

STUDY GUIDE

SWEET CHARIOT

Written by Bruce Craig Miller

Based on oral histories taken during the Works Progress Administration's (WPA) Federal Writers' Project and traditional spirituals

TEACHER RESOURCES

Sweet Chariot and this Classroom Connections Study Guide are produced in support of the following Virginia Standards of Learning: English, History and Social Sciences, Music, and Fine Arts.

AT THE LIBRARY

Ben and the Emancipation Proclamation
by Pat Sherman

Dear America: A Picture of Freedom
by Patricia C. McKissack

Freedom Roads: Searching for the Underground Railroad by Joyce Hansen

Slave Spirituals and the Jubilee Singers
by Michael L. Cooper

ON THE WEB

The Library of Congress: African American Song [loc.gov/item/ihas.200197451](https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197451)

Slave Voyages slavevoyages.org/

The Underground Railroad [nps.gov/nr/travel/underground/](https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/underground/)

PBS: Slavery and the Making of America [pbs.org/wnet/slavery/](https://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/)

National Endowment for the Humanities Lesson Plan: Spirituals edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/spirituals

Library of Congress: Born in Slavery Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 - 38 [loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection/](https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection/)

Africans in America: A PBS 4-part documentary series [pbs.org/wgbh/aia/home.html](https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/home.html)

Sweet Chariot



Virginia Rep's production of *Sweet Chariot*

SYNOPSIS

Virginia Rep's production of *Sweet Chariot* shares the narratives of the ex-enslaved, as told to WPA writers. These stories were compiled in the 'Slave Narrative Collection'. Over two thousand interviews with former enslaved people were conducted in seventeen states during the years 1936-38. Virginia Rep combines these first-hand accounts of life as an enslaved person and emancipation with enslaved spirituals to recreate a world of longing and hope in *Sweet Chariot*.

The spirituals not only held religious meaning for African-American enslaved people, they also served as a means of communication, especially along the Underground Railroad. Through spirituals that served as coded messages, enslaved people could issue a warning to others or communicate plans for escape or uprising. The play asks, "Did you make history today?" Enrich your history by experiencing the rich historical narratives and spirituals that tell the stories of African-American enslaved people in *Sweet Chariot*.

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ACTIVITY 1: EXPLORING PRIMARY SOURCES

The Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviewed surviving ex-enslaved people during the 1930s. The result was the 'Slave Narrative Collection'. Collected in seventeen states during the years 1936-1938, there are more than two thousand interviews with former slaves. The interviews gave ex-enslaved people an opportunity to describe what it felt like to be enslaved in the United States.

Read the interview below, then work with a partner to discuss and answer the questions on the following page.

INTERVIEW OF MISS MARY JANE WILSON BY THELMA DUNSTON - APRIL 1937

One of the rooms in the Old Folks Home for Colored in Portsmouth, Virginia is occupied by an ex-slave — one of the first Negro teachers of Portsmouth.

On meeting Miss Mary Jane Wilson, very little questioning was needed to get her to tell of her life. Drawing her chair near a small stove, she said, "My mother and father was slaves, and when I was born, that made me a slave. I was the only child. My mother was owned by one family, and my father was owned by another family. My mother and father were allowed to live together. One day my father's master took my father to Norfolk and put him in a jail to stay until he could sell him. My missus bought my father so he could be with us."

"During this time I was small, and I didn't have so much work to do. I just helped around the house. I was in the yard one day, and I saw so many men come marching down the street, I ran and told my mother what I'd seen. She tried to tell me what it was all about, but I couldn't understand her. Not long after that we were free."

