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 11:00am-1:00pm  
 3 Treeline Drive • Rochester  
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**The Harbor at Greece**  
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# Family quilts help keep history alive

Kathrynne Skonicki/CNS

PLAINFIELD, Ill. — When Clarice Boswell inherited dozens of family quilts nearly 20 years ago, she knew they were much more than patchwork designs.

Her paternal grandmother had told her how the quilts sent secret messages to slaves who were on the path to freedom. The escaping slaves could see the quilts as they hung out on laundry lines, without raising suspicion from slave owners.

The flying geese quilt appeared to be scraps of material lined in a perfect "V" shape. In reality, the quilt was a message to the fugitive slaves: The geese were flying back north and the waterways had thawed after a cold winter, meaning the Underground Railroad that followed the rivers and lakes north was now open.

The flower garden quilt appeared to be a wonderful collage of multi-colored flowers; in reality, it was a signal that there was a refuge for slaves behind the flower garden.

The "railroad" set up by abolitionists took slaves through streams, bayous and forests to get them to freedom in the North. "Stations" included houses where slaves were taken in until they could leave for the next stop on the railroad.

In an interview with the *Catholic Explorer*, newspaper of the Joliet Diocese, Boswell said she heard these stories about the railroad over the course of two decades while her grandmother lived with the Boswell family in Nicholasville, Ky.

Boswell, 64, lives in Plainfield. She worked for 30 years as an administrator for Joliet Township High School and keeps the family stories alive by telling them to her children and grandchildren and giving local presentations. She also has written a book, *Lizzie's Story: A Slave Family's Journey to Freedom*.

Cathleen Schultz, assistant history professor at the University of St. Francis in Joliet, said she had not heard about quilts having hidden messages before. She said many secrets of the Underground Railroad remain hidden today because documenting the system would have put people's lives in danger at the time.

Schultz noted that this lack of information is not unique to the Underground Railroad.

"African-American history has in a lot of ways been lost. It's true for any society that is not well-educated or oppressed because they didn't have time to sit around and write their memoirs," she said.

Regardless of the time she has spent sifting through old and sometimes illegible records and reading hundreds of books to research her family history, Boswell said, this journey of exploring and sharing has strengthened her faith.

Boswell, a member of Grace United Methodist Church in Joliet, said she now recognizes what a struggle it was for previous family genera-



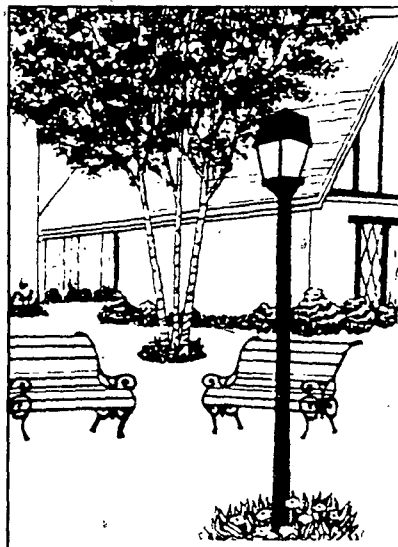
Kathrynne Skonicki/CNS

**Clarice Boswell displays family quilts that may have been hung on clotheslines to help fugitive slaves find their way to freedom.**

tions to gather together for Sunday prayer services. It wasn't until years after her family was free from slavery that they were able to attend the African Methodist Episcopal church in Leesburg, Ky.

Appreciating God's gifts has motivated Boswell to pledge funds from the sale her book to a different charity every year, she said. For 2003, she designated a Joliet medical clinic as the recipient of a portion of her profits. She eventually would like to establish a scholarship fund for African-American students.

She also is working on her second book, *The Secrets of Pearlle*, about a slave on the same plantation as the Boswell family.



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