

Finding Your Way on the Underground Railroad

Theme: Cultural & Historical

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Subject Areas

History/Social Studies, Mathematics, Science

Duration

One class period

Setting

Indoors

Skills

Interpreting, relating, charting and mapping, identifying, describing, comparing

Charting the Course

Although not specifically mentioned in the film, the era of the Underground Railroad's operation did impact the settlement and development of the region and played an important role in the history of New Jersey."

Vocabulary

Underground Railroad, slavery, emancipation, abolitionist, fugitive, Quaker, freedom, conductor, station master, passenger, North Star, William Still, Harriet Tubman

Correlation to NJ Core Curriculum Content Standards

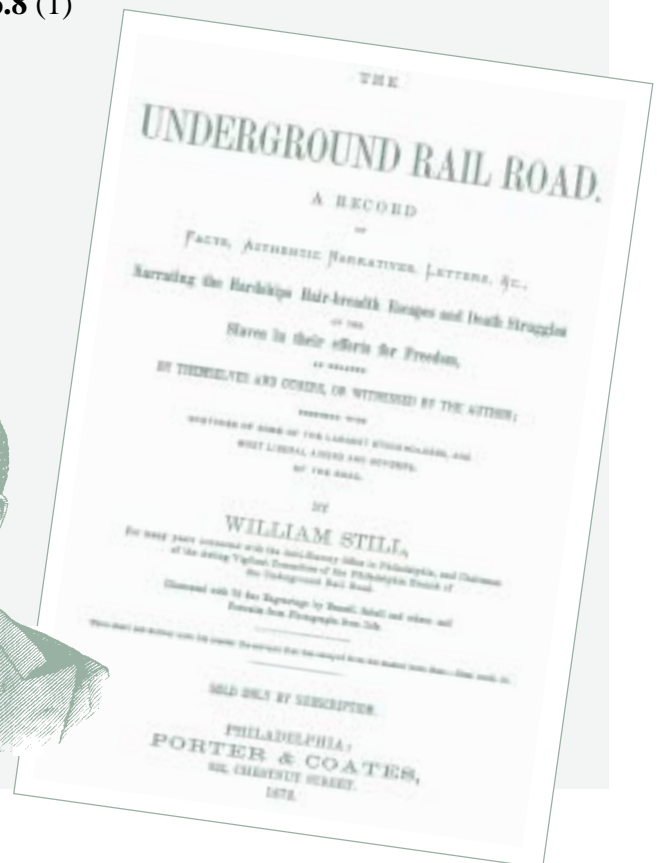
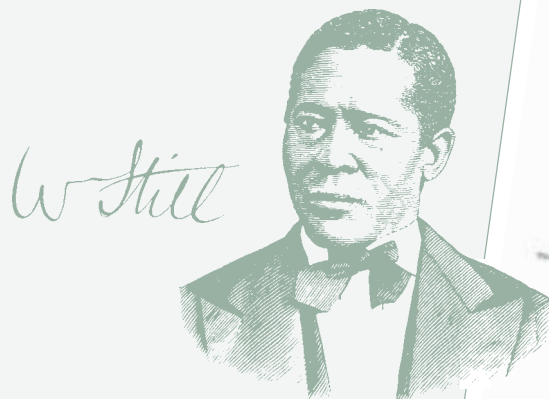
Social Studies

6.3 (1, 2, 3, 4)

6.4 (2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8)

6.7 (1, 5)

6.8 (1)



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■ Objectives

Students will

1. Explain what the Underground Railroad was and why it was important.
2. Identify some of the routes of the Underground Railroad on a map of New Jersey.
3. Describe some of the conditions and the historical significance of the Underground Railroad to the shaping of the region “Down Jersey.”

■ Materials

Provide students with a map of New Jersey and a list of some of the documented stops on the Underground Railroad provided in the activity.

A map is provided courtesy of the New Jersey Historical Commission, Afro-American Studies

■ Making Connections

Explain that the Underground Railroad was not a railroad line, but a network of people who helped African-Americans escape from slavery in the South to freedom in the North and Canada. Down Jersey’s proximity to the slave states of Delaware and Maryland made this region important to the Underground Railroad. The movement of African-Americans into and through this region played an important role in the formation and development of the varied and diverse make up of the region’s people.

Perhaps the two most prominent figures of the Underground Railroad were Harriet Tubman and William Still. Although

many teachers refer to them in their lessons, many instructors never relay the regional significance of these courageous African-Americans.

