

# PRE-VISIT LESSON PLAN – BUILDING THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD (GRADES 5-8)

**OVERVIEW:** This lesson plan is intended as an introduction to the Building the Underground Railroad tour for grades 5-8. It will acquaint students with some of the ways abolitionists fought against African American enslavement, as well as how people associated with the Underground Railroad helped **freedom seekers** north. This lesson plan will also help orient your class to the layout of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center (NURFC), specifically the galleries and exhibits which you will see during your time here. Students will learn about elements of the Underground Railroad through a series of hands-on activities. The activities given here satisfy learning standards from Social Studies, Technology, and Science. The times given for each activity are estimates based on doing all three over one or two days. Depending on how deeply into discussion you would like to go, each can be spread out over a full class day.

**OBJECTIVES:** Students will:

- » Describe how freedom seekers and **conductors** on the Underground Railroad used technology such as **skiffs** and other types of boats, as well as how these forms of escape work.
- » Understand how maps can help orient you through the use of landmarks such as rivers.
- » Introduce students to art and artifacts which can give clues to how people lived in a given place and time.
- » Orient future visitors to NURFC's layout.

**VOCABULARY:**

- » **Conductor:** on the Underground Railroad, a person who would guide freedom seekers from safe house to safe house or hiding place to hiding place.
- » **Free State:** a state which, prior to the Civil War, prohibited enslavement. This is in contrast to **Slave States**.
- » **Freedom Seeker:** a person who fled African American enslavement in the US South in order to make their way north to freedom, typically in Canada. Also known as an escaped slave or a fugitive slave, “freedom seeker” is the preferred term at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center.
- » **Fugitive Slave Act:** a law passed by the US Congress in 1850 mandating the return of captured freedom seekers to their enslavers. The citizens and governments of Free States were required to cooperate.
- » **Grueling:** extremely tiring and demanding.
- » **Skiff:** a flat-bottomed boat typically used in rivers and streams, rowed by one person.
- » **Slave State:** a state which, prior to the Civil War, allowed enslavement. This is in contrast to a **Free State**.
- » **Surface Area:** the total area of the surface of a three-dimensional object.

## BOAT ACTIVITY (45 MINUTES: 15-20 MINS FOR BUILDING THE BOATS, 10-20 FOR TESTING THEM)

This activity satisfies Ohio's 2017 Learning Standards for Technology, including:

- » *Explore and document how technology can impact efficiency (Strand: Design and Technology, Topic 1, p. 8).*
- » *Analyze how tools, materials, and processes are used to alter the natural and human-designed worlds (Strand: Design and Technology, Topic 1, p. 8).*
- » *Identify and discuss how the use of technology affects self and others in various ways (Strand: Society and Technology, Topic 3, p. 7).*

**STRUCTURE:** Separate students into groups of about three to five people. Pass around the materials per group for this activity.

**MATERIALS PER GROUP:** One piece of aluminum foil (about 50cm), four inch piece of tape, three straws (optional, but students usually do cool stuff with them), map of NURFC's second floor.

**MATERIALS PER CLASS:** Large tank or tub that can hold water, pennies/nuts/other weighted things you can stack on the boats, a board to chart results (optional).

**INTRO:** Many Underground Railroad conductors helped freedom seekers cross rivers such as the Ohio and Mississippi in boats. This led to these rivers, part of the natural world, looming large in the minds of freedom seekers and conductors alike. Boats operate due to buoyancy; the ability to float in water. Some conductors who helped freedom seekers cross the Ohio River were John Hatfield, William Casey, and John Fairfield here in Cincinnati. In Ripley, Ohio, John Parker did the same. In 1853 Hatfield, a black conductor, and Fairfield, a white one, helped 28 freedom seekers cross the Ohio River from Kentucky into Cincinnati on their way north to Canada, and freedom. Fairfield loaded too many people into his boat, causing it to sink. His passengers were all OK, if a bit wet. Inform the students that this activity will explore buoyancy and how much weight their boat can hold until it sinks, like Fairfield's did. What weight would make the boat "inefficient" (ie cause it to sink)?

**ACTIVITY:** Each group gets a 50c piece of aluminum foil, a small piece of tape, and three straws. In order to get them to think about the impact of **surface area** on buoyancy, you might ask them questions like: what happens if you stand up in a canoe versus a rowboat? If you lay out all the weight in a flat area, how much surface does it cover? How high are the sides on different kinds of boats? If they don't know the answers to these questions, feel free to tell them (canoes tend to tip over while rowboats are less likely to, the sides of boats need to be high enough to prevent water from flowing in). Let the groups get to work, shaping the aluminum foil into shapes reminiscent of flat-bottom skiffs and rafts, the principle boats used on the Underground Railroad.

Once the boats are built, ask the students to guess how many pennies or nuts or washers their boats will hold. The winning boats will probably have the most surface areas, but high enough walls to keep the water from getting in. Call them up group by group, ask them to place their boat in the water, and either place the pennies on the boat one by one, or let them do it. Chart the results if you want to.

