

# The Underground Railroad at Fort Donelson

**Subject:** Social Studies and Language Arts

**Duration:** One week

**Location:** Classroom

**Key Vocabulary:** fugitive slaves, slave hunters, stations, Underground Railroad, conductors, Quakers

**Related Activities:** View the film, *Following the Drinking Gourd*, and read/discuss Ellen Levine's, *If You Traveled on the Underground Railroad*

**Standards:**

**National: Strand 1: Culture**

**State: Kentucky – S.S. 2.20 and L.A. 1.2,1.11**

**Tennessee – S.S. 5.03, L.A. 1.01**



**Objectives.** Students will be able to: a) understand the meaning of the Underground Railroad, b) recognize the significance of codes and special signals; and c) become familiar with key individuals and groups who helped slaves escape via the Underground Railroad.

**Method.** The students will discuss the Underground Railroad with classmates, brainstorm words/adjectives which describe the issues, the codes, and the people related to the Underground Railroad; and, create a poem, rap song, story or skit using modern terminology and context clues (slang, Ebonics, lyrics from modern songs). Classmates will try to decipher the secret codes.

**Background.** The Civil War brought changes for every American. Family life was altered as husbands and sons answered the call to arms. The women left behind assumed new roles and responsibilities, and these roles frequently forced women to work outside the home managing businesses, performing charity work, or operating farms. As the war progressed, many women felt it their duty to help wounded soldiers. African American women experienced many changes, changing from slave to citizenship as United States citizens. The stories of women, regardless of their background, as told in their lives and work, help explain how the war transformed our nation.

## Suggested Procedure.

1. Research: Students will draw from a list of topics related to the Underground Railroad and gather information using encyclopedias, biographies, and the Internet. (see topics in Extension section)
2. Students will present findings of their research using one of the following methods: Power Point presentations, research papers, skits, or oral reports.
3. Write a diary entry about a slave's choice to decide whether to escape or stay with the slave master's family.
4. Students will write a message to a classmate using several of the key code phrases on the attached list. The receiver of the message must interpret where they were to travel if he/she had been a fugitive slave.

## Evaluation

Assessment rubrics will be created to test student knowledge of the Underground Railroad, key people, codes used on the journey to freedom and the historical significance of the Underground Railroad. Students will present findings from research and share writings with other classes.

## Extension

Research Topics: Abolitionist movement, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Emancipation Proclamation, Abraham Lincoln's role, Fugitive Slave Act, the role of Quakers, spirituals and secret codes, and maps/escape routes used by fugitive slaves.

**Code words/phrases for the Underground Railroad:**

1. "Drinking gourd" – the Big Dipper and the North Star
2. "The river ends between two hills" – a clue for the directions to the Ohio River
3. "The dead trees will show you the way" – a reminder that moss grows on the North side of dead trees if stars are not visible
4. "When the sun goes down and the first quail calls" – a good time for escaping – means early spring
5. "The river bank is a mighty good road" – a reminder that the tracking dogs cannot follow the scent through the water
6. "Left foot, peg foot traveling on" – a visual clue for escapees left by an Underground Railroad worker who had a wooden leg
7. Wagon wheel pattern – when a runaway slave saw the wagon wheel quilt hanging on a fence or doorway, they knew to pack belongings and travel
8. Monkey wrench quilt pattern – this design told slaves that they should prepare any tools they might need to escape to freedom

## Read:

- Sterling, Dorothy. *Freedom Train: The Story of Harriet Tubman*. (New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1954).
- Haskins, James and Benson, Kathleen. *Great Journeys Following Freedom's Star*. (New York: Benchmark Books, 2002).

## Materials

- *A Journey on the Underground Railroad*, NPS traveling trunk
- Levine, Ellen. *If You Traveled on the Underground Railroad* (New York: Scholastic, 1994).
- Film, *Follow the Drinking Gourd*
- Activity Guide, traveling trunk