

SLAVE 1: A gourd, like a squash with a big bottom, but hollow fo to drink with.

SLAVE 3: That there looks like a chariot, and its just aswingin' low, kissin' de ground.

SLAVE 4: It's movin' 'round the North Star up there in a circle.

SLAVE 2: Yeah, I sees it up there.

SLAVE 1: Yeah, dis drinkin' gourd, if you look over, it's pointin' to 'notha star. Dat dere is de North Star.

SLAVE 4: Afore my momma was sold away, she told me

'bout dat star—it leads to God.

SLAVE 1: Well, to get to freedom, we have to meet dis man, "Peg-Leg Joe." He'll be up aways, but we gotta get up dere ta meet 'em.

SLAVE 2: How?

SLAVE 1: Well, first you gotta know when. Winta's the best time, cuz we got longer in de night, and de ribers is froze fo ta cross 'em.

SLAVE 3: How do we get dere?

SLAVE 1: If you follow de drinkin' gourd, 'long de riber, just keep goin' till you see de dead trees. Keep on that riber, an not de others.

SLAVE 2: Fo how long?

'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.*

This haunting folk song, first sung by slaves in Alabama and Mississippi before the Civil War, was rediscovered in 1912 by folklorist

H.B. Parks, who overheard an African-American man in North Carolina singing it. The words were a puzzle, but the singer flatly refused to explain their meaning. A year later, Parks heard the song again in Louisville, Kentucky—but again, the singer kept mum. It was only after 1918 that he learned from a Black man in Texas, that the lyrics gave escaping slaves directions to find their way north to freedom. They would always travel under the cover of night. By finding the "Drinking Gourd" in the sky—the constellation we call the Big Dipper, which points to the North Star, Polaris—they would follow a route north (described in "code" in the song), along first the Tombigbee River, then the Tennessee, and finally crossing

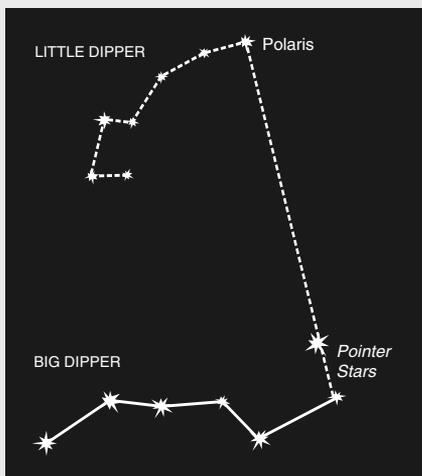


Harriet Tubman

the Ohio River into the free state of Illinois.

The idea of using the vast, unfettered expanse of the starry heavens to find one's way to freedom, became more than just a navigational "trick," but a metaphor for the quest for freedom. Frederick Douglass, the great leader of the movement to free the slaves, named his newspaper *The North Star*. He understood profoundly that science means the liberation of man; only if your oppressors can keep you ignorant, can they control you.

As most people know, the slaves were helped along their way by the "Underground Railroad" of people who would feed and safehouse them, and direct them on to the next "station." The most famous



Finding the North Star using the Big Dipper.

SLAVE 1: Well, when ya come on de end of de riber, wid two hills, keep wid de drinkin' gourd and you'll see a meetin' of two riber on de otha side. That's where you meet Joe, to take you up North onta freedom.

SLAVE 4: Oh no, here come massa.

[All sing "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," first verse]

MASTER: What in hell! What y'all doin' here, justa singin'? You niggers are dumber'n I thought, out here in the cold dark. Why arn't y'all in the shed, justa drinkin' and screwin' and havin' yo fun, like good fellas? Lookin' at the stars, heh? Well, I c'n tell ya, ya won't see nothin' up dere? I seed the same shit fo thirty years. Now, git yer asses insides, 'fore y'all git sick and can't work. Git! Git. . . .

[Exits]

SLAVE 1: Alright now, massa's gone. Here's de plan, remember dis . . .

[All sing "Follow the Drinkin' Gourd"]

[Fade . . . tones . . . ambient sounds of a Dark Age . . . hip hop, Age of Aquarius, radio sounds . . . WWII . . .]

Epilogue

[Silver Girl, Bronze Guy, Random Guy, Visitors]

SILVER GIRL: Let's turn the music down for a minute! I'm trying to find Steve. I think we nodded off for a minute, and I'm afraid that since he took his own car up here, he just got sick of how buzzed we were getting, and decided to try to catch the end of another one of those LaRouche meetings. Everyone says they run really late on Saturdays.

BRONZE GUY: I just hope we still have a future—ya know, there's no jobs out there anymore.

SILVER GIRL: The last thing I remember Steve talking about, was some kind of Dark Age that we were in now. I don't know. [calling out] Steve, are you still here somewhere? We're ready to talk politics.

[Enter Myra Boomer]

"conductor" on the "railroad" was Harriet Tubman, known as the Moses of her people. Frederick Douglass wrote to her in 1868: "I have had the applause of the crowd and the satisfaction that comes of being approved by the multitude, while the most you have done has been witnessed by a few trembling, scared, and foot-sore bondsmen and women, whom you have led out of the house of bondage, and whose heartfelt 'God bless you' has been your only reward. The midnight sky and the silent stars have been the witnesses of your devotion to freedom and your heroism."

Tubman, herself a slave in Maryland,

had escaped to freedom at the age of 28, with only the North Star to guide her. She then helped more than 300 others to do the same, telling them: "Children, if you are tired, keep going; if you are scared, keep going; if you are hungry; keep going; if you want to taste freedom, keep going."



Helping slaves to freedom on the "Underground Railroad."

She kept a six-shooter under her skirt, to provide a little encouragement to anyone who fearfully complained that he could not take another step. Tubman summed up her life's work: "On my

Underground Railroad I nebber run my train off de track and I nebber los' a passenger"—a quote which was inscribed on a plaque in her honor by the citizens of Auburn, New York, at the courthouse in Cayuga County, where she died in 1913.

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—Susan Welsh