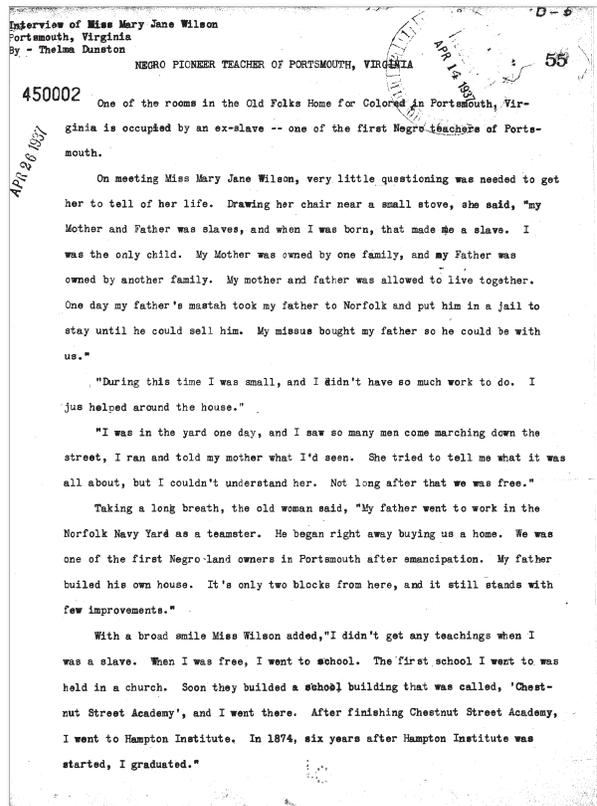
Taking a long breath, the old woman said, "My father went to work in the Norfolk Navy yard as a teamster. He began right away buying us a home. We was one of the first Negro land owners in Portsmouth after Emancipation. My father built his own house. It's only two blocks from here, and it still stands with few improvements."

With a broad smile Miss Wilson added, "I didn't get any teachings when I was a slave. When I was free, I went to school. The first school I went to was held in a church. Soon they built a school building that was called Chestnut Street Academy, and I went there. After finishing Chestnut Street Academy, I went to Hampton Institute. In 1874, six years after Hampton Institute was started, I graduated."

At this point Miss Wilson's pride was unconcealed. She continued her conversation, but her voice was much louder and her speech was much faster. She remarked, "My desire was to teach. I opened a school in my home, and I had lots of students. After two years my class grew

so fast and large that my father built a school for me in our back yard. I had as many as seventy-five pupils at one time. Many of them became teachers. I had my graduation exercises in the Emanuel A.M.E. Church. Those were my happiest days."

This interview was taken from the American Memory section of the Library of Congress website. A few dialectical spellings were changed to make it easier for young students to read and understand the interview. No content or meaning was altered.



Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 17, Virginia, Berry-Wilson. 1936. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn170/>.

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ACTIVITY 1: QUESTIONS

1. What made Mary Jane enslaved?

2a. What did Mary Jane see before the enslaved were freed?

2b. Who do you think the people were?

3. Name three specific improvements in Mary Jane's life after her family's emancipation from slavery:

a. _____

b. _____

c. _____

4. This interview was done in what year? _____

5. How do you think the interviewer may have felt about Miss Wilson's story?

6. Use a map to locate Portsmouth, Virginia and Norfolk, Virginia. How might Miss Wilson's life have been different had she been born in New York City?

7. Why do you think it was important to interview the ex-enslaved? What can we learn from narratives such as Mary Jane's?



EXTEND IT!

Create interview questions for someone you know (a family member, friend, or neighbor) to learn more about that person's life and experience. What can we learn by studying others' narratives? Write your questions below.

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ACTIVITY 2: STORIES OF YOUR LIFE

Much of this play was made up of stories. Every person has stories to tell — big and small — that make up the narrative of their life.

You be the interviewer! Work with a partner to learn about the stories in their life. Use the three interview questions below, and add two questions of your own. Make notes, then create a timeline of four events from your partner’s life in the space below.

Question #1: When and where were you born?

Question #2: What was your first memory as a very small child?

Question #3: What is one important event that has changed your life in some way?