Harriet Tubman was known as “Moses” for the large number of slaves she guided to freedom as a “conductor” on the Underground Railroad. Tubman came from the Eastern Shore of Maryland which is close to the Delaware Bayshore. In 1849 when she fled her own bondage she only knew two northern states: New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Her knowledge of New Jersey may have come from historic ties between blacks of the Eastern Shore and the Delaware Bayshore. She escorted groups of slaves from the Eastern Shore of Maryland to Philadelphia and as far north as St. Catharines, Canada (now Ontario).

It is highly probable that Tubman’s route sometimes included New Jersey., perhaps as she guided them from Philadelphia to New York City. She spent the summers between 1849 and 1852 in Cape May, and winters in St. Catharines. In Cape May she earned money working in hotels to finance her trips back to Maryland to escort more slaves in their escape. Tubman made approximately 19 forays into the South to bring out about 300 fugitives. These journeys were filled with peril. Harriet possessed endless courage. Slaves that had second thoughts about their escape met with Harriet’s positive attitude and determination that each succeed. She is said to have carried a pistol and threatened

to use it rather than risk having a failed fugitive divulge the secrets of the Underground Railroad.

William Still was born in 1821 in Shamong, New Jersey (formerly called Indian Mills — Burlington County). Make students aware that this is not far from the Bayshore. He was the main chronologist of the Railroad’s operations. His parents emancipated themselves from slavery. He worked on their New Jersey farm til the age of 23 when he moved to Philadelphia. By the age of 26 he had taught himself to read and write. He became deeply involved in the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee. During his fourteen year service providing aid and comfort, as a “station master” to Southern slaves journeying to freedom, he recorded hundreds of interviews. One narrative entitled *Crossing The Bay In A Skiff* tells of four bondmen crossing the Delaware Bay. Their crossing took 15 or more hours. With no knowledge of a safe haven they were bewildered. In this state of despair they were discovered by the captain of an oyster boat. The captain took pity on their exhausted and bedraggled state and ferried them to Philadelphia. There their story was recorded by William Still. Still placed himself in jeopardy in his devotion not only to help slaves but by the mere process of recording their plight.

Both Harriet Tubman “Moses” and William Still are profiles of Afro-American heroism. Teachers should develop ties to their New Jersey connections.



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■ Background

Historic Themes and Resources book, pages 34 and 143

Reprinted from *The Atlantic City Press*, November 23, 1997; *Slavery Slumbers in Cumberland's History*, by Eileen Bennett:

“My colored friends, should you conduct yourselves on true moral principles, not gaudy manners nor boisterous in talk, your ways calm and decisive, your word so sacred that 'tis never violated, your promises fulfilled, your debts paid, modest in all things and meddlesome in none, you shall find the monster Prejudice only a thing to be talked about. Merit alone will promote you to respect.”

Dr. James Still (1812-1885),
“The Black Doctor of the Pines.”

“... Make no mistake, Slavery did, indeed, exist in southern New Jersey,” said Giles R. Wright, director of Afro-American studies at the New Jersey Historical Commission, Department of the State. “Some of this had to do with the topography of South Jersey. When you talk about slavery in South Jersey, there's many dimensions to it,” added Wright, author of the book *Afro-Americans in New Jersey: A Short History*.

For example, in Cumberland County, slaves were used in agriculture, working on the large expanses of farmlands or tending livestock; in Cape May County, they worked on docks or on ships. “In the communities that were located near waterways, slaves could be used to go out on ships, catch whales, a wide range of occupations,” Wright

said. “Slavery in the maritime industry included a wide range of things, from catching of fish to working along the docks and shores, moving cargo — and even, to some degree, slaves were used for the manufacturing of sails and even boats themselves,” Wright continued. Another area in which slaves were used was for domestic work — butlers, cooks, and other similar jobs around the homes of people of considerable means. “It's hard to imagine any craft or trade in which you wouldn't find black workers,” Wright said. There were even skilled craftsman slaves: blacksmiths, millers, carpenters, shoemakers, coopers and tanners.

