

RESOURCE LIBRARY | ACTIVITY : 1 HR

How Slaves Found Their Way North

Students learn about natural and human-made clues that helped slaves 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 slaves 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-slaves-found-way-north/>

DIRECTIONS

1. Discuss how slaves used clues in nature to find their way north.

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

Underground Railroad, as well as memorization, images, and spoken communication. Slaves 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 slaves 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 slaves used clues in music and art to find their way north.

Explain to students that slaves 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 slaves memorized. These patterns helped slaves 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 slaves. Ask: *Why were songs and quilts helpful for escaping slaves?* Elicit from students that these were ways to communicate in secret, and slaves 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 slaves 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

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Recommended Prior Activities

- [Introduction to the Underground Railroad](#)
- [The Underground Railroad Route](#)

Vocabulary

Term	Part of Speech	Definition
slave	<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 American slaves escape to free states.

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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