

“Inspiration for truly national music might be derived from the Negro melodies or Indian chants. I was led to take this view partly by the fact that the so-called plantation songs are indeed the most striking and appealing melodies that have yet been found on this side of the water, but largely, by the observation that this seems to be recognized though often unconsciously, by most Americans.

The most potent as well as most beautiful among them, according to my estimation, are certain of the so-called plantation melodies and slave songs, all of which are distinguished by unusual and subtle harmonies.”

—Antonin Dvorak, "Music in America," 1895.

Steal Away

—arranged by Clayton White

*Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus.
Steal away, steal away home.
I ain't got long to stay here.*

The Atlantic Slave Trade



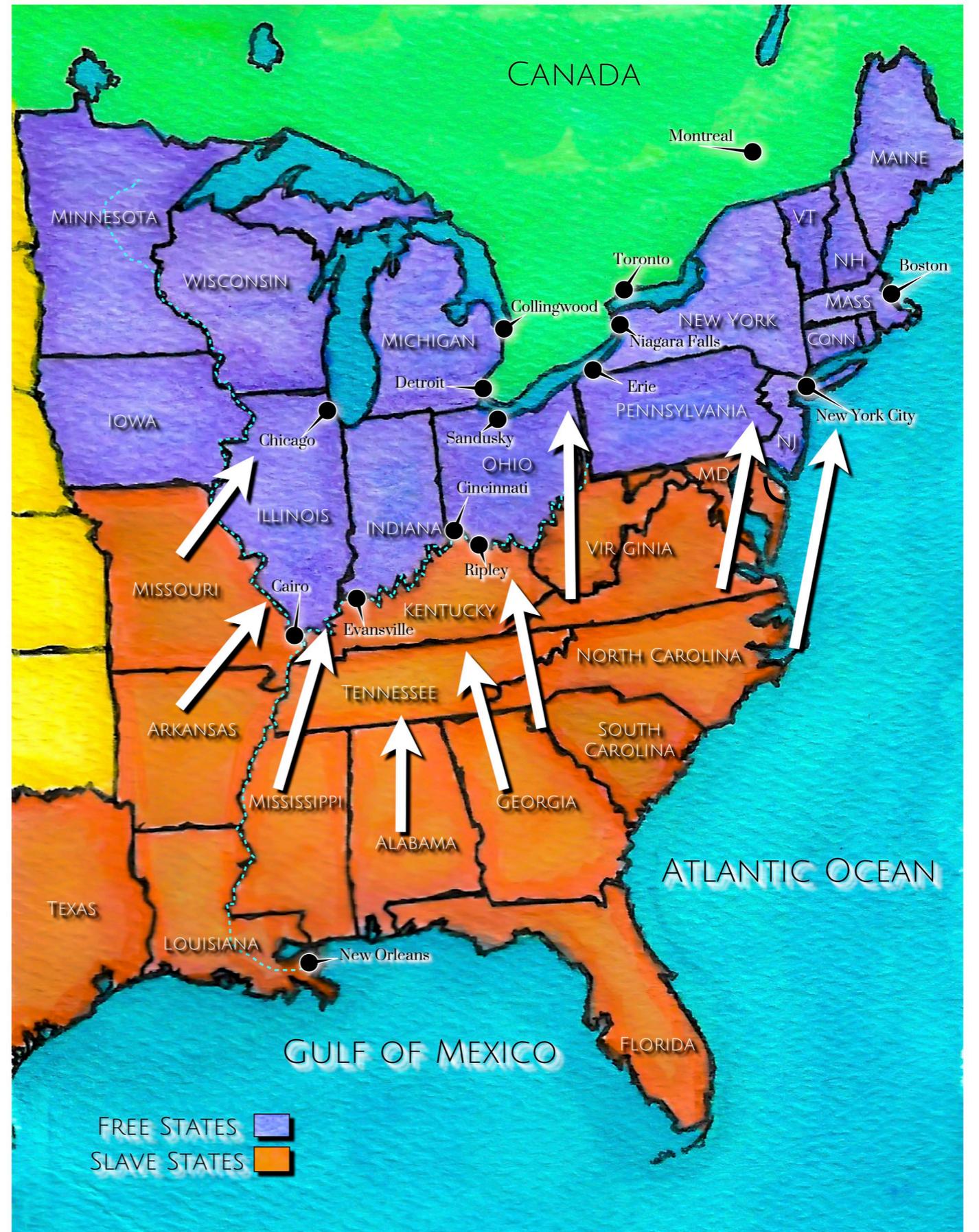
"The Underground Railroad"

“The origin of the term ‘Underground Railroad’ has several versions. One story says that, in 1831, a fugitive slave named Tice Davids escaped from Kentucky to safer ground in Ohio. When his master looked in vain for him in Ripley, just across the Ohio River, he is said to have commented, ‘he must have gone off on an underground railroad.’”

—David Blight, *Passages to Freedom : the Underground Railroad in History and Memory*

Underground Railroad:

Routes & Passage Points



Follow the Drinkin' Gourd

—arranged by André Thomas

Follow the drinkin' gourd.

For the old man is comin' just to carry you to freedom.

When the sun comes back, and the first quail calls,

Follow the drinkin' gourd.

The river bank makes a mighty good road,

The dead trees will show you the way.

Left foot, peg foot, travelin' on,

Follow the drinkin' gourd.

The river ends, between two hills,

There's another river on the other side.

Where the great river meets the little river,

Follow the drinkin' gourd.

For the old man is waiting to carry you to freedom,

Follow the drinkin' gourd.

