



Quilt Code

When Africans were brought to America as slaves, their strong oral tradition accompanied them. In a number of African tribes, the most honored person was the storyteller, who committed to memory the entire history of the tribe, which he then taught to a younger member of the group. Each succeeding generation was assured in this way that the tribe's historical record would be retained.

An example of the African oral tradition is the Underground Railroad Quilt Code said to have been handed down orally from generation to generation. The Quilt Code was recently revealed by Ozella McDaniel Williams of Charleston, South Carolina to Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard. They present the code in their book **Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad**.*

Key words in this code refer to common quilt blocks used by both black and white quilters of the pre-Civil War era. The code is believed to have served as a language to "talk" about paths to freedom. It may also have been used by enslaved blacks as they traveled along the Underground Railroad.

After the publication of **Hidden in Plain View**, Serena Wilson (Ozella's niece) was featured on the HGTV cable show **Simply Quilts** hosted by Alex Anderson. Serena mentioned another block that may have been used to communicate. She says the Jacob's Ladder pattern—renamed by some as the Underground Railroad pattern—was hung outside the homes of Underground Railroad supporters as a signal to slaves that they had reached a safe haven. Jacob's ladder and the eleven blocks from Ozella's code are provided in this document.

It must be noted there are some historians who question whether quilts were ever used as coded maps to help slaves escape. Elementary students at Greenway Elementary in Beaverton, OR received an email from author Tobin responding to this and other issues. Tobin's message is posted on the school's **Virtual Underground Railroad Quilt** web page at www.beavton.k12.or.us/greenway/leahy/ugrr/. Choose the "Quilts" link.

The Beaverton web site has a variety of activities and suggested resource materials concerning the Underground Railroad for use by students and teachers. Besides visiting this site, consider having students use their math skills to reproduce the patterns used in the secret code on paper—or have them create a new design that might be used by those who participated in the Underground Railroad. A more ambitious project is the creation of a quilt using fabric blocks created by the class. To help you recreate the quilt blocks, I have created patterns that may be reproduced for classroom use. The details concerning the patterns were provided by Serena Wilson on **Simply Quilts**.

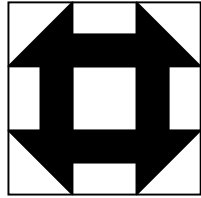
*Jacqueline L. Tobin, Raymond G. Dobard, Maude Southwell Wahlman, and Cuesta Benberry (Bantam Doubleday Dell Pub, 2000) ISBN: 0385497679.

NOTE: Suggestions for classroom use of the code and sample patterns are provided by Pat Bonner, Economic Connections. Email: econnect@voyager.net

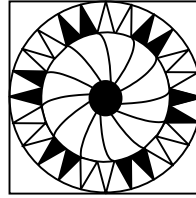


Ozella's Underground Railroad Quilt Code

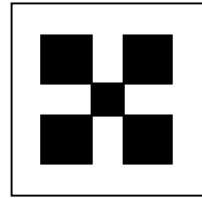
The monkey wrench



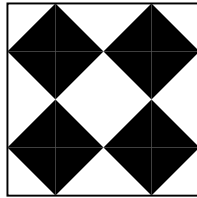
turns the wagon wheel



toward Canada on the bear's paw trail

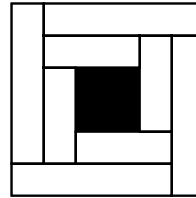


to the crossroads.

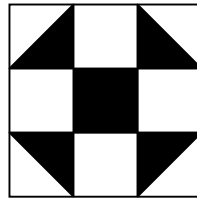


Once they got to the

crossroads, they dug a log cabin

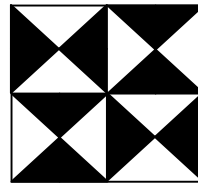


on the ground. Shoofly



told them to dress up,

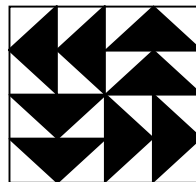
put on cotton and satin bowties,



go to the

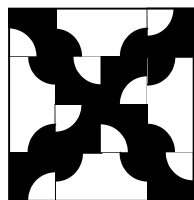
cathedral church, get married, and exchange double

