

Myths and Codes of the Underground Railroad

SUBJECT

History, Social Studies

GRADE LEVEL

Grades 6-9



LESSON SUMMARY

The Underground Railroad has become a revered chapter in American history. Unfortunately, myths and misinformation about the Underground Railroad abound. This lesson presents several of these myths and stereotypes, indicating how they developed and helping students understand why they are not true. The use of secret codes and signal songs to assist the progress of runaway slaves is also part of the mystique of the Underground Railroad. Students investigate these codes and escape strategies, practice decoding letters and singing signal songs, and learn about the controversy over the existence of secretly coded messages in quilts.

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

1. Recognize that many myths about the Underground Railroad exist.
2. Learn to know when key myths are being perpetuated.
3. Develop an understanding of how these myths developed.
4. Learn to appreciate the need for historical evidence to validate claims.
5. Identify at least two important signal songs.
6. Practice using the coded language of the Underground Railroad.
7. Describe escape strategies used by freedom seekers.

OHIO ACADEMIC CONTENT STANDARDS

See Lesson Correlations on page 17 of the Teacher Guide.

WEB LESSON - Myths and Codes of the Underground Railroad

TIME NEEDED

5 to 6 class periods

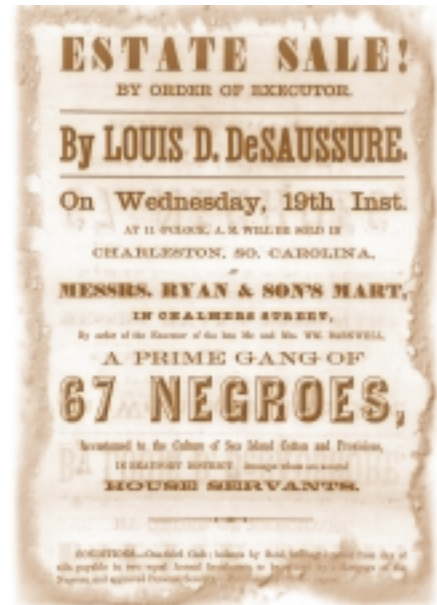
MATERIALS

Handouts 1-10

Selection of fiction and nonfiction books related to Underground Railroad. See Underground Railroad Bibliography on page 217 of the Teacher Guide for a sample of titles.

TECHNOLOGY

Computer with Internet access
Safe Passage CD-ROM



VOCABULARY

- ▶ **Myth** — Legendary narrative that presents part of the beliefs of a people or explains a practice; an imaginary or unverifiable person or thing.
- ▶ **Stereotype** — The notion that many people have about a thing or a group that may often be untrue or only partly true.
- ▶ **Generalize** — To emphasize the main or overall facts, features, conditions, ideas, etc. rather than specific details.
- ▶ **Stereotype** — A fixed notion of a person, group, idea, etc., that allows for no individuality or critical judgment.

NOTES FOR THE TEACHER

As the Underground Railroad's popularity has soared, so has the perpetuation of myths, legends and misconceptions about it. Use this lesson to help dispel some of these incorrect notions and to illustrate the importance of historical evidence.

PREPARE

Make copies of handouts as needed.

PROCEDURE

1. Begin by distributing copies of *Handout 1*, a short true-or-false quiz designed to determine how many commonly held notions about the Underground Railroad students believe to be true. The quiz is more about what they have heard and believe to be true rather than how much specific information they have learned. If students think a statement is false, they are asked to change the statement to make it true. You might want to have several literature books on hand for students to review for assistance during this process. Answer key provided.
2. After using the quiz, explain to students that even though the Underground Railroad is a very popular topic in American history, there are many myths and widespread misinformation about it. *Handout 2* helps explain how such myths and misinformation developed. Students try to match a reason in one column with the explanation or example that best fits it in the second column. This exercise goes to the heart of how historical evidence is collected and what the pitfalls can be. Answer key provided.
3. Another aspect of the misinformation surrounding the Underground Railroad has to do with the stereotypes of various groups associated with it. These developed in the mid-19th century because of the way newspapers depicted groups and because each side (North/South, proslavery/antislavery) had a political agenda and interest in making the other side look bad while making themselves look noble and good. The stereotypes were so strong at the time that they have largely persisted to the present. Make sure that students understand that modern research now leads historians to describe the complexities, exceptions and variations of people within each 19th-century group and place. Use *Handout 3* to help students identify stereotypes about the Underground Railroad. Answer key provided.

