

MANCHESTER COLLEGE
Department of Education

LESSON PLAN by: Laura Ahnert

Lesson: IUP Lesson #3: The Myth of Quilt codes

Length: 50 minutes

Age or Grade Intended: 7th Grade English

Academic Standard(s):

7.2.4 Identify and trace the development of an author's argument, point of view, or perspective in text.

Performance Objectives:

Given an article about slave quilts, the students will trace the author's perspective throughout the article in small groups with a set of guiding questions for 2 points per correct answer.

Given materials, the students will create their own quilt block which they will present to the class for participation points.

Assessment: In groups, the students will answer the questions on the worksheet. They should make sure to all put their names on the sheet so they will all get the points. By working together, they will be able to come up with thoughtful answers for the higher-order questions. I will pick up the worksheets after they are done. Each question is worth 2 points apiece.

I will also provide the students with materials to make their own slave quilt block. This is meant to be a fun and creative activity. I understand that not every student is creative. I will only be giving 5 participation points for the day for completed quilt blocks.

Advanced Preparation by Teacher:

- Find a picture of a slave quilt.
- Find article about slave quilts.
- Print National Geographic article for students.
- Make group project worksheet.
- Print 1 group worksheet for each group.
- Find quilt block patterns.
- Cut each strip of quilt block description apart. 1 for each student.
- Have several packages of fabric markers.
- Have squares of cloth for each student.

Procedure:

Introduction/Motivation: Have the picture of the slave quilt on the overhead as the students come in. Ask the students what they learned last time we were in class, and then ask them

to get their journals out. Ask the students to write down what this quilt brings to their mind. (Give them about 5 minutes to write down thoughts)

Step-by-Step Plan:

1. Leave the picture of the slave quilt up throughout the entire lesson.
2. Have the students put their journals away.
3. Have the students get into groups of 3-4.
4. Read the article out loud to the students as they follow along. (M.I. Verbal/Linguistic)
5. After reading the article, pass out the group worksheet.
6. Have the students answer the questions in their group on the worksheet provided. (Give them about 10 minutes.) (M.I. Interpersonal)
7. After the students are done with this, pick up the worksheets.
8. Next, pass out one quilt block with explanation and one piece of fabric.
9. Explain to the students that we are going to make our own slave quilt blocks. Each student will get a different block that has a certain meaning behind it. With markers, each student will need to recreate their block onto the piece of fabric. (Give them about 10 minutes to do this.) (M.I. Intrapersonal)
10. After the 10 minutes, read the following order to the students: "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 satin *bow ties* and go to the cathedral church, get married, and exchange *double wedding rings*. *Flying geese* stay on the *drunkard's path* and follow the *stars*."
11. Have each student present their block and give the meaning behind it.

Closure: Make sure each student puts their name on the back of their quilt block! Collect the quilt blocks for participation points for the day. If there is time, ask the students how they feel about the myth of the slave quilts. The myth of the slave quilt is certainly an interesting one, and one that may be partly true. We will never know!

Adaptations/Enrichment:

For LD students who struggle in Language Arts, I will read the article out loud to them. They will also benefit from working in groups on the questions about the article. I hope that the hands-on activity will be fun and engaging for them.

For students who need enrichment, I will ask them to give me another explanation of why they think someone would make up the "quilt code" myth.

Self-Reflection:

- What could I have done differently?
 - I could have found a different article, or had the students compare the article to a children's book about slave quilts.
- How did my students respond to the quilt block activity?
 - By listening to my students present their blocks to the class, and then by collecting their blocks, I will be able to gauge how much they were into the activity.



"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 satin bow ties and go to the cathedral church, get married, and exchange double wedding rings. Flying geese stay on the drunkard's path and follow the stars."

Did Quilts Hold Codes to the Underground Railroad?

