

Game rules:

How to play the game:

Teacher/Group Conference (possible suggestions)

## Follow the Drinking Gourd



According to the experts at

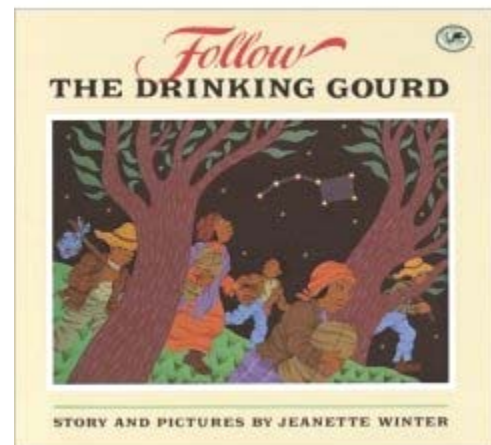
<http://www.madison.k12.wi.us/planetarium/ftdg1.htm>,

"Follow the Drinking Gourd" is a coded song that gives the route for an escape from Alabama and Mississippi. This is what they have to say about the codes in the song:

Of all the routes out of the Deep South, this is the only one for which the details survive. The route instructions were given to slaves by an old man named Peg Leg Joe. Working as an itinerant carpenter, he spent winters in the South, moving from plantation to plantation, teaching slaves this escape route. Unfortunately, we know nothing more about Peg Leg Joe. The song and its translation are as follows:

**When the sun comes back and the first quail calls,  
Follow the Drinking Gourd.  
For the old man is waiting for to carry you to freedom,  
If you follow the Drinking Gourd.**

"When the sun comes back" means winter and spring when the angle of the sun above the horizon at noon is getting higher each day. Quail are migratory birds which winter in the South. The Drinking Gourd is the Big Dipper. The old man is Peg Leg Joe. The verse tells slaves to leave in the winter and walk towards the Drinking Gourd. Eventually they will meet a guide who will escort them for the remainder of the trip. Most escapees had to cross the Ohio River which is too wide and too swift to swim. The Railroad struggled with the problem of how to get escapees across, and with experience, came to believe the best crossing time was winter. Then the river was frozen, and escapees could walk across on the ice. Since it took most escapees a year to travel from the South to the Ohio, the Railroad urged slaves to start their trip in winter in order to be at the Ohio River the next winter.



Jeanette Winter's *Follow The Drinking Gourd*

**The river bank makes a very good road,  
The dead trees show you the way,  
Left foot, peg foot, traveling on  
Follow the Drinking Gourd.**

This verse taught slaves to follow the bank of the Tombigbee River north looking for dead trees that were marked with drawings of a left foot and a peg foot. The markings distinguished the Tombigbee from other north-south rivers that flow into it.

**The river ends between two hills,  
Follow the Drinking Gourd.  
There's another river on the other side,  
Follow the Drinking Gourd.**

These words told the slaves that when they reached the headwaters of the Tombigbee, they were to continue north over the hills until they met another river. Then they were to travel north along the new river which is the Tennessee River. A number of the southern escape routes converged on the Tennessee.

**Where the great big river meets the little river,  
Follow the Drinking Gourd.  
For the old man is awaiting to carry you to freedom if you  
follow the Drinking Gourd.**

This verse told the slaves the Tennessee joined another river. They were to cross that river (which is the Ohio River), and on the north bank, meet a guide from the Underground Railroad.

## Follow the Drinking Gourd

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Follow the drinking gourd!  
Follow the drinking gourd.  
For the old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom  
If you follow the drinking gourd.

When the sun comes back and the first quail calls,  
Follow the drinking gourd,  
For the old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom  
If you follow the drinking gourd.

The riverbank makes a very good road,  
The dead trees will show you the way,  
Left foot, peg foot traveling on,  
Following the drinking gourd.

The river ends between two hills,  
Follow the drinking gourd,  
There's another river on the other side,  
Follow the drinking gourd

You can hear The Weavers sing this song at:

<http://www.math.nus.edu.sg/aslaksen/gem-projects/hm/0203-1-20-follow/drinkinggourd/decoding.html#self>

The image shows a musical score for the song 'The Drinking Gourd'. It consists of six staves of music in 4/4 time, with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The first two staves are labeled 'CHORUS' and contain the lyrics: 'Fol - low \_\_\_\_\_ the drink - ing gourd! Fol - low \_\_\_\_\_ the drink - ing gourd. — For the old man is a - wait - ing for to'. The next four staves are labeled 'VERSE' and contain the lyrics: 'car - ry you to free - dom If you fol - low the drink - ing gourd. When the sun comes back, and the first quail calls, — Fol - low \_\_\_\_\_ the drink - ing gourd. — For the old man is a - wait - ing for to car - ry you to free - dom If you fol - low the drink - ing gourd.' The lyrics are written below the notes, with some words hyphenated and some lines starting with a dash.

