

# HANDOUT 6

## UNDERGROUND RAILROAD CODES

Much of the communication between freedom seekers and Underground Railroad operatives was coded language. This secretive communication was sometimes called the “grapevine telegraph.” Many of the terms were railroad terms, since U.S. railroads were beginning to move west about the time the Underground Railroad became active.

### TERMS

- ▶ **Abolitionist** — Person who demanded an immediate end to slavery.
- ▶ **Agent** — Coordinator, who plotted courses of escape and made contacts.
- ▶ **Baggage** — Fugitive slaves carried by Underground Railroad workers.
- ▶ **Bundles of wood** — Fugitives that were expected.
- ▶ **Canaan** — Canada.
- ▶ **Conductor** — Person who directly transported slaves.
- ▶ **Drinking Gourd** — Big Dipper and the North Star.
- ▶ **Flying bondsmen** — The number of escaping slaves.
- ▶ **Forwarding** — Taking slaves from station to station.
- ▶ **Freedom train** — The Underground Railroad.
- ▶ **French leave** — Secret departure.
- ▶ **Gospel train** — The Underground Railroad.
- ▶ **Heaven** — Canada, freedom.
- ▶ **Jumping off place** — Place of shelter for fugitives.
- ▶ **Load of potatoes** — Escaping slaves hidden under farm produce in a wagon.
- ▶ **Moses** — Harriet Tubman.
- ▶ **Operator** — Person who helped freedom seekers as a conductor or agent.
- ▶ **Parcel** — Fugitives that were expected.
- ▶ **Patter roller** — Bounty hunter hired to capture slaves.
- ▶ **Preachers** — Leaders of and spokespersons for the Underground Railroad.
- ▶ **Promised Land** — Canada.
- ▶ **River Jordan** — Ohio River.
- ▶ **Shepherds** — People who encouraged slaves to escape and escorted them.
- ▶ **Station** — Place of safety and temporary refuge, a safe house.
- ▶ **Station master** — Keeper or owner of a safe house.
- ▶ **Stockholder** — Someone who gave money, clothing or food to the Underground Railroad.

**PHRASES**

- ▶ **The wind blows from the South today** — A warning that slave bounty hunters were nearby.
- ▶ **A friend with friends** — A password used to signal arrival of fugitives with an Underground Railroad conductor.
- ▶ **A friend of a friend sent me** — A password used by fugitives traveling alone to indicate they were sent by the Underground Railroad network.
- ▶ **When the sun comes back and the first quail calls** — Early spring, a particular time of year good for escaping.
- ▶ **The river bank makes a mighty good road** — A reminder that tracking dogs could not follow the scent of fugitives through the water.
- ▶ **The dead trees will show you the way** — A reminder that moss grows on the north side of dead trees, so if the North Star were not visible, they would know which way to walk.
- ▶ **Left foot, peg foot** — A visual clue for escapees left by an Underground Railroad worker famous for his wooden leg.
- ▶ **The river ends between two hills** — The Tombigbee River in Mississippi.
- ▶ **When the great big river meets the little river** — The Ohio River and its tributaries.
- ▶ **Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus** — Used to alert other slaves that an escape attempt was anticipated.

Do you use any “coded” language today?

What words or terms do you use and what do they mean?

Who do you communicate with using this language?

Where else is “coded” language used? In what situations? Who uses it?