In his book, Wright explains that it is not clear when blacks first appeared on New Jersey soil, although he writes:

“Probably the Dutch — who were among the foremost slave traffickers of the 17th century — were responsible.” Pockets of slavery cropped up in several areas. “By 1790, the largest (pockets of slavery) in terms of population were in Burlington, then Salem, Gloucester, Cumberland, and then Cape May,” Wright said. (Atlantic County didn't exist until 1837, when it was carved out of Gloucester County.) In 1790, it's estimated there were 120 slaves in Cumberland County and 141 in Cape May County. By 1800, that number had dwindled to 75 and 98, respectively, until finally, in 1830, Cumberland had only two slaves and Cape May had three.

A law establishing gradual emancipation actually allowed slavery in New Jersey to exist well into the 1860s — later than



A Ride for Liberty — The Fugitive Slaves, circa 1862

By Eastman Johnson (1824-1906) — courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum of Art

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any other Northern state. Wright credits a strong Quaker influence in Philadelphia and southern New Jersey for helping to eliminate slavery. “The Quakers were the first organized group in the country to speak out against the evils of black slavery, and the first group to become abolitionists,” Wright said. While Quakers didn’t necessarily feel slaves were their equal, they believed the premise of enslaving another human was wrong because freedom was a natural right. “In 1776, the yearly (Quaker) Philadelphia meeting voted to excommunicate anyone who was a slave owner. The Quakers were very active in the Underground Railroad,” Wright said.

Known Underground Railroad routes — the network of safe houses that slaves followed to freedom in the North — did pass through sections of Salem and Cumberland counties on the way to more fugitive-friendly points in the North. Springtown, located in Greenwich Township in Cumberland County, was established around 1800 by slaves who had been freed or escaped bondage in Delaware, Maryland or states farther south, according to Wright. The Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Springtown is believed to have played an important role in the Underground Railroad in the area. How Springtown got its name remains a mystery. Some say it was the proliferation of springs there, but others say that it was because “it was a springboard to freedom for many slaves.”

Testaments to slavery in southern New Jersey remain. Since slaves were forbidden to read or write, they created quilts in order to leave stories for prosperity. Those quilts, many of which still exist, served as a way for some slaves to record milestones of their lives: births, marriages and deaths, as well as beatings and the sale of a loved one. It’s said that quilts were key to the Underground Railroad. Quakers, who owned many of the stations on the railroad, would display a Jacob’s Ladder-patterned quilt to let runaway slaves know they were welcome.

■ Procedure

Warm Up

Begin a discussion about the Underground Railroad. Explain that the Underground Railroad was not a railroad line, but a network of people who helped African-Americans escape from slavery in the South to freedom in the North and Canada.

The Activity

1. Reproduce and distribute a map of New Jersey and the list of some of the documented stops on the Underground Railroad.
2. Ask students to draw and label the four routes through New Jersey on the map.
3. Discuss the implications of this region for the freedom of Afro-Americans trying to escape slavery. Expand discussion to include an overview of US History.

Wrap Up

Discuss with the class the importance of the Underground Railroad to the African-American community. How do they think that people knew about where to stop and that it was safe? (Remember — it was illegal to harbor a runaway slave. They were considered to be the property of their “master.”)

Discuss the type of person that operated and assisted in the Underground Railroad. Do students see themselves as those type of people? Would they do the same thing today? Why or why not? (This can be a personal journal entry and/or discussion.)

■ Assessment

Participation in the activity and discussions. Completion of the map.

■ Extensions

Have students write a short story about traveling on the Underground Railroad. Have them pretend that they are slaves trying to escape to freedom in the North. What are some of the obstacles that they would come across? What were the dangers? How must the slaves have felt along this journey?

Fugitive slaves used the North Star as a compass. The song “Follow the Drinking Gourd” refers to the North Star. Read students William Still’s story of *Crossing The Bay In A Skiff*. Discuss the story. Would they have the courage to cross the Bay? Have the students create a drawing of the four bondmen crossing the Delaware Bay.



■ Resources

Pages 186 and 187 of **Historic Themes and Resources**

Underground Railroad Special Resource Study — Management Concepts/Environmental Assessment, September 1995, United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service
Outlines five concepts for commemorating and interpreting the UGRR. Explains the potential environmental impacts of implementing these concepts. Also, includes a brief history of the UGRR. 204 pages, illustrated; black and white with two-color maps. Price: \$8.00 per copy, Stock Number: 024-005-01175-7.

U.S. Government Printing Office — 8 a.m.-4 p.m. M-F at 1-202-512-1800 or fax 1-202-512-2250.

