

Key Knowledge:

A network of helpers called the Underground Railroad helped enslaved people in America on their way to freedom. According to legend, a safe house along the Underground Railroad was often indicated by a quilt hanging from a clothesline or windowsill. These quilts were embedded with a kind of code, so that by reading the shapes and motifs sewn into the design, an enslaved person on the run could know the area's immediate dangers or even where to head next. The quilts were displayed as signals to enslaved people that they should begin to pack for the journey (wagon wheel), dress up (shoofly) and get ready to escape (tumbling blocks). Quilts were used to alert fugitive slaves to food (bear's paw), the way north (star) and danger (log cabin). Because quilts were such an American tradition, they could be hung on porches or displayed on fences, without attracting attention. The quilts were made of several different squares of fabric sewn together. There were different symbols and each referred to something very specific. Using quilts was a way of communicating to other people via a secret code.

The history of quilting during this time is only just beginning to be explored.

Media and techniques:

- Sewing – using a needle and thread, tying knots, threading needles.
- Stitches – cross stitch, backstitch and running stitch.
- Using cotton thread, felt and fabric squares.

Key vocabulary:

Freedom quilt – a quilt made which was used to communicate messages between enslaved people.

Underground railroad – a network of helpers which supported enslaved people in American on their road to freedom.

Slavery – the act of being a slave and having to work very hard without pay or appreciation.

Running stitch – a line of small even stitches.

Cross stitch – two stitches which cross each other.

Back stitch – a method of sewing with overlapping stitches.

Example Artwork:

