped the Underground Railroad may have identified themselves as friends to slaves on the run by tracing this pattern in dirt as a signal. This quilt told slaves to look for this symbol on their journey to freedom. It was also a symbol to set up a "home" in a free state.



Shoofly

Little is known about this pattern. It is believed that Shoofly refers to an actual person who might have aided escaping slaves.



Bow Ties

Slaves' clothes were often tattered and easy to spot. This pattern meant that someone would bring the slave nice clothes to help them blend in with the free blacks.



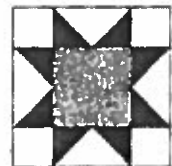
Flying Geese

This pattern told the slaves to follow migrating geese north towards Canada and to freedom. This pattern was used as directions as well as the best season for slaves to escape. Geese fly north in the spring and summer. Flying geese pointed to the direction, north, for the slaves to move. Also, geese would have to stop at waterways along their journey in order to rest and eat. Slaves were to take their cues on direction, timing and behavior from the migrating geese.



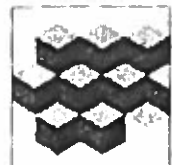
North Star (Evening Star/Star)

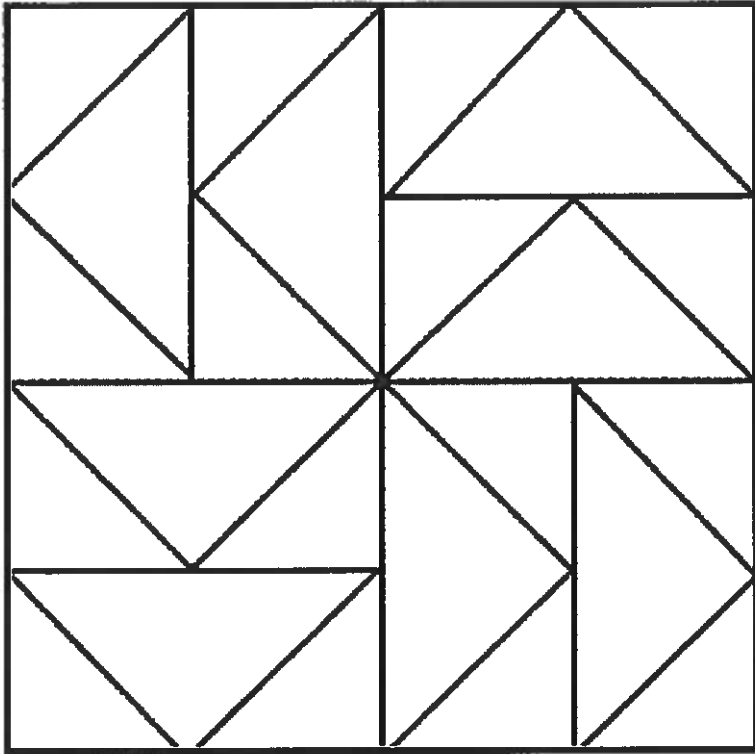
This instructed the slaves to follow the North Star to Canada and to freedom.



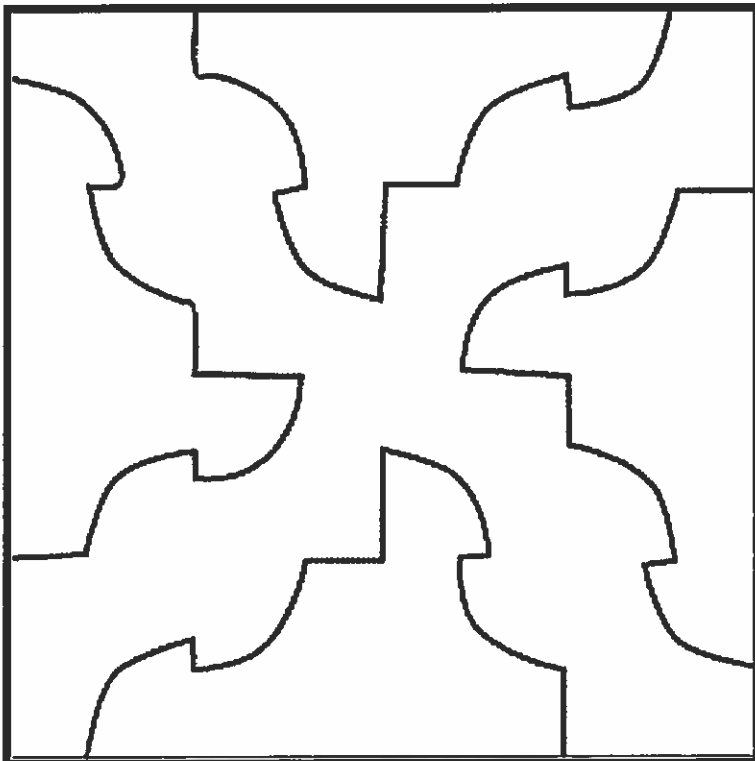
Tumbling Blocks (Boxes)

This signaled to the slaves—by the number of boxes and knots—the time to "box up" all one's belongings in preparation to escape.

