



Fact or Fiction?

Name _____ Date _____

Read, analyze, and hypothesize

Many people have long believed that African-American spirituals (religious songs created by slaves) were coded with instructions to be used to guide slaves on the Underground Railroad. Others, however, have recently disputed that claim, saying there is no historic evidence to support it.

What do YOU think? Read and decide for yourself. Write an essay supporting your position.

Read Below

Evidence to Ponder:

One famous Underground Railroad song is "Follow the Drinking Gourd":

Verse 1

*When the Sun comes back
And the first quail calls
Follow the Drinking Gourd.
For the old man is a-waiting for
to carry you to freedom
If you follow the Drinking Gourd.*

Verse 2

*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.*

Verse 3

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

VERSE 4

*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.*

Many versions of this song exist, but the first one was published by H.B. Parks in 1928. The publication date is used by some historians to prove that it could not have been used as a coded song for the Underground Railroad, because it was written so long after the fact. Others disagree and say that the song was passed down orally for decades before H.B. Parks wrote it down, and that there is enough documentation to show that these codes and signals were actually used at the time.

According to those that believe the song was used as a code, the drinking gourd is a reference to hollowed-out gourds used by slaves and other rural Americans as a water dipper. It is a code name for the Big Dipper star formation, which appears in the North Sky.

Verse 1 suggests escaping in the spring (when the sun comes back and the quail calls during spring breeding season) and heading North to freedom.

The term "old man" is nautical slang for "Captain." According to Parks, "peg foot" in Verse 2 refers to an Underground Railroad operative named Peg Leg Joe, who was formerly a sailor. Verse 3 gives directions to rivers that lead to the Mississippi River.

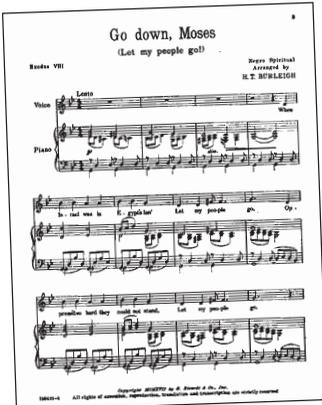
Verse 4 refers to where the Ohio runs into the Mississippi River at Cairo, Illinois. Here runaways would be met on the banks of the Ohio by the old sailor or other Underground Railroad conductor.



Article 1: In Support of Coded Underground Railroad Songs

Songs of freedom

City of Owen Sound, Ontario, Canada Website



The seemingly innocent spirituals, as the slave songs came to be known, were more than simple hymns of endurance and a belief in a better afterlife. As sung by slaves and their descendants, the spirituals allowed the slaves to communicate secret messages and information to each other about the Underground Railroad.

The spirituals and their lyrics were part of a sophisticated system that involved no incriminating evidence for plantation owners or overseers to find. Codes imbedded in the spirituals instructed slaves as to when, how and where to escape. They also included warning signals, such as the message of “Wade in the Water,” informing slaves to travel along the riverbank so the dogs giving chase would be thrown off their scent.

Most slaves could not read or write; in fact, it was against the law to teach slaves to read or write. The spirituals provided a means of verbal, coded communication understood only by those in the Underground Railroad. Outsiders generally interpreted the spirituals on a literal level, while slaves knew the meaning of the messages hidden within the words and phrases. Through the words, the refrains, the “call and response” method of singing, and the rhythmic sounds produced by dancing feet, slaves could decipher these hidden meanings.

Songs were a part of the slaves’ daily lives and were a survival tactic as well as a means of coded communication. Field slaves sang while they worked so the plantation overseer knew where they were, and could make sure that they were working.

Article 2: Disputes Coded Underground Railroad Songs

History’s tangled threads

By Fergus M. Bordewich
New York Times, February 2, 2007

Few aspects of the American past have inspired more colorful mythology than the Underground Railroad. It’s probably fair to say that most Americans view it as a thrilling tapestry of midnight flights, hairbreadth escapes, mysterious codes and strange hiding places.

Popular songs associated with the underground rarely withstand scrutiny, either. Recent research has revealed that the inspirational ballad “Follow the Drinking Gourd”—perhaps the single best-known “artifact” of the Underground Railroad—was first published in 1928, and that much of the text and music as we know it today was actually composed by Lee Hays of the Weavers in 1947. Nor do its “directions” conform to any known underground route.

Such fictions rely for their plausibility on the premise that the operations of the Underground Railroad were so secret that the truth is essentially unknowable. In fact, there is abundant documentation of the underground’s activities to be found in antebellum antislavery newspapers, narratives of escape written by former slaves, and the recollections of participants recorded after the Civil War, when there was no longer danger of reprisal.

Most successful fugitives were enterprising and well informed. The vast majority had little need for coded maps, since they came from the border states of Maryland, Virginia, and Kentucky, just a few days’ or hours’ walk from the nearest free state.

The Underground Railroad provided shelter, transportation, and guides, but through most of the North its work was hardly secret. Abolitionist newspapers reported news of fugitives in detail—their passage through town, the names of people who’d assisted them. In some places, activists distributed handbills announcing what they were doing and how many fugitives they had helped. Jermain Loguen, the African-American leader of the underground in Syracuse, advertised his address in local newspapers as an aid to freedom-seekers.



The larger importance of the Underground Railroad lies not in fanciful legends, but in the diverse history of the men and women, black and white, who made it work and in the far-reaching political and moral consequences of what they did. The Underground Railroad was the nation's first great movement of mass civil disobedience after the American Revolution, engaging thousands of citizens in the active subversion of federal law, as well as the first mass movement that asserted the principle of personal responsibility for others' human rights. It was also the nation's first interracial political movement, which from its beginning in the 1790s joined free blacks, abolitionist whites and sometimes slaves in a collaboration that shattered racial taboos.

Fergus M. Bordewich is the author of *Bound for Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America*.

Bordewich, Fergus M. "History's Tangled Threads." *New York Times*. 2 February 2007. Op-Ed.

Further Evidence to Ponder:

Here's another song that some historians believe contained coded messages to guide escaped slaves to freedom in the North.

"Go Down Moses" is a spiritual song that describes events in the Old Testament of the Bible. The first written mention of this song occurred in 1861, the year the Civil War started.

*When Israel was in Egypt's land
Let my people go
Oppressed so hard they could not stand
Let my people go*

*Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land
Tell old Pharaoh, Let my people go*

*So Moses went to Egypt's land
Let my people go
To make old Pharaoh understand
Let my people go*

*Thus spake the Lord, bold Moses said,
"Let my people go,
If not, I'll strike your first born dead
"Let my people go"*

In the song "Israel" represents the African-American slaves while "Egypt" and "Pharaoh" represent the slavemaster.

