



**SIGNAL SONGS
OF THE
UNDERGROUND
RAILROAD**
*with Dr.
Phyllis Wade*

Recommended for Ages 7-14

Grades 2 to 8

A Reproducible Learning Guide for Educators

This guide is designed to help educators prepare for, enjoy, and discuss *Signal Songs of the Underground Railroad*. It contains background, discussion questions and activities appropriate for ages 7 to 14.

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ABOUT THE ARTIST

How do you describe a former banker who has performed for a U.S. president, been a member of one of the first Christian rock bands in America, and earned a master's degree in education while raising two teenagers and serving as the dean of students at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York?

Dr. Wade provides a partial answer by saying that she "crammed a four-year college education into eight years," a boast that speaks to the unconventional approach taken to her life's work. Guided by an insatiable curiosity and driven by a passionate love of music, Dr. Wade completed a bachelor's degree in voice at Roberts Wesleyan College while taking the occasional semester off to tour with her rock group, The Sons of Thunder. This thirst for travel subsequently took her to Kenya where she sang for church groups in and around the city of Nairobi.



The fact that she made the trip to Africa with her family was no accident. Family is at the center of her life, both personally and professionally. Dr. Wade speaks often and with a great deal of pride about her mother, a retired public school guidance counselor, and her father, a professor of oral surgery, peppering her lively conversation with anecdotes about her two young grandchildren. She incorporates his talent for story-telling into her performance "*Signal Songs of the Underground Railroad*," weaving tales of her own ancestors with those of runaway slaves into a rich musical, historical, and personal tapestry. As Dr. Wade says, "*Signal Songs* is the perfect way for me to combine the most important elements of my life: family, music, education, and my own heritage."

ABOUT THE SHOW

With the aid of her powerful voice, Dr. Phyllis Wade combines acapella spirituals, slave narratives, and stories passed down through generations to pay tribute to one of the most controversial periods of our nation's history. The music we have come to know as "signal songs" was used by slaves to communicate with one another and to share directions to the Promised Land via the Underground Railroad. These powerful songs and stories will move you to stand up, clap, sing and rejoice for freedom.

UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

The **Underground Railroad** was a secret system that helped slaves escape from the southern **slave states** to northern **free states** and Canada...and sometimes even Mexico. It ran from the 1810's to the 1860's. The Underground Railroad wasn't really a railroad though. The word "underground" referred to the system being a secret, and "railroad" was used because they helped transfer slaves to different places. To keep the secret of the Underground Railroad going, the people who were a part of it used a special **lingo**. Check out the next page to see what some of the words they used were and what they meant!

There were a lot of people involved in the Underground Railroad. One of the most famous **conductors** was **Harriet Tubman**, who you will read more about later. **Harriet Tubman** was so well known for helping slaves escape, she was on a most wanted list. If someone had found her, they would have been given \$40,000. Other people who helped were people who thought slavery was wrong. A very prominent group of people who were against slavery were Quakers. These people would provide shelter, food, and clothing for the runaway slaves.

Traveling on the Underground Railroad was not easy, and not safe. The travelers would usually only travel at night, and they would walk about 10-20 miles to get to each **safe house**. Sometimes they would have to stay at one safe house for a while until they received word that it was safe to travel to the next one. Since they had to stay hidden from view during the day, the travelers would hide in places like abandoned mine shafts, secret tunnels, covered wagons with false bottoms, and hidden compartments in floors, closets, and cupboards.

Traveling and helping out on the Underground Railroad was against the law. In the south, **conductors** that were caught could be killed. However, during the course of the Underground Railroad, it is estimated that 100,000 slaves escaped to freedom.



SIGNAL SONGS

Singing was a tradition among most all African Americans. During the time of the **Underground Railroad** it was illegal to teach slaves to read and write, so for most slaves, singing was their main form of communication. Their songs were used to express what they believed in and cared about when they celebrated. They also sang songs to keep a steady rhythm and pass time while they performed manual labor.

