The success of the Underground Railroad can be attributed to the secret signs, routes and the secrecy of the Underground Railroad society, along with the help of brave individuals who risked their lives to help slaves escape to freedom. Secret signs were heard in the song lyrics that were being sung, and were seen in the patterns of quilts that were hanging on porches or fence posts, or in lanterns marking “safe houses.” The routes which slaves used along the way to freedom were the linchpin of the Underground Railroad and were known only by the members of the Underground Railroad society. Brave individuals including Harriet Tubman, a former slave who had run away and returned to rescue others; Thomas Garrett, a Quaker businessman who aided by housing slaves as they were on their way to Canada; and Frederick Douglas, a fugitive slave who published the North Star, an abolitionist newspaper; risked their lives to help many slaves escape to freedom.

Features in this exhibit include: timeline of slavery, faces of freedom, maps of Underground Railroad routes, songs with special messages, the examples of quilt messages, and miniature replicas of hiding places and safe houses.

Group Members: Noah Frazier, Crystal Gomes, Kevin McCrabb, and Aaron Weik.
FREDERICK DOUGLASS (ca 1817-1895) was a fugitive slave. Douglass became a skilled abolitionist speaker, praised for "wit, argument, sarcasm, and pathos." He urged blacks to pursue vocational education and the vote; his print shop in Rochester, New York, was a depot on the underground. He was quoted saying, "I am a Republican, a black, dyed in the wool Republican, and I never intend to belong to any other party than the party of freedom and progress."

THOMAS GARRETT (1789-1871) "Among the manliest of men, and the gentlest of spirits," wrote William Lloyd Garrison about the Wilmington businessman who aided more than 2,700 slaves to freedom.

HARRIET TUBMAN (1820-1913) was born into slavery. She escaped but later returned over a dozen times to help runaway slaves escape to freedom. She was a very active and an important part of the Underground Railroad.

The Underground Railroad can be attributed to the secret signs, routes and the secrecy of the Underground Railroad society, along with the help of brave individuals who risked their lives to help slaves escape to freedom.
The Underground Railroad

Secret Signs

They used many secret symbols ranging from songs, to language, to symbols contained in quilts. For example many prominent “conductors,” as they were called, sang songs to help guide or communicate with the “passengers” or “baggage,” as escaping slaves were called. Harriet Tubman sang of following the drinking gourd which was a way to locate Polaris and follow it north. Another example is Harriet Tubman would sing two songs to notify her group she was back and it was safe or a different song if it was not. Another example of the secret communications was in quilts. If quilts were tied with multiple knots it indicated greater distances between “stations” and another symbol was the bow tie pattern which indicated a change of clothes as to blend in with other blacks in the community.

Escape Routes

The routes by which slaves escaped to free territory were the linchpin of the Underground Railroad, and the particular routes used were very important in order for escapes to be successful. The route used was extremely dependant on where search parties and slave catchers were located. Some escape journeys required the use of many different routes. If danger of capture was expected, then the guides leading the slaves would change paths. Many fugitives on the run often hid in swamps or heavily wooded areas for days until the route was safe again. Two main important factors were considered when choosing escape routes: geographic area and the amount of workers available to help slaves escape. For example, Iowa was on the border of slave territory and a route was still being developed so the distance between “stations” or groups of Underground Railroad workers was large, and there would also be fewer routes. So, the escaping to Iowa would be quick but chances of being caught would be high. Ohio, for example had more routes and a bigger population, so escaping would take longer but be safer.

Quilts displayed certain messages for runaway slaves.