

Educator Resources

Lesson Idea: Grade Levels 6–8

From The Programming Guide for *Through Darkness to Light: Photographs Along the Underground Railroad*
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Plotting a Personal Path

(aspects of this lesson idea are adapted from the PBS *Underground Railroad: The William Still Story Community and Educator Resources* and the *National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Junior Ranger Activity Book*)

Grade Levels 6–8

Summary:

Using the photographs and listed Underground Railroad site locations featured in Jeanine Michna-Bales photographs featured in *Through Darkness to Light: Photographs Along the Underground Railroad* (use exhibition labels, checklist, and/or reproductions of images in Michna-Bales' book) invite students to research each site using Google maps and plot the specific locations of each site on a United States Map—highlighting nearby cities, rivers, and other points of interest. Students will learn about various escape routes traversed by freedom seekers throughout the United States and will compare the route illustrated in the photographs in the exhibition to an 1860 map indicating slave and free states and territories open to slavery. Students will read one or several personal narratives from varied freedom seekers for a class discussion and to inspire a personal reflection writing activity.

Objectives:

- Students will be able to define and describe what the Underground Railroad is
- Students will understand various journeys of fugitive slaves as they traveled on the Underground Railroad
- Students will use Google Maps and internet research to locate and plot on a United States map the specific route illustrated by photographs in the exhibition
- Students will research and plot miles between sites, and study cities, rivers and points of interest near each site using a blank map template and reference map (see Resources section of this lesson for template handout and map)
- Students will read one or several slave narratives from *A North Side View of Slavery. The Refugee* or accounts archived in the Library of Congress (see Resources section of this lesson for recommended links and readings)
- Students will write an imagined escape plan to freedom as a journal entry (or several entries reflecting the amount of days it might take to travel the distance) using map research and authentic narratives as inspiration for personal reflection.

Materials Needed:

- Access to the exhibition *Through Darkness to Light: Photographs Along the Underground Railroad*
- Access to maps, Google maps, and the internet
- Reference books included as traveling resources with the exhibition (exhibition catalogue *Through Darkness to Light: Photographs Along the Underground Railroad, A North Side View of Slavery. The Refugee, etc.*)
- Web resources
- Printed exhibition labels or checklist of the exhibition with titles of the works (locations of Underground Railroad sites)
- Colored pencils and pencils
- Map worksheets
- Paper and pens for creating imagined journal entries to reflect a desired route to freedom

Lesson Time:

- One class period to explore and experience the exhibition
- One class period to discuss the history of the Underground Railroad, to investigate and study routes of freedom seekers on a map, research and plot specific locations of sites depicted in photographs on a map worksheet using Google maps, and compare and contrast slave states to free states as a class discussion and give students a writing assignment
- One class period as desired for students to complete additional research and work of imagined diary entries
- One class period to share their writings as a class group by reading them aloud and discussing their imagined escape route informed by research and personal opinion.

Lesson Procedures:

Step one

Following a tour of *Through Darkness to Light: Photographs Along the Underground Railroad*, share with students facts about slavery in the United States and the Underground Railroad.

Enslaved African Americans sought freedom by escaping were called fugitive slaves. Explain to students that enslaved people had no legal rights—they couldn't own property, they could be bought or sold at any time. Slaves could not worship as they chose. It was illegal to teach slaves how to read and write. Slaves could not legally marry. Slaves couldn't choose their own job and received no pay for their work. Running away, even though the risk and punishment for getting caught, was the only way to escape slavery.

The Underground Railroad provided a means for helping fugitive slaves escape to free states or out of the country. The Underground Railroad was not a train, did not have actual train tracks, nor was it a system of underground tunnels. The Underground Railroad was an idea that reflected efforts of enslaved individuals to gain their freedom through escape and flight and the assistance of individuals who were opposed to slavery. Escaping enslaved life was dangerous and risky—if caught, a person could be severely beaten—even killed and often risked the safety of others in the group and/or left behind. Individuals who helped others to freedom were also subject to fines and/or imprisonment.

There were four main routes that freedom seekers in general followed: North along the Mississippi and Ohio rivers to the northern United States and Canada; South to Florida and refuge with the Seminole Indians and to the Bahamas; West along the Gulf of Mexico and into Mexico; and East along the seaboard into Canada. These routes were not “roads” nor were they marked—often people on the route had to zig zag or back track to throw off the scent of tracking bloodhounds and to outwit bounty hunters looking for escaped slaves.

Individuals who decided to escape had to travel at night, look for good hiding places during the day (corn fields, barns, and swamps would be good at concealing freedom seekers), and could not take many belongings or supplies with them. It was also risky on the route to freedom to encounter other people, as it was unknown who was “friendly” or against slavery and could be trusted to help and who would turn freedom seekers into authorities.

Word of mouth about safe houses (stations) and helpers (conductors) was the primary means of finding safe passage for travelers on the Underground Railroad. Spirituals, traditional African songs often conveyed messages through lyrics to others. The lyrics to the song “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” for example, communicated to the escaping traveler that it was time to leave his or her situation.

Step two

Using Google maps online, have students plot each approximate location described in each of Jeanine Michna-Bales’ photographs in the exhibition. Use the exhibition checklist and/or catalogue that accompanies the exhibition for site location reference. Have students use the blank map worksheet (in the references section of this lesson) to draw the locations, making a line from one “stop” general area to the next. Encourage students to draw in additional information on the map including rivers, landmarks, and or cities. Have students compute the approximate distance in miles between each site. Discuss with students how many days it might have taken on foot to get from one place to another.

Step three

Invite students to compare general Underground Railroad routes to the map worksheet indicating which states were free and which were states in which slavery was legal. Ask students what direction(s) they would travel if seeking freedom on the Underground Railroad. Have students read (or read aloud to them) several narratives from former slaves who described their passage to safety and freedom and escape from slavery. (see the resources section of this lesson for links and references).

Step four

Invite students to plot and imagine an escape route from a slave state to a free state or out of the country in the year. Using maps for reference, create imagined journal entries detailing the geography and imagined conditions one might experience en route by travelling on foot. Use real time miles of the route to estimate how many days it might take to get from point A to point B to craft each days' journal entry. Include weather conditions, time of day, imagined feelings, hardships, concerns, etc. informed by experiences communicated by real individuals who recorded their journeys.

Step five

Have students share his or her journal entries in front of the class to compare and contrast routes and imagined experiences.