Group Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

*April 24, 1857*

*To Mr. John Rankin, at Ripley, Ohio,*

*This letter is to inform you of new business I expect to bring you. Know that two days hence I will be forwarding a large load of potatoes to you, courtesy of a friend with friends. One of my agents will accompany the parcels. I trust that your operators can then safely ship the parcels across the River Jordan and deliver them to the appropriate station. My stockholders in that area will be happy to assist in forwarding the parcels on to Canaan.*

*I trust all is well with you and yours. I have been enjoying the fine spring weather of late, but noticed that the wind blows from the South today, perhaps a harbinger of bad weather to come.*

*Your faithful servant,*

*Jeremiah James,*

*at home in Maysville, Kentucky*

# HANDOUT 8

## SIGNAL SONGS

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signal songs were a type of spiritual the enslaved sang. On the surface, signal songs seemed to be music praising the Christian God, and southern whites openly allowed and encouraged such singing. But under the surface, the songs held hidden messages communicated by code words that meant one thing to whites and another thing to the enslaved. Messages of support, unity and revolt, even directions for how to escape on the Underground Railroad, were contained in the songs. For example, “being bound for the land of Canaan” on one level meant preparing to die and go to heaven, but to the enslaved it also meant fleeing north to Canada.

Most signal songs had references to Biblical people (Moses, Jesus), places (Egypt, Promised Land) and stories (Jews led out of Egypt). The hidden meanings made analogies between Biblical themes and the conditions of slavery. The slavery of Jews in Egypt was similar to that of African slaves in the South. The main theme in signal songs and other spirituals was escaping from slavery by striving toward freedom.

**Try to match these “code words” with their hidden meanings:**

- |                           |  |
|---------------------------|--|
| 1. _____ Moses            | A. Atlantic Ocean  |
| 2. _____ Egypt            | B. Means of escape   |
| 3. _____ Pharaoh          | D. Conductor who led slaves to freedom   |
| 4. _____ River Jordan     | D. Personal decision to escape   |
| 5. _____ Red Sea          | E. The North and freedom   |
| 6. _____ Chariot or train | F. Ohio River separating North and South that must be crossed to reach freedom |
| 7. _____ Shoes            | G. Plantation owner or slave owner   |
| 8. _____ Promised Land    | H. Land of suffering   |

**These signal songs are well-known because of their connection to the Underground Railroad:**

*Steal Away* — A direct invitation to run away.

*Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* — Describes being transported to freedom.

*Get on Board, Little Children* — Was a direct reference to the Underground Railroad.

*Wade in the Water* — Warned runaways to walk in the water when dogs are on their trail and what to do otherwise.

*Follow the Drinking Gourd* — Contained specific directions to reach the North.

**Listen to signal songs at these websites. Sing the songs in class.**

Steal Away, Music of the Underground Railroad with Kim and Reggie Harris

<http://www.appleseedrec.com/underground/>

Maryland and the Underground Railroad—Music

<http://pathways.thinkport.org/secrets/music2.cfm>

**Review the signal song lyrics. Identify words or phrases that:**

- ▶ Refer to water
- ▶ Contain Biblical references
- ▶ Hint at hiding places
- ▶ Give directions
- ▶ Encourage slaves to run from slavery
- ▶ Describe slavery or slave masters
- ▶ Describe geographical places
- ▶ Mention weather or seasons of the year
- ▶ Mean freedom
- ▶ Refer to people who will help

Which signal song melody is your favorite? Try writing your own signal song, using a melody you know. How many of these “messages” can you convey with coded words in your song?

**Song lyric ideas:**

- ▶ Leave on Saturday night (won't be missed right away)
- ▶ Leave in winter (nights are long and rivers frozen)
- ▶ Use the North Star for direction
- ▶ Look for cabin at the foot of the hill
- ▶ Cross the frozen river
- ▶ Plan on taking a year to reach Canada
- ▶ Meet a conductor on the edge of town along the river
- ▶ Hide in bottom of produce wagon

# HANDOUT 8

## STEAL AWAY

*Chorus*

Steal away, steal away.  
Steal away to Jesus.  
Steal away, steal away home!  
I ain't got long to stay here!

My Lord, he calls me!  
He calls me by the thunder!  
The trumpet sounds within my soul!  
Oh, I ain't got long to stay here!

*Chorus*

My Lord, he calls me!  
He calls me by the lightning!  
The trumpet sounds within my soul!  
I ain't got long to stay here!

