

Peg Leg Joe and the Drinking Gourd

Written and Formatted for Readers Theater

By Lois Walker

ESTABLISHING THE RHYTHM

This is a story-poem script. To find the proper rhythm, first read-aloud and clap through the text as you go. Each underlined word or word part falls directly on a beat. As you read, clap on each underlined word, keeping the rhythm steady. Be careful not to read too fast! This is a rehearsal technique and readers will not clap throughout these sections during performance. However, in this particular script the readers are asked to **clap** in certain sections during performance. These sections are clearly indicated in the script text below.

FLEXIBLE READING PARTS

"Peg Leg Joe and the Drinking Gourd" is formatted for 12 solo readers and an ALL CHORUS. You can use fewer solo readers by reassigning lines to the number of readers you wish to use. You can also include more solo readers by reassigning lines so that each solo reader reads only one line, thus freeing additional lines for additional readers. The ALL CHORUS can include as many additional readers as you wish, or simply be a chorus formed solely by the solo readers.

READERS THEATER FOCUS AND FOLDERS

Ask your readers to speak directly to the audience, not to each other. This is called "storyteller focus." Readers will focus upon the audience just as a storyteller focuses upon the listeners. (It is sometimes helpful for readers to focus eyes slightly above heads of audience members.)

Place cast scripts in colorful folders. (Ring binders allow for smooth and easy page turning.) Place folders on chairs or music stands before reading begins. Ask readers without music stands to hold folders at chest level and away from their bodies so listeners can see facial expressions and hear clearly.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

During the 1800's, slaves were told:

"Find the north, and you'll find freedom."

But which direction was north?

Slaves knew the promise of freedom lay to the north, but they didn't know how to get there. In a desperate effort to keep their slaves from running away, masters tried to prevent them from learning any directions.

"They find out which way is east, then they figure out west. The next thing you know, they figure out which way is north," went the old saying.

Yet the deliberate attempts to keep slaves ignorant, and therefore enslaved, were destined to fail. Slowly the word spread that to find freedom, one had only to look to the skies. With the North Star pointing the way, thousands began the perilous journey to freedom. Those who could not or would not attempt the journey at least wanted to ensure that their children knew how to escape.

So, as soon as slave children were old enough to understand, their parents would take them outside and point out the Big Dipper in the night sky. The dipper was also called the "drinking gourd" because it looked like the hollowed out gourd slaves used to scoop up and drink water. Once the children knew how to locate the big dipper, their parents taught them the song "Follow the Drinking Gourd". This was a coded song that gave the route for an escape to the north from Alabama and Mississippi. Of all the routes out of the Deep South, this is the only one for which details survive.

An old man named Peg Leg Joe passed the song and its lyrics from slave to slave. Working as an itinerant carpenter, Joe spent winters in the South, moving from plantation to plantation, teaching the slaves this escape route. At the end of the "drinking gourd" was the North Star, and the path of the North Star was the path to freedom.

Here are the lyrics to that song:

Lyrics

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.

Chorus:

Follow the drinking gourd,
Follow the drinking gourd,
For the old man is waiting
For to carry you to freedom
If you follow the drinking gourd.

The riverbank will make a very good road,
The dead trees show you the way.
Left foot, peg foot traveling on,
Following 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.

When the great big river meets the little river,
Follow the drinking gourd.
For the old man is waiting
For to carry you to freedom
If you follow the drinking gourd.

The information above is a compilation of facts found online at:

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Troy/9087/black/gourd.html>

<http://www.teachervision.fen.com/african-american-history/u-s-civil-war/9406.html>

READERS 1,2,3: Which way is north?

ALL: (clap, clap)

READERS 4,5,6: Don't know, DON'T KNOW!

READERS 7,8,9: Which way is north?

ALL: (clap, clap)

READERS 10,11,12: Way to go, WAY TO GO?

ALL: Maybe this way? Maybe that way?
Maybe up, maybe down,
Maybe on the road to town?
We want to know!

ALL: (clap, clap)

READER 1: But Master wouldn't tell them,
North, West, East, or South,

READER 2: No words of instruction
Would be coming from *his* mouth.

READER 3: For once that information
Was out and brought forth,

READER 4: It wouldn't take much time

For his slaves to head north.

READERS 1,2,3: Which way is north?

ALL: (clap, clap)

READERS 4,5,6: Ask Joe, ASK JOE!

READERS 7,8,9: Which way is north?

ALL: (clap, clap)

READERS 10,11,12: Will he know? Will he know?

ALL: Is it this way? Is it that way?
Maybe up, maybe down,
Maybe on the road to town?
JOE WILL KNOW!

ALL: (clap, clap)

READER 5: And Joe said,

ALL: Follow (clap)
The drinking gourd.
Follow (clap)
The drinking gourd.
Listen to the old man
And follow if you can.

Hope will be restored,
By the...

ALL: (clap)

ALL: drinking gourd.

READER 6: Then Joe took his hammer,
Then he took his nails,

READER 7: Worked at the plantation,
And sang about quails.

READER 8: Said, when the sun is high
And you see winter birds,

(Teacher's note: In winter and early spring,
the angle of the sun above the horizon at noon
gets higher each day. Quail are the migratory
birds that winter in the South)

READER 9: Check the night sky
And remember these words:

ALL: Follow (clap)
The drinking gourd.
Follow (clap)
The drinking gourd.
Listen to the old man