Sarah Ives

for National Geographic News

February 5, 2004

Two historians say African American slaves may have used a quilt code to navigate the Underground Railroad. Quilts with patterns named "wagon wheel," "tumbling blocks," and "bear's paw" appear to have contained secret messages that helped direct slaves to freedom, the pair claim.

Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard first posited the quilt code theory six years ago in their book *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*, published in 1998. In the book, the authors chronicled the oral testimony of Ozella McDaniel, a descendant of slaves. McDaniel claims that her ancestors passed down the secret of the quilt code from one generation to the next.

The code "was a way to say something to a person in the presence of many others without the others knowing," said Dobard, a history professor at Howard University in Washington, D.C. "It was a way of giving direction without saying, 'Go northwest.'"

The Code

In a series of discussions with Tobin and Dobard, McDaniel described the code: A plantation seamstress would sew a sampler quilt containing different quilt patterns. Slaves would use the sampler to memorize the code. The seamstress then sewed ten quilts, each composed of one of the code's patterns.

The seamstress would hang the quilts in full view one at a time, allowing the slaves to reinforce their memory of the pattern and its associated meaning. When slaves made their escape, they used their memory of the quilts as a mnemonic device to guide them safely along their journey, according to McDaniel.

The historians believe the first quilt the seamstress would display had a wrench pattern. "It meant gather your tools and get physically and mentally prepared to escape the plantation," Dobard said. The seamstress would then hang a quilt with a wagon wheel pattern. This pattern told slaves to pack their belongings because they were about to go on a long journey.

Dobard said his favorite pattern was the bear's paw, a quilt he believes directed slaves to head north over the Appalachian Mountains. "You were supposed to follow the literal footprints of the bear," Dobard said. "Bears always go to water and berries and other natural food sources."

The last quilt had a tumbling blocks pattern, which Dobard described as looking like a collection of boxes. "This quilt was only displayed when certain conditions were right. If, for example, there was an Underground Railroad agent in the area," Dobard said. "It was an indication to pack up and go."

Fact or Myth?

The quilt-code theory has met with controversy since its publication. Quilt historians and Underground Railroad experts have questioned the study's methodology and the accuracy of its findings.

Giles R. Wright, a New Jersey-based historian, points to a lack of corroborating evidence. Quilt codes are not mentioned in the 19th century slave narratives or 1930s oral testimonies of former slaves. Additionally, no original quilts remain.

"What I think they've done is they've taken a folklore and said it's historical fact," Wright said. "They offer no evidence, no documentation, in support of that argument."

Dobard refutes the claims that his book lacks evidence, noting that he uses oral history and thus lacks written records. "Who is going to write down what they did and what it meant ... [if] it might fall into the wrong hands?" Dobard said.

Addressing the lack of concrete evidence, Dobard emphasized the fragility of quilts. "Consider the nature of quilts. A quilt was to be used," Dobard said. "To expect a quilt that remained within the slave community to survive more than one hundred years is asking a lot."

Fact or myth, people agree that the idea of a quilt code is compelling. Bonnie Browning of the American Quilter's Society in Paducah, Kentucky, said: "It makes a wonderful story."

The Myth of the Quilt Code

1. After reading the article, how would you describe “the secret quilt code?” (Bloom’s: Knowledge)
2. What facts or ideas from the article do they state against the quilt code? (Bloom’s: Comprehension)
3. If you believe the quilt code, what do you think would result if the quilt blocks were put in the wrong order? (Bloom’s: Application)
4. Why do you think people would believe the quilt code? (Bloom’s: Analysis)
5. How would you adapt the quilt code to create a different myth? (Bloom’s: Synthesis)
6. What is your opinion of the evidence against the quilt code? Do you still think it is a possible idea? If so, why? If not, why? (Bloom’s: Evaluation)

Quilt Codes



Flying Geese: A signal to follow the direction of the flying geese as they migrated north in the spring. Most slaves escaped during the spring; along the way, the flying geese could be used as a guide to find water, food and places to rest. The quilt maker had flexibility with this pattern as it could be used in any quilt. It could also be used as a compass where several patterns are used together.