Before beginning *Handout 3*, teachers should help students distinguish between “generalizations” and “stereotypes.” *Webster’s New World Dictionary* defines the two terms as follows:

Generalize — To emphasize the main or overall facts, features, conditions, ideas, etc. rather than specific details.

Stereotype — A fixed notion of a person, group, idea, etc., that allows for no individuality or critical judgment.

Good teachers use generalizations regularly, and avoid stereotypes at all cost. While it may be true that stereotypes carry a kernel of truth, one way to think about the difference is to view stereotypes as generalizations taken to an unreasonable extreme. Generalizations help us to understand complex ideas, situations and events; stereotypes distort them.

It is also important to remember that stereotypes carry value judgments, such as good and bad, right and wrong, etc.

WEB LESSON - Myths and Codes of the Underground Railroad

4. Another major myth concerns the claims of property owners throughout the North that their homes, barns or churches were stations on the Underground Railroad. Countless community and familial legends are based on this notion, most of which turn out to be false and in some instances even fraudulent. Part of the desire to be an Underground Railroad site may be based on the desire to reap the benefits of the heritage tourism associated with authentic sites or a natural interest in the historic period.

To pique students' interest, begin by asking if there are any Underground Railroad sites in your community. Do students know where the property is? Is it open to the public? Have students visited it? What stories are associated with this property? Investigate whether this property has been authenticated.

Introduce *Handout 4*. Read the text, go to the web links and review the types of evidence the National Park Service uses in its research and the types of properties it considers. Check to see what sites, if any, are listed in or near your community. If local sites are not listed, discuss the implications of this with the class. Make sure students understand that claiming a house is an Underground Railroad site does not necessarily make it so. Some tunnels and secret rooms in homes were created during Prohibition.

Once you find authentic sites, arrange a field trip to one nearby. Learn the history connected to it. Take photos and post in the classroom.

But above all, avoid spreading or adding to any Underground Railroad myths in your community.

5. A new controversy is currently raging in the field of Underground Railroad studies. *Handout 5* concerns the quilt controversy. Read and discuss the information about the book *Hidden in Plain View* and conduct a debate as suggested if you think it appropriate for your students. Several resources are listed to assist students in learning more about the quilt controversy. The activity also lists links to quilt examples and ideas for making a quilt in the classroom. The main point for students to understand is the concept of coded quilts being used in the Underground Railroad rests on shaky evidence and most historians give the idea little credibility for this reason. Until further evidence is uncovered, this subject falls into the category of myth.
6. One of the more mysterious elements of the Underground Railroad was the use of secret codes to assist those fleeing. There is enough documentation to know that these codes and signals were actually used at the time. Distribute copies of *Handout 6*. Review the basic code words and phrases, noting that many use railroad terminology. Draw comparisons between the coded language of the Underground Railroad and coded words that students and other groups might use today.
7. Distribute copies of *Handout 7* and the coded letter. To "decode" the letter and write their own coded messages, students will need to refer back to the list of code words in *Handout 6*. Emphasize why fugitive slaves and Underground Railroad operatives felt the necessity to speak in code and how the cultural differences between the enslaved African population and white Southerners enabled the coded system to exist.

Myths and Codes of the Underground Railroad - WEB LESSON

8. Fugitives and slaves used signal songs as another successful strategy in Underground Railroad escapes. *Handout 8* provides information and samples of common signal songs. Students match code words and study the underlying meanings of the lyrics. Listen to some of the spirituals on the Internet or on the *Safe Passage* CD-ROM. Answer key provided.
9. Distribute copies of *Handout 9* dealing with escape strategies. Review the strategies, written in second person so that students can imagine being the freedom seeker. Provide a selection of books as suggested for students to survey regarding escape strategies. Have students share their mock escape plans.



