

## Follow the Drinking Gourd - lyrics explained

<b><i>LYRICS</i></b>	<b><i>EXPLANATION</i></b>
<b>VERSE 1</b>	Taken together, this verse suggests escaping in the spring and heading North to freedom.
When the sun comes back,	Refers to the winter or spring. The days are getting longer, and the angle of the sun is higher each day at noon.
and the first quail calls,	Refers to the breeding season. Quail in Alabama start calling to each other in early to mid-April.
Follow the drinking gourd	The "drinking gourd" alludes to the hollowed out gourd used by slaves (and other rural Americans) as a water dipper. Used in this context it is a code name for the Big Dipper star formation, which points to Polaris, the Pole Star, and North.
For the old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom	"Ole man" is nautical slang for "Captain" (or "Commanding Officer.") According to Parks, the Underground Railroad operative Peg Leg Joe was formerly a sailor. Per one of Parks's informants, the runaways would be met on the banks of the Ohio by the old sailor. Of course, the chances that Peg Leg Joe himself would be there to meet every escapee (as depicted literally in the children's books) are quite small.
If you follow the drinking gourd.	

### **CHORUS**

Follow the drinking gourd,  
Follow the drinking gourd,  
The old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom  
If you follow the drinking gourd.

<b>VERSE 2</b>	Describes how to follow the route, from Mobile, Alabama north.
The river bank makes a very good road	The first river in the song is the Tombigbee, which empties into Mobile Bay. Its headwaters extend into northeastern Mississippi.
Dead trees will show you the way	According to Parks, Peg Leg Joe marked trees and other landmarks "with charcoal or mud of the outline of a human left foot and a round spot in place of the right foot."
Left foot, peg foot, traveling on	
Follow the drinking gourd.	

**CHORUS**

<b>VERSE 3</b>	Describes the route through northeastern Mississippi and into Tennessee.
The river ends between two hills,	The headwaters of the Tombigbee River end near Woodall Mountain, the high point in Mississippi and an ideal reference point for a map song. The "two hills" could mean Woodall Mountain and a neighboring lower hill. But the mountain itself evidently has a twin cone profile and so could represent both hills at once. (More on the route in future editions.)
Follow the drinking gourd,	
There's another river on the other side,	The river on the other side of the hills is the Tennessee, which extends outward in an arc above Woodall Mountain. The left-hand side proceeds virtually due north to the Ohio river border with Illinois – definitely the preferred route, since the right hand side meanders back into northern Alabama and then proceeds up into Tennessee.
Follow the drinking gourd.	

**CHORUS**

<b>VERSE 4</b>	Describes the end of the route, in Paducah, Kentucky.
When the great big river meets the little river	When the Ohio River meets the Tennessee. The Tennessee and Ohio rivers come together in Paducah, KY, opposite southern Illinois. Note that the order of the rivers has been switched, most likely for poetic reasons.
Follow the drinking gourd	...meets the Ohio River. The Tennessee and Ohio rivers come together in Paducah, KY, opposite southern Illinois.
For the old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom	
If you follow the drinking gourd.	

**Explanation of the Lee Hays Arrangement (published 1947)**

The following explanations are drawn principally from the 1912 ( Hot Springs, North Carolina), 1913 (Louisville) and 1918 (Waller, Texas). Published in 1928.) , supplemented by additional research.