North Star: A signal with two messages--one to prepare to escape and the other to follow the North Star to freedom in Canada. North was the direction of traffic on the Underground Railroad. This signal was often used in conjunction with the song, "Follow the Drinking Gourd", which contains a reference to the Big Dipper constellation. Two of the Big Dipper's points lead to the North Star.



Monkey Wrench: A signal to gather all the tools required for the fleeing slave's journey, meaning the physical tools, as well as the mental and spiritual ones.



Sailboat: A signal that either a body of water was nearby or that boats were available.



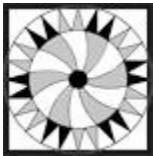
Drunkard's Path: A warning signal to take a zigzag route to elude pursuing slave hunters and their hounds that are in the area. A slave spotted travelling south, for instance, would not be suspected of escaping.



Dresden Wheel: It is possible that the Dresden Plate could be a variation of the Wagon Wheel. Records indicate that the Dresden Plate quilt pattern did not emerge until the 1920s.



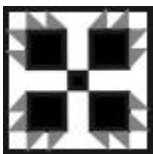
Wagon Wheel/Carpenter's Wheel: A signal to the slave to pack the items needed to travel by wagon or that could be used while travelling. It could also mean to pack the provisions necessary for survival, as if packing a wagon for a long journey, or to actually load the wagon in preparation for escape. Some records indicate this symbol meant a wagon with hidden compartments in which slaves could conceal themselves, would soon be embarking for the trip to freedom.



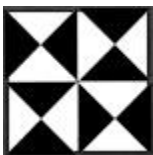
Wagon Wheel Variation: A signal to the slave to pack the items needed to travel by wagon or that could be used while travelling. It could also mean to pack the provisions necessary for survival, as if packing a wagon for a long journey, or to actually load the wagon in preparation for escape. Some records indicate this symbol meant a wagon with hidden compartments in which slaves could conceal themselves, would soon be embarking for the trip to freedom.



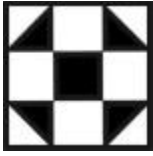
Crossroads: A symbol referring to Cleveland, Ohio, which was the main crossroads with several routes to freedom. On a less literal level, the term "crossroads" also means reaching a turning point in one's life, where a choice must be made and then carry on.



Bear's Paw: Follow a mountain trail, out of view, and then follow an actual bear's trail which would lead to water and food.



Bow Tie (or Hourglass): A symbol indicating it was necessary to travel in disguise or to change from the clothing of a slave to those of a person of higher status.



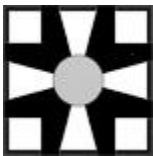
Shoofly: A symbol that possibly identifies a person who can guide and help; a person who helped slaves escape along the Underground Railroad and who knew the codes.



Tumbling Blocks or Boxes: A symbol indicating it was time for slaves to pack up and go, that a conductor was in the area.



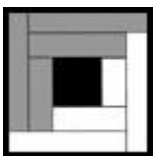
Broken Dishes: A symbol referring to a signal that involved broken crockery at some future landmark.



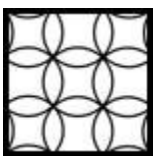
Britches: A symbol indicating the escaping slave needed to dress as a free person.



Rose Wreath: A symbol that indicated someone had died on the journey. It was an African tradition to leave floral wreaths on the graves of deceased.



Log Cabin: A symbol in a quilt or that could be drawn on the ground indicating it was necessary to seek shelter or that a person is safe to speak with. Some sources say it indicated a safe house along the Underground Railroad.



Double Wedding Ring: This pattern did not exist until after the American Civil War. However, the Double Irish Chain pattern did and is believed to have symbolized the chains of slavery. When a slave saw this quilt displayed, it meant the rings or shackles of slavery could be removed. When marrying, slaves did not exchange wedding rings; they “jumped the broom”.

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