

Songs of the Underground Railroad

 harriet-tubman.org/songs-of-the-underground-railroad/

Songs were used in everyday life by African slaves. Singing was tradition brought from Africa by the first slaves; sometimes their songs are called spirituals. Singing served many purposes such as providing repetitive rhythm for repetitive manual work, inspiration and motivation. Singing was also use to express their values and solidarity with each other and during celebrations. Songs were used as tools to remember and communicate since the majority of slaves could not read.

[Harriet Tubman](#) and other slaves used songs as a strategy to communicate with slaves in their struggle for freedom. Coded songs contained words giving directions on how to escape also known as signal songs or where to meet known as map songs. Read more about [Underground Railroad secret code language](#).

Songs used Biblical references and analogies of Biblical people, places and stories, comparing them to their own history of slavery. For example, “being bound for the land of Canaan” for a white person could mean ready to die and go to heaven; but to a slave it meant ready to go to Canada.

These are the lyrics of some songs that have been passed along for generations.

In Wade in the Water

Tubman used “Wade in the Water” to tell slaves to get into the water to avoid being seen and make it through. This is an example of a map song, where directions are coded into the lyrics. These are the lyrics to “Wade in the Water”

Chorus: Wade in the Water, wade in the water children.

Wade in the Water. God's gonna trouble the water.

Who are those children all dressed in Red?

God's gonna trouble the water.

Must be the ones that Moses led.

God's gonna trouble the water.

Chorus

Who are those children all dressed in White?

God's gonna trouble the water.

Must be the ones of the Israelites.

God's gonna trouble the water.

Chorus

Who are those children all dressed in Blue?

God's gonna trouble the water.

Must be the ones that made it through.

God's gonna trouble the water.

Chorus

Steal Away

This song communicates that the person singing it is planning to escape.

Chorus: steal away, steal away!

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

*My Lord calls me!
He calls me by the thunder!
The trumpet sound it in my soul!
I ain't got long to stay here!*

Chorus

*My Lord calls me!
He calls me by the lighting!
The trumpet sound it in my soul!
I ain't got long to stay here!*

Chorus.

Sweet Chariot

If a slave heard this song he would know he had to be ready to escape, a band of angels are coming to take him to freedom. The Underground Railroad (sweet chariot) is coming south (swing low) to take the slave to the north or freedom (carry me home). This was one of Tubman's favorite songs according to Sarah Hopkins Bradford's biography, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*.

*Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home,
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.*

*I looked over Jordan and what did I see
Coming for to carry me home,
A band of angels coming after me,
Coming for to carry me home.*

*I you get there before I do,
Coming for to carry me home,
Tell all my friends that I'm coming, too,
Coming for to carry me home.*

Follow the Drinking Gourd

This song suggests escaping in the spring as the days get longer. It also refers to quails which start calling each other in April. The drinking gourd is a water dipper which is a code name for the Big Dipper which points to the Pole Star towards the north. Moss grows on the north side of dead trees, so if the Big Dipper is not visible, dead trees will

guide them north.

*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.*

Another unnamed song sang in the same situation but letting them know it is not safe to come out, there is danger in the way. Source: Harriet Tubman, the Moses of her People by Sarah Hopkins Bradford.

*Chorus:
Oh go down, Moses,
Way down into Egypt's land,
Tell old Pharaoh,
Let my people go.*

*Oh Pharaoh said he would go cross,
Let my people go,
And don't get lost in the wilderness,
Let my people go.*

Chorus

*You may hinder me here, but you can't up there,
Let my people go,
He sits in the Heaven and answers prayer,
Let my people go!*

Chorus