ASSESSMENT

Have students create an addition to a time capsule about the Underground Railroad.

In an effort to set the record straight for future generations, students will choose a popular myth connected with the Underground Railroad. They will research the background, fallacies and reasons for the appearance of the myth, then develop an argument that debunks the myth. As with the other “time capsule” assignments, the following parameters will help students judge their success in this task.

- ▶ **PURPOSE:** Inform
- ▶ **AUDIENCE:** Posterity
- ▶ **FORM:** Essay/argument or legal brief
- ▶ **VOICE/TONE/PERSPECTIVE:** You are investigators, who are inquisitive and evidence-driven, using clues to discover the truth.

LESSON EXTENSIONS

Have students read the excerpt from *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* where historian Larry Gara explains how so many myths and legends about the Underground Railroad developed and why they continue to be told.

Hold a class discussion about why Underground Railroad myths still persist.

Research local sites to find evidence about Underground Railroad activities.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- ▶ Addy's Escape to Freedom
http://www.americangirl.com/agcn/addy/game1_escape/index.html
- ▶ Headbone Derby's Escape to Freedom
<http://www.headbone.com/derby/escape/main.b.html>
- ▶ The Underground Railroad (National Geographic simulation)
<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/features/99/railroad/>
- ▶ Ohio Underground Railroad Sites, Programs and Facilities
http://209.10.16.21/TEMPLATE/FrontEnd/network_d.cfm
- ▶ Franklin County Underground Railroad Myths
<http://www.miketreon.com/ugrr/myths.html>
- ▶ Researching the Underground Railroad
http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/ugrr/exuggr3.htm
- ▶ The Underground Railroad in Oberlin: History and Memory
http://www.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/UndergroundRR/Lasser_speech.htm
- ▶ *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad*, Larry Gara, University of Kentucky Press, 1980. ASIN 0813101158



UNDERGROUND RAILROAD: MYTHS AND REALITY

Name _____ Date _____

Much of what people commonly hear and believe about the Underground Railroad is based on myths and false information. See how much you know about the Underground Railroad. Decide whether each statement below is true or false. If false, change the statement to make it true.

1. The Underground Railroad was a narrow dirt road that freedom-seeking slaves walked along to reach Canada.

2. Few African Americans in the South or the North helped runaway slaves. _____
3. Much of what we know today about the Underground Railroad comes from accounts written after the Civil War.

4. Some slaves learned to read even though the South had laws that said slaves could not be taught to read or write.

5. Accurate statistics on the total number of runaway slaves are easy to find and verify.

6. White abolitionists were the most important leaders in the operations of the Underground Railroad.

7. Slaves, for the most part, planned and carried out their own escapes.

8. Nearly all runaway slaves managed to escape to safety in the North or Canada.

9. Runaway slaves used quilts with secret codes sewn into them to guide them North.

10. The majority of slaves who escaped came from Deep South states where slavery was much crueler.

11. Finding a tunnel in the basement of a home in the North likely means that the house was once an Underground Railroad station.

12. Most freedom seekers were male and single. _____

HANDOUT 1

UNDERGROUND RAILROAD: MYTHS AND REALITY

Review student responses, using the discussion as a chance to correct misinformation. This is the key to the quiz.

Much of what people commonly hear and believe about the Underground Railroad is based on myths and false information. See how much you know about the Underground Railroad. Decide whether each statement below is true or false. If false, change the statement to make it true.

