

Inquire & Investigate

A MAP TO FREEDOM

There were many escape routes out of the South, but the route detailed in “Follow the Drinking Gourd” is a famous one.

The song used code to tell slaves to follow the Tombigbee River, which runs through Mississippi and Alabama, to the Tennessee River. The Tennessee River runs through Alabama, Tennessee, and Kentucky. There, it flows into the Ohio River, a common escape route into the free state of Illinois.

- **Look at the explanation of the lyrics and refer to a United States map to follow the path.** Can you follow the trail?
- **Map out another route on the map. Write your own verses with coded geographical messages. Include a code-cracker to explain the messages.** Brainstorm creative, poetic ways to assign a second level of meaning to your lyrics.



MUSICAL NOTE

Have you ever told stories around a campfire? What made your story stand out? As stories and songs flow from one person to another through the oral tradition, original pieces change. People add in jokes and dramatic touches. A story with a grain of truth can evolve into one that's completely imaginative.



Lyrics	Coded Meaning
When the sun comes back,	Leave in spring when the days are getting longer.
and the first quail calls, follow the drinking gourd	Quail in Alabama start calling to each other in early to mid-April. Then find the Big Dipper and the North Star and head north.
The old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom if you follow the drinking gourd	"Ole man" is a sailing term for "Captain." This is said to refer to Peg Leg Joe who was once a sailor. Peg Leg Joe led many slaves to freedom.
The riverbank will make a very good road	Follow along the Tombigbee River out of Alabama.
The dead trees will show you the way Left foot, peg foot, traveling on, Follow the drinking gourd	According to H.B. Parks, Peg Leg Joe marked trees and other landmarks "with charcoal or mud in the outline of a human left foot and a round spot in place of the right foot."
The river ends between two hills, Follow the drinking gourd	The source of the Tombigbee River is near Woodall Mountain, the high point in Mississippi. There is a neighboring hill, but Woodall itself looks like two gentle hills.
There's another river on the other side, Follow the drinking gourd	The Tennessee River is on the other side. Following it north leads to the Ohio River border with Illinois.
Where the great big river meets the little river Follow the drinking gourd The old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom If you follow the drinking gourd.	The Tennessee meets the "great" Ohio River in Paduchah, Kentucky. There you'll find Peg Leg Joe who will take you across to the free state of Illinois.

Ideas for Supplies ▼

- journal and pencil
- map of the United States
- colored pencils

To investigate more, use coded lyrics to create a route near your house or school. See if your friends or family can follow it! How will they know if they're on the right track? How do they know when they've arrived?