## SWING LOW SWEET CHARIOT

Swing low, sweet chariot,  
Comin' for to carry me home,  
Swing low, sweet chariot,  
Comin' for to carry me home.

I looked over Jordan and what did I see,  
Coming for to carry me home,  
A band of angels comin' after me,  
Comin' for to carry me home.

## GET ON BOARD, LITTLE CHILDREN

De gospel trains a comin',  
I hear it roun' de bend.  
I hear de car wheels turnin',  
And rumblin' through de land.

*Chorus*

Green trees are bending,  
Poor sinner stands a trembling,  
The trumpet sounds within my soul,  
I ain't got long to stay here.

*Chorus*

Tombstones are bursting,  
Poor sinner stands a trembling,  
The trumpet sounds within my soul,  
I ain't got long to stay here.

*Chorus*

If you get there before I do,  
Comin' for to carry me home,  
Tell all my friends that I'm comin' too,  
Comin' for to carry me home.

I'm sometimes up and sometimes down,  
Comin' for to carry me home.  
But still my soul feels heavenly bound,  
Comin' for to carry me home.

Git on board, little children,  
Git on board, little children,  
Git on board, little children,  
Dere's room for many a more!

**WADE IN THE WATER**

*Chorus*

Wade in the water,  
Wade in the water children,  
Wade in the water,  
God's gonna trouble the water.

Well, who are these children all dressed  
in red?

God's gonna trouble the water.  
Must be the children that Moses led.  
God's gonna trouble the water.

*Chorus*

Who that young girl all dressed in white?  
God's gonna trouble the water?  
Must be the children of Israelites.  
God's gonna trouble the water.

*Chorus*

**FOLLOW THE DRINKING GOURD**

Follow the Drinking Gourd,  
Follow the Drinking Gourd.  
For the old man is a-waiting 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 a-waiting 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,  
Follow the Drinking Gourd.

Who's that yonder dressed in blue?  
God's gonna trouble the water.  
Must be the ones that made it through.  
God's gonna trouble the water.

*Chorus*

Jordan's water is chilly and cold.  
God's gonna trouble the water.  
It chills the body, but not the soul.  
Gods' gonna trouble the water.

*Chorus*

If you get there before I do,  
God's gonna trouble the water.  
Tell all my friends I'm comin' too.  
God's gonna trouble the water.

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

When the great river meets the little river,  
Follow the Drinking Gourd.  
For the old man is a-waitin' for to carry  
you to freedom,  
If you follow the Drinking Gourd.

## SIGNAL SONGS

Signal songs were a type of spiritual the enslaved sang. On the surface, signal songs seemed to be music praising the Christian God, and southern whites openly allowed and encouraged such singing. But under the surface, the songs held hidden messages communicated by code words that meant one thing to whites and another thing to the enslaved. Messages of support, unity and revolt, even directions for how to escape on the Underground Railroad, were contained in the songs. For example, “being bound for the land of Canaan” on one level meant preparing to die and go to heaven, but to the enslaved it also meant fleeing north to Canada.

Most signal songs had references to Biblical people (Moses, Jesus), places (Egypt, Promised Land), and stories (Jews led out of Egypt). The hidden meanings made analogies between Biblical themes and the conditions of slavery. The slavery of Jews in Egypt was similar to that of African slaves in the South. The main theme in signal songs and other spirituals was escaping from slavery by striving toward freedom.

Try to match these “code words” with their hidden meanings:

1. C Moses                      *C. Conductor who led slaves to freedom*
2. H Egypt                      *H. Land of suffering*
3. G Pharaoh                      *G. Plantation owner or slave owner*
4. F River Jordan                      *F. Ohio River separating North and South that must be crossed to reach freedom*
5. A Red Sea                      *A. Atlantic Ocean*
6. B Chariot or train                      *B. Means of escape*
7. D Shoes                      *D. Personal decision to escape*
8. E Promised Land                      *E. The North and freedom*