A brochure on the UGRR — # GPO: 1996-404-952/40095, 1996. Or write: Underground Railroad Initiative, National Park Service, National Capital Field Area, 1100 Ohio Drive SW, Washington, D.C. 20242, or visit the National Underground Railroad website at <http://www.nps.gov/undergroundrr/contentshhtm> or at the subaddress: www.cr.nps.gov/aahistory/undergroundrr.

Visit the **New Jersey Historical Commissions's** Internet page at www.state.nj.us/state/history/hisidx.html or call them at (609) 292-6062.

Asbury Park Press, September 6, 1998, Section C — **Tracking a Freedom Train**

The Underground Rail Road, by William Still.
This is a compilation of Still's interviews with hundreds of runaway slaves during his fourteen years of service for the underground railroad. Still was a native of New Jersey and a prominent figure in the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee. Some of his moving accounts of the challenges runaways faced in their quest for freedom include stories of Delaware Bay crossings. His narratives were originally printed in 1872. Since then Chicago, Johnson Pub. Co. Press, Inc. has reprinted the book, copyright 1970.

The New Jersey African-American History Curriculum Guide, Grades 9-12, by Larry A. Greene and Lenworth Gunther, 1997, 197 pp. paper. illus. The first resource guide for teachers that combines the American, black American and black New Jersey past into a common history. It is designed to help teachers integrate African-American history into high school courses in United States history, world history, social studies, and ethnic studies. The guide is organized into fifteen chronological units, each representing a period in African-American historical experience. Order ISBN 0-89743-082-4, \$20. Add \$1.50 shipping and handling for the first 1-5 books. Volume discounts available for schools, libraries and historical organizations. Make checks payable to: Treasurer, State of New Jersey. Send orders to: Publications, New Jersey Historical Commission, P.O. Box 305, Trenton, NJ 08625-0305.

“Freedom Train” is a play about Harriet Tubman, a.k.a. “Moses,” the famous conductor of the Underground Railroad. Tubman used to work summers in Cape May to earn money to conduct the business of the Underground Railroad. Traveling theater companies do presentations of “Freedom Train” periodically at Rowan University.

“Music and the Underground Railroad” features the Kim and Reggie Harris Group. “Follow the Drinking Gourd” is one song on the tape. Ascension Productions, P.O. Box 18871, Philadelphia, PA 19119.



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Four Routes of the Underground Railroad Through New Jersey

Based on an interview conducted August 2, 1895, by Wilburt H. Siebert with Reverend Thomas Clement Oliver of Windsor, Ontario, Canada, “who, like his father, traveled the New Jersey routes many times as a guide or conductor.”

Choose a different color for each of the four Routes.
Place an “X” at the location of each town/city and then connect them.

Route 1

Philadelphia
Camden
Burlington
Princeton
New Brunswick

Route 2

Salem —
Goodwin Sisters
Woodbury
Evesham Mount
Bordentown
(Connect with Route 1)

Alternative A

Perth Amboy
New York City
Syracuse, New York
(Off map)
Ontario, Canada
(Off map)

Route 3

Dover, Delaware
(by boat across
Delaware Bay)
Greenwich
Othello
Springtown*
Evesham Mount
Mount Holly
Camp Cedar Knoll*,
Bethany Baptist
Association
(Connect with Route 1)

Alternative B

Rahway
Jersey City
(Connect with
New York City route)

Route 4

Newtown, Pennsylvania
Trenton
New Brunswick
(Connect with Route 1)

