

Name _____ Date _____

UNDERGROUND RAILROAD SONGS OF FREEDOM

Music played an important part in the lives of Americans born into slavery. Songs were a way of giving encouragement and hope for a free future. Read about three popular songs, then answer the questions.



LET MY PEOPLE GO

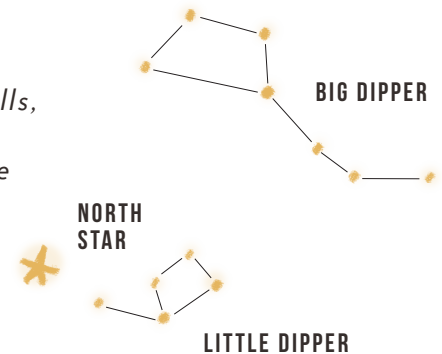
This song refers to the Exodus in the Bible, when the Israelites left Egypt for freedom. Americans born into slavery also wanted freedom and to leave the South.

*“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 land.
Tell old Pharaoh:
Let my people go.”*

FOLLOW THE DRINKING GOURD

A gourd was a dried vegetable shell used for drinking. The song may refer to the Big Dipper, the star formation that includes Polaris, or the North Star. Those who escaped slavery followed the North Star to get to the free states in the North.

*When the sun come back,
When the first quail call,
Then the time has come
Follow the drinking gourd.
The river’s bank is a very good road,
The dead trees show the way,
Left foot, peg foot going on,
Follow the drinking gourd.
The river ends between two hills,
Follow the drinking gourd;
Another river on the other side
Follow the drinking gourd.
When the little river
Meets the great big one,
The old man waits—
Follow the drinking gourd.*



FREDERICK DOUGLASS

was a writer, statesman and anti-slavery activist. He also escaped slavery to freedom in the North. In one of his books, he writes about the songs sung by enslaved people to encourage each other to escape. Here is part of one of the songs that inspired him:

*“O Canaan, sweet Canaan,
I am bound for the land of Canaan.”*

Douglass said about the song:
“We meant to reach the North —
and the North was our Canaan.”

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

What represented the North in the song that encouraged Frederick Douglass?

What does “my people” mean in the song?

Which direction would you go if you followed the Big Dipper?

UNSCRAMBLE
THE WORDS



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