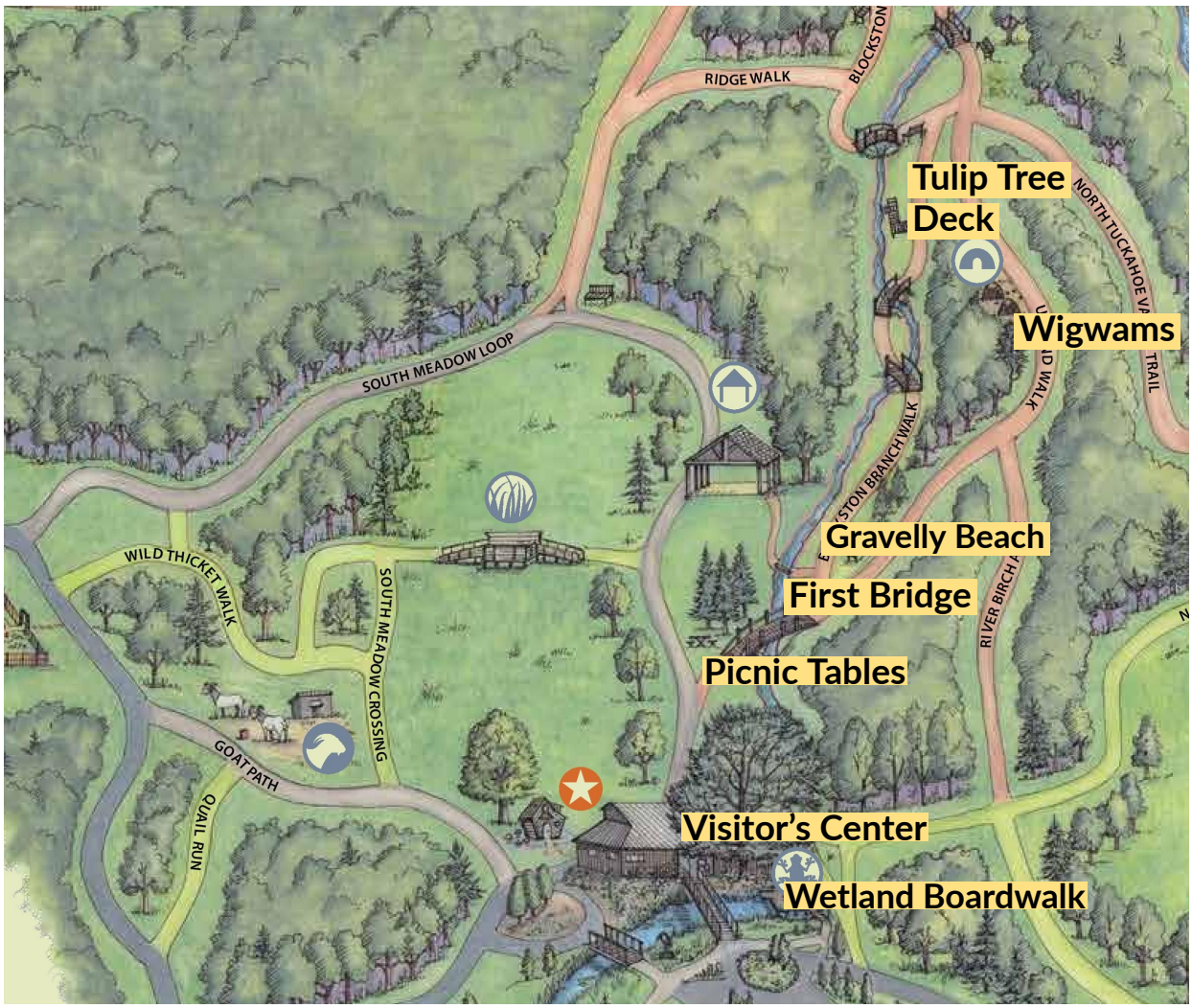
# Nature's Story in the Underground Railroad

## A Self-Guided Field Trip for Grades 4--8

Welcome to Adkins Arboretum! The Arboretum is a 400-acre native garden and plant preserve. Native plants have been evolving here since the last polar ice age, 10,000 years ago. Animals depend on native plants for food and shelter.

In this field trip, your students will explore the connections between nature and the journey to freedom.

Self-guided field trips MUST be scheduled in advance. To schedule yours, email Madison Palmer at mpalmer@adkinsarboretum.org. Fee: $5/student. Groups will receive access to nets and buckets when they check in at the Visitor's Center.



# Introduction

*Walk to the picnic tables at the woodland entrance. Have students find a seat. Provide students with context to link Adkins Arboretum and the Underground Railroad, either by sharing the following text aloud or providing it in the form of a hand-out for whole group reading.*

“Adkins Arboretum is home to 400 acres of native plants. Native plants have been growing here for the past 10,000 years. The meadows, marshes, and forests that you see today are your window to the past. We could set our sights on the days of the saber-toothed tiger, the Eastern Woodland Indians, or the first settlers. But you are here for another reason. You are here to experience nature through the eyes of the Freedom Seekers."