wedding rings. Flying geese

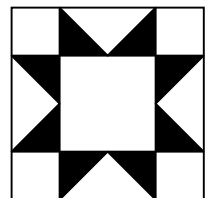


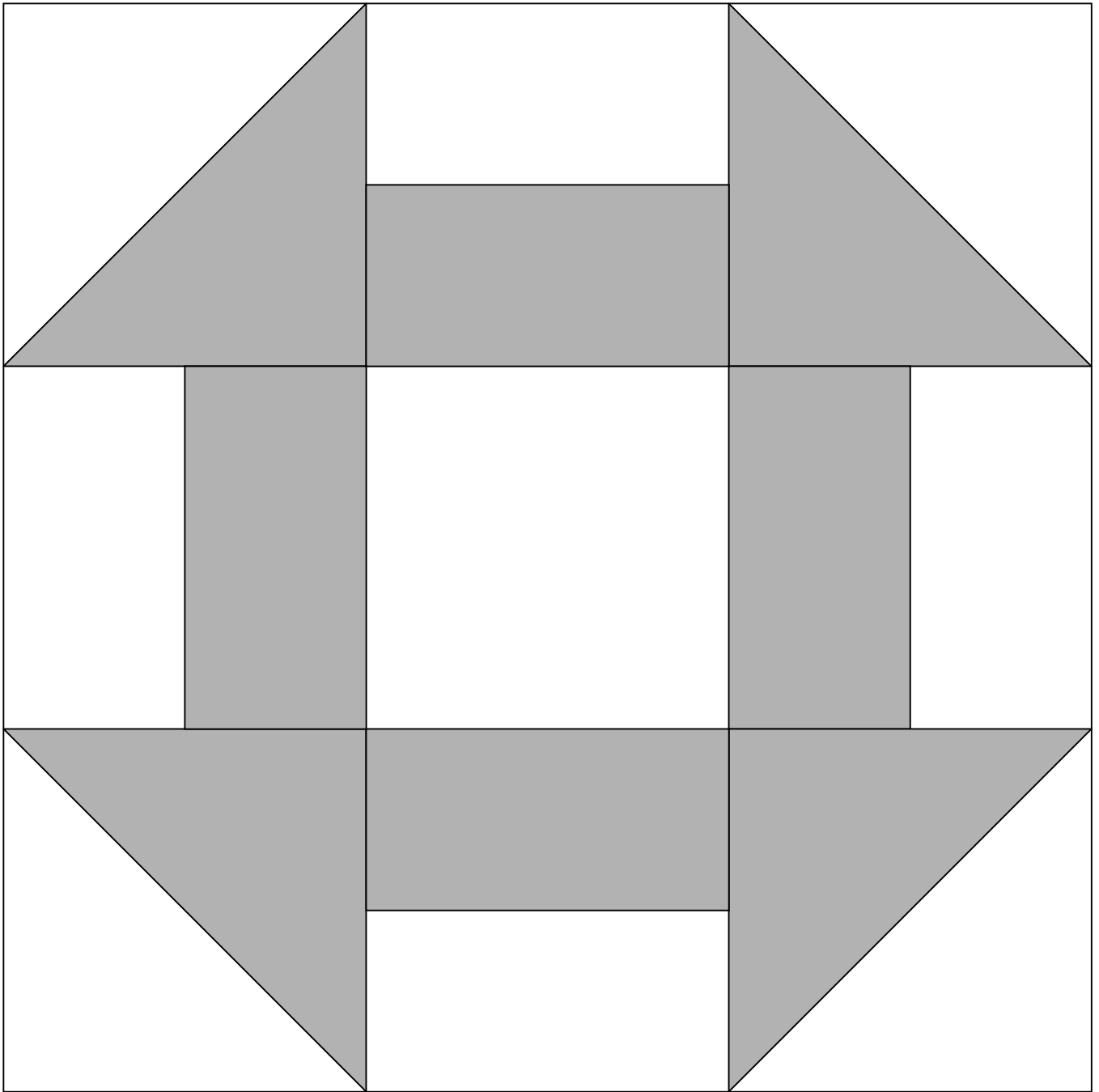
say stay on the

drunkard's path

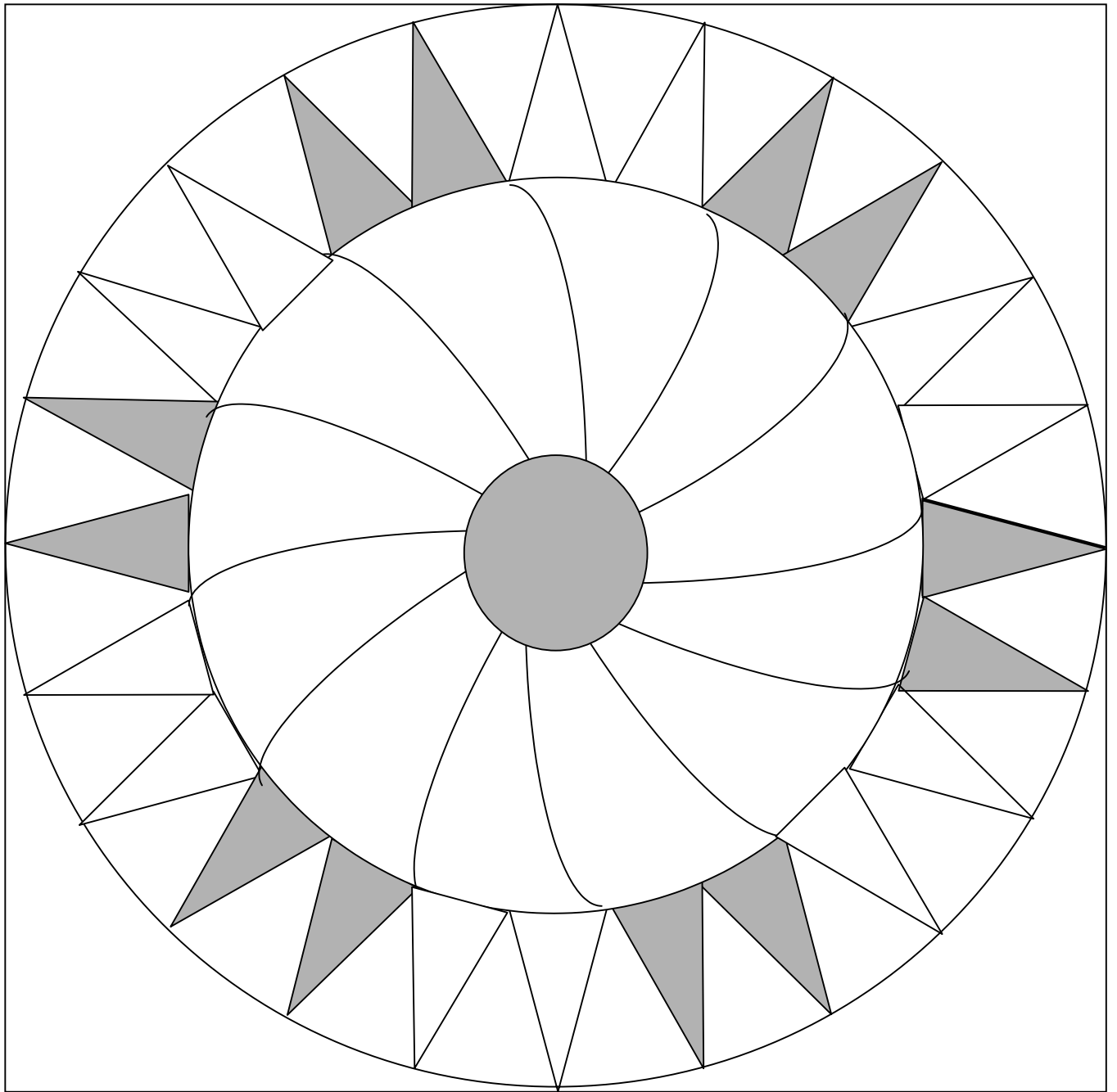


and follow the stars.