1. The Underground Railroad was a narrow dirt road that freedom-seeking slaves walked along to reach Canada.
FALSE *The Underground Railroad was a loosely organized network with no clearly defined routes of escape.*
2. Few African Americans in the South or the North helped runaway slaves.
FALSE *It was mainly African Americans in the North and the South who assisted runaway slaves.*
3. Much of what we know today about the Underground Railroad comes from accounts written after the Civil War.
TRUE
4. Some slaves learned to read even though the South had laws that said slaves could not be taught to read or write.
TRUE
5. Accurate statistics on the total number of runaway slaves are easy to find and verify.
FALSE *Accurate statistics are difficult to find and may never be verifiable.*
6. White abolitionists were the most important leaders in the operations of the Underground Railroad.
FALSE *Free blacks and former fugitive slaves joined white abolitionists as leaders in the Underground Railroad.*
7. Slaves, for the most part, planned and carried out their own escapes.
TRUE
8. Nearly all runaway slaves managed to escape to safety in the North or Canada.
FALSE *Many fugitive slaves failed in their attempts to escape and were returned to slavery.*
9. Runaway slaves used quilts with secret codes sewn into them to guide them North.
FALSE *Historians have not been able to find proof that quilts had secret codes in them.*

10. The majority of slaves who escaped came from Deep South states where slavery was much crueler.

FALSE *The majority of slaves who escaped came from the states in the Upper South that bordered the North.*

11. Finding a tunnel in the basement of a home in the North likely means that the house was once an Underground Railroad station.

FALSE *Tunnels in old homes were used for many purposes and most were never used in the Underground Railroad.*

12. Most freedom seekers were male and single.

TRUE

HANDOUT 2

WHY ARE THERE SO MANY MYTHS ABOUT THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD?

Name _____ Date _____

In his book, *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad*, historian Larry Gara explains how so many myths and legends about the Underground Railroad developed and why they continue to be told.

Match each reason in the left column with the best explanation in the right column.

- | | |
|--------------------------|--|
| 1. ____ Aging informants | A. Many informants were elderly people who had to recall events that happened decades earlier when they were young. Their memories were rusty and their accounts lacked details and often were contradictory. In his memoirs, Levi Coffin even asked readers to forgive him for his feebleness. |
| 2. ____ Ancestral pride | B. This involves spreading ideas or information to help or hurt a cause. The Underground Railroad was a highly charged subject and people in both the North and South used information to promote their own causes and accuse the other side. |
| 3. ____ Dimming memories | C. These are popular stories from the past that are accepted as true though they cannot be verified. One of the most popular stories is how the Underground Railroad got its name. Many people say it traces back to the escape of Tice Davids along the Ohio River near Ripley. But there are at least three other stories that claim to explain how the name came to be. No one really knows which story, if any, is true, but they keep getting told. |
| 4. ____ Distortion | D. Many Underground Railroad accounts lack specific details and statistics. An informant might state that “the Underground Railroad in our town did a large business.” |
| 5. ____ Embellishment | E. This is information passed on by word of mouth from generation to generation, often without any documentation. Over time, it becomes accepted as part of the community or family folklore. Because so little was written down at the time, much of what we know of Underground Railroad history is based on oral accounts. |
| 6. ____ Exaggeration | F. Children and grandchildren of Underground Railroad participants retold the stories of their ancestors with great pride. They had heard the stories passed on from generation to generation and believed that their ancestors had been on the side of right and justice. |
| 7. ____ Legends | G. After the Civil War, almost every Northern community wanted to claim that they had a major role in the Underground Railroad. They printed local histories filled with claims about barns or homes that supposedly had been stations. Most such claims had no documented proof. But that did not keep locals from repeating the stories. |