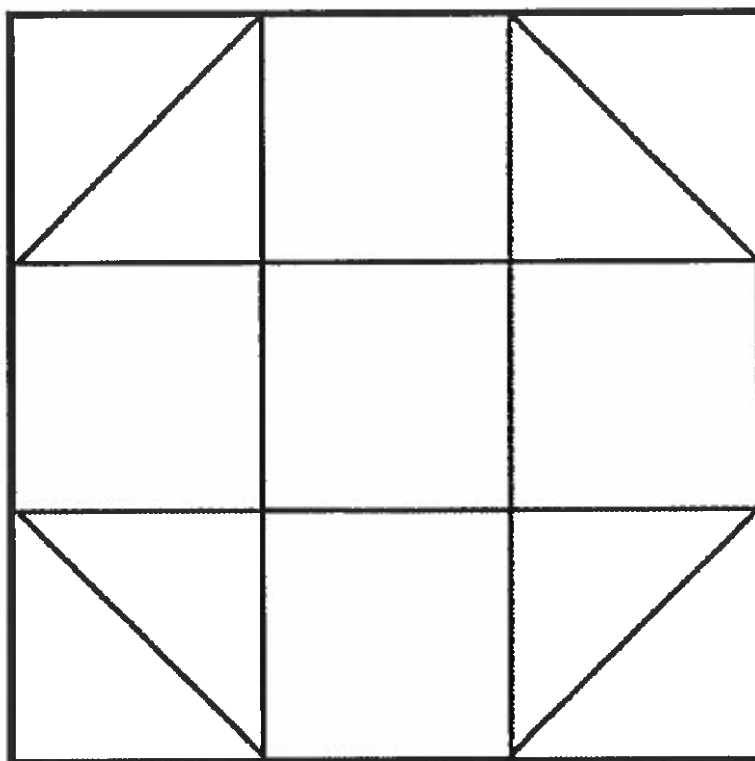




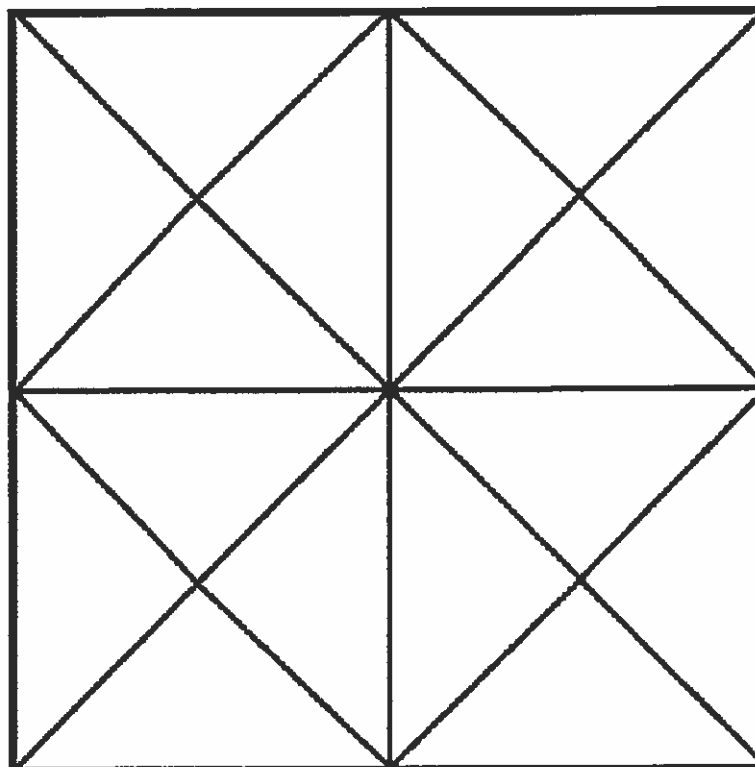
Flying Geese

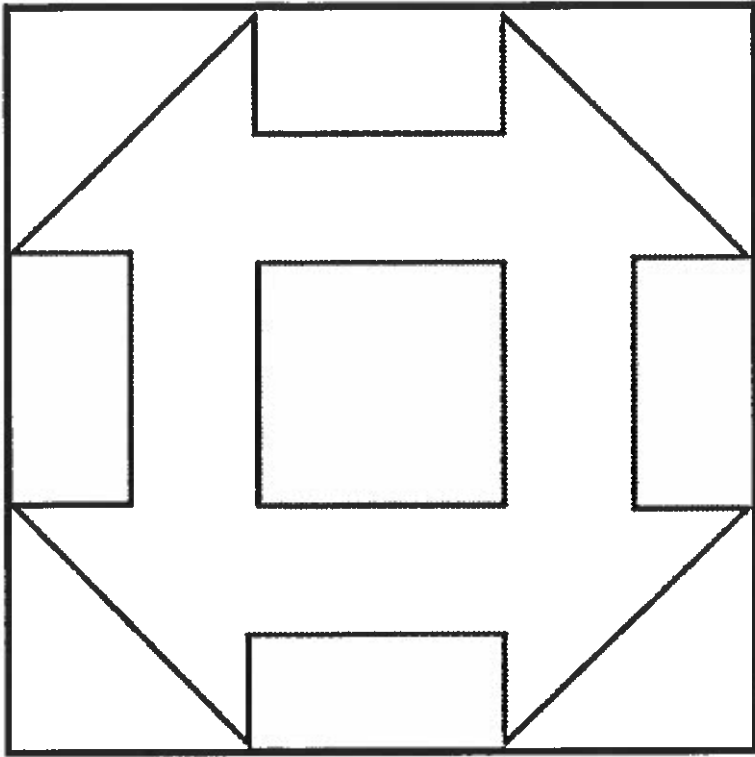