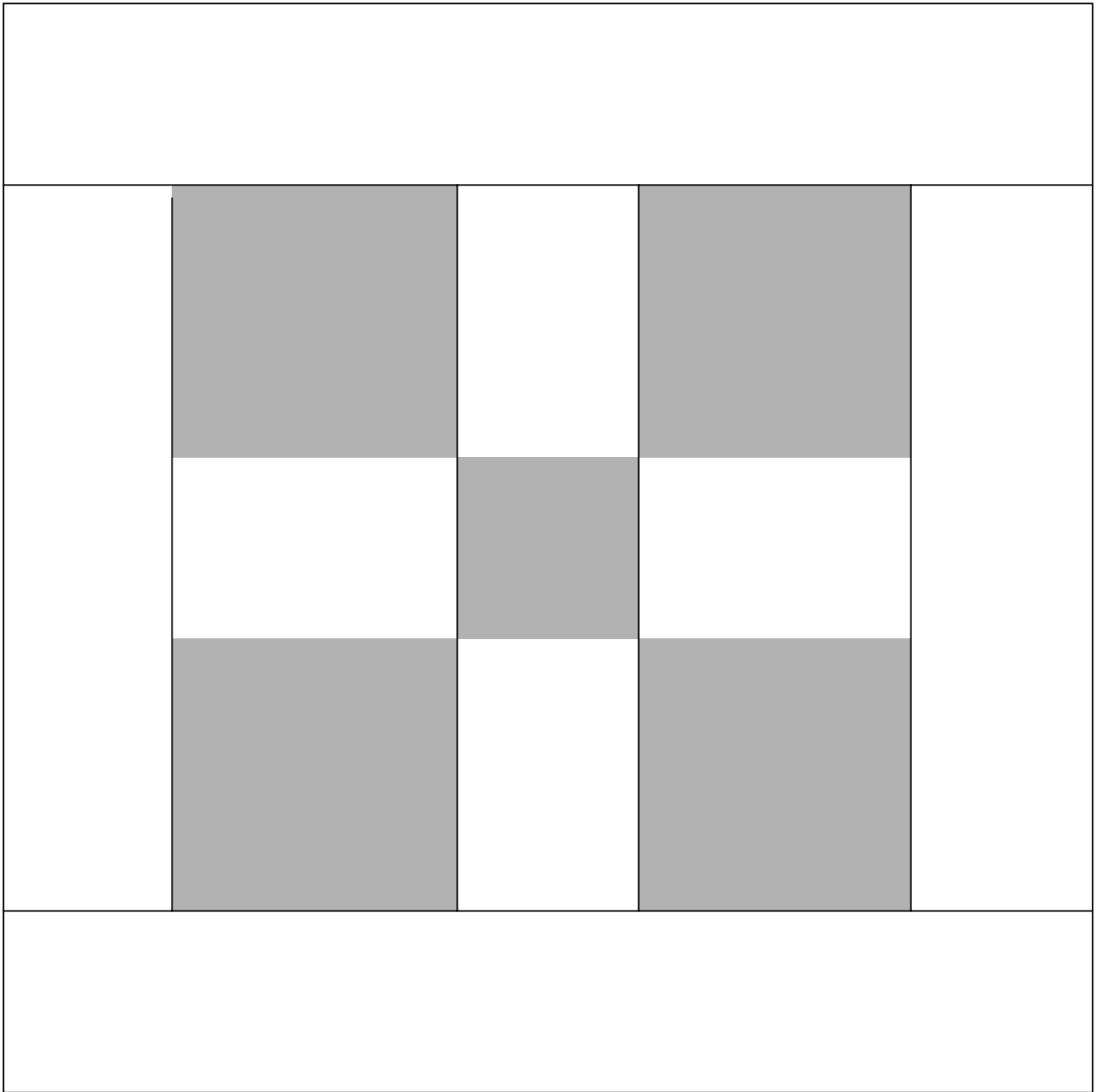




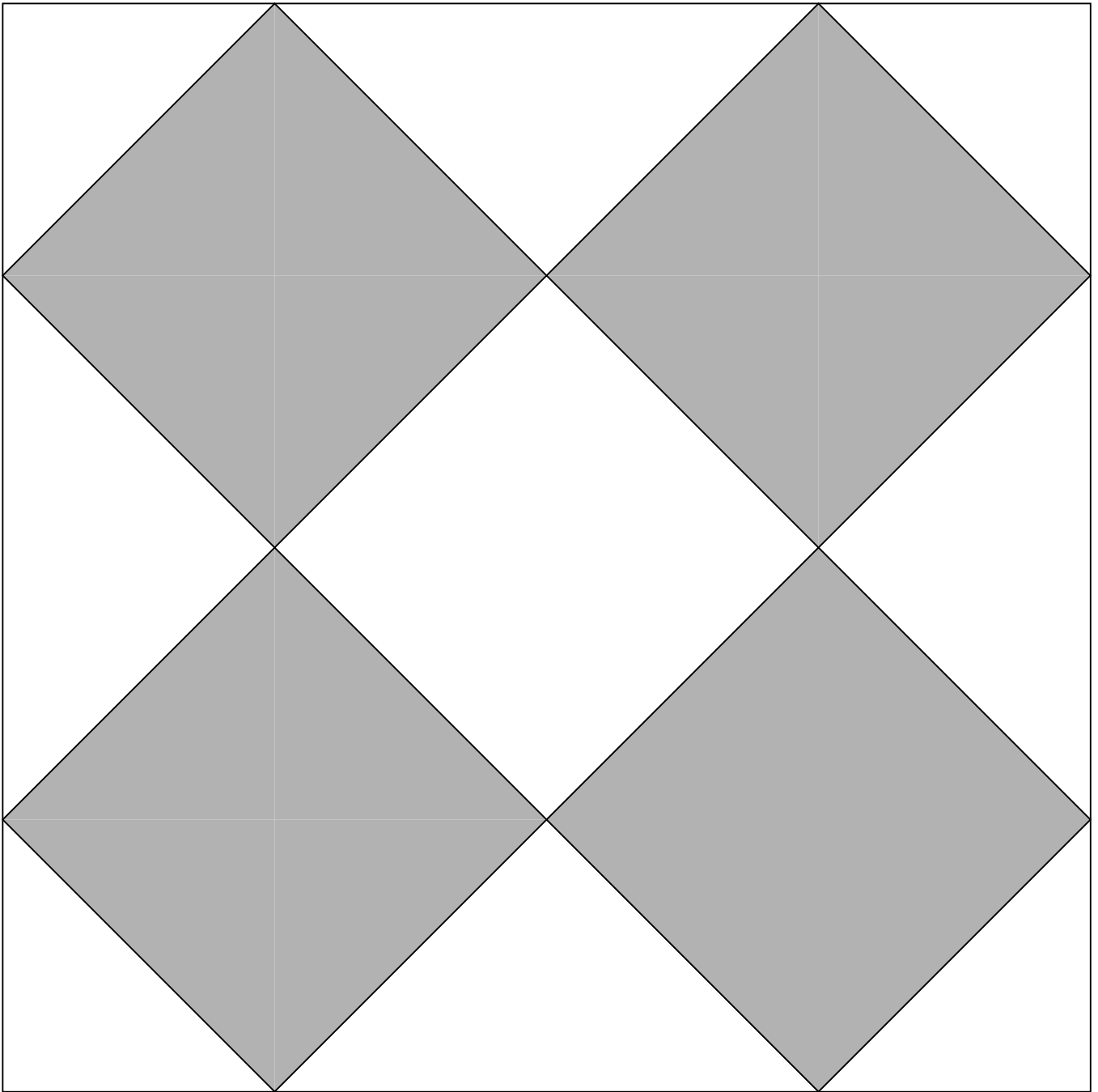
MONKEY WRENCH. *Get ready for the trip by gathering tools. Get prepared physically and mentally.*