Once the Underground Railroad began to grow in popularity, slaves began to use their songs as codes. They reinterpreted the words to have meanings of escaping to the north. Songs about escaping were called **signal songs**, and songs about where to meet were called **map songs**. Their songs often included Biblical references, so that if someone had heard their song, they would think they were just singing about the Bible.

The famous **conductor Harriet Tubman** had special songs she would sing to let her **passengers** know whether it was safe to come out of hiding or not. **Nat Turner**, who led a slave's rebellion in Virginia, would sing the song "Steal Away" to call people to him so they could discuss plans for his rebellion.

There were a bunch of songs the **conductors** and **passengers** would use on the Underground Railroad, and each song had a different meaning. "Wade in the Water" told the passengers to get into the river to walk, so they would stay hidden from view and search dogs wouldn't be able to find them. A slave would sing "Steal Away" when they were planning on escaping soon. "Sweet Chariot" was sung to let slaves know that they would be escaping soon. This was **Harriet Tubman's** favorite song. In the spring, they would sing "Follow the Drinking Gourd" to remind the slaves of the clues to find their way north. When a **conductor** was near or amongst slaves, or a group of runaways were near, the slaves might hear the song "The Gospel Train's a Comin'" to let them know there's an escape opportunity soon.

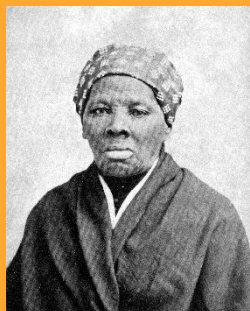
Lyrics to "Follow the Drinking Gourd"

*I 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.*



NOTEABLE PEOPLE

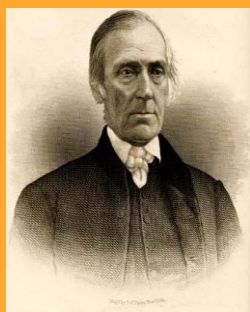
Harriet Tubman

On September 17, 1849, Harriet Tubman escaped to the north aided by members of the Underground Railroad. She resided and worked in Philadelphia to save up money, but she wanted to share her freedom with her loved ones. This was the beginning of Harriet Tubman leading slaves to freedom on the **Underground Railroad**.

On her first return to the south, she helped lead her niece and children to a safe home in Baltimore. From Baltimore they fled to her home in Philadelphia. She then rescued her brother, Moses. However, because of the **Fugitive Slave Act**, they had to now flee to Canada, or the **Promised Land**, to truly be free.

When conducting slaves to freedom, Harriet always traveled at night and rested during the day, and preferred traveling in the fall because the nights were longer. She typically used backroads, waterways, mountains, and swamps to avoid getting caught, and she always carried a gun for protection.

Over a ten year period, Harriet returned to the south a total of 19 times, and helped over 300 slaves to freedom. She boasted on the fact that she never lost a passenger. She was nicknamed **Moses** by William Lloyd Garrison, alluding to the story of Moses in the Bible. She was also nicknamed “General Tubman” by **abolitionist** John Brown.



Levi Coffin

Also known as the “President of the Underground Railroad,” Levi Coffin was one of the most famous **station masters** on the Underground Railroad. Levi and his wife Catherine lived in a large home, sometimes called “the Grand Central Station” of the Underground Railroad in Newport, Indiana. Their house even had a secret door that allowed slaves to hide in the walls if people came looking for them.

Catherine would sew clothes and make food for the **fugitives**, and even got their neighbors involved. The Coffin’s and their neighbors who also sheltered runaway slaves came up with a better route to Canada. They called it “the mysterious road.”

After a couple of years, some of their Quaker friends decided they should stop giving fugitives a place to stay, and told their other friends to do the same. Levi and Catherine did not listen to their friends, and as a result were expelled from their group.

After 20 years of being a stop on the Underground Railroad, Levi and Catherine helped 2,000 slaves to freedom. Every single slave that had stayed in their home reached freedom.