Shoofly

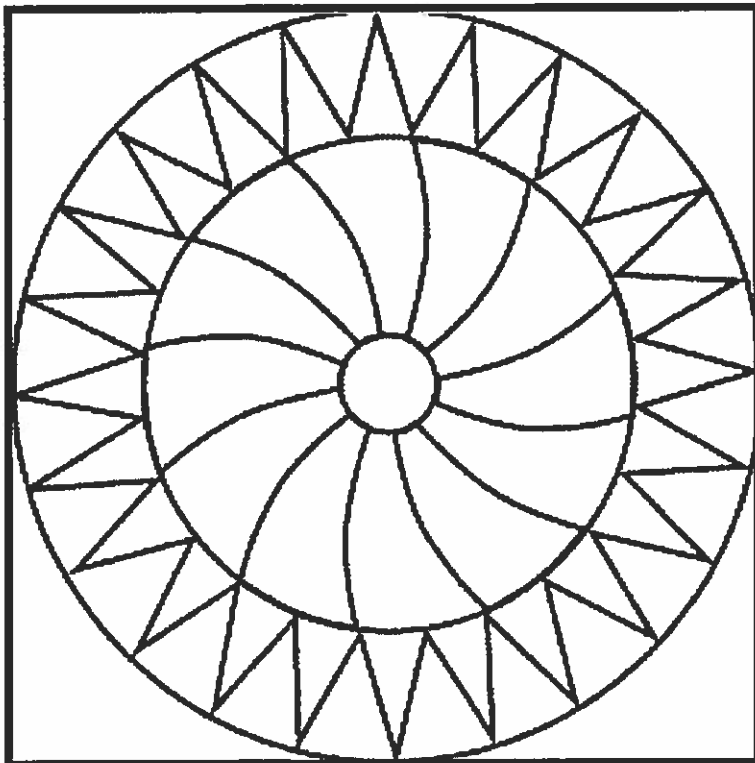


Bow Ties



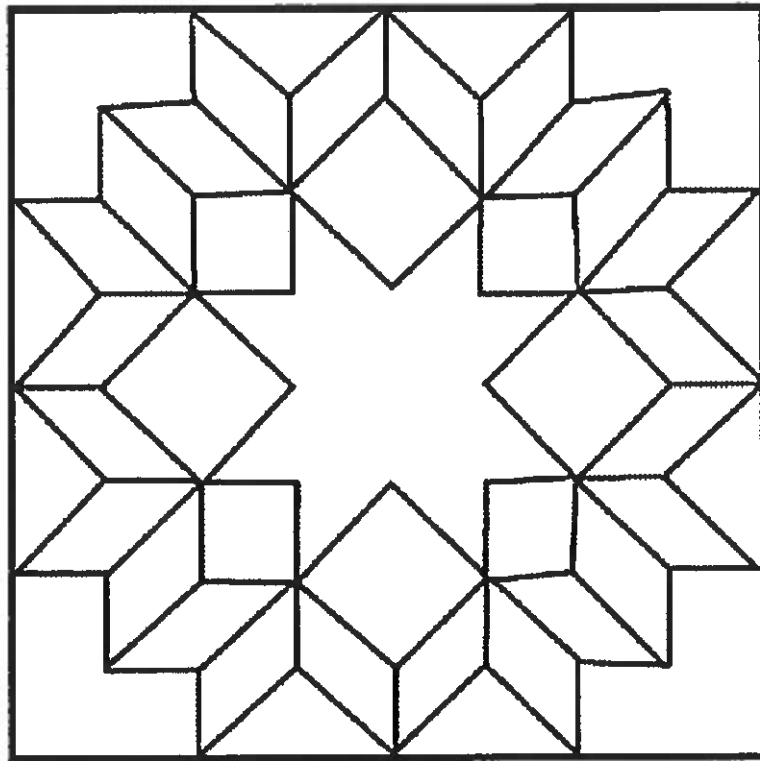


Monkey Wrench

