



# Heroes of the Underground Railroad

## Bright Star Touring Theatre Study Guide



### About the show:

The Underground Railroad received its name in 1831 when an escaping slave, Tice Davids, lunged into the Ohio River with his owner close behind him. At once, Tice was out of sight from his owner who became quite surprised by his disappearance. "It was if he had escaped into an underground railroad," his owner said.

It's important to know that the Underground Railroad was neither underground nor a railroad, but rather an intricate system of homes, farms and people that could help guide an escaping slave to freedom. Slaves traveling North would rely on these stopovers for food, shelter, and information. The Underground Railroad moved thousands of slaves to freedom in almost complete secrecy.

The Underground Railroad offered many challenges to those making their way North. This secret network developed many methods of communicating that helped travelers find their way. Most famous were the songs popular at the time with slaves. "Follow the Drinking Gourd," the song used in the beginning of our play, offered many hints to slaves as to how to begin their journey. Hidden in the lyrics are clues as to what time of year to plan an escape,

what direction to follow and what signs to seek along the route. Aside from music, a number of other tools were utilized to help guide slaves to freedom. Lanterns placed in specific places around a house indicated that it was safe for an escapee to approach the house. Carvings in trees showed which rivers to follow North and quilts conveyed meanings through their different patterns. Even the language of the Railroad was incorporated with coded meanings: 'Conductors' were those that helped slaves to freedom; 'Passengers' and 'Baggage' referred to the slaves; and 'Stations' were the safe-houses along their journey. Such language enabled people to talk openly about the Underground Railroad without fear of being overheard.

In the Bright Star production, we seek to empower young people to stand up for their beliefs and to show them that real heroes do exist throughout our American history and landscape.

### About Our Production:

This production is a touring show with Bright Star Theatre. During its run, this production may be seen by audiences in as many as 15 different states! Professional actors join Bright Star from across the United States to tour our shows. In a typical week, they'll perform in 10-13 venues for all kinds of audiences. Our actors travel in minivans, averaging 800-1000 miles of driving *per week*, and they have performed for as many as 10,000 people *in one week*! After the show, our actors are available for you to ask questions about this production and their lives as actors - it's one of the most exciting parts of the Bright Star experience - and we hope you have the chance to have your question answered!



# Words to Know:

Theatre is a form of storytelling that has been entertaining people for thousands of years. Theatre has its own kind of language. Here are some terms that actors, directors, and other “theatre people” use all the time!

**Audition:** A hopeful actor will either read, sing or dance (or sometimes all three!) in order for the director to decide which actor she wants to cast in a particular role.

**Director:** The director reads the script, and tells the actors where they should go and what they should do. Each director has a different way of telling a story from every other director, and this means that each play will be unique from every other play!

**Set:** All of the scenery on the stage is part of what is called the “set.” It helps to paint a picture of where the story takes place, so it is easier for the audience to follow the play. For *Heroes of the Underground Railroad*, our actors use a backdrop, which is the colorful painted background.

**Costumes:** All of the clothes that are worn onstage by the actors are costumes. The hats, the coats, and even the shirts and shoes are all part of the costumes!

**Props:** Anything that an actor carries during the show is a prop. Can you remember any of the props used by the actors in this play?

**Rehearsal:** Once the cast of the play is set, everyone on the show needs to practice to get ready for the show. This can take weeks, and that gives time for the sets and costumes to be built, and for the actors to learn their lines.

**Actors:** These are the people that you see on stage. They each have a character to play, and they spend a long time rehearsing before they perform. They have to learn where they should walk, when they should talk, and how their characters should act. It’s a lot of work!

## and of course -

**Audience:** Perhaps the most important element in the show! The audience consists of the people who watch the play. You were our audience for *Heroes of the Underground Railroad*!

# Seeing the Play:

Attending the theatre is very different than going to the movies or watching television. For one thing, the actors are real people who can hear and see everything that’s happening in the audience. It’s important to know a few rules before seeing a play:

- ★ Please be quiet and respectful during the performance so that those around you can hear what’s happening.
- ★ If something’s funny, it’s okay to laugh!
- ★ If you like the play, be sure to clap at the end.

What else can you add to the list?

## Timeline:

- 1619:** First Africans arrive in Jamestown, Virginia.
- 1660:** Slavery becomes officially recognized in America.
- 1776:** The United States Constitution declares that “all men are created equal” but this does not extend to those men considered slaves.
- 1777:** Vermont becomes the first state to outlaw slavery.
- 1808:** Congress bans the importation of slaves stolen from a federal arsenal.
- 1820-21:** Missouri Compromise allows Missouri to enter as a slave state and Maine as a free state.
- 1831:** William Garrison begins publishing the Abolitionist paper *The Liberator*.
- 1831:** Nat Turner launches his slave revolt in Virginia.
- 1852:** *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is published by Harriet Beecher Stowe.
- 1857:** US Supreme Court hears the Dred Scott Case.
- 1858:** Abraham Lincoln is nominated for president.
- 1859:** John Brown fails in his attempt to launch a slave rebellion in Virginia with weapons.
- 1861:** The Civil War begins in Charleston, South Carolina.
- 1863:** The Emancipation Proclamation frees all slaves in the Confederacy.
- 1865:** The Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, which outlaws slavery, is ratified by Congress.
- 1865:** The Civil War ends at Appomattox Court House, Virginia.
- 1870:** The Fifteenth Amendment is passed, which allows all citizens the right to vote regardless of race.