UNDERGROUND RAILROAD LINGO AND PHRASES

Promised Land— Canada

River Jordan— Ohio River

Conductor— the person who led the slaves

Station— a safe house

Station Master— owner of the safe house

Drinking Gourd— the big dipper and the north star

Heaven— Canada, or freedom

Stockholder— people who donated money, clothes, and food

Moses— Harriet Tubman

The wind blows from the south today— warning that bounty slave hunters were nearby

A friend of a friend sent me— password for fugitive slaves traveling alone to indicate they were sent by the Underground Railroad

When the sun comes back and the first quail calls— early spring, a good time of year to escape

The river banks makes a mighty good road— reminder that tracking dogs can't follow the scent of slaves when they're in the water

The dead trees will show you the way— reminder that moss grows on the north end of trees, in case the fugitives could not see the drinking gourd



RELATED RESOURCES

A Picture of Freedom: The Diary of Clotee, a Slave Girl, Belmont Plantation, Virginia 1859, Ages 9 to 12.

My America: Corey's Underground Railroad Diary Series, Ages 7 to 10.

Secret Signs: An Escape Through the Underground Railroad, Ages 4 to 8.

The Drinking Gourd: A Story of the Underground Railroad (I Can Read Level 3), Ages 4 to 8.

The Underground Railroad: A History Just for Kids!, Ages 9 & up.

Freedom's a-Callin Me, Ages 6 to 10.

http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/bhistory/underground_railroad/ An interactive story of a slave on the Underground Railroad. Ages 10 & up.

<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/ugrr/education/upload/Junior-Ranger-Activity-Booklet.pdf> Interactive booklet from the National Parks service about the Underground Railroad. Ages 5 & up.

VOCABULARY

Abolition— the end of slavery

Abolitionist— a person who supports the end of slavery

Civil War— war in the United States from 1861-1865 between the free states in the north (Union) and the slaves states in the south (Confederacy)

Compromise of 1850— made slave trade illegal in Washington, D.C. and admitted California as a free state.

Emancipation— freeing someone from slavery

Emancipation Proclamation— executive order from President Abraham Lincoln declaring all slaves in southern states are free

Free States— states in the north where African Americans could not be owned as slaves

Fugitive— someone who is hiding, or has run away

Fugitive Slave Act— a law passed under the Compromise of 1820, which allowed southern slaveholders to capture their slaves who escaped to the northern free states

Lingo – specific words a group uses that only they know the meaning to

Map Song – song about where to meet/where to go

Signal Song – song with directions for escaping

Slave States— states in the south where African Americans could be owned as slaves

13th Amendment— the amendment that made slavery illegal in the United States, December 18, 1865

SMITHSONIAN CONNECTION

The **National Museum of African American History and Culture** is the newest addition to the Smithsonian Institution. You can visit the museum beginning September 24th. Check out the 10 galleries throughout the museum and be on the lookout for some of the different people and events you learned about from this packet! For more information, visit www.nmaahc.si.edu.



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Smithsonian Associates advances the Institution’s mission to “increase and diffuse knowledge” through life-enriching educational and cultural experiences inspired by the Smithsonian’s research and collections for DC-region students, families, and adults, and for learning communities nationwide.

Discovery Theater has been presenting DC-area children with live educational performances for more than 30 years. With programs that enrich the Smithsonian experience for nearly 50,000 children annually, Discovery Theater is a gateway to the exhibits, collections, and themes contained in the museums and galleries on the National Mall and beyond. We explore American history and cultures, folk tales from around the world, and exciting, accessible science and math programs in the company of puppeteers, storytellers, dancers, actors, and musicians. Discovery Theater performances unite ideologies, enact themes that reflect the diversity of its audiences, open avenues of self-reflection, and offer an enjoyable means for parents and teachers to demonstrate life’s lessons. There’s so much to do and explore at the Smithsonian—and Discovery Theater is the ideal place to begin! For more information, please visit our website www.discoverytheater.org.

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