

RESOURCE LIBRARY  
ACTIVITY : 1 HR

## How Enslaved People Found Their Way North

Students learn about natural and human-made clues that helped enslaved people find their way north through the Underground Railroad. Then they create a quilt with clues about routes to freedom.

### GRADES

1, 2

### SUBJECTS

*Geography, Human Geography, Physical Geography*

### CONTENTS

2 Links, 1 PDF

## OVERVIEW

Students learn about natural and human-made clues that helped enslaved people find their way north through the Underground Railroad. Then they create a quilt with clues about routes to freedom.

For the complete activity with media resources, visit:

<http://www.nationalgeographic.org/activity/how-enslaved-people-found-way-north/>

## DIRECTIONS

### 1. Discuss how enslaved people used clues in nature to find their way north.

Tell students that enslaved people did not have maps, compasses, or GPS units. Most enslaved persons were never allowed to receive an education, and so could not read or write. Ask: *How do you think enslaved people knew they were going in the right direction?* Tell students that

enslaved people relied on guides in the Underground Railroad, as well as memorization, images, and spoken communication. Enslaved people could also tell they were traveling north by looking at clues in the world around them. For example:

- Moss usually grows on the north side of trees.
- Migrating birds fly north in the summer.
- The North Star always points to the north. You can find it by looking for the Big Dipper, a group of stars that some enslaved people called “the drinking gourd.”

Have students imagine themselves in the woods, trying to find their way north. Ask: *What other clues in nature tell you something about direction?* Elicit from students that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. They could use this to figure out which way is north at the beginning and end of the day.

## **2. Discuss how enslaved people used clues in music and art to find their way north.**

Explain to students that enslaved people also relied on songs and quilts to find their way north. Tell them that songs were one way to hide information about a route. Read aloud the lyrics of “Follow the Drinking Gourd” and the clues about the words on the Pathways to Freedom website. Then explain that quilts were blankets that had special patterns, or codes, that enslaved people memorized. These patterns helped enslaved people learn about the route to take in order to escape to the north. Show students two of the quilt patterns on the Pathways to Freedom website. Read aloud the meanings of the patterns for enslaved people. Ask: *Why were songs and quilts helpful for escaping enslaved persons?* Elicit from students that these were ways to communicate in secret, and enslaved people did not need to know how to read or write to understand their message.

## **3. Have each student create a quilt with a clue about routes to freedom.**

Display for students the map “Routes to Freedom.” Ask students to draw a quilt with a picture clue about something enslaved people would have needed to know to successfully take one of the routes north. Encourage students to be creative. For example, students can create clues about:

- what the weather was like
- where food could be found
- how much distance was left to travel
- ways to cross bodies of water
- dangers from people or animals
- which way is north

#### 4. Create a class quilt.

After students have finished, tape all of the squares together on a wall to create a class quilt.

## OBJECTIVES

# Subjects & Disciplines

### Geography

- Human Geography
- Physical Geography

# Learning Objectives

Students will:

- describe clues in nature, music, and art that helped slaves find their way north
- create a quilt showing clues about routes to freedom

# Teaching Approach

- Learning-for-use

# Teaching Methods

- Discussions
- Hands-on learning

# Skills Summary

This activity targets the following skills:

- Critical Thinking Skills
  - Applying
  - Remembering
  - Understanding

- Geographic Skills
  - Analyzing Geographic Information

# National Standards, Principles, and Practices

## NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULUM STANDARDS

- Theme 2:

Time, Continuity, and Change

## NATIONAL GEOGRAPHY STANDARDS

- Standard 17:

How to apply geography to interpret the past

### **Preparation**

### **What You'll Need**

#### **MATERIALS YOU PROVIDE**

- Construction paper
- Crayons
- Markers

#### **REQUIRED TECHNOLOGY**

- Internet Access: Required
- Tech Setup: 1 computer per classroom, Projector

#### **PHYSICAL SPACE**

- Classroom

#### **GROUPING**

- Large-group instruction

# BACKGROUND & VOCABULARY

## Background Information

Clues in nature, music, and art helped slaves navigate their way north via the Underground Railroad.

## Prior Knowledge

## Recommended Prior Activities

- [The Underground Railroad Route](#)

## Vocabulary

Term	Part of Speech	Definition
enslaved person	<i>noun</i>	person who is owned by another person or group of people.
slavery	<i>noun</i>	process and condition of owning another human being or being owned by another human being.
Underground Railroad	<i>noun</i>	system used by abolitionists between 1800-1865 to help enslaved African Americans escape to free states.

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### For Further Exploration

### Interactives

- [National Geographic Education: The Underground Railroad](#)

### Websites

- [National Parks Service: Aboard the Underground Railroad](#)

- [PBS: The Underground Railroad](#)
- [Maryland Public Television: Pathways to Freedom—Maryland & the Underground Railroad](#)



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