*(Repeat chorus)*

The riverbank makes a very good road,  
The dead trees will show you the way,  
Left foot, peg foot, traveling on,  
Follow the drinking gourd.

*(Repeat chorus)*

The river ends between two hills,  
Follow the drinking gourd.  
There's another river on the other side,  
Follow the drinking gourd.

*(Repeat chorus)*

When the great big river meets the little river,  
Follow the drinking gourd.  
For the old man is a - waiting for to carry you to freedom  
If you follow the drinking gourd.

### The Drinking Gourd.

From: <http://www.madison.k12.wi.us/planetarium/ftdgsong.pdf>

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## What Does this Song Really Say?



### Lesson Overview:

Students listen to, sing, and read the lyrics to various African-American spirituals. They discuss the coded messages in the songs, and the purpose of these codes. Students then write original coded messages, and present their work in a performance format.

**Length of Lesson:** Three 45-minute periods

**Notes:** This lesson is suitable for grade 4-8.

### Instructional Objectives: Students will:

- Sing and/or listen to songs that are representative of spirituals sung by slaves.
- Read lyrics of songs, and interpret the meaning of the lyrics, in terms of their cultural significance
- Write coded messages, and include interpretation.
- Create an opportunity to share their coded messages through reading, drawing, a PowerPoint presentation, or another medium.

### Supplies:

- Piano or guitar for accompaniment or a CD or tape player
- Audio recordings or sheet music for the spirituals "This Train" and "Wade in the Water" (see Sources) "Wade in the water" can also be found at <http://cattailmusic.com/LyricsandNotes/WadeintheWater.htm#>

### Instructional Plan:

This is the first of two lessons however, the lesson can be taught in isolation with minor adaptation.

### *Activity A*

The goal of this activity is to explore the experience of a slave trying to escape through the Underground Railroad. Initiate a discussion about slavery. Have students imagine what it would be like to be a slave. Discuss how it would feel to be a slave—to lose one's freedom and become the property of someone else, and to be separated from friends and family.

Present the interactive activity at the National Geographic site, **The Underground Railroad**.

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/features/99/railroad/>

This activity can be completed with one computer, or presented on a large screen with an LCD projector as a whole class activity. It can also be completed in a computer lab with students working together as partners.

If the Underground Railroad interactive activity is presented to the class as a whole, have a student read the introductory paragraph from the website...

**<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/features/99/railroad/>**

When the students are given a choice (i.e., choose to escape, choose to stay), pick a student to make the choice, and ask for them to articulate why they made that choice. Allow approximately 20 minutes to complete the activity as a group.

If the activity is presented in the computer lab, group the students in pairs. Let them explore the activity, making as many choices as possible. Tell students that they will be asked to name one thing they learned on the site. Allow approximately 20 minutes to complete the activity

Close this class period by asking students to state one thing they learned. Tell students that they will learn a musical secret message the slaves used to escape through the Underground Railroad during the next class period.

### ***Activity B***

The goal of this activity is to learn a spiritual, discuss its significance during slavery time, and begin to learn the “coded messages” embedded in the song.

As a warm up, list the following code words on the board: freedom train, gospel train, conductor, station, station master, and agent. Give students one minute to read the list and determine what the words have in common.

Once the class determines that all of the words are related to trains, ask students how they would feel if they were not allowed to ride on a train. Ask them why they think spirituals would describe leaving on a train. Lead a discussion to explore answers to these questions for about five minutes.

Tell students that the words discussed were codes used by slaves to communicate so the slave masters would not understand their plans for escape. Slaves were not allowed to talk, but they could sing; therefore, many slaves disguised their communications through song. The spiritual is a type of song that served many functions for slaves. These songs reflected their desire to be free, and often told other slaves how they could escape.



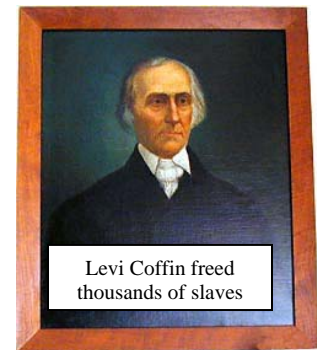
The Underground Railroad has been described as "silent and secret" and "running on silent rails in the dark of night." People developed codes, passwords, and secret signals, to be used by runaways and "investors" in the Underground Railroad. Give students a list of code words and phrases (**some examples can be found in *The Underground Railroad Codes* – page 223**). Ask students to

discuss the meaning of each Underground Railroad code word/phrase. Ask them to share their responses, and then clarify any misinterpretations.

