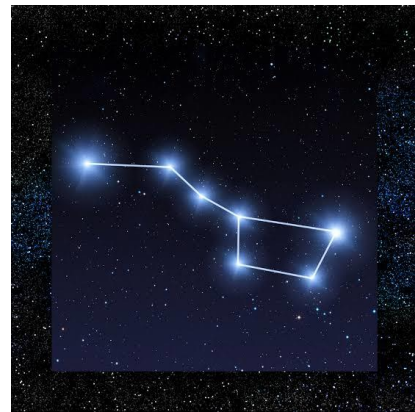


The Spirituals, the Blues connection – Myths and Legends, so often the two merge and become vague, but like so many of these stories the truth is in their somewhere and is usually based on some kind of reality. It is known that the spirituals had many uses, as a form of worship, to express misery and pain, and to cry out for deliverance from persecution, this song and possibly to a greater extent ‘Steal away’, was a means of conveying coded messages of clandestine meetings, or gatherings.

Follow the Drinking Gourd is an African-American folk song first formally published in 1928. There is however reference to the words in poem / written form long before that as a spiritual.

The ‘drinking gourd’ in this context is another name for the Big Dipper asterism. Popular legend has it that enslaved people in the United States used it as a point of reference so they would not get lost during their journey of escape to the North and to freedom. The Drinking Gourd describes a trail from Mobile, Alabama to Paducah, Kentucky. From Paducah, slaves could cross the Ohio River to the Free states.



According to the same legend, the song was used by a conductor of the Underground Railroad, called Peg Leg Joe, to guide some fugitive slaves; many of the lyrics are simply cartographic directions to advise the runaways on their escape route. While the song may possibly refer to some lost fragment of history, the true origin and context is effective lost in the mists of time and remains a mystery.

Two of the stars in the Big Dipper line up very closely with and point to Polaris. Polaris is a circumpolar star, and so it is always seen pretty close to the direction of true north. Hence, according to a popular

myth, all slaves had to do was look for the Drinking Gourd and follow it to the North Star (Polaris) north to freedom.