“Up until the end of the Civil War in 1865, the Eastern Shore was home to many African Americans, both free and enslaved. Enslaved people worked long, hard hours without pay. Families lived in one-room cabins with little food. If they disobeyed, they could be beaten or sold, sometimes far away in the Deep South. Families who were separated often never saw each other again."

“Some enslaved Americans escaped by making their way north to places where enslavement wasn’t allowed. At first, this meant Pennsylvania and other free states. But with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, even free states were required to return captured freedom seekers to their slaveholders. The only way to be truly free was to travel all the way to Canada.”

“Some people helped freedom seekers by providing food, hiding places, transportation, and directions. They formed a loose group of men and women, Black and white, from the mid-Atlantic to the northern states and into Canada. The code name of this group? The Underground Railroad.”

“Even with help from the Underground Railroad, the decision to run away was not easy. It meant leaving family behind. Running away could lead to capture, punishment, and even death. Today, we’ll examine the difficult decision to escape, as well as how nature made the journey easier...and harder.”

# Nature as Shelter

*Gather on the wetland boardwalk for this section of your field trip.*

1. Walk to the wetland boardwalk and have students take a seat. "While many freedom seekers escaped to the free northern states and Canada, some found shelter in the Florida Everglades and the Great Dismal Swamp of Virginia and North Carolina, where they were unlikely to be tracked. The Great Dismal and the Everglades are both wetlands—places where land and water meet."

2. "You are sitting over a wetland right now! To better understand what it would be like to wade through a wetland—as Harriet Tubman did on her journey to freedom (show image of Harriet Tubman)--we need to find out what's in the wetland." Explain how to use nets and buckets.

**Tips for Using Nets and Buckets:**

- Kneel inside the boardwalk rim, not on it.
- Be aware of students around you so that you don't accidentally hit someone.
- You may move around the boardwalk, but leave the buckets where they are.
- Try not to get mud in the buckets.
- Handle creatures gently and put them in the buckets as soon as possible.

3. Give students about 10 minutes to search for wetland creatures. Afterwards, have them walk from bucket to bucket to see what classmates found.

4. Gather and debrief: "Why might this be a good place to seek shelter?" Food, cover, water/mud would cover tracks. "Why wouldn't it be a good place?" Sinking/drowning, cut grass, mosquitoes, flies, snakes, leeches. "What we perceive as reasons not to hide in a swamp or marsh are also what made these places safe from those who hunted freedom seekers."

5. Begin walk back to the picnic tables for your next stop.

# Nature as Navigation

*Return to the woodland picnic tables for the start of this session.*

1. “Frederick Douglass (show image) was born in a small cabin along the Tuckahoe Creek, just a few miles from here. He escaped from enslavement as a young man by traveling to Philadelphia and went on to become a famous leader in the fight against enslavement. How do you think he and others like him found their way north?”

2. “Some enslaved people may have had access to a compass. The compass was invented in China over 2000 years ago. But compasses were expensive. Most freedom seekers would not have owned one...or even a map. So how did they find their way north?”

3. “Many enslaved people used the North Star to guide them, as well as the Big Dipper constellation, known to them as the Drinking Gourd. Others knew that birds migrated south in the fall and north in the spring. Because the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, at mid-day the sun is directly above us. Before noon its position in the sky indicates an easterly direction, and after noon its position indicates a westerly direction. Can you look at the sky now and tell me which direction is east? West?”

4. “Some freedom seekers followed streams and rivers to find their way. They also waded through streams in hopes that the water would wash away their scent. In reality, the oils in our skin linger in water, so this wasn’t a foolproof method of tricking the slave catchers and their dogs. But what would it have been like to run through an icy stream in bare feet, knowing that your pursuers were close behind?”

5. Walk students to the gravelly beach to the left of the bridge. Give them a few minutes to observe the stream, dip their hands in the water, and feel the stream bed. Optional: have students sketch the stream bed. “What do you think the bottom of the stream would feel like if you ran across it without shoes? Because many enslaved people went barefoot, they had tougher feet than we do. Still, imagine if you were running through a stream and stepped on a sharp stone! Crying out in pain could lead to capture.”

# Nature as Concealment

*This session begins at the gravelly beach and continues along the Blockston Branch Walk to the Tulip Tree Deck.*

1. “Hiding was another way freedom seekers avoided capture. John Thompson fled to freedom in the late 1830s. This quote recalls a dangerous moment in his journey."

*"We at last found an old tree, which had fallen so that the trunk was supported by the limbs about two feet from the ground. Under this we crawled and lay flat upon our faces, as being the safest place we could find."*

2. “According to Mr. Thompson’s memoir, his pursuers and their dogs came to within 10 yards of where he and his companion lay flat upon the ground and did not discover their hiding place. Thompson believed that God was responsible for keeping them safe. After five hours, they finally left their hiding place, and from then on traveled only at night.”