8. ____ Local community pride
9. ____ Oral tradition
10. ____ Passage of time
11. ____ Propaganda
12. ____ Repetition
13. ____ Secrecy
14. ____ Stereotypes
15. ____ Subjectivity
16. ____ Vague generalizations
- H. Some informants made their stories more attractive by painting dramatic and melodramatic tales of high adventure, hair-raising escapes and cruel slave masters.
- I. Whether it was Southern slave owners or Northern abolitionists, neither side was objective about the Underground Railroad. They had strong passions and opinions about the subject and saw what happened from their own perspectives.
- J. This is the notion that everyone in a group shares certain physical features or personality traits in common simply by reason of being part of the group. This trait, that every group member supposedly has, can be viewed as positive (i.e., smart) or negative (i.e., lazy). Stereotypes of abolitionists and fugitives were common at the time and linger even today.
- K. Some informants manipulated information for their own purposes, twisting it beyond its true meaning or causing something to be perceived as untrue.
- L. If someone keeps saying something often enough, it begins to be taken as fact, whether it is or not. Many Underground Railroad stories were told over and over until they became part of the overall legend.
- M. Many informants were children when slavery existed and quite elderly when interviewed decades later about their knowledge of the Underground Railroad. What recall they had was about either their own actions as children or youth or, more likely, stories they remembered about other relatives and people.
- N. There was not as much secrecy surrounding the Underground Railroad as once believed. There was a minimum of secrecy in some locales. A number of operatives openly advertised their activities in local newspapers. But other Underground Railroad leaders criticized this openness.
- O. Most Underground Railroad accounts were not recorded until well after the Civil War ended, some as late as the 1880s and 1890s. This resulted in accounts full of inaccuracies.
- P. Some informants made accounts of their roles seem more important than they really were or they inflated the numbers of people involved.

WHY ARE THERE SO MANY MYTHS ABOUT THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD?

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Match each reason in the left column with the best explanation in the right column.

1. M Aging informants
Many informants were children when slavery existed and quite elderly when interviewed decades later about their knowledge of the Underground Railroad. What recall they had was about either their own actions as children or youth or, more likely, stories they remembered about other relatives and people.
2. F Ancestral pride
Children and grandchildren of Underground Railroad participants retold the stories of their ancestors with great pride. They had heard the stories passed on from generation to generation and believed that their ancestors had been on the side of right and justice.
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Many informants were elderly people who had to recall events that happened decades earlier when they were young. Their memories were rusty and their accounts lacked details and often were contradictory. In his memoirs, Levi Coffin even asked readers to forgive him for his feebleness.
4. K Distortion
Some informants manipulated information for their own purposes, twisting it beyond its true meaning or causing something to be perceived as untrue.
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Some informants made their stories more attractive by painting dramatic and melodramatic tales of high adventure, hair-raising escapes and cruel slave masters.
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These are popular stories from the past that are accepted as true though they cannot be verified. One of the most popular stories is how the Underground Railroad got its name. Many people say it traces back to the escape of Tice Davids along the Ohio River near Ripley. But there are at least three other stories that claim to explain how the name came to be. No one really knows which story, if any, is true, but they keep getting told.

8. **G** Local community pride

After the Civil War, almost every Northern community wanted to claim that they had a major role in the Underground Railroad. They printed local histories filled with claims about barns or homes that supposedly had been stations. Most such claims had no documented proof. But that did not keep locals from repeating the stories.

9. **E** Oral tradition

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10. **O** Passage of time

Most Underground Railroad accounts were not recorded until well after the Civil War ended, some as late as the 1880s and 1890s. This resulted in accounts full of inaccuracies.

11. **B** Propaganda

This involves spreading ideas or information to help or hurt a cause. The Underground Railroad was a highly charged subject and people in both the North and South used information to promote their own causes and accuse the other side.

12. **L** Repetition

If someone keeps saying something often enough, it begins to be taken as fact, whether it is or not. Many Underground Railroad stories were told over and over until they became part of the overall legend.

13. **N** Secrecy

There was not as much secrecy surrounding the Underground Railroad as once believed. There was a minimum of secrecy in some locales. A number of operatives openly advertised their activities in local newspapers. But other Underground Railroad leaders criticized this openness.

14. **J** Stereotypes

This is the notion that everyone in a group shares certain physical features or personality traits in common simply by reason of being part of the group. This trait, that every group member supposedly has, can be viewed as positive (i.e., smart) or negative (i.e., lazy). Stereotypes of abolitionists and fugitives were common at the time and linger even today.

15. **I** Subjectivity

Whether it was Southern slave owners or Northern abolitionists, neither side was objective about the Underground Railroad. They had strong passions and opinions about the subject and saw what happened from their own perspectives.

16. **D** Vague generalizations

Many Underground Railroad accounts lack specific details and statistics. An informant might state that "the Underground Railroad in our town did a large business."