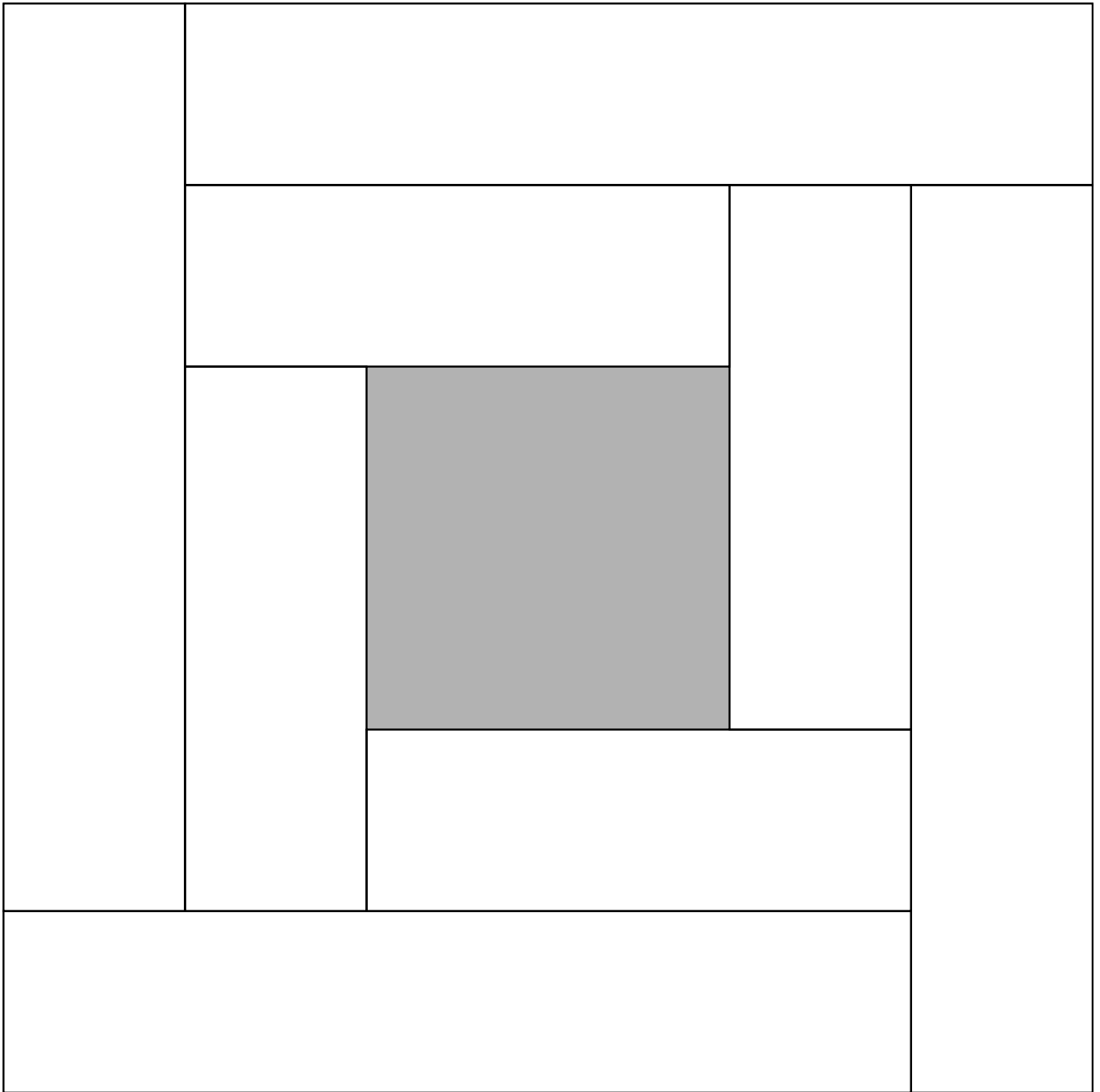
Wagon Wheel. Travel will be by wagon.



