

# THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

## A CONNECTION BETWEEN CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES

Although it sounds like a subway the Underground Railroad was not a train on tracks in a tunnel under streets and houses. It was a chain of safe houses, hiding places and people who would help African Americans escape slavery to freedom in the north. At first it led slaves to free states but The Fugitive Slave Act made it possible for escaped slaves in free states to be returned to captivity so the Underground Railroad led to safety in Canada.

The people who helped slaves escape were breaking laws and used railroad terms as codes to describe what they were doing.

Safe places to stop were called **Stations**.

People who helped slaves escape were called **Conductors**

Routes between stations were called **Lines**. Lines were about 15 miles, the distance of a one-day walk.

**Passengers** were escaping slaves.



HARRIET TUBMAN

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Harriet Tubman was a person who led slaves to freedom after escaping to freedom in Philadelphia. She escaped by the Underground Railroad from slavery in Maryland to Delaware where she worked in Philadelphia. She went back 19 times and helped others to freedom.

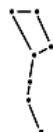
She was never caught even though there was a huge reward of \$40,000 offered by some southern slave owners for her capture. She was known as the Moses of her people for her work helping slaves escape to freedom.

This is a picture of Harriet Tubman and a group of "passengers" she led to freedom in Canada



### THE DRINKING GOURD

There is a song that has instructions on escaping on the Underground Railroad. It is called the Drinking Gourd. This is a picture of a Drinking gourd.



In the night sky the Drinking Gourd is what is known as the big dipper. It helps people find the North Star and the North Star was used to direct people so they would know which way to go.



## Explanation of "Follow the Drinking Gourd"

From <http://quest.arc.nasa.gov/lrc/special/mlk/gourd2.html>

The song and its translation are as follows:

*When the sun comes back and the first quail calls,  
Follow the Drinking Gourd.  
For the old man is waiting for to carry you to freedom,  
If you follow the Drinking Gourd.*

"When the sun comes back" means winter and spring when the altitude of the sun at noon is higher each day. Quail are migratory bird wintering in the South. The Drinking Gourd is the Big Dipper. The old man is Peg Leg Joe. The verse tells slaves to leave in the winter and walk towards the Drinking Gourd. Eventually they will meet a guide who will escort them for the remainder of the trip.

Most escapees had to cross the Ohio River, which is too wide and too swift to swim. The Railroad struggled with the problem of how to get escapees across, and with experience, came to believe the best crossing time was winter. Then the river was frozen, and escapees could walk across on the ice. Since it took most escapees a year to travel from the South to the Ohio, the Railroad urged slaves to start their trip in winter in order to be at the Ohio the next winter.

*The river bank makes a very good road,  
The dead trees show you the way,  
Left foot, peg foot, traveling on  
Follow the Drinking Gourd.*

This verse taught slaves to follow the bank of the Tombigbee River north looking for dead trees that were marked with drawings of a left foot and a peg foot. The markings distinguished the Tombigbee from other north-south rivers that flow into it.

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

These words told the slaves that when they reached the headwaters of the Tombigbee, they were to continue north over the hills until they met another river. Then they were to travel north along the new river, which is the Tennessee River. A number of the southern escape routes converged on the Tennessee.

*Where the great big river meets the little river,  
Follow the Drinking Gourd.  
For the old man is awaiting to carry you to freedom if you  
follow the Drinking Gourd.*

This verse told the slaves the Tennessee joined another river. They were to cross that river (which is the Ohio River), and on the north bank, meet a guide from the Underground Railroad.