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Charles Blockson

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HIPPOCRENE GUIDE TO

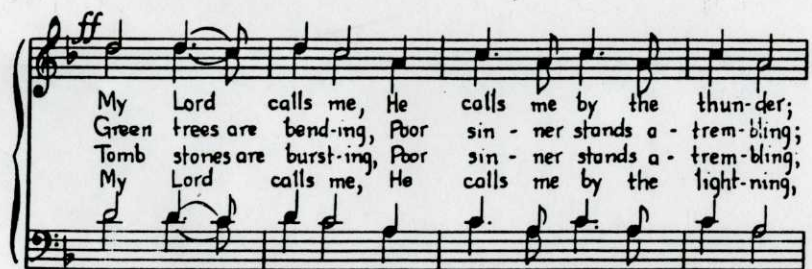
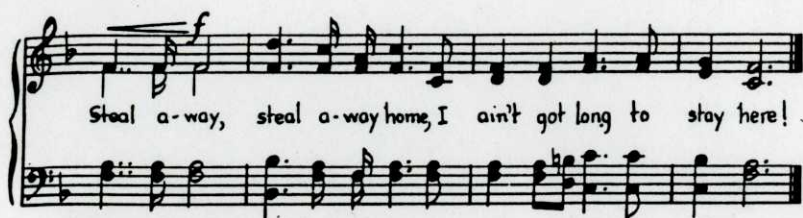
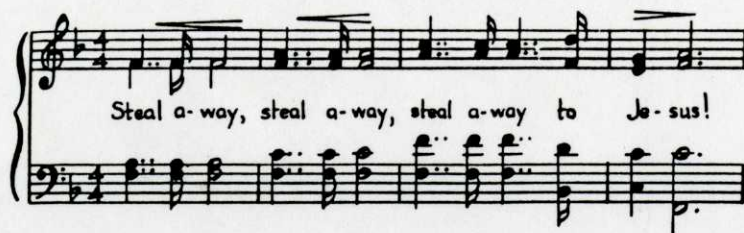
**THE  
UNDERGROUND  
RAILROAD**

**Charles L. Blockson**

E  
450  
• B65  
1994

HIPPOCRENE BOOKS  
*New York*

## STEAL AWAY TO JESUS



## Songs of the Underground Railroad

For those travelers who would like to experience the sense of community and the full spirit of the Underground Railroad, there are a number of coded spirituals that could give them the feeling of the adventure as they are traveling between sites.

These coded spirituals conveyed every hidden signal imaginable, signals for escaping, hiding, and expressing danger. Slaves used the Bible as a source for the religious interpretation of lyrics, when singing innocent seeming spirituals. One song, for example, "Steal Away," was an obvious invitation to the slave to steal way to freedom.

*Steal away, steal away  
Steal away to Jesus  
Steal away, steal away  
I ain't got long to stay here*

Harriet Tubman, the noted Underground Railroad conductor, composed her original spiritual:

*Lie de friends of endless days  
Dark and thorny is the path,  
Where the Pilgrim make his way  
But beyond this vale of sorrow*

"Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," the song, beloved by Har-



## THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD



The Fugitive's Song, dedicated to Frederick Douglass was sung at many anti-slavery meetings.



The Underground Rail Car was a popular song sung by abolitionists and other friends of freedom.

riet Tubman was sung by her friends the evening that she died March 10, 1913.

Frederick Douglass once said, "A keen observer might have detected [Canada] in our repeated singing of: O' Canaan, sweet Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan."

"Follow the Drinking Gourd," for example was a metaphoric allusion to the Big Dipper and North Star. Knowledge of the North Star was shared by most slaves. This traditional spiritual served as a map for escaping slaves.

Slaves took advantage of every possible opportunity to escape from bondage, and when their owners deployed packs of bloodhound dogs to track them down, fellow slaves alerted them to the oncoming peril so that they could elude their would-be captors by singing:

## Songs of the Underground Railroad

Wade in the water  
Wade in the water children  
Wade in the water  
God's gonna trouble the water

The time of the meeting and plans for escape were coded in the verses of many spirituals:

Let us break bread together on our knees  
When I fall on my knees  
With my face to the rising sun  
O Lord have mercy, if you please.

