Map the Underground Railroad

Grade level: 5+

Overview
This lesson takes a look at how people were able to escape slavery through a series of stop points called the Underground Railroad. Prior to beginning this lesson, students should study the Underground Railroad for one to two weeks and have a firm understanding about the process used to move from plantation to getting help from a “conductor”, who helped orchestrate escapes, to different stop points along the way. Although the exact escape route varied, students should have an overall concept of what was needed to escape from the south to a northern city where slavery was not practiced and the difficulty of this journey.

Lesson Goals
Students should:

1. Understand that slaves had to move through different stages to escape slavery and that the journey was treacherous and not always successful.
2. Receive a map of the United States that shows each state’s boundaries.
3. Work in a group to figure out how the slave will escape and what route the slave will take to get to a northern state.
4. Choose one person to present to the rest of the class what plans they made, what route they chose and why they chose that route.

Materials
A map of the United States during the 1850s to show each state’s boundaries. You should have enough copies so that each group of students has a map.

Teaching the Lesson
Start the class by explaining the steps slaves had to go through to escape via the Underground Railroad. There are several resources in the resource section below that you can use to help students learn more about the railroad. Make sure students understand that it was not an actual railroad, but a chain of locations with “conductors” who saw that the escaped slave made it from one “stop” to the next.

Divide the class into groups of five or six students. If you have a small class of 12 or less, you can make the groups smaller. If you have an extremely large class, you can make the groups larger. There should be four to six groups total.

Pass out a map to each group of student and instruct the students that they are to come up with a story about a slave who escapes slavery via the Underground Railroad. Tell them they must come up with the path the person took to escape slavery. Tell the students that they will need to choose one person to present the escape route at the end of the class.
Lesson Resources

Websites

- http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/media/underground-railroad-journey-freedom/?ar_a=1
- http://pathways.thinkport.org/flash_home.cfm (offers a mapping feature)
- http://freedomcenter.org/

Videos

- http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/underground-railroad/videos
- http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/Bhistory/underground_railroad/
- http://www.brainpop.com/socialstudies/ushistory/undergroundrailroad/preview.weml (interactive online lesson plan)

Books for Kids

- Night Boat to Freedom by Margot Theis Raven
- Minty: A Story of Young Harriet Tubman by Alan Schroeder
- Henry's Freedom Box: A True Story from the Underground Railroad by Ellen Levine
- The Underground Railroad by Ann Heinrichs
- The Underground Railroad: An Interactive History Adventure by Allison Lassieur

These are just a handful of resources. There are many books, videos and websites that offer valuable information on the Underground Railroad, including some personal accounts from the diaries of escaped slaves.

Concluding Activity

This lesson concludes with the students presenting their maps in front of the class. As students discuss how the slave escaped they will gain an understanding of just how much it took to reach freedom, and how many people had to help along the way. It is amazing that the Underground Railroad was as successful as it was. The endeavor required a great number of people to keep secret the locations of all the stops. This activity will help students both understand the challenge of escape and the challenge of helping others escape.

Photo: Moses Vance Rawlings' homestead, a station on the Underground Railroad at 318 Rawlings Street, Washington Court House, Fayette County, Ohio.
Photo Credit: Image in the public domain, Underground Railroad Small Picture Collection, Ohio Historical Center Archives Library, http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ammemrr.pl?title=%3Ca+href%3d%22%2fammem%2faward97%2fohahtml%2faeohome.html%22%3EAfrican-American+Experience+in+Ohio%3a+1850-1920%3C%2faward97%2fohahtml%2faeohome.html%22%3EAfrican-American+Experience+in+Ohio%3a+1850-1920%3E+&coll=aaeo&default=award&dir=ammem
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