Question #4. _____

Question #4 Answer:

Question #5. _____

Question #5 Answer:

TIMELINE

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ACTIVITY 3: INTERPRETING LYRICS

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot

Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home
Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home
I looked over Jordan, and I what did I see
Coming for to carry me home?
A band of angels coming after me, coming for to carry me home
If you get there before I do, coming for to carry me home
Tell all my friends I coming too, coming for to carry me home
I'm sometimes up, I'm sometimes down
Coming for to carry me home
But still my soul feels heavenly bound
Coming for to carry me home

1. Read (or sing) the lyrics, and discuss how music played an important role in communication among enslaved people.

2. What do you think is meant by “carry me home”? What double meaning might that have for enslaved people? Think about the imagery in this song and illustrate the scene that comes to mind.

3. What is the resounding message of this song?

4. What spiritual references were used in this song to empower the singer or listener of this hymn?

5. The singers of this song wanted to tell a story. What story do you think they were aiming to express?

6. What hidden messages can be found in the lyrics that speak to the nature of struggle, survival, and perseverance?

7. Think about the challenges faced by enslaved people who may have sung this song. Think about changes our society has seen since this song was first sung. List some of these changes.

8. Talk to your parents or other adults about changes they have witnessed in their lifetimes. Write a journal entry predicting how life may change during your lifetime. How would you like to see it change for the better?

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Slavery is the holding of people through force, fraud or coercion for purposes of exploitation or forced labor so that the enslaver can extract profit.

Enslaved person is a preferable term to “slave” because a person is not a thing.

Chattel slavery is an intergenerational system of slavery where individuals are held as property and traded as commodities.

Indentured servants are not enslaved; they sell their labor for a certain number of years to pay a debt.

The Middle Passage was the voyage of enslaved people from the west coast of Africa to the Americas, usually via the Caribbean. Enslaved people endured traumatic conditions on enslavers’ ships, including cramped quarters, meager rations and assault.

Fugitive was a common term in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that is still used today to describe the freedom seeker. The term was attached to the various Fugitive Slave Laws passed by the U.S. Congress, and suggests that the “fugitive” was criminal to escape from bondage. The language employed was key in attempts to preserve the view that the law was on the side of slaveholding society — which it was — while reinforcing the view that the “fugitive” was incapable of acting responsibly in a society governed by the rule of law.

An **abolitionist** takes a political position, and is likely politically active. The abolitionist may act on their anti-slavery principles by helping individuals to escape from slavery, joining anti-slavery groups, or, in some cases, taking their position even further by joining rebellions.

A **conductor** was an individual who escorted or guided freedom seekers between Underground Railroad stations or safe houses. A conductor need not have been a member of an organized section of the Underground Railroad, only someone who provided an element of guidance to the freedom seeker.

‘Slave Patrols’ were formed by state militias, county courts and sometimes by plantation owners themselves. They were responsible for apprehending African-Americans who were involved in crimes, keeping the enslaved “in their place”, stopping escapes, and capturing freedom seekers. Mounted on horses, they were often armed with guns, whips, and clubs. They would stop Blacks and demand “passes” or other forms of identification to prove that they weren’t escapees.

An Underground Railroad **station** provided a haven for traveling freedom seekers and was secured by the stationmaster, an individual who provided shelter or a hiding place to freedom seekers on the Underground Railroad. Stations took many forms such as basements, cabins, homes, barns or caves, or any other site that provided an element of security, while giving the freedom seekers an opportunity for rest and provisions.





ACTIVITY 5: DID YOU KNOW?