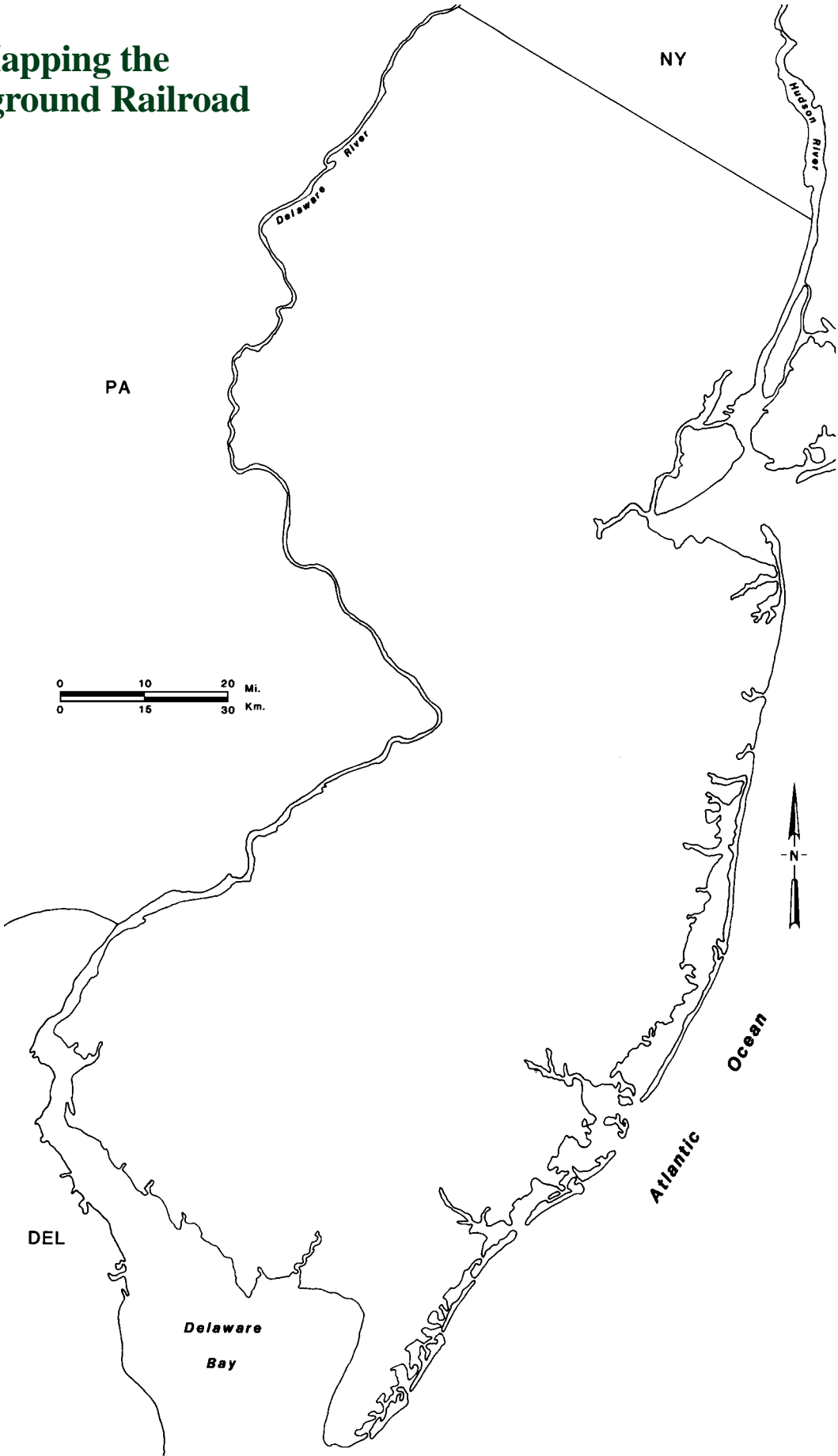
Source: Wilburt H. Siebert, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (1898).

*Additions from regional sources.