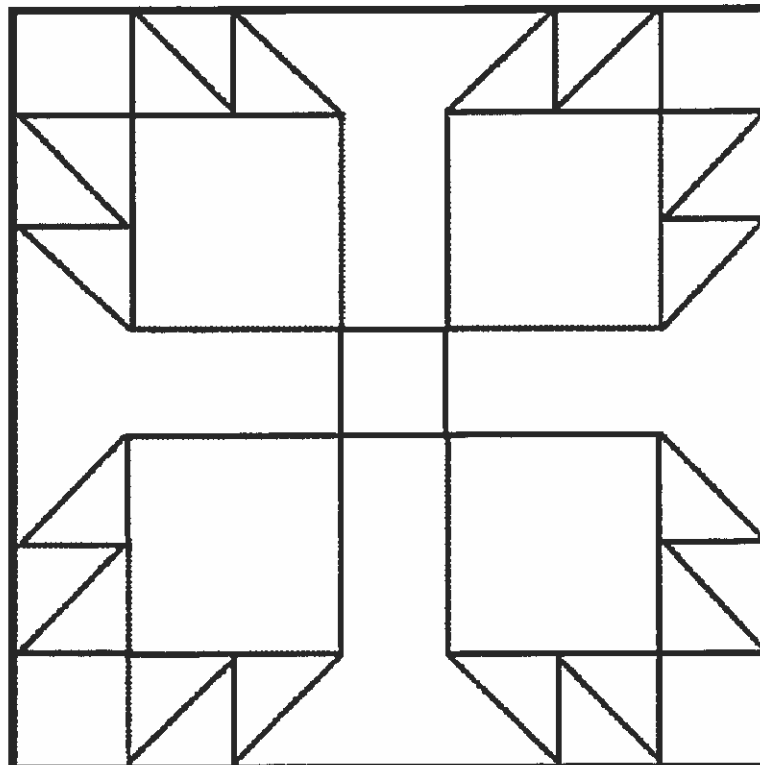


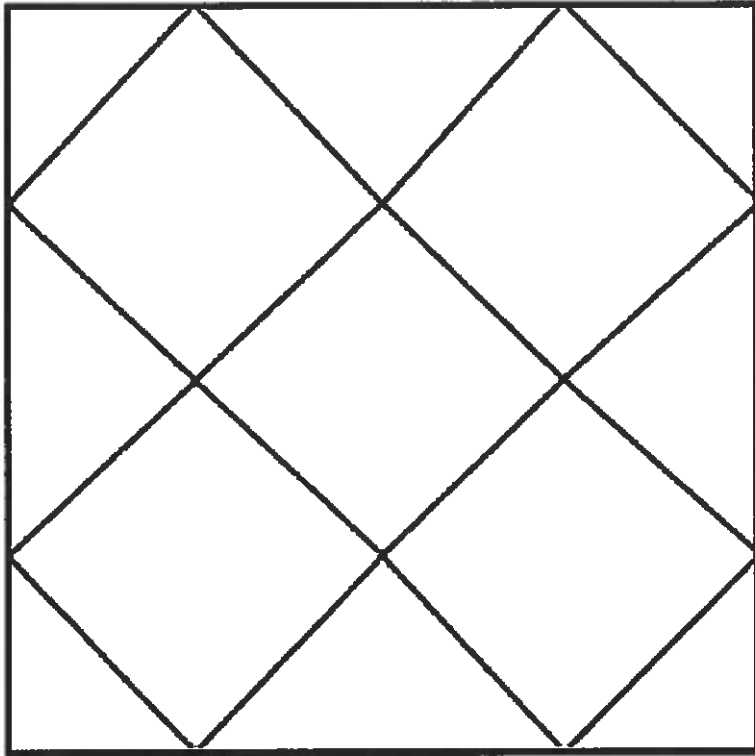
Wagon Wheel

Carpenter's Wheel

