

It's not known if Peg Leg Joe was a single individual or a combination of a number of people as there doesn't seem to be any evidence that one person is credited with that name. According to the story, Peg Leg Joe had a prosthesis or "peg or wooden" right leg and from a poem, is credited with *Follow the Drinking Gourd* a song that contained codes that would help slaves travel through the Underground Railroad to freedom.



The story goes that Peg Leg having worked in Whynott, Indiana fields, travelled pretending that he was a carpenter. He would arrive in locations and teach the slaves the song so that they could learn how to follow the Underground Railroad to get to freedom. Other stories tell that he was a sailor that went to a few plantations near Mobile, Alabama in 1859. After he showed up many of the slaves would disappear.

The Underground Railroad wasn't a railroad, but a network of people, homes and shelters that would take in and hide slaves as they travelled to the Northern Free States. The song tells them to leave only in the spring and travel by night, following the Big Dipper as it points to the North Star.

The lyrics of the song have various meanings that the slaves would easily understand. The lyrics in the first verse talks about leaving when days are getting longer and when the breeding season of the Quail happens, which is in the spring. The lyrics of the drinking gourd refer to a vessel which is hollowed out and that slaves used to drink water. In the lyrics it's also a reference to the Big Dipper.

The chorus of the song includes, *for the ole man say*, this is slang used by those at sea for a Commanding Officer. It is said that Peg Leg Joe had been a sailor and he was referring to himself.

The second verse is a description of the travel north from Mobile, Alabama. The first river mentioned is the Tombigbee which then empties directly into Mobile Bay. This is followed by the alert to watch for dead trees, and any landmarks that had marks on them resembling a left or right foot.

The third verse of the song is about heading through Mississippi and then onto Tennessee. The words *the riva ends a-tween two hills* relates to the two hills that are Woodall Mountain and the lower hill next to it. However, looking at it in the right place, they would look like two hills at once. The continued words in the third verse say "Nuther riva on the other side" which is said to mean on the other side of the hills is a river that is the Tennessee.

The fourth verse is a description of the end of the journey in Paducah, Kentucky. "Meet the grea' big un" which is said to translate to meeting up with the Ohio River. The Ohio and Tennessee Rivers do come together in Paducah, Kentucky, which is on the opposing side of southern Illinois. The lyrics of "The ole man waits" is said to relate to the fact that there would be someone waiting to help them once they arrived to freedom.

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