Classroom Activity—Civil War & Underground Railroad Program

Coded Slave Songs

Objective: Students will learn how escaping slaves used codes to communicate information about escape routes. Then students will make their own coded directions.

Materials:

"Follow the Drinkin' Gourd" song sheets

Backstory:

Escaping slaves like Caroline Quarles usually did not have access to books or maps that would give them directions to the North, and slaves were not allowed to openly discuss escape routes. So they invented coded songs to pass this information to one another. The songs may sound innocent or even meaningless, but if one knows what to look for they contain vital information. "Follow the Drinkin' Gourd" gives coded directions from Alabama to the northern states (along the Tombigbee, Tennessee, and Ohio rivers), as well as instructions about when to leave, which direction to walk, and whom to trust. "Wade in the Water" was another coded song, which instructed escaping slaves to wade in creeks and streams so their scent could not be tracked by dogs.

Activity:

- Read the lyrics of the song "Follow the Drinking Gourd" and discuss their meaning
- Ask students to take out two sheets of paper and a pencil
- Ask them to choose a location they want to write directions to (the cafeteria, library, or another location in the school building would be best). Instruct them to write this location at the top of one sheet of paper, then write out "real" directions to that location below. They can refer to these "real" directions while they write their "coded" directions.
- Next, ask the students to take out the other sheet of paper. On this, they should re-write the directions to their chosen location in "code" words, avoiding words like place names (library, cafeteria) and directions (right, left, straight). Here are some examples:
    - "Go down the hall" becomes "Walking through the dark tunnel"
    - "Turn right" becomes "Going the way that isn't wrong"
    - "Go into the cafeteria" becomes "Crossing over to the Land of Lunch"
    - Hint: Landmarks are also good directional indicators. You might suggest some examples of landmarks in your school and "coded" versions of them.
- When the students have finished their "coded" directions, choose a few students to read their work in front of the class. Have the other students guess the destination of each set of directions.

Follow the Drinkin Gourd - Lyrics

VERSE 1

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

CHORUS

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

VERSE 2

The river bank will make a mighty good road
The dead trees show you the way
Left foot, peg foot, traveling on
Follow the drinkin gourd.

CHORUS

VERSE 3

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

CHORUS

VERSE 4

Where the great big river meets the little river
Follow the drinkin gourd
The old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom
If you follow the drinkin gourd.

LYRICS	EXPLANATION/INTERPRETATION
VERSE 1	Taken together, this verse suggests escaping in the spring and heading North to freedom.
When the sun comes back,	Refers to the winter or spring. The days are getting longer, and the angle of the sun is higher each day at noon.
When the first quail calls,	Refers to the breeding season. Quail in Alabama start calling to each other in early to mid-April.
Then the time is come	
Follow the drinkin gourd	The "drinkin' gourd" alludes to the hollowed out gourd used by slaves (and other rural Americans) as a water dipper. Used here it is a code name for the Big Dipper star formation, which points to Polaris, the Pole Star, and North.
CHORUS	
Follow the drinkin' gourd,	
Follow the drinkin' gourd;	
For the old man is awaiting to carry you to freedom	"Old man" is nautical slang for "Captain" (or "Commanding Officer.") According to historians, the Underground Railroad operative Peg Leg Joe was formerly a sailor.
"Follow the drinkin' gourd."	
VERSE 2	Describes how to follow the route, from Mobile, Alabama north.
The river bank will make a mighty good road	The first river in the song is the Tombigbee, which empties into Mobile Bay. Its headwaters extend into northeastern Mississippi.
The dead trees show you the way,	As the story goes, Peg Leg Joe marked trees and other landmarks "with charcoal or mud of the outline of a human left foot and a round spot in place of the right foot."
Left foot, peg foot going on,	
Follow the drinkin' gourd.	
CHORUS	
VERSE 3	Describes the route through northeastern Mississippi and into Tennessee.
The river ends between two hills,	The headwaters of the Tombigbee River end near Woodall Mountain, the high point in Mississippi and an ideal reference point for a map song. The "two hills" could mean

	Woodall Mountain and a neighboring lower hill. But the mountain itself evidently has a twin cone profile and so could represent both hills at once.
Follow the drinkin' gourd;	
There's another river on the other side	The river on the other side of the hills is the Tennessee, which extends outward in an arc above Woodall Mountain. The left-hand side proceeds virtually due north to the Ohio river border with Illinois – the preferred route, since the right hand side meanders back into northern Alabama and then proceeds up into Tennessee.
Follow the drinkin' gourd.	
CHORUS	
VERSE 4	Describes the end of the route, in Paducah, Kentucky.
Where the great big river	When the Tennessee...
Meets the little river	...meets the Ohio River. The Tennessee and Ohio rivers come together in Paducah, KY, opposite southern Illinois.
The ole man waits--	The runaways would be met on the banks of the Ohio by the old sailor. Of course, the chances that Peg Leg Joe himself would be there to meet every escapee are quite small.
Follow the drinkin' gourd	