HANDOUT 3

UNDERGROUND RAILROAD STEREOTYPES

Name _____ Date _____

In the previous activity, stereotypes were listed as one way myths about the Underground Railroad got started. Strong, mostly inaccurate, stereotypes of the Underground Railroad were typical at the time.

Below are some of the most common stereotypes from the point of view of Northerners. Match each group or region with its traditional stereotype, keeping in mind that these are not accurate.

- | | |
|-------------------------|---|
| 1. ____ Abolitionists | A. Helpless, weak and passive |
| 2. ____ Southerners | B. All led happy, successful lives in the North |
| 3. ____ New England | C. Home of decadence and vice |
| 4. ____ South | D. Very moral with strong religious beliefs |
| 5. ____ Quakers | E. Evil and mean |
| 6. ____ Fugitive slaves | F. Home of civilized society |
| 7. ____ Free blacks | G. Noble and heroic leaders of the Underground Railroad |

- ▶ What was the stereotype of each group or region from the point of view of Southerners?
- ▶ Look for examples of these stereotypes in textbooks, children's literature and fiction.
- ▶ It's time to let go of these old stereotypes. Use current sources to research slavery, the Underground Railroad, the North and the South. Write a paragraph that creates a more accurate description of each group of people or region.
- ▶ Discuss examples of group stereotypes that exist today and why they are unfair and inaccurate.

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1. G Abolitionists *G. Noble and heroic leaders of the Underground Railroad*
2. E Southerners *E. Evil and mean*
3. F New England *F. Home of civilized society*
4. C South *C. Home of decadence and vice*
5. D Quakers *D. Very moral with strong religious beliefs*
6. A Fugitive slaves *A. Helpless, weak and passive*
7. B Free blacks *B. All led happy, successful lives in the North*

- ▶ What was the stereotype of each group or region from the point of view of Southerners?
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- ▶ Discuss examples of group stereotypes that exist today and why they are unfair and inaccurate.

HANDOUT 4

THE TRUTH ABOUT TUNNELS, BARNs AND SECRET ROOMS

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the Underground Railroad today is the notion that someone's house was once part of the Underground Railroad. Do you know of any such stories or legends in your community?

Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of buildings throughout the North lay claim to being Underground Railroad sites based on family traditions, community legends and oral histories. People think that any house with a tunnel leading from the basement meant it was used by fugitive slaves. Loose floorboards must have opened to a trap door hiding place. A hayloft in a barn could have sheltered runaways. However, in the majority of cases, such claims turn out to be false.

Because of the confusion over authentic versus unverified Underground Railroad sites, the government recently passed a law (National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Act of 1998) to help accurately document sites. The government asked the National Park Service (NPS) to take the lead in this process. These online articles explain more:



http://www.cr.nps.gov/ugrr/program_publiclaw.htm

<http://www.cr.nps.gov/ugrr/program.htm>

<http://www.s-t.com/daily/02-99/02-22-99/a03sr027.htm>

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/travel/visitorsguide/tours/underground.htm>

These are among the types of properties the NPS investigates:

- ▶ Buildings that claim to have been stations on the Underground Railroad
- ▶ Properties associated with well-known Underground Railroad figures
- ▶ Slave rebellion sites
- ▶ Places associated with legal challenges to slavery
- ▶ Places that have documented slave escapes
- ▶ Properties associated with documented fugitive rescues
- ▶ Churches that had congregations active in the Underground Railroad

Underground Railroad sites must be carefully documented. Experts make onsite inspections and pore over these types of primary sources to establish whether a property was an actual Underground Railroad site:

- ▶ Autobiographies and memoirs
- ▶ Oral histories
- ▶ Local histories
- ▶ County and township records
- ▶ City directories
- ▶ Almanacs
- ▶ Calendars
- ▶ Images and photographs
- ▶ Records of organizations such as anti-slavery societies, churches and vigilance committees
- ▶ Contemporary newspapers
- ▶ Legal documents
- ▶ Court records
- ▶ Personal and family manuscripts (diaries, letters, etc.)
- ▶ Maps
- ▶ Census records
- ▶ Real estate records
- ▶ Archaeological evidence

The NPS website has a list of Underground Railroad sites that have been authenticated. Scroll down to see what is listed for Ohio and Kentucky. The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center website also has site information.