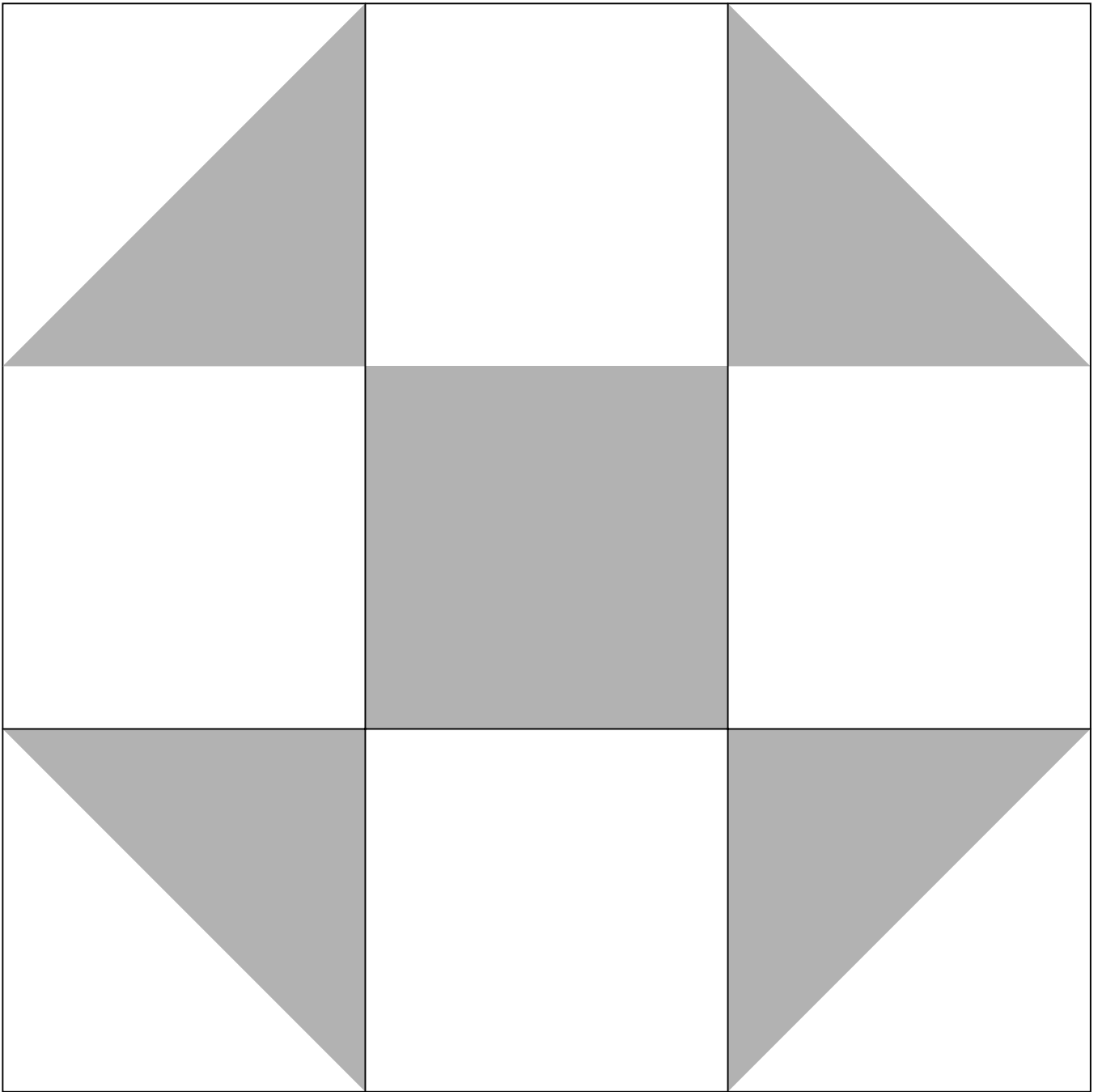
BEAR PAW. Follow the bear paw path because the bears know the better ways to go over the mountains.



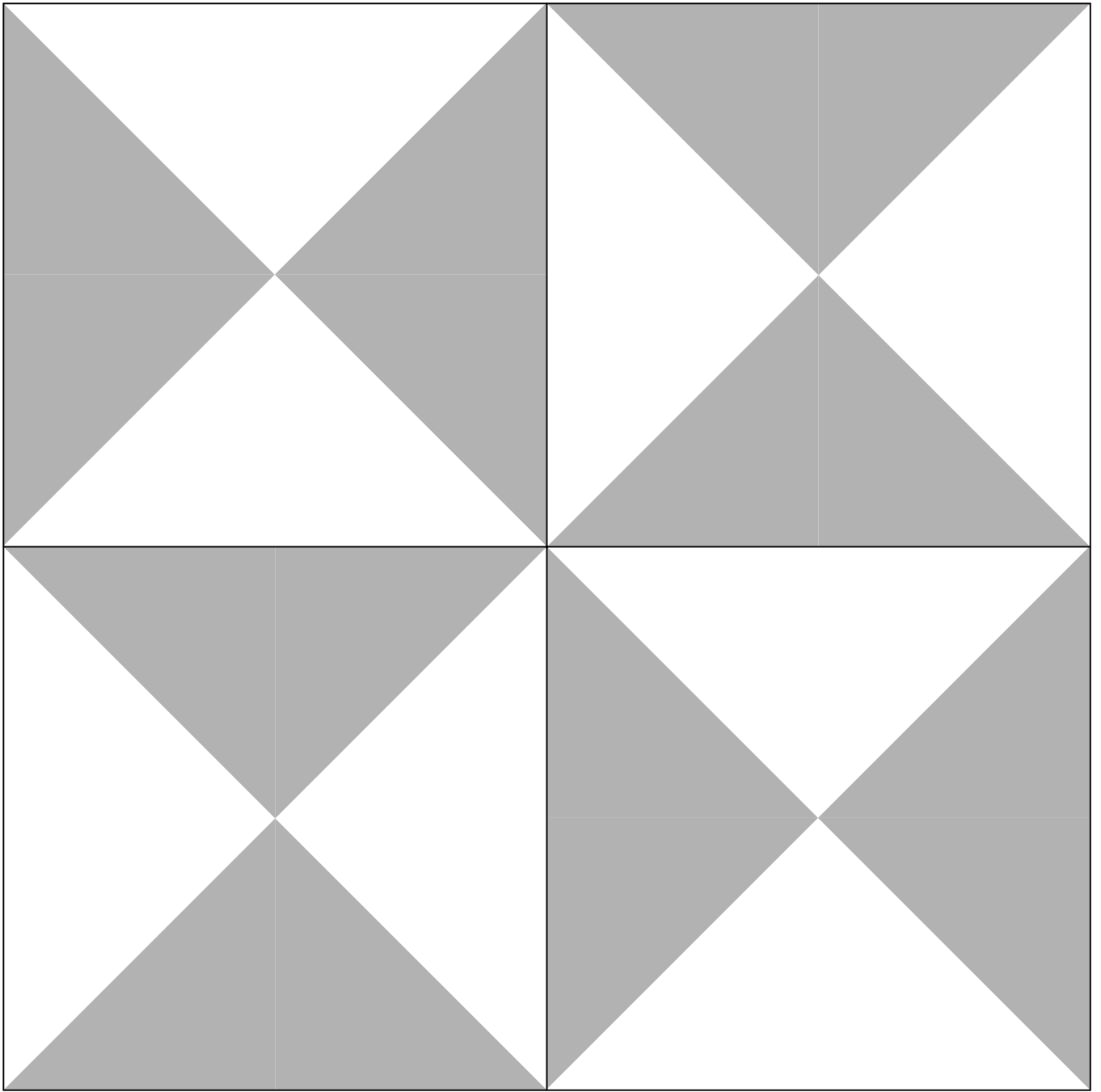
CROSSROADS. The need to make a decision.
Another interpretation refers to Cleveland, OH as the
physical crossroads for the Underground Railroad.