Once students are done, explain that they will learn more about conductors such as John Parker who helped freedom seekers across the Ohio River in his boat. This will happen in the Pavilion of Perseverance, specifically in the theater showing "Brothers of the Borderland." Ask students to find and circle the Pavilion of Perseverance on their maps. From there, ask them to find and circle the theater in which "Brothers of the Borderland" plays.

# MAPPING THE CINCINNATI 28 ACTIVITY (20-25 MINUTES)

This activity satisfies Ohio's (2017) Learning Standards for Social Studies, including:

- » *Modern and historical maps and other geographic tools are used to analyze how historic events are shaped by geography (Geography Strand, p. 26).*
- » *Globes and other geographic tools can be used to gather, process, and report information about people, places, and environments. Cartographers decide which information to include in maps (Geography Strand, p. 19).*

**STRUCTURE:** Separate students into groups of three to five. Have chaperones sit with or circulate among the students if there is space.

**MATERIALS:** Maps of NURFC's second floor; maps of the riverfront of the Ohio River during the Underground Railroad area (if available); regional maps of Northern Kentucky, Indiana, Ohio, and Michigan OR a regional map of Cincinnati.

**INTRO:** Explain to students that during the time of the Underground Railroad, Cincinnati saw 28 freedom seekers pass through on their way to Canada. This group, the Cincinnati 28, was one of the largest successful groups of freedom seekers to travel along the Underground Railroad. Using a combination of disguises and resourcefulness, they left Petersburg, KY on April 2, 1853 and arrived in Windsor, Canada on April 19. This meant that they passed through multiple states and saw many important landmarks.

**ACTIVITY:** Pass out regional maps of the route taken by the Cincinnati 28, including the locations at which they stopped. Include such elements as keys, legends, alphanumeric codes, topography, and rivers. If focusing on Ohio and the Cincinnati area, ask them to locate significant places like College Hill, Cumminsville, the 1850s location of Zion Baptist Church, and Wesleyan Cemetery. If focusing on their entire route, ask them to locate places like Cabin Creek (a **maroon community** in Indiana where they stopped for a bit), Ypsilanti, and Windsor, Canada. See if they can describe, either orally or in writing, the significant people and events there. As students trace the route, ask them to discuss with one another the following questions:

- » Why did the Cincinnati 28 decide to undertake such a **grueling** journey to Canada? Why didn't they just stop in Ohio, a **free state**? This is a good opportunity to explain the **Fugitive Slave Act** to them.
- » How long is a mile? How long does it take you to walk or ride a mile (you can use the estimate of about 20 minutes)? How many miles did the Cincinnati 28 cover?
- » Have you ever tried to sleep when you're stressed out about something? How well do you think the Cincinnati 28 slept?

Once you're done, explain that your class will learn more about the Cincinnati 28 at NURFC. Inform them that they can find information about the Cincinnati 28 in the Escape Gallery, including details about disguises they used as well as information about Levi and Catherine Coffin, stationmasters on the Underground Railroad who helped them. Ask them to find and circle the Escape Gallery.

## RAGGONON ACTIVITY (20-25 MINS)

This activity satisfies Ohio's 2017 Learning Standards for Social Studies, including:

- » *The practice of race-based slavery led to the forced migration of Africans to the American colonies. Their knowledge and traditions contributed to the development of those colonies and the United States (History Strand, p. 25).*
- » *Empires in African (Ghana, Mali, and Songhay) and Asia (Byzantine, Ottoman, Mughal, and China) grew as commercial and cultural centers along trade routes (History Strand, P. 23).*

**STRUCTURE:** Have students separate into groups of three to five. If possible, have chaperones sit at tables or circulate among them.

**MATERIALS:** Construction paper, pencils, pens, markers, crayons, magazines, other craft supplies, maps of NURFC's second floor.

**INTRO:** The *RagGonOn* is one of NURFC's primary works of art. The Columbus, OH-born artist Aminah Robinson spent 35 years crafting it. It is two massive quilts which tell her story, the story of the African American experience in Ohio, and the African American experience as a whole. It also tells the story of great African empires such as Mali and Songhay, which were major trading and cultural centers. There are representations of the Underground Railroad as well. You will see *RagGonOn* in NURFC's Great Hall. While quilting is a tradition for many groups, particularly women, in the US, *RagGonOn* includes many features typical of quilts made by African American women. For example, there are long panels along the bottom and sides, as well as representations of humans rather than simply abstract shapes.

**ACTIVITY:** Explain that students will be making their own "quilts" out of construction paper, craft supplies, and magazine pictures and articles. These quilts should tell their own stories as well as the stories of their family and traditions. As they make the quilts ask them to ask themselves: what sort of hardships have you or your family endured? How did you overcome them? How might they be represented in your quilt?

Inform students that *RagGonOn* is on display on NURFC's second floor, in the Great Hall. Ask them to find and circle the Great Hall on the second floor map.