



Escaping slaves did not have maps to guide them North. Instead, they often relied on "map songs" which included coded words. Those coded words provided directions. One of the most famous songs was "Follow the Drinking Gourd."

*When the sun comes back and the first quail calls,  
Follow the drinking gourd.  
For the old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom,  
If you follow the Drinking Gourd.*

*The river bank makes a mighty fine road,  
Dead trees to show you the way,  
And it's 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.*

*Where the great big river meets the little river,  
Follow the drinking gourd.  
For the old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom  
If you follow the drinking gourd.*

*I thought I heard the angels say  
Follow the drinking gourd.  
The stars in the heavens  
Gonna show you the way  
Follow the drinking gourd.*

What does the song mean? According to *Music of the Civil War Era*, by Steven Cornelius, at [page 120](#):

*The text seems to be a set of coded instructions telling the resolute traveler how to make his way north. The "drinking gourd" refers to either the constellation of the Little Dipper (Canus [sic] Minor), which holds the North Star at the end of its handle, or possibly, the "gourd" may be the Big Dipper (Canus [sic] Major), whose "pointer stars" at the end of the pot point almost straight to the North Star. (NOTE: There are other errors in this quote. The [Little Dipper](#) is in the constellation [Ursa Minor](#) [not [Canis Minor](#)] and the [Big Dipper](#) is in the constellation [Ursa Major](#) [not [Canis Major](#)].)*

*The first stanza instructs the traveler to begin the journey around the winter solstice when "the sun comes back" to the northern hemisphere...*

There was a very good reason for choosing winter as the best time to begin the journey. Most escaping slaves had to cross the Ohio River. It is very wide, with a strong current, which makes swimming difficult. If the river were frozen, people could walk across.

Since it took slaves about one year to reach the Ohio, after they left the South, they would be able to make the crossing at the best time of year. Cornelius (in *Music of the Civil War Era*) continues:

*The riverbank of verse two was evidently the Tombigbee River, which stretches from Tennessee to the Gulf of Mexico. From there, travelers follow the Tennessee River until it joins with the "great big" Ohio River. After completing that crossing, preferably in the winter when the river was frozen, people would be waiting on the other side to "carry you to freedom." (*Music of the Civil War Era*, by Steven H. Cornelius, [page 120](#).)*

Note, however, some scholars believe that line - "For the old man is waiting for to carry you to freedom" - was added much later (well after the slaves were freed and no longer had to travel by way of the underground railroad). The line is attributed to Lee Hayes (as noted in his papers which are maintained at the Smithsonian). The writer of the rest of the song is unknown, although there have been several different versions. Click on the image for a much-better view of the Dipper.

## Credits:

Image from "Ohio's Underground Railroad to Freedom," an article in the *Ohio State Parks Magazine* (Spring/Summer 1996).

Quoted passages from *Music of the Civil War Era*, by Steven H. Cornelius. Online, courtesy Google Books.

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