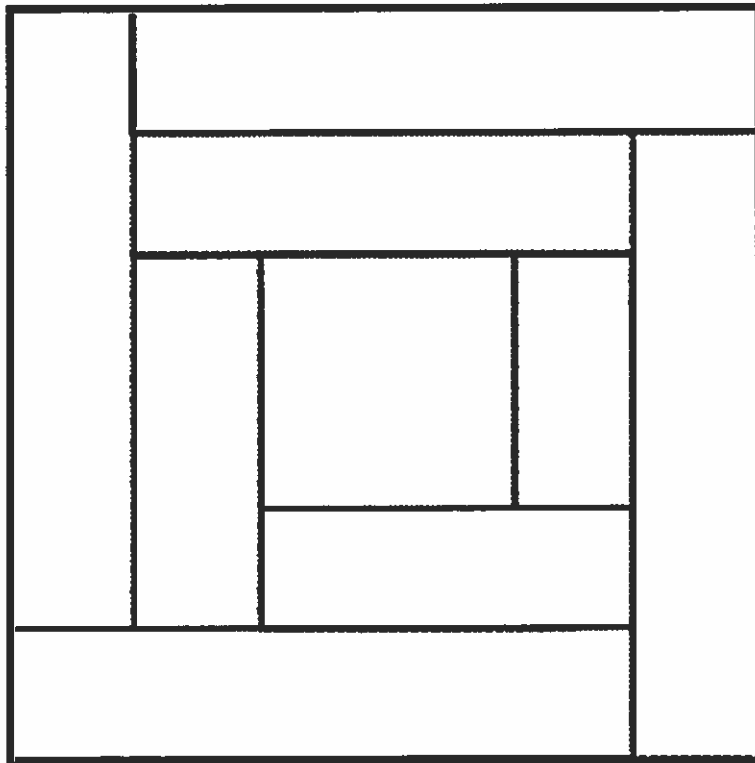


Bear's Paw



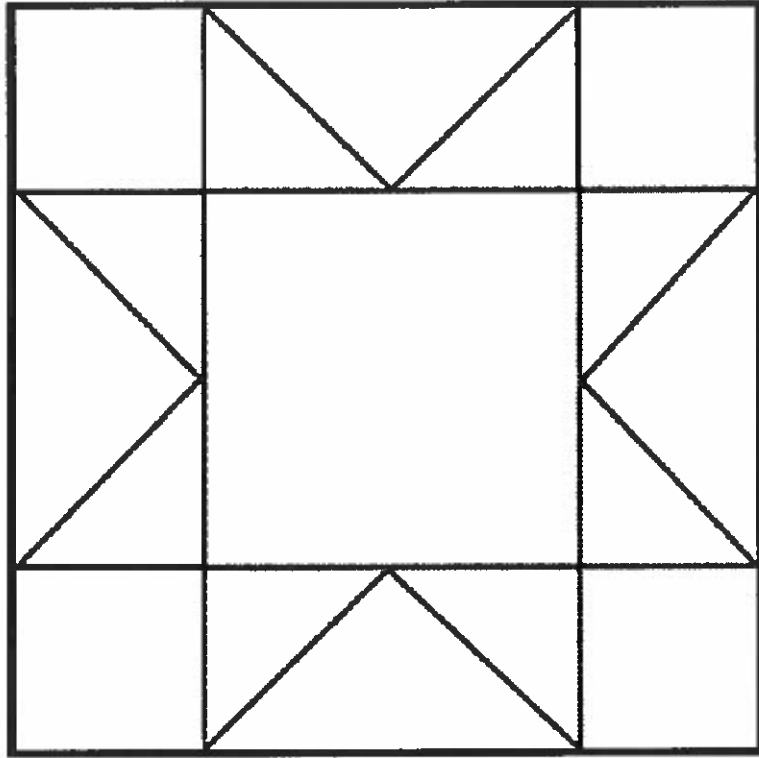


Crossroads



Log Cabin

Star



Boxes