National Park Service Network to Freedom Sites
http://www.cr.nps.gov/ugrr/network_d.htm

Ohio Sites, Programs and Facilities
http://209.10.16.21/TEMPLATE/FrontEnd/network_d.cfm

National Underground Railroad Freedom Center
<http://www.freedomcenter.org/>

United States Map
http://www.freedomcenter.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.viewPage&page_id=F36B3BE3-2277-4BDC-978DC6256BB76894

Ohio Underground Railroad Sites
http://www.freedomcenter.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.viewPage&page_id=0A78F5D8-1838-44C8-9FD59E928E05871C

THE QUILT CONTROVERSY

A few years ago, the book *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* was published. It suggested slaves made and used quilts to send coded messages about how to escape on the Underground Railroad. The book became very popular and soon, in classrooms across the country, students were eagerly designing coded quilt squares.

But historians and quilt experts spoke up to say that the book had no historical verification. Since then, the subject of coded quilts and the Underground Railroad has become controversial.

Why do African American and quilt historians disagree with the book? Mostly because most historians believe the authors did not use proper historical research methods:

- ▶ The book is based on the oral history of one woman. The woman died before the book was even published, so no one can go back to interview her again.
- ▶ Scholars have not been able to find other evidence or other sources to support what the book says about quilts.
- ▶ Some of the quilt patterns said to be used in the coded quilts did not even exist in the days of the Underground Railroad.
- ▶ No other references to coded quilts exist in the many slave narratives recorded after the Civil War.
- ▶ Some former slaves did make quilts after the Civil War that depict their paths of escape to freedom, but none from before the war have been found.
- ▶ There are a number of factual errors in the book.

The authors, Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard, respond this way:

- ▶ There cannot be solid evidence of the code quilts because nothing was written down.
- ▶ Other people have now come forth with stories passed down in their own families about codes, quilts and escapes.
- ▶ The authors are confident more evidence and coded quilts will surface because people are searching attics and trunks.

Hold a classroom debate about the quilt controversy. Divide the class into two groups, with one group defending the coded quilt idea and the other group arguing against it. Prepare your debate points by learning more about the controversy over coded quilts using some of these resources:

Historian Giles Wrights' Criticism

http://historiccamdencounty.com/ccnews11_doc_01a.shtml

Hidden in Plain View

<http://www.coax.net/people/lwf/quilts.htm>

Threads of History?

<http://artemis.austincollege.edu/acad/hwc55/threads.html>

Quilts and the Underground Railroad

<http://www.culver.org/news/quilts.asp>

Abolition Quilts and the Underground Railroad

<http://www.womenfolk.com/historyofquilts/abolitionist.htm>

African American Quilting Traditions

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~UG97/quilt/atrads.html>

Quilts: A Secret Language, Metaphorical Meaning and Oppression

<http://www.cl.uh.edu/itc/course/LITR/5731/rp1rb.htm>

Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad,
Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard, Doubleday, 1999. ISBN 0385491379

Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt, Deborah Hopkinson, Dragonfly Books, 1993.
ISBN 0679832115

Whether or not coded quilts were used in the Underground Railroad, there are many quilts with Underground Railroad themes. Look at the quilts at these sites:

Our Virtual Underground Railroad Quilt

<http://www.beavton.k12.or.us/greenway/leahy/ugrr/>

Threads of Freedom: The Underground Railroad Story in Quilts

http://www.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/threads_of_freedom/threads2.html

Quilt Block Postcards

<http://www.oberlin.edu/~EOG/Postcards/QuiltPostcards.html>

Try designing and making a quilt with an Ohio or Kentucky Underground Railroad theme in class. You might sew squares that show:

- ▶ Slave chains
- ▶ North Star
- ▶ Big Dipper
- ▶ Lanterns
- ▶ Candles in the window
- ▶ Africa
- ▶ Ohio River
- ▶ Portraits of local Underground Railroad leaders
- ▶ Local Underground Railroad sites
- ▶ Map showing towns and cities central to Underground Railroad routes

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?

