



NORTH the Musical

School Show Activity

Activity created by Playhouse Square in Cleveland, OH

Based on resources from the Harriet Tubman Historical Society

Luther Burbank Center for the Arts
January 30, 2024

A Coded Letter (Grades 4-12)

The Ohio Learning Standards listed below are addressed in the following Pre-Show Activity:

English/Language Arts: L.4.1, L.4.2, SL.4.1, W.4.4, L.5.2, SL.5.1, W.5.4, L.6.2, RL.6.4, SL.6.1, W.6.4, L.7.2, RL.7.4, SL.7.1, W.7.4, L.8.2, RL.8.4, SL.8.1, W.8.4, L.9-10.2, RL.9-10.4, SL.9-10.1, W.9-10.4, L.11-12.2, RL.11-12.4, SL.11-12.1, W.11-12.4

Fine Arts: Music: 4.1RE, 4.2RE, 6.3CE, 7.4RE, HS.1.6CE

The musical *NORTH* is about two enslaved people who travel the Underground Railroad to escape slavery. Explain to your class that the Underground Railroad was not an actual railroad that was underground. Instead, it was a network of people, African American as well as white and other races, offering shelter and aid to escaped enslaved people from the South. People involved in the Underground Railroad often used codes, symbols and disguises to help enslaved people escape. This activity will introduce students to some of the common codewords that were used in letters, conversations, songs, quilts and more. Railroad terminology was often chosen because it was an emerging form of transportation and its lingo was not yet widespread.

Begin by giving each student a copy of the Underground Railroad Code Sheet located on the next page. It is important that they understand this list is just a small sample of codes that were used. Do they recognize any of the code words from other meanings or situations? Why do they believe those specific codes were chosen for the information they were hiding? Are there any references they do not know? As a class, discuss the codes and their meanings, looking up any unknown terms.

Next, distribute a copy of the Underground Letter to your students. Read it together as a class. Does it make sense? Probably not. Have students refer to the code sheet they received to decipher the meaning behind the letter, circling the codewords and rewriting the message for its original intention. Discuss as a class. Finally, have students imagine that they are an agent, someone who coordinates the escape, makes contacts along the route that will be taken, and helps the enslaved people make their way safely to freedom. They are to write a letter to a friend informing them of freedom seekers who are on their way. Students should use the proper letter format; however, they will want to keep their names and the name of the person to whom they are writing a secret. Otherwise, they risk being discovered and arrested!

After completing this activity and in preparation for the field trip, encourage students to pay attention to any codes used throughout the musical.

Extension of Activity #1

As an extension of this activity, explore the coded language present in the spirituals sang. These religious songs were thought to derive from European hymns, though with freer rhythms and harmonies. The enslaved would often be forbidden to speak to one another so they would communicate through song. These helped with morale on long, labored days and allowed a method for expressing their feelings. Though they were often based on biblical words or stories, the lyrics of spirituals have significant dual meanings. For example, the lyric “being bound and ready to go to Canaan” is assumed to refer to a person who was ready to pass and go to heaven, but for the enslaved, their Canaan (or heaven) would mean either a free state or Canada.

Through choice lyrics and tone, spirituals can express emotions or support and convey various meanings through coded instructions such as telling others to be ready to leave. One such spiritual is “Wade in the Water,” which is underscored in *North, the Musical*. This song and its hidden messages are also addressed in the Pre-show Classroom Connections Workshop Video available earlier in this guide.

Have students check out these other renowned spirituals. Can they interpret any coded meanings in the lyrics?

- “Steal Away”
- “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”
- “Follow the Drinking Gourd
- “Get on Board, Little Children”
- “Go Down Moses”
- “Let Us Break Bread Together”
- “Song of the Free”
- “Down in the River to Pray”

This activity was adapted from the Harriet Tubman Historical Society and the African American Museum of Iowa.

Underground Railroad Code Sheet

Code Words & Phrases	Meaning
A wind blows from the South today	Fugitive enslaved people are on the move from the South to the North
Agent	Coordinator, who plotted courses of escape and made contacts.
Baggage Bundles of Wood Flying Bondsmen Ham Load of Potatoes Parcel or Package Sheep Wool	The number of fugitive enslaved people carried by the Underground Railroad workers
Conductor	Person who directly transported enslaved people
Drinking Gourd	Big Dipper and the North Star
Forwarding	Taking enslaved people from station to station
Friends	Quakers are also known as friends. Since they were abolitionists, they were considered friendly
Freedom Train Gospel Train	The Underground Railroad
French Leave	Sudden departure
Heaven Promised Land	Canada, freedom
Lost a passenger	A runaway enslaved person has been caught
Stockholder	Those who donated money, food, clothing, and/or other supplies
Meeting House	Place of worship for Quakers, often used as a hiding spot for fugitives
Moses	Harriet Tubman
Operator	Person who helped conductors, agents, and other freedom seekers
Patter roller	Bounty hunter hired to capture escaped enslaved people
Preachers	Leaders of, and spokespersons for the Underground Railroad
River Jordan	The Ohio River
Shepherds	People who encouraged enslaved people to escape and escorted them
Station	Place of safety and temporary refuge, a safe house
Station Master	Keeper or owner of a station (safe house)

Code Sheet was created by the Harriet Tubman Historical Society at harriet-tubman.org.

An Underground Letter

September 17, 1861

My Dear Friend,

I hope this letter finds you and yours well. I am deeply saddened to hear that a train in Boston has lost a passenger recently. I know how hard this is on everyone, but do not despair for long as a wind from the South blows today to restore hope. Please accept my condolences and the 2 large bundles of wood and 3 smaller bundles of wood that I am forwarding to you. I am sending them from Charlotte, and they will arrive in Baltimore on Wednesday. A conductor will pick up the bundles the following day and forward them to Philadelphia. A sympathetic, and generous stockholder has offered to pay to forward the bundles to you in Boston.

As these bundles of wood are very valuable, I would appreciate it if you could confirm the safe arrival of the bundles when you receive them.

Your dear friend,

D. A. Smith