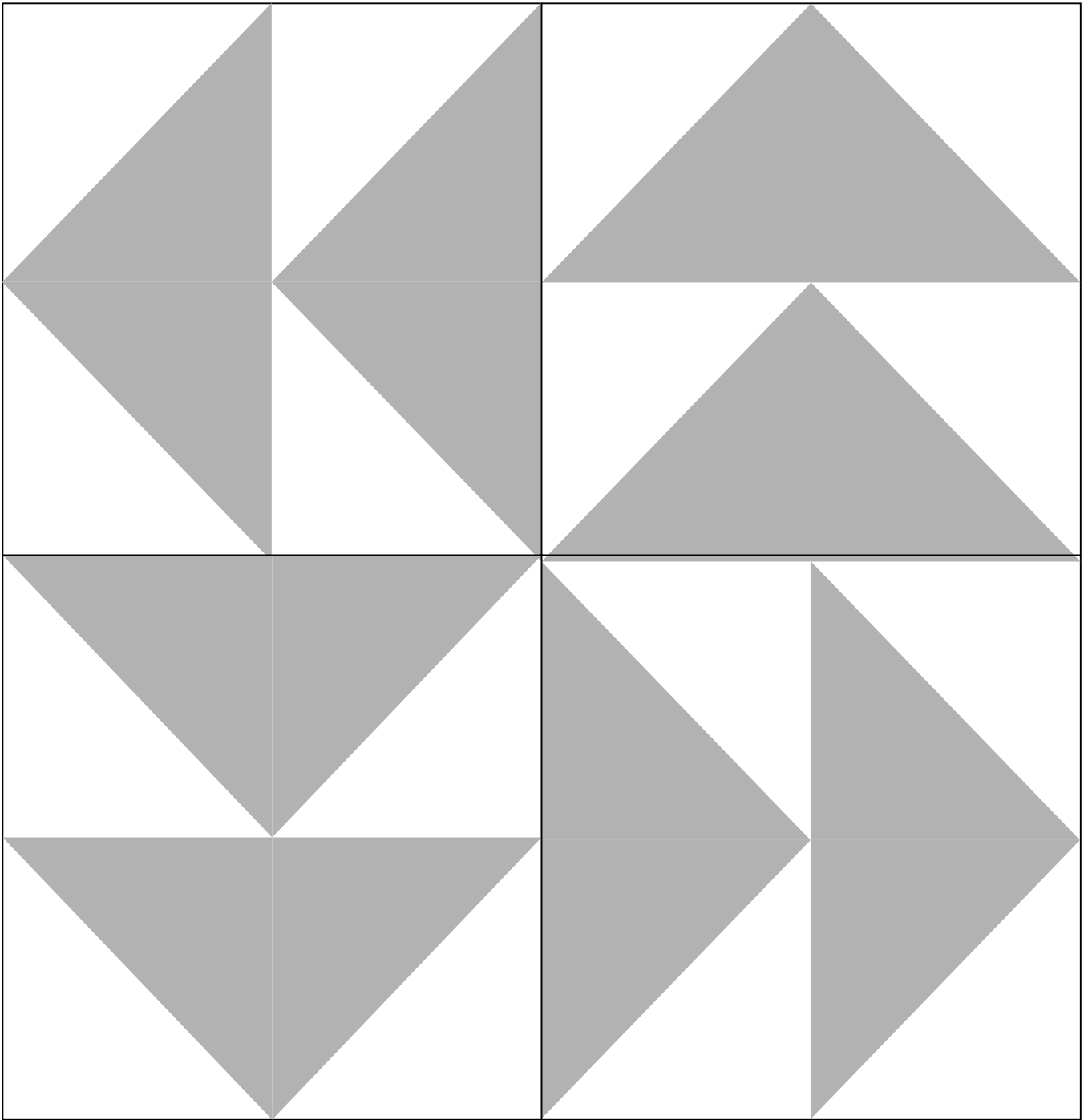
LOG CABIN. When greeting an unknown person, it was African tradition to use a stick to inscribe a symbol on the ground that identified where the person was from or the secret society they belonged to. While traveling the Underground Railroad, the pattern identified safe persons.