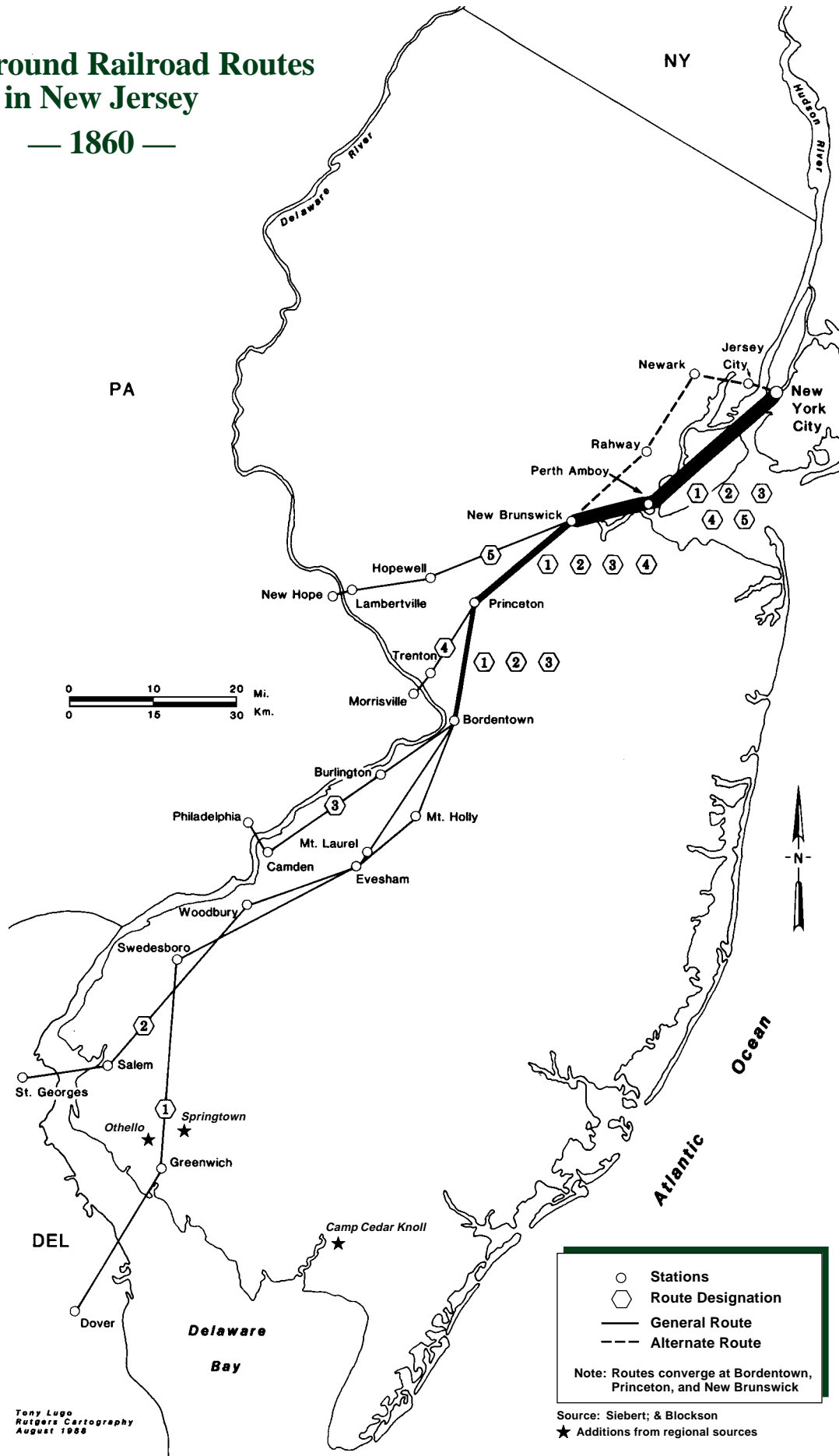
Editor’s Note:

The following pages contain a worksheet for student use and a map providing a similar interpretation of the Underground Railroad routes. The Underground Railroad was clandestine by its very nature and apparently interpretations vary.

Mapping the Underground Railroad



Underground Railroad Routes in New Jersey — 1860 —



Tony Lugo
Rutgers Cartography
August 1984

Music and song were important means of communication between slaves. The song *Follow the Drinking Gourd* is the story of a one-legged free black sailor — Peg Leg Joe. His existence may be legend but he is said to have traveled from plantation to plantation spreading this song.

Follow the Drinking Gourd

Follow the drinking gourd! Follow the drinking gourd.
For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom
If you follow the drinking gourd.
When the sun comes back, and the first quail calls,
Follow the drinking gourd.
For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom
If you follow the drinking gourd.

The riverbank makes very good road,
The dead trees will show you the way.
Left foot, peg foot, traveling on,
Follow the drinking gourd.

The river ends between two hills,
Follow the drinking gourd.
There's another river on the other side,
Follow the drinking gourd.

When the great big river meets the little river,
Follow the drinking gourd.
For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom
Follow the drinking gourd.

The words have hidden meaning, telling the secrets of traveling the Underground Railroad. Following the Big Dipper leads to the North Star, the main navigational tool of the escaping bondsmen. "Drinking gourd" is the nickname for the Big Dipper. Springtime is "when the sun comes back," or when the slave should travel. The Tombigbee River in Mississippi "ends between two hills." The second river was the Tennessee River. And the "great big river" referred to the Ohio. Peg Leg Joe is said to have promised to meet the runaway slaves at the Ohio to ferry them to freedom, where they would travel on the Underground Railroad to Canada.