HANDOUT 7

CODED MESSAGES

Underground Railroad agents who helped freedom seekers escape sometimes used secret language to disguise their plans. Their letters might have been similar to this one.

- ▶ Divide into small groups.
- ▶ Read the letter and work together to find and decode the hidden messages.
- ▶ Review the list of Underground Railroad code words and phrases to assist you (*Handout 6*).
- ▶ Rewrite the letter to reflect what was actually being communicated. Use the space between the lines of the text.

Based on what you've learned, make up your own coded letter in which you communicate these details:

- ▶ Recipient of letter is Levi Coffin.
- ▶ Five freedom seekers will arrive in three days.
- ▶ Fugitives came from Tennessee through Kentucky.
- ▶ Slave catchers are on their trail.
- ▶ One runaway is injured and cannot walk.
- ▶ Need a wagon to transport them to next station.
- ▶ A female conductor is traveling with the group.
- ▶ Year is 1845.
- ▶ Season is winter.
- ▶ Must cross Ohio River.
- ▶ Freedom seekers want to settle somewhere in Ohio.

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

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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*

ESCAPE STRATEGIES

If you had been a freedom seeker, you would have relied on some of these strategies to make your way from South to North:

- ▶ Escape on weekends, holidays or during harvest season to get a head start on authorities.
- ▶ Travel during the night and rest during the day.
- ▶ Locate and use the North Star to navigate.
- ▶ Avoid traveling during a full moon.
- ▶ Look for moss growing on the north side of tree trunks.
- ▶ Follow birds migrating north in the spring.
- ▶ Avoid regular roads that are patrolled by slave catchers.
- ▶ Use back roads, waterways, mountains, swamps, forests and fields.
- ▶ Zigzag as you travel, to confuse slave catchers following you.
- ▶ Walk in streams and shallow rivers so dogs can't track your scent.
- ▶ Stow away in wagons, steamships, boats and trains when possible.
- ▶ Use clever disguises—women dress like men and vice versa; light-skinned African Americans pass as whites.
- ▶ Pretend to be someone else, like a sailor or a steamboat roustabout.
- ▶ Depend on “grapevine telegraph”—signals, whispered conversations, passwords, coded messages.
- ▶ Look for a lighted candle or lantern in windows that would indicate a safe house.
- ▶ Pretend to be illiterate even if you know how to read or write.
- ▶ Listen for spirituals with coded messages being sung by enslaved people you encounter.

Read short stories, children's literature books or juvenile fiction about Underground Railroad escapes. Make a chart showing escape strategies the characters use in the stories. See Underground Railroad Bibliography on page 217 of the Teacher Guide.

How do the details in the stories compare to tactics real freedom seekers used? You might review Levi Coffin's reminiscences or John Parker's autobiography for a comparison.



HANDOUT 9



Imagine you are a freedom seeker in the 1850s. Plan an escape route that starts or continues from your own community. Keep in mind that your community today is not like it was in 1850.

- ▶ Choose a place to flee to in the North or Canada.
- ▶ Decide when you will flee (season) and when you will travel (day or night).
- ▶ Figure out how many miles you can cover each day. How long will it take to get to your destination? Make a timeline.
- ▶ Describe and illustrate ideal hiding places.
- ▶ What will you take with you?
- ▶ What will you eat?
- ▶ What will you wear?
- ▶ What weather will you face?
- ▶ What natural features will you encounter? What features will help or hinder your flight?
- ▶ List places where a fugitive might hide and danger spots to avoid.
- ▶ Identify landmarks as reference points.
- ▶ Decide places where you can stop along the way. How will you know they are safe?
- ▶ Sketch a map showing places to stop along the way.
- ▶ How will you know whom to trust?
- ▶ Write and keep a daily journal of your “escape.”