

Follow the Drinking Gourd (20 minutes) is offered by arrangement only, and is suitable for elementary and family audiences.

Prior to the Civil War, slaves escaped from southern plantations and made their way to the Underground Railroad by means of the Big Dipper (Drinking Gourd) and North Star. A carpenter called Peg Leg Joe traveled from farm to farm and plantation to plantation, teaching slaves a song that would cryptically remind them of his instructions to find their way northward.

When the Sun comes back
And the first quail calls¹
Follow the Drinking Gourd.
For the old man² is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom
If you follow the Drinking Gourd.

The riverbank³ makes a very good road.
The dead trees will show you the way.
Left foot, peg foot, traveling on,⁴
Follow the Drinking Gourd.

The river ends between two hills
Follow the Drinking Gourd.
There's another river on the other side⁵
Follow the Drinking Gourd.

When the great big river meets the little river⁶
Follow the Drinking Gourd.
For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom
If you follow the drinking gourd.

NOTES:

1. On the winter solstice the Sun rises in the southeast. In the months after the December solstice the Sun rises more northerly and ascends higher in the sky each day. Migratory quail winter in the south.
2. Peg Leg Joe.
3. Tombigbee River, leading northward from the Gulf of Mexico toward Tennessee.
4. Dead trees were used as markers with charcoal and mud drawings of a peg leg and a foot.
5. Tennessee River, which flows northward across Tennessee and Kentucky.
6. That is, at the confluence of the Tennessee River and the Ohio River (over 800 miles north of Mobile), where Underground Railroad guides would meet fugitive slaves on the northern bank and transport them to safer regions. A slave who left a farm or plantation in southern Alabama or Mississippi in the winter (see note 1) would arrive at the Ohio river about a year later--the best time to cross, when one could simply walk across the ice.