

Yet the deliberate attempts to keep slaves ignorant, and therefore enslaved, were destined to fail. Slowly the word spread that to find freedom, one had only to look to the skies. With the North Star pointing the way, thousands began the perilous journey to freedom. Those who could not or would not attempt the journey at least wanted to ensure that their children knew how to escape.

So, as soon as slave children were old enough to understand, their parents would take them outside and point out the Big Dipper in the night sky. The dipper was also called the "drinking gourd" because it looked like the hollowed out gourd slaves used to scoop up and drink water. Once the children knew how to locate the big dipper, their parents taught them the song "Follow the Drinking Gourd". This was a coded song that gave the route for an escape to the north from Alabama and Mississippi. Of all the routes out of the Deep South, this is the only one for which details survive.

An old man named Peg Leg Joe passed the song and its lyrics from slave to slave. Working as an itinerant carpenter, Joe spent winters in the South, moving from plantation to plantation, teaching the slaves this escape route. At the end of the "drinking gourd" was the North Star, and the path of the North Star was the path to freedom.

Here are the lyrics to that song:

Lyrics

When the sun comes back,
and the first Quail calls,
Follow the drinking gourd,
For the old man is waiting
For to carry you to freedom
If you follow the drinking gourd.

Chorus:

Follow the drinking gourd,
Follow the drinking gourd,
For the old man is waiting
For to carry you to freedom
If you follow the drinking gourd.

The riverbank will make a very good road,
The dead trees show you the way.

Left foot, peg foot traveling on,
Following 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 waiting
For to carry you to freedom
If you follow the drinking gourd.

The information above is a compilation of facts found online at:

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Troy/9087/black/gourd.html>

<http://www.teachervision.fen.com/african-american-history/u-s-civil-war/9406.html>

ALL: Follow...

(clap)

The drinking gourd.

Follow...

(clap)

The drinking gourd.

The old man is waiting to carry you to freedom

If you follow the drinking gourd.

ALL GIRL VOICES: Star light, star bright,
First star we see tonight.
We wish we may,
We wish we might,

ALL: Find our way to freedom!

ALL BOY VOICES: Way down in the deep deep south
An old man sang a tune.
He sang his song the whole day long
Morning, night, and noon.

ALL GIRL VOICES: Sang in the morning,
Sang in the evening,
Sang in the after - noon.

ALL BOY VOICES: Star light, star bright,
 First star we see tonight.
 We wish we may,
 We wish we might,

ALL: Find our way to freedom.

ALL GIRL VOICES: The old man had a wooden leg.
 His name was Peg Leg Joe.
 He told the slaves,

SOLO VOICE: "Do sing my song,
 It's something you should know!"

ALL BOY VOICES: Sing it high,
 Sing it low.
 It's something you should know!

ALL GIRL VOICES: Star light, star bright,
 First star we see tonight.
 We wish we may,
 We wish we might,

ALL: Find our way to freedom.

ALL BOY VOICES: The slaves dipped water from the well.
 They used a drinking gourd.

And then they sang Joe's little song,
Each special note and chord.

ALL GIRL VOICES: Dipped the water,
Sang the song,
Sang each note and chord.

SOLO VOICE: The song said:

ALL: Follow...

(clap)

The drinking gourd.

Follow...

(clap)

The drinking gourd.

The old man is waiting to carry you to freedom

If you follow the drinking gourd.

ALL GIRL VOICES: The slaves looked to the dark night sky
And then what did they see?
They saw a gourd made out of stars,
As plain as it could be.

ALL BOY VOICES: They saw a gourd
Made out of stars,