



*ordinary* PEOPLE  
*extraordinary*  
COURAGE

MEN AND WOMEN OF THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

**Lesson 5: Oral History of The Underground Railroad through Songs and Spirituals**

**The Objective:**

The objective of this lesson is to expose students to one of the many methods of communication and collaboration between slaves, song.

**The Overview:**

Deeply rooted with religious undertones, songs morphed into ways for slaves to communicate movement, routes and danger. In this lesson, students will be introduced to an article from the Library of Congress, which outlines famous UGRR figures as Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass, and their relation to song. Students will then be presented with lyrics to three common spirituals and will be given the opportunity to determine their underlying meanings.

**Standards:**

- Indiana Standards: 3rd grade: 3.1.5,3.1.6, 3.1.7, 3.3.3, 4th grade: 4.1.7, 4.1.8, 4.1.15, 5th grade: 5.1.20, 8th grade: 8.1.24,8.1.25, U.S. History: USH 1.3
- Kentucky Standards (2018\*)5th grade: 5th grade: SS-05-5.1.1, 5.2.4, 2.3.1,2.3.2, 8th grade: SS-08-2.1.1, 2.3.1, 4.1.1, 4.2.3, 4.3.2, 5.1.1, 5.1.2, 5.2.4, U.S. History

**Materials:**

- <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197495/> Article for teacher background building and for older students to read independently prior to the work time.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Thz1zDAytzU> link to Etta James Swing Low, Sweet Chariot
- 3 lyric sheets ("Swing low, sweet chariot", "Wade in the Water" and "Follow the Drinking Gourd")
- Song Interpretation Graphic Organizer
- Song Interpretation Answer Key\*
- Song Creation Prompt

**Timing:**

- Timing: (1) 45-60 minute session. Depending upon work time, and instructionally how article is presented to students (individually or group). 10 minutes for the introduction, 25-30 minutes for the work time, 10-15 written reflection/song development



## LESSON PROGRESSION:

**Lesson 1.** Open the lesson with the playing of *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* by Etta James. This link is provided in the materials list above.

**Lesson 2.** Once the song is over, ask students what that made them think of or feel? After collecting responses, your lesson may go one of two ways depending upon the age of your class.

- **Elementary:** Prior to beginning the lesson, read the article from the Library of Congress. There are several mini-stories within the context of the article (Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman) that illustrate the importance of song to the culture and communication of slaves during the pre-Civil War and Civil War era.
  - Ask students if they have songs that are important to them, and help them convey meaning to their lives?
  - The goal of this introduction and line of questioning is for students to see real life examples from recognizable figures, and for students to connect songs with meaningful moments or ideas in their lives.
- **Middle/High:** Students can access this article via the web-based link, or a printable PDF that is available directly from the link. The reading level of this text is appropriate middle and high-school students to comprehend independently.

**Lesson 3.** Upon the completion of the article, or review of, introduce students to the lyrics of the three songs and [Song Interpretation Graphic Organizer](#).

**Lesson 4.** Depending on the needs of the class, the teacher can either model the first song and ask for student feedback as to what they believe the meaning of this song is, and how slaves would have used it for secretive communication. If able to begin independently, let students work in partnerships to first annotate the songs, and then write down their thinking on the included [Song Interpretation Graphic Organizer](#).

**Lesson 5.** Monitor student work time, and once students have had enough time to progress through the songs, check for understanding. (Answer Key included)

### **Evaluation/Assessment:**

1. Students will try their hand at creating a song/spiritual using information that they gained today, and the coded words that they were able to uncover meanings for yesterday.
  
2. Based on the needs of the group, this can be completed individually or collaboratively.



# Wade in the Water

*Wade in the Water, wade in the water children.*

*Wade in the Water.*

*God's gonna trouble the water.*

*Who are those children all dressed in Red?*

*God's gonna trouble the water.*

*Must be the ones that Moses led.*

*God's gonna trouble the water.*

*Wade in the Water, wade in the water children.*

*Wade in the Water.*

*God's gonna trouble the water.*

*Who are those children all dressed in White?*

*God's gonna trouble the water.*

*Must be the ones of the Israelites.*

*God's gonna trouble the water.*

*Wade in the Water, wade in the water children.*

*Wade in the Water.*

*God's gonna trouble the water.*

*Who are those children all dressed in Blue?*

*God's gonna trouble the water.*

*Must be the ones that made it through.*

*God's gonna trouble the water.*

*Wade in the Water, wade in the water children.*

*Wade in the Water.*

*God's gonna trouble the water.*



# 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.*

*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 big river meets the little river*

*Follow the Drinking Gourd*

*For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom*

*If you follow the drinking gourd.*



# Swing Low, Sweet Chariot

*Swing low, sweet chariot,*

*Coming for to carry me home.*

*Swing low, sweet chariot,*

*Coming for to carry me home.*

*I looked over Jordan and what did I see*

*Coming for to carry me home,*

*A band of angels coming after me,*

*Coming for to carry me home.*

*I you get there before I do,*

*Coming for to carry me home,*

*Tell all my friends that I'm coming, too,*

*Coming for to carry me home.*



# SONG INTERPRETATION GRAPHIC ORGANIZER

Song Title	What were the songs really trying to say?
<p data-bbox="126 583 440 898"><b>Wade in the Water</b></p>	
<p data-bbox="115 1016 451 1346"><b>Follow the Drinking Gourd</b></p>	
<p data-bbox="131 1493 451 1822"><b>Swing Low, Sweet Chariot</b></p>	



# SONGS FOR A PURPOSE

As oral traditions have been passed through generations, the interpretations of songs over time has connected with many cultures. During the pre-Civil War era, it was suggested that slaves used songs as methods of secretive communication and collaboration.

**Using the coded words from yesterday, and the interpretations that you went through today with your groups, create your own verses and repeating chorus that could have been used as communication in the 1850s-1860s.**

Verse 1	
Chorus	
Verse 2	
Chorus	

***What story is your song trying to tell?***



# SONG INTERPRETATION GRAPHIC ORGANIZER ANSWER KEY !



Song Title	What were the songs really trying to say?
<p><b>Wade in the Water</b></p>	<p>The oral history indicates, that Harriet Tubman and other conductors would use songs like Wade in the Water to tell slaves to get into the water/woods to avoid being seen and make it through.</p> <p>It is thought that directions could have been coded in this song based on the different locations, and that Moses could be a reference to Tubman, as that is what she was often called.</p>
<p><b>Follow the Drinking Gourd</b></p>	<p>This song is more straight forward in terms of its meaning, continually referring to the North, looking at the Big Dipper- which has the North Star at the end. This song was focused on directionality with repeated themes of North.</p>
<p><b>Swing Low, Sweet Chariot</b></p>	<p>Swing low, Sweet chariot is a song that was focused on movement. With the main focus being carrying home to safety. Looking over Jordan referred to the Ohio River, and the band of angels focuses on conductors or abolitionists.</p>