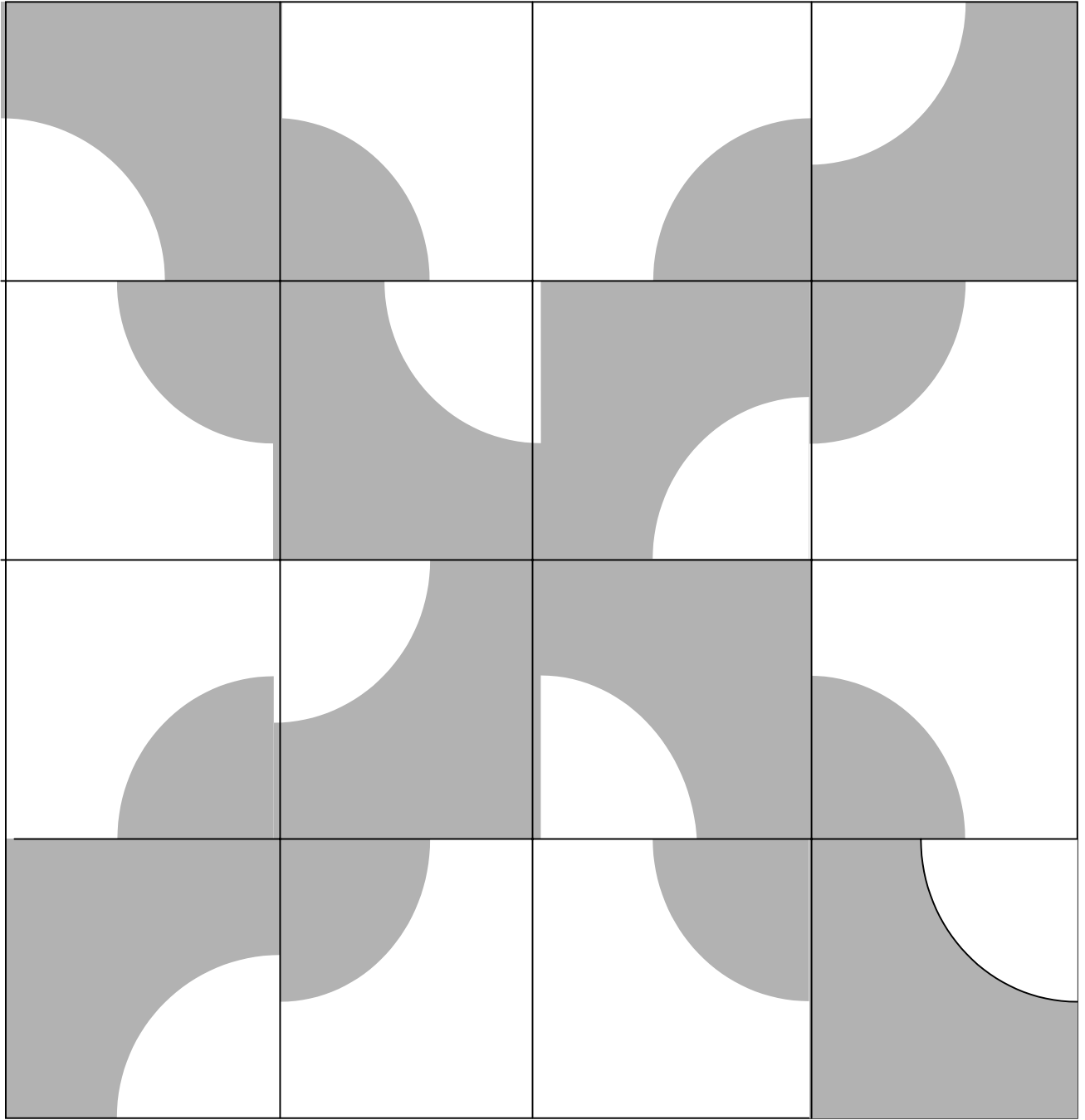
SHOOFLY. Scatter in many directions and meet at a preordained location.



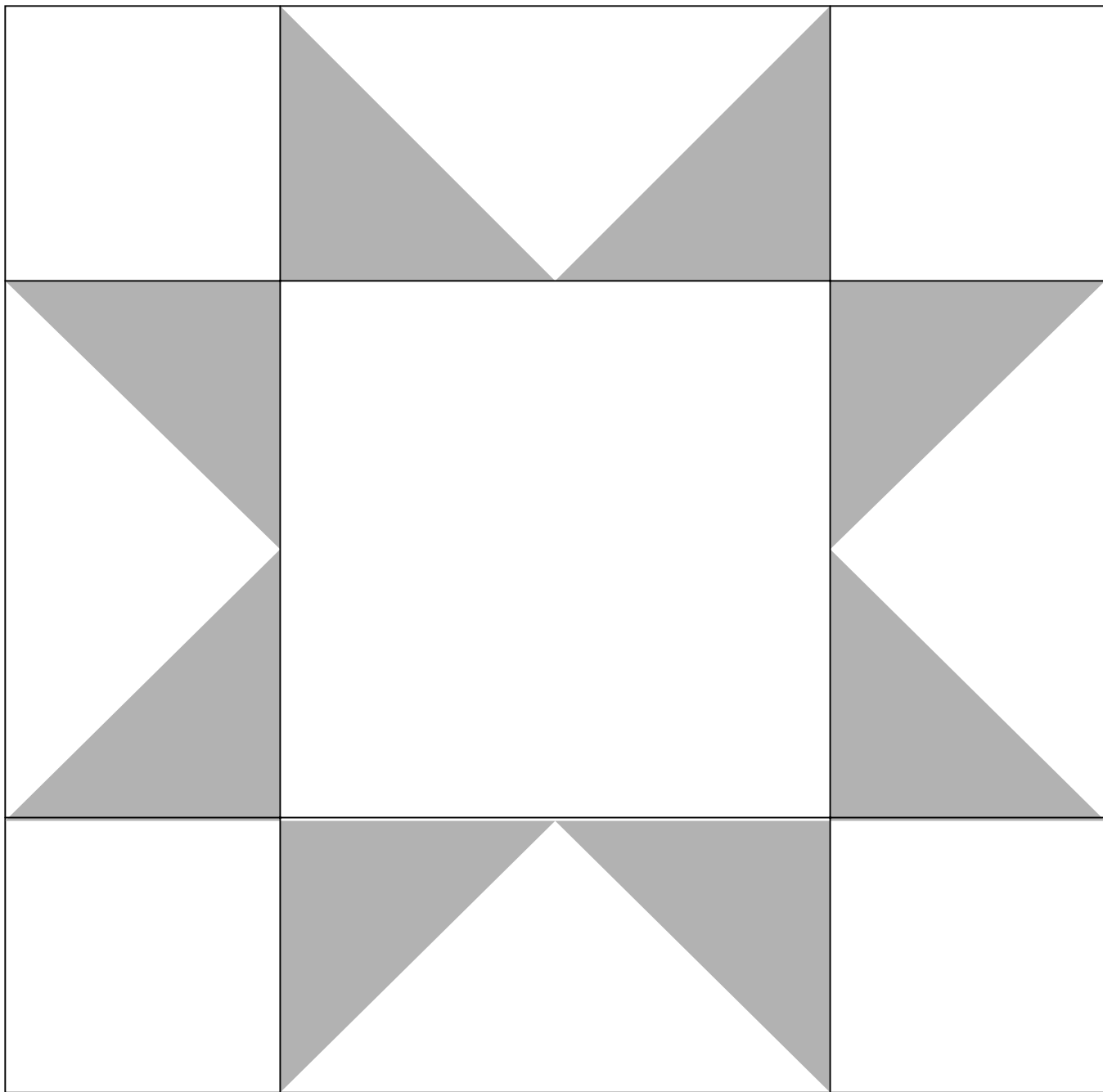
BOWTIE. After weeks or months of travel to freedom, travelers should wash and dress up to fit in.