- Europeans enslaved people long before colonization. Slavery was widespread in the Roman Empire and later justified on the basis of religion during the Crusades. Until the 1450s, European sugar planters in the Mediterranean imported enslaved laborers from parts of Eastern Europe and Central Asia.
- Slavery and the slave trade were central to the development and growth of the colonial economies and what is now the United States. Protections for slavery were embedded in the founding documents; enslavers dominated the federal government, Supreme Court and Senate from 1787 through 1860.
- Slavery was an “institution of power” designed to create profit for the enslavers and break the will of the enslaved, and was a relentless quest for profit abetted by racism.
- Slavery shaped the fundamental beliefs of Americans about race and whiteness, and white supremacy was both a product and legacy of slavery. Slavery was the central cause of the Civil War.
- Enslaved people drew on long standing traditions of communicating oral history to pass along knowledge and stories when reading and writing were strictly controlled.
- Music was very important in the lives of enslaved people, and the music they created shapes popular music today. Enslaved people drew from oral traditions in indigenous and African cultures to pass on stories, history, culture and teachings. Enslaved Africans created two of America’s most enduring musical forms: spirituals and blues music.
- Cultural practices, including crafts and food, that developed in indigenous and African cultures continue to this day.

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ACTIVITY 6: MUSICAL HISTORY

Enslaved people recreated many music and dance traditions while in captivity and on the plantations, by working with the few materials they could get their hands on and making instruments in a slightly different form.

The most common musical instruments used by enslaved people were the banjo and the fiddle. While it eventually became associated with “white” country music, the banjo is actually modeled after a family of West African instruments, such as the kora. Banjo-like instruments were first recreated by enslaved people on plantations in the U.S. South in the 18th century. Enslaved people made banjos by hollowing out a gourd or large squash, attaching it to a pole for the neck of the instrument and making strings out of horsehair or animal intestines. Other instruments were made by using different animal bones in addition to sticks and other pieces of wood.

Africa is famous for being the birthplace of many types of drums. In fact, drums have historically been used as a form of communication, as in the tradition of “talking drums.” However, after a 1739 slave revolt in South Carolina used drums as a form of communication between enslaved people, the instruments were outlawed in most colonies. While they continued playing drums in secret, most of the time enslaved people invented substitutes to make rhythms for their music.

The most common methods were hand-clapping, foot-stomping and “patting juba,” which meant switching back and forth between foot-tapping, hand-clapping and slapping the thigh with the hands. Sometimes patting juba was done by beating sticks on the floor to make a rhythm.

Enslaved people were thrown together on the plantations, where Africans from different ethnicities who spoke different languages all lived together. They blended their different types of music and combined them with Euro-American music that they learned by being in contact with white enslavers and overseers.

Enslaved people performed different types of music at distinct moments in their lives. For example, to keep their spirits up, they sang work songs while they picked cotton, shucked corn, cut wood and did other repetitive work. For this reason, many enslavers and overseers encouraged enslaved people to sing while working, since they thought it made them work harder.

This tradition of making music while working was brought directly from Africa, where music was part of daily life. Some work songs were communal (sung in a group) and others were solo songs, and others were call and response songs, where the lead singer would sing a line, the others would respond with the same line, and then the lead singer would improvise.

While many enslaved people were not allowed to learn to read and write, this doesn’t mean they weren’t intelligent. They showed cleverness by making fun of their enslavers in songs and by using satire. This is a type of humor that doesn’t sound like a criticism on the surface, but that other enslaved people would understand. There were also songs that held hidden messages, like “Follow the Drinking Gourd,” which gave instructions to runaways on how to use the stars to escape slavery and go north.

Beyond music played for fun or dancing, enslaved people also used music for religious worship. The folk spiritual is the earliest form of African-American religious music to develop in the United States, in the late 1700s. Spirituals used Christian verses from the Bible but combined them with lyrics about the specific situation of being enslaved. Singing during worship was usually accompanied by hand-clapping, body movement and sometimes shouting.

Harriet Tubman is said to have sung the spiritual “Wade in the Water” while she was helping enslaved people escape on the Underground Railroad. The lyrics told runaways to walk in the water instead of on land because the dogs used to find them wouldn’t be able to pick up their scent. (-Teaching Tolerance)



Harriet Tubman circa 1868. Photograph by Benjamin F. Powelson, Collection of the National Museum of African American History and Culture shared with the Library of Congress.

Cues at the Theatre

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