Distribute copies of the **The Lyrics of Spirituals handout**. (Page 56) Tell students to read the lyrics and search for code words and phrases, while you play the spiritual entitled "This Train." Play the song two to three times, either via a recording or on the piano or guitar. Ask the students to tell you what the lyrics of "This Train" mean. Students can interpret individual words (i.e., train, glory, sleepers, etc.), or they can describe the phrases (i.e., "this train don't carry sleepers, this train"). **The assessment rubric can be found on page 57.**

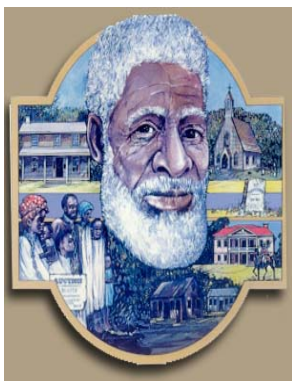
Clarify any confusion. For example, "sleepers" could refer to a sleeping car, but in the context of this song, it means someone who wants to escape, but doesn't want to endure the hardship (i.e., "wake me up when it's over"). "Righteous peoples" refers to people who are doing what is right, in spite of the difficulties involved.

Teach "This Train" to the class. Sing each phrase in the first verse and have the class repeat after you. Now sing the second verse in the same way. Finally, sing the entire song. For variation, have the boys sing one line, and the girls the next, or have a small group stand and sing a phrase or a verse, then alternate with another small group.



(Note: You may substitute any spiritual or freedom song for "This Train." Songs that have a simple and direct tune and lyrics that repeat three or more times would be the easiest to learn and/or song. "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands" and "This Little Light of Mine" may be used. MP3's of these songs can be found at <http://www.negrospirituals.com/song.htm>

Give students five minutes to look for coded messages in the lyrics. Discuss findings as a class. Tell students they will listen to another spiritual during the next class period, and begin working on their own coded messages.



### **Activity C**

The goal of this activity is to have students interpret the coded message in another spiritual, and begin to write their own coded messages to share with the class. Sing "This Train" as a warm up activity.

Listen to "Wade in the Water." ... which can be found at

<http://cattailmusic.com/LyricsandNotes/WadeintheWater.htm#>

In this style of spiritual, there is a chorus (music and words that repeat throughout a song). The words repeat three times, with an explanation at the end. Explain to students that when the words repeat in a song, this means they are very important, and something for the slave to remember—it could be the difference between life and death. For example, the phrase "wade in the water" is repeated several times. Ask students to consider this phrase. Why would slaves need to wade (go into) the water? (Slave owners used dogs to "sniff out" the trail of their escaped slaves; the dogs could not follow the scent into the water.)

Divide the class into groups of three or four. Distribute the **What Does this Song Really Say?** (Page 58) handout. Assign each group a different phrase from the song "Wade in the Water." Give the groups five minutes to write an interpretation of the assigned phrase. (It is okay if more than one group has the same phrase, depending on the size of your class.)

Ask groups to share their interpretations with the entire class, in the order of the song. Record each interpretation on the board as it is articulated. When all groups have shared their findings, read the entire interpretation of the song.

### *Closing Activity*

In this activity, students will write their own coded messages. Choose the variation of the activity that is most appropriate for your class:

Keep students in the same small groups, and have them write their own original coded message. It must be three to five sentences, using the code words and phrases given. They can even make up their own, but it must follow the general "clues," using words that have meanings from the religious and railroad terminology. They must also write the interpretation. Students will have the rest of this period and part of the next (if needed) to complete this activity. Then each group will share their coded messages with the rest of the class, and the class is tasked with interpreting the meaning.

Keep the students in groups; however, give them the messages they need to put in code. For example: "I plan to escape tonight. Meet me by the river. The leader will show us the way." Provide students with three or four different messages, and the students should figure out how to convey the same meaning in code. Each group should share their codes with the class, and the class is tasked with interpreting the meaning.

For either variation of the activity, students must work cooperatively and write their coded messages using correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

**Assessment:** Assess student work using the Assessment Rubric on page 59.

### **Extensions:**

Have students illustrate their codes, phrase by phrase. The pictures should have the phrase distinctly written on the bottom of the picture. You may wish to scan the pictures into the computer or on disc, and present the pictures in PowerPoint, with the spirituals playing in the background. Have the students could write additional verses to "This Train" and/or "Wade in the Water." You may also wish to have them perform their songs for other classes.

**Sources: Print: Johnston, Richard. *Folk Songs North America Sings*. Toronto: Kirby, 1984.**

**Sources: Media:** The Florida A&M Concert Choir, The Howard University Chamber Choir, and The Fisk Jubilee Singers. *Wade In the Water, Volume I: African American Spirituals: The Concert Tradition*. Smithsonian Folkways [40072](#).