On the eve of the planned escape, when fear engulfed them, these words gave courage as well as dignity to the possibility of death.

Sinner please don't let this harvest pass  
and die and lose your soul at last.

Those who remained in slavery would have been consoled by such spirituals as "You'd Better Get Ready"; "Go Where I Send Thee, Deep River"; "The Gospel Train is Coming"; "I have a Robe"; "Go Down Moses"; "There is a Highway to Heaven, Oh, Sinners, You'd Better Get Ready"; "Good News, de Chariot's Coming"; and "I Hear from Heaven To-Day"; "This Train; and "Many Thousands Gone."

The song "John Brown's Body" is recommended when visiting Harpers Ferry, West Virginia and his grave at North Elba, Near Lake Placid, New York.

Upon reaching their final destination, they sang the spirituals "Great Day" and the soul stirring words of "Amazing Grace."

If books about African-American spirituals and slave songs are not found in bookstores; they should be available for copying in local libraries.

Chatham Hill Games produces an adventure game and music cassette set entitled "The Underground Railroad



## THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

Game and Songs." For more information about the set contact:

Chatham Hill Games  
P.O. Box 253  
Chatham, NY 12037

### Suggested Reading for Slave Songs and Spirituals

Allens, William, Ware, Charles, and Garrison, Lucy McKim, eds. *Slave Songs of the United States*. New York, 1867; modern paperback ed. with arrangements by Irving Schlein, New York, 1965.

Barton, William F. *Old Plantation Hymns*, Boston, 1899.

Douglass, Fredrick. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Boston, 1845, New York, 1969.

Fisher, Miles. *Negro Slave Songs in the United States*. Ithaca, New York, 1953.

Frances, Mary and Ludlow, Helen. *Hampton and Its Students with Fifty Cabin and Plantation Songs*, arranged by Thomas P. Fenner (New York, 1874).

Higginson, Thomas Wentworth. "Negro Spirituals." *Atlantic Monthly Magazine* (1867), *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, Boston, 1870; reprinted New York 1962.

Johnson, James Weldon and Johnson, J. Rosamond. *The Book of American Negro Spirituals and the Second Book of Negro Spirituals*. New York, 1925, 1926, issued in one volume, New York, 1969.

Lomax, John A. and Lomax, Alan, eds. *Folk Songs; U.S.A.* New York.

Marsh, J.B. *The Story of the Jubilee Singers, with Their Songs*. (Boxton, 1880).

Odum, Howard W., and Johnson, Guy B. *The Negro and His Songs*. Chapel Hill, 1925.

Parrish, Lydia. *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands*. New York, 1942, 1965.

## Songs of the Underground Railroad

Southern, Eileen. *The Music of Black America*. New York, 1971.

Work, John Wesley and Work, Fredrick J. *Folk Songs of the American Negro*. Nashville, 1907.

Work, John Wesley. *American Negro Songs and Spirituals*. New York, 1940.



# THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

## GIT ON BOARD, LITTLE CHILLEN

Arranged by Laurence Brown

To Laura J. Heathfield

*Allegro*

*f*

Git on board, lit-tle chil-len, Git on board, lit-tle chil-len, Git on

*mp* *p*

board, lit-tle chil-len, Dere's room for ma-ny a mo! De

gos - pel trains a-com-in', I hear it jus' at han';- I hear de car wheels mov-in', An'

rumblin' thro de lan! Git on board, lit-tle chil-len, Git on board, lit-tle chil-len, Git on

# Songs of the Underground Railroad

board, lit-tle chil-len, Dere's room for ma-ny a mo! De fare is cheap, an' all can go, De

rich an' poor are dere,- No sec - ond class a - board dis train, No

*mp*

diff-rence in de fare. Git on board, lit-tle chil-len, Git on board, lit-tle chil-len, Git on