# Classroom Activities:

## **Create a *Heroes of the Underground Railroad* Newscast!**

*This activity incorporates creative thinking, research, writing, and performance!*

1. Break students into small groups. Have each group create a segment of a newscast about *Heroes of the Underground Railroad*. The possibilities are endless and the more creative, the better the result! Ideas for segments could include: an interview with Harriet Tubman, an investigative report on symbols used for communication along the Underground Railroad routes, an interview with a slave in the midst of his or her journey along with a followup once he or she has arrived safely to the destination, a story about what types of food slaves ate while traveling - even the weather and commercials could be tackled!
2. Discuss all the things that make a play possible. Have each group think about how costumes, props, and the set could help bring their news segments to life. If there's time, try to create some of these props or costume pieces from everyday items!
3. Time for performance! Have each group perform their segment of the news. Remind the other students about being good audience members while they watch their friends onstage!

## **Writing for *The Liberator*!**

*This activity incorporates creative thinking, reading, visual art, and writing!*

1. Break students into teams of two.
2. Have each team write an article or draw a cartoon that could be included in William Garrison's anti-slavery newspaper *The Liberator*. Be creative!
3. Have each team read or present their article or drawing. Talk about why the team made their specific choices.
4. Put together all the articles and drawings into a classroom version of *The Liberator*. Feel free to send a copy to Bright Star Touring Theatre!

## **Map It!**

*This activity incorporates social studies, math, and geography!*

1. Break students into teams of two.
2. Have each team find Ripley, Ohio and Uniontown, AL on a map. Measure the distance between the two cities in miles.
3. Slaves generally traveled about 20 miles a night along the Underground Railroad. Using this number, have each team estimate how many nights it would take a slave to travel from Uniontown to Ripley.
4. Repeat the steps with Richmond, VA to Philadelphia, PA; Charleston, SC to Newport, IN; Norfolk, VA to Rochester, NY; Macon, GA to St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada.

# Questions for Discussion:

1. Deciding to escape slavery and following the Underground Railroad took a great deal of courage. What kind of decisions and problems faced someone taking the journey?
2. Read the lyrics to the song "Follow the Drinking Gourd" and work together to decipher what the various verses could mean to an escaping slave. What is the drinking gourd? Are their directions hidden in the song? Why was a song used to pass down directions to a slave? Why did the directions have to be hidden in the song?
3. What kinds of people do we consider heroes today? Who are your heroes? Why?
4. Imagine the bravery it took for people to stand up for their beliefs against slavery while being threatened. Are there injustices today that deserve our attention and help?

# Biographies:

**Harriet Tubman (1819-1913)** was born into slavery in Maryland and named Harriet Ross to honor her enslaved parents. At 25, she married John Tubman, a freed African, and began thinking about her escape North. Five years later, she escaped to Philadelphia, PA by use of stops along the Underground Railroad. In Philadelphia, she worked extremely hard to raise the money needed to buy her family's freedom and finally she succeeded in moving them to St. Catharines, just across the American/Canadian border. Harriet Tubman has been called the "Moses of her people" because of her brave returns to Maryland to assist others escape to freedom. She is credited for assisting over 300 people in their journey to freedom!

**Levi Coffin (1798-1877)** was part of a family of North Carolina Quakers who moved to Newport, Indiana to open their home to the Underground Railroad. Here they assisted 2,000 escapees in a home full of hidden rooms and an indoor well. In 1847, Levi and his wife moved to Cincinnati to open a store selling goods made exclusively by freed slaves. Here they assisted another 1,500 people to freedom along the legendary route. Their Indiana home has been called the "Grand Central Station of the Underground Railroad!" He once worked with John Fairfield to lead a group of slaves to freedom by disguising them as a funeral procession!

**Henry "Box" Brown (1815-?)** was a Virginia slave who hatched a plan to ship himself as "fragile goods" to an abolitionist's address in the North. Having spent 26 hours in a shipping crate making the journey from Richmond, VA to Philadelphia, PA, Mr. Brown exited the box a free man. Over the years, several more shipping crates full of escaping slaves arrived at various addresses in the North—including one containing a pregnant woman!

**John Fairfield (1797-1847)** was the son of a slave owner, as well as an Ohio abolitionist and friend to Levi Coffin. He asked fugitives to swear that they would fight to their death before allowing someone to return them into slavery!

**John Parker (1827-1900)** was born in Norfolk, VA, and remained in slavery until he was able to buy his freedom at the age of 18. He then moved to Ripley, Ohio. Parker was extremely brave and would make many risky trips into slave territory to help others escape North.

**Rev. John Rankin (1793-1886)** was a strong abolitionist and minister who moved to Ripley, Ohio with his 13 children in order for his house to be a stop on the Underground Railroad. It is estimated that his family helped some 2,000 slaves achieve freedom!

**Dred Scott (1799-1858)** was a slave who brought one of the most important cases in our nation's history to the American Supreme Court: whether or not it was legal that he could be held a slave in a free nation. The Court held that since Africans could never be considered American Citizens, his case was not valid in the court system. Mr. Scott's master eventually paid for his freedom; however he passed away a year-and-a-half later.

# Singing Along:

*A drinking gourd was a hollowed out gourd used by slaves (and other rural Americans) as a water dipper. But in this song, it is used as a code name for the Big Dipper star*

## Follow the Drinking Gourd

### Chorus

Follow the Drinking Gourd!  
Follow the Drinking Gourd.  
For the old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom.  
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,  
Follow the drinking Gourd.

### *(Repeat Chorus)*

The Riverbank makes a very good home,  
The dead trees will show you the way,  
Left foot, peg foot travelin' on,  
Follow the drinking gourd.



### *(Repeat Chorus)*

The river ends between two hills,  
Follow the drinking gourd,  
There's another river on the other side,  
Follow the drinking gourd.



### *(Repeat Chorus)*

Where the great big river meets the little river,  
Follow the drinking gourd,  
The old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom,  
Follow the drinking gourd!

