

Copy of Lyrics with Explanation

<i>LYRICS</i>	<i>EXPLANATION</i>
VERSE 1	Taken together, this verse suggests escaping in the spring and heading North to freedom.
When the sun come back,	Refers to the winter or spring. The days are getting longer, and the angle of the sun is higher each day at noon.
When the firs' quail call,	Refers to the breeding season. Quail in Alabama start calling to each other in early to mid-April.
Then the time is come	
Foller the drinkin' gou'd.	The "drinkin' gou'd" alludes to the hollowed out gourd used by slaves (and other rural Americans) as a water dipper. Used here it is a code name for the Big Dipper star formation, which points to Polaris, the Pole Star, and North.
CHORUS	
Foller the drinkin' gou'd,	
Foller the drinkin' gou'd;	
For the ole man say,	"Ole man" is nautical slang for "Captain" (or "Commanding Officer.") According to Parks, the Underground Railroad operative Peg Leg Joe was formerly a sailor.
"Foller the drinkin' gou'd."	
VERSE 2	Describes how to follow the route, from Mobile, Alabama north.
The riva's bank am a very good road,	The first river in the song is the Tombigbee, which empties into Mobile Bay. Its headwaters extend into northeastern Mississippi.
The dead trees show 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." (1)
Lef' foot, peg foot goin' on,	
Foller the drinkin' gou'd.	
CHORUS	

VERSE 3	Describes the route through northeastern Mississippi and into Tennessee.
The riva ends a-tween 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 to come.)
Foller the drinkin' gou'd;	
'Nuther riva 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.
Follers the drinkin' gou'd.	
CHORUS	
VERSE 4	Describes the end of the route, in Paducah, Kentucky.
Wha the little riva	When the Tennessee...
Meet the grea' big un,	...meets the Ohio River. The Tennessee and Ohio rivers come together in Paducah, KY, opposite southern Illinois.
The ole man waits--	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.
Foller the drinkin' gou'd.	