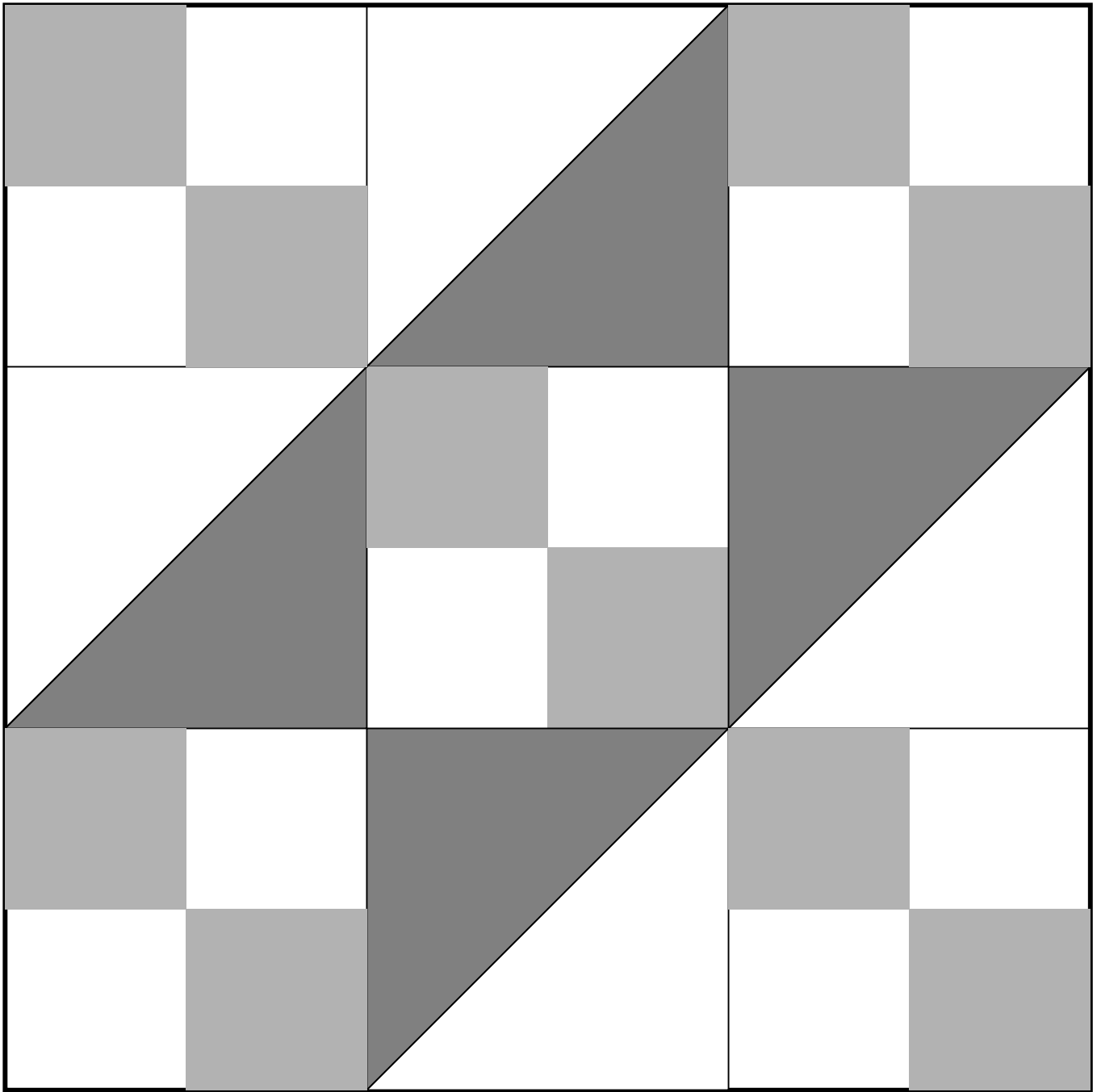
FLYING GEESE. Spring is the best time to escape when geese are flying north.



DRUNKARD'S PATH. To avoid slave catchers, travel a zigzag or crooked path. African tradition also says it is evil to travel in a straight line



NORTH STAR. North is the direction to freedom. Follow the north star.



JACOB'S LADDER. A safe haven for
travelers on the Underground Railroad.