Folksong & Oral Tradition

**“Time and ‘group editing,’
are the two greatest known
purifiers of folk song.”**

—John Work, American Negro Songs: 230 Folk Songs & Spirituals

"Slaves must not be seen talking together, and so it came about that their communication was often made by singing, and the words of their familiar hymns, telling of the heavenly journey, and the land of Canaan, while they did not attract the attention of the masters, conveyed to their brethren and sisters in bondage something more than met the ear."

— Harriet Tubman

"A keen observer might have detected in our repeated singing of "O Canaan, sweet Canaan. I am bound for the land of Canaan," something more than a hope of reaching heaven.

**We meant to reach the north
—*and the north was our Canaan.*"**

— *Frederick Douglass, My Bondage & My Freedom*

Common Themes & Text
in
Coded Message Spirituals:
Context & Connotations

*Heaven • Canaan
The Promised Land
Gospel Feast • Kingdom*

- **The enslaved often sang of heaven and their longing to go there.**
- **This usually meant freedom in the northern states, Canada, Africa (Liberia), or heaven.**

Hell • Egypt

- **Where evil, sin, and bondage resides.**
- **Being in "hell" means being sold further south, into more difficult and harsh conditions**

Deliverance • Being Redeemed Baptized • Good Religion

- **Every man whose soul has been converted deserves deliverance and freedom**

Jubilee

- **The "Year of Jubilee" (Leviticus 25:8-10) referred to the day, every fifty years, when the Israelites received their property returned and the freedom to reunite with family.**
- **Emancipation, freedom, escape**

Evil Figures

(Satan, Pharaoh, Egyptians, Rich Man Dives)

- **Represented any people that stood in the way of freedom...including slave traders, slave masters, and plantation owners.**

Water • Jordan River • Rivers Baptism • Rain • Fountains

- Usually indicated a journey to the "other side" to freedom. The most often-used codes were for the Ohio River, the Atlantic Ocean (to return to Africa), or any other body of water that posed as a barrier to freedom.
- Also prompted use of the water to aid escape...for example, "Wade in the Water" to conceal any scent from the search dogs.

Possessions

(shoes, robe, crown, harp, trumpet, wings)

- **Since the enslaved didn't "own" anything, the promise of having these things in heaven or when they were freed was exciting.**
- **These were all symbols of traveling, hope, or freedom.**

Place

(Drinking Gourd, Canaan, streets of gold, Promised Land, Jordan River)

- **Providing a sense of “place” kept the focus forward for escape plans.**
- **They might also include geographical markers or other locations for escape. The Drinking Gourd was the north star, Canaan was Canada, the Promised Land was emancipation.**

Heroic Figures

(Moses, Daniel, Elijah, Ezekiel, Jonah, Hebrews, Lazarus, Joshua, Nicodemus)

- **Were ordinary men with extraordinary faith. These figures represented the ordinary men and women enslaved on plantations, hoping to be delivered from slavery, as well as those that sought to help them as agents on the Underground Railroad.**

Transportation

*(chariots, ships, trains, wheels,
wings, shoes, running, flying)*

- **Modes of transportation indicated a manner of traveling and means of escape, such as wagons, wheels, trains, etc. They were all methods of movement and escape on the Underground Railroad.**

Elijah Rock

—arranged by Moses Hogan

*Oh Elijah, oh Elijah. Elijah rock, oh.
Come on sister, help me to pray,
tell me my Lord done pass dis way.*

*Elijah rock, shout, shout.
Elijah rock, comin' up, Lawdy.
Elijah rock, comin' up, Lawd.*

*Satan ain't nothin' but a snake in the grass.
He's a conjur. He's a liar. Hallelujah, Lord.*

*If I could I surely would,
stand on the rock where Moses stood.*

Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?

—arranged by Moses Hogan

*Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
then why not every man?
He deliver'd Daniel from the lion's den,
Jonah from the belly of the whale,
And the Hebrew children from the fiery furnace,
and why not every man? Hallelujah!
The wind blows east and the wind blows west,
it blows like the judgment day.
And ev'ry poor soul that never did pray
will be glad to pray that day.
I set my foot on the Gospel ship,
and the ship it begin to sail.
It landed me over on Canaan's shore,
and I'll never come back anymore.*

Steal Away

—arranged by Clayton White

*Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus.
Steal away, steal away home.
I want to cross over into campground.*

*My Lord, He calls me,
He calls me by the thunder.
The trumpet sounds within a my soul.
I ain't got long to stay here.*

*Green trees are bending,
poor sinner stands a trembling.
The trumpet sounds within a my soul.
I ain't got long to stay here.*

Deep River

—arranged by René Clausen

*Oh, deep river, my home is over Jordan,
Deep river, Lord,
I want to cross over into campground.*

*Oh, don't you want to go to that gospel feast,
That promised land where all is peace?*

*Deep river, Lord,
I want to cross over into campground.*

The Old Ship of Zion

—arranged by Richard Harrison Smith

*'Tis the old ship of Zion, hallelujah!
I'm no ways weary! I'm no ways tired! O glory hallelujah!
Just let me in the kingdom when the world ketch a fire!*

*She has landed many thousands, hallelujah!
She is rollin', jes rollin'.
She is coming in the harbor, hallelujah!
She will land you safe in heaven, hallelujah!*

*O get your ticket ready, the ship will soon be leavin'.
O get your ticket ready to go.*

*King Jesus is her captain, hallelujah!
She will never rock nor totter, hallelujah!
Just let me in the kingdom when the world ketch a fire.
O glory hallelujah! Sing hallelujah!*

**“Intolerable suffering
becomes tolerable
when the end is in sight, or
when something beautiful
transforms ugliness.”**

— Christa Dixon, Negro Spirituals: from Bible to Folk Song