

African American Voices Lesson Plans

Lesson Plan: The Underground Railroad

Subject: United States History

Grade: 11

NGSSS-SS: **SS.912.A.2.2-** Understand the causes, course, and consequences of the Civil War and Reconstruction and its effects on the American people.



Assess the influence of significant people or groups on Reconstruction.

**Description/
Abstract of Lesson:** The students will study the various strategies used in the Underground Railroad from multiple perspectives. The students will display comprehension by writing an essay taking a position on whether or not they would risk being punished and help runaway slaves. The students will also engage in a role play activity making and posting signs throughout the school that would help fellow classmates make it from one end of the school to a secret area of the school labeled “freedom.”

Objective(s): Students will:

- Identify the various personalities involved and strategies used in the Underground Railroad.
- Understand the difficulty of “running away” through a role play activity.
- Develop a moral versus legal understanding of the Underground Railroad.

Materials:

- Internet resources
- Books, magazines and other resources made available by the school/school media center
- Construction paper, scissors, markers, crayons, colored pencils, etc.

Duration: 3 class periods

**Lesson Lead In/
Opening:**

1. The teacher will explain to the students they will be reading/singing an old and very famous song in the African American community. Display the Drinking Gourd song lyrics on the overhead/smart board.
2. After singing/reading as a class, the teacher will ask the students what they believe the song was used for. The teacher will write the answers on the board.
3. The teacher will explain to the students how songs like “Follow the Drinking Gourd” were used to help runaway slaves escape to gain their freedom. Explain how “The Drinking Gourd” referred to the “Big Dipper” (which includes “The North Star”) and helped run

away slaves make it all the way to Canada.

Activity 1:

1. The teacher will engage the students about the Underground Railroad. Explain that while on the path towards freedom there were people that were against slavery that assisted runaway slaves hide and escape to safety. Point out that there were various strategies that were used, all of them were “underground” or unknown to the public since it was illegal to assist runaway slaves especially after 1850 when the Fugitive Slave Act was passed, which required Northern states to return runaway slaves to their masters. This law also allowed professional slave catchers to enter into northern states and capture runaway slaves.

Here are various strategies used in the Underground Railroad:

- The use of songs as instructional guides that taught how to escape
- Actual rescue missions as employed by Harriet Tubman.
- The harboring of runaway slaves in houses, barns, etc., as in the way the Reverend John Rankin of Ripley, Ohio did.
- The use of signs: Examples included candles being lit or off to symbolize if it was safe to enter into certain areas.
- The use of symbols on tree bark or quilts to show whether or not it was safe to enter certain areas, inform what route should be taken, if there was danger approaching, etc.

2. Use internet sources as supplementary reading material. You may use the following as examples:

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850

http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/fugitive.asp

The Underground Railroad

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/railroad/>

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2944.html>

<http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/underground/>

<http://www.history.rochester.edu/class/ugrr/home.html>

<http://www.slaveryinamerica.org/scripts/sia/gallery.cgi>

Harriet Tubman

<http://www.nyhistory.com/harriettubman/life.htm>

<http://www.americaslibrary.gov/cgi-bin/page.cgi/aa/tubman>

<http://www.incwell.com/Biographies/Tubman.html>

<http://www.civilwarhome.com/tubmanbio.htm>

The Rankin House

<http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/travel/underground/oh3.htm>

The Use of Quilts in the Underground Railroad

<http://www.quilthistory.com/ugrrquilts.htm>

http://www.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/threads_of_freedom/threads2.html

3. After discussing the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and the heroic things done while breaking the law for moral reasons (rescuing and assisting runaway slaves), have the students answer the following questions in the form of brief essays:

- Knowing the horrible things African peoples experienced in slavery and knowing the risks of getting caught violating the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, would you have broken this law? Why or why not?
- Are there situations in our society today that would cause you to break certain laws for moral reasons? Why or why not?

4. Have the students share and discuss their answers with the class.

Note: While covering this lesson, be sure to emphasize to the students that the Underground Railroad that led to the North was only one of several routes African peoples took to make it to freedom. Runaway slaves also escaped to The Caribbean, Florida to live amongst the Seminoles and Mexico where slavery was illegal. Reference the following websites for further information:

http://www.slaveryinamerica.org/history/hs_es_seminole.htm

<http://www.neta.com/~1stbooks/saint5.htm>

http://www.staugustine.com/stories/120201/new_326428.shtml

<http://www.johnhorse.com/black-seminoles/news/index.htm>

<http://www.ket.org/underground/timeline/ustime.htm>

<http://www.yale.edu/glc/gullah/07.htm>

<http://www.texancultures.com/>

http://www.mexconnect.com/mex_/feature/ethnic/bv/spec0303.html

Also reference:

Katz, W. L. (1986) Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage, Atheneum

Activity 2: Engage the students in a role play activity. Divide the class into two groups:

- **Group A** will be assigned to design symbols and signs that give clues as to where to go in the school to find “freedom” (a secret classroom pre-selected by the teacher). Group A will post the symbols and signs appropriately throughout the school. (Have Group A use the quilt codes as a reference. You may arrange for the symbols and signs to be constructed according to imagery that people are popularly familiar with today.)
- **Group B** will be assigned to search the school for the symbols and signs. Students in Group B will interpret the symbols and signs, guiding them to “freedom.”

Assessment:

- Consider cooperation and creativity grades when students work in groups.
- Teacher observation and evaluation of essays/projects. Check for historical accuracy as an indicator of comprehension, grammar, etc.
- Evaluate students according to how well they give and follow coded directions.

Higher Order

Thinking Questions:

1. Knowing the horrible things African peoples experienced in slavery and knowing the risks of getting caught violating the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, would you have broken this law? Why or why not?
2. Are there situations in our society today that would cause you to break certain laws for moral reasons? Why or why not?
3. If you were to give instructions to get from one end of the school to the other without using words, what signs would you create and where would you post them?

**Suggested Books
In Lesson:**

Bial, R. (1999) The Underground Railroad, Boston: Houghton Mifflin

Hendrick, G. (2004) Fleeing for Freedom: Stories of the Underground Railroad as Told by Levi Coffin and William Still, Ivan R. D

Hopkins, D. (2003) Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt, Knopf Books for Young Readers

Hopkins, D. (2005) Under the Quilt of Night, Aladdin

Winter, J. (1992) Follow the Drinking Gourd, Dragonfly Books

Blockson, C. (1987) The Underground Railroad, New York: Prentice-Hall Press

Breyfogle, W. A. (1958) Make free; the story of the Underground railroad, Philadelphia: Lippincott

Johnson, H. U. (1970) From Dixie to Canada: romance and realities of the underground railroad, Westport, Conn: Negro Universities Press

Web Resources: <http://www.nku.edu/~undergroundrr/lessonplans/>

Follow the Drinking Gourd

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

**The river bank makes a very good road,
The dead trees 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.**

**Where the great big river meets the little river,
Follow the Drinking Gourd.
For the old man is awaiting to carry you to
freedom if you
follow the Drinking Gourd.**