*mp*

*poco rit.*

board, lit-tle chil - len, Dere's room for ma - ny a mo! —

*poco rit.*




## THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

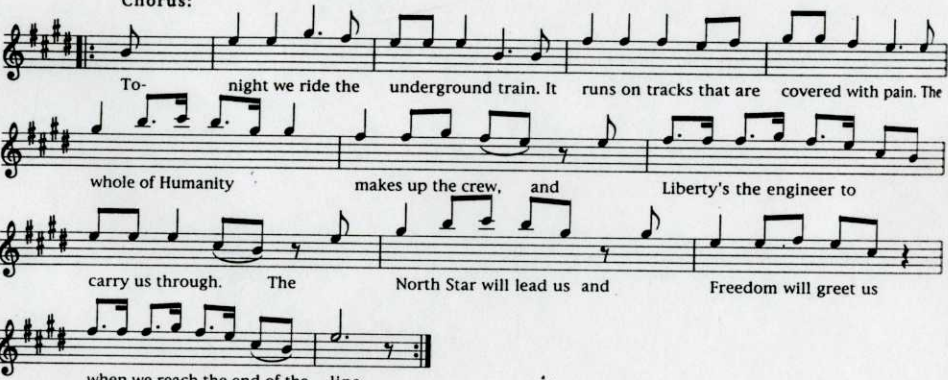
### The Ballad of the Underground Railroad

Charles Blockson and James McGowan

Verse:



Chorus:



To- night we ride the underground train. It runs on tracks that are covered with pain. The whole of Humanity makes up the crew, and Liberty's the engineer to carry us through. The North Star will lead us and Freedom will greet us when we reach the end of the line.

Repeat chorus after every 3 verses.  
Music arranged by B. David Krivit.

## THE BALLAD OF THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

by Charles L. Blockson

The Underground Train,  
Strange as it seems,  
Carried many passengers  
And never was seen.

It wasn't made of wood,  
It wasn't made of steel;  
A man-made train that  
Ran without wheels.

The train was known  
By many a name.  
But the greatest of all  
Was "The Freedom Train."

The Quakers, the Indians,  
Gentiles and Jews,  
Were some of the people  
Who made up the crews.

Free Blacks and Christians  
And Atheists, too,  
Were the rest of the people  
Who made up the crews.

Conductors and agents  
Led the way at night,  
Guiding the train  
By the North Star Light.

The passengers were  
The fugitive slaves  
Running from slavery  
And its evil ways.

Running from the whip  
And the overseer,  
From the slave block  
And the Auctioneer.

They didn't want their masters  
To catch them again,  
So the men dressed as women  
And the women as men.

They hid in churches,  
Cellars and barns,  
Waiting to hear the  
Train's alarm.

Sleeping by day,  
And traveling by night,  
Was the best way they knew  
To keep out of sight.

They waded in the waters  
To hide their scent,  
And fool those bloodhounds  
The slavemasters sent.

They spoke in riddles  
And sang in codes,  
To understand the message,  
You had to be told.

Those who knew the secret  
Never did tell  
The sacred message  
Of the "Freedom Train's" bell.

Riding this train  
Broke the laws of the land,  
But the laws of God  
Are higher than man's.



# THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

## O, WASN'T DAT A WIDE RIVER?

Arranged by J. Rosamond Johnson

Moderately Lively

O, was - n't dat a

wide riv - er, dat riv - er of Jor-dan, Lord, Wide — riv - er! Dere's

one mo' riv - er to cross. O, was - n't dat a wide riv - er, dat riv - er of

Jor-dan, Lord, Wide — riv - er! Dere's one mo' riv - er to cross. O, de

# Songs of the Underground Railroad

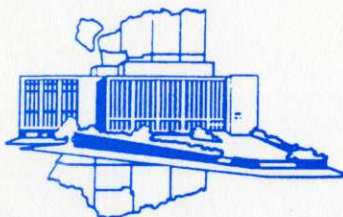
riv - er of Jor - dan is so wide, One mo' riv - er to cross. I  
Sat - an am noth - in' but a snake in de grass, One mo' riv - er to cross. If

don't know how to get on de oth - er side; One mo' riv - er to  
you aint might - y care - ful he will hol' you fas'; One mo' riv - er to

cross. Ol' cross. O, was - n't dat a wide riv - er, dat riv - er of Jor-dan, Lord,

Wide — riv - er! Dere's one mo' riv - er to cross.





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Daniel L. Walters, Director

Sept 17, 1998

Dear Ms. Batchelor:

Here are the promised photocopies. I hope they will prove to be just what you need.

My very best wishes for the success of your Underground Railroad Project.

Sincerely

Wm. H. Love

Curator, Rose

Book Room