3. Show students the hollow tree trunk by the gravelly beach as an example of a place to hide. Tell students that hollow trees were also used as places to stash supplies, either in preparation for an escape or by “conductors”--people who helped lead freedom seekers on their journey. Begin walk to hollow tulip tree observation deck. Along the way, encourage students to look for other hiding places.

4. Seat students on the hollow tulip tree observation deck. “If you were going to hide a bag of supplies in a hollow like this one in preparation for your journey, what would you put in it? Pass out the “Freedom Bag” activity. Allow students to work independently for about five minutes, then discuss as a group by asking “Give me a thumbs up if you included a candle in your freedom bag and a thumbs down if not.” Discuss the pros and cons of packing each item.

5. Continue walking. Make your first right and another right to reach your next stop, the wigwams.

# Nature as Nourishment

*This session begins at the wigwams; students will return to the first bridge by the end.*

1. Sit students on stumps around the campfire ring. Ask them if they've ever built a campfire. "Why would a freedom seeker have needed to build a fire? Why might a fire have been dangerous?" Read quote from Freedom Seeker Edward Hicks:

*"We made a fire in the hollow of a tree. [edit] [H]earing a noise in the bushes, we looked up, and beheld dogs coming towards us, and behind them several white men, who called out, "O! you rascals, what are you doing there? Catch him! Catch him!" My feelings I cannot describe, as I started, and ran with all my might. My brothers, having taken off their coats and hats, stopped to pick them up, and then ran off in another direction, and the dogs followed them, while I escaped, and never saw them more."*

2. "In the case of Edward Hicks, a campfire led to the capture of his brothers. But there were instances when fire was necessary. If you had to survive off the land, would you know how to build a fire?" Explain method of fire-building (tinder, kindling, small wood, large wood, tepee-style construction.) Give students 10 minutes to gather and assemble fire-building materials in the campfire ring.

3. "We've assembled our materials, but how will we light this fire? Matchsticks were invented by the 1800s, but there were no matchbooks, and matches might not have been easily accessible to enslaved people." Talk about use of flint to start fire, friction methods.

4. "The Native Americans who first lived in these woods were well-equipped to start a fire with friction...and to find food by hunting for wild plants and animals. Unlike the Native Americans, many enslaved Americans grew up eating farm-grown food. They had little knowledge of what was safe to eat in the wild. But because it was difficult to carry food for a journey that could take weeks or months, many had no choice but to forage for food."

5. Break students into small groups. Give each group a clipboard with paper and a writing utensil. Tell students that they will have ten minutes to conduct a wild edible survey. Keeping between the wigwams and the first bridge (show on map), they should make a list of all possible food sources—plant and animal--that they find in the woods. Tell students to meet on the first bridge when their time is up.

6. Gather students on the first bridge to share their findings. Use visuals to discuss edible native plants, such as blueberries, sassafras, walnuts, acorns (if soaked first to remove tannin), pine needles (can be brewed into a tea for vitamin C), and paw paws. Also discuss stream water for drinking and animal food sources: squirrels, rabbits, grubs, insects, fish, frogs, etc. Discuss seasonal limitations of foraging and the time and effort involved in trapping game.

7. "We can learn more about how freedom seekers found food by reading their own words." Call on students to read primary source quotes (found in resource section.)

8. "Part of the role of the conductors—or leaders--on the underground railroad was to help escaping victims of enslavement find food, either by foraging for it themselves while their passengers hid, or by directing them to friendly stations where sympathetic strangers, both white and Black, would provide food. Still, the way was long and hard, and stomachs were never full."

# Closure

"I hope that your experience today gave you some insight into the role of nature in the journey to freedom. The legacy of enslavement continues to divide and darken our country, but we should never underestimate the ability of hope and strength, vision and courage to lead us to a better place. As Frederick Douglass said "If there is no struggle, there is no progress." We walk in his footsteps. In the footsteps of Harriet Tubman and all those who risked their lives for freedom. It is not up to us to begin the journey but to join it."

# Nature's Story in the Underground Railroad

## Resources

ADKINS ARBORETUM

# Adkins Arboretum and the Underground Railroad

Adkins Arboretum is home to 400 acres of native plants. Native plants have been growing here for the past 10,000 years, since the last major ice age. Look around you. The meadows, marshes, and forests that you see today are your window to the past. We could set our sights on the days of the saber-toothed tiger, the Eastern Woodland Indian, or the first European settlers. But you are here for another reason. You are here to experience nature through the eyes of the Freedom Seekers.

Up until the end of the Civil War in 1865, Maryland's Eastern Shore was home to many African Americans, both free and enslaved. Enslaved people worked long, hard hours without pay. Families lived in one-room cabins with little food to eat. If they disobeyed, they could be beaten or sold to new owners, sometimes far away in the Deep South. Families who were separated this way often never saw each other again.

Some enslaved Americans decided to escape by making their way north to places where enslavement wasn't allowed. At first, this meant Pennsylvania and other so-called 'free states.' But with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, even free states were required to return captured freedom seekers to the slaveholders. The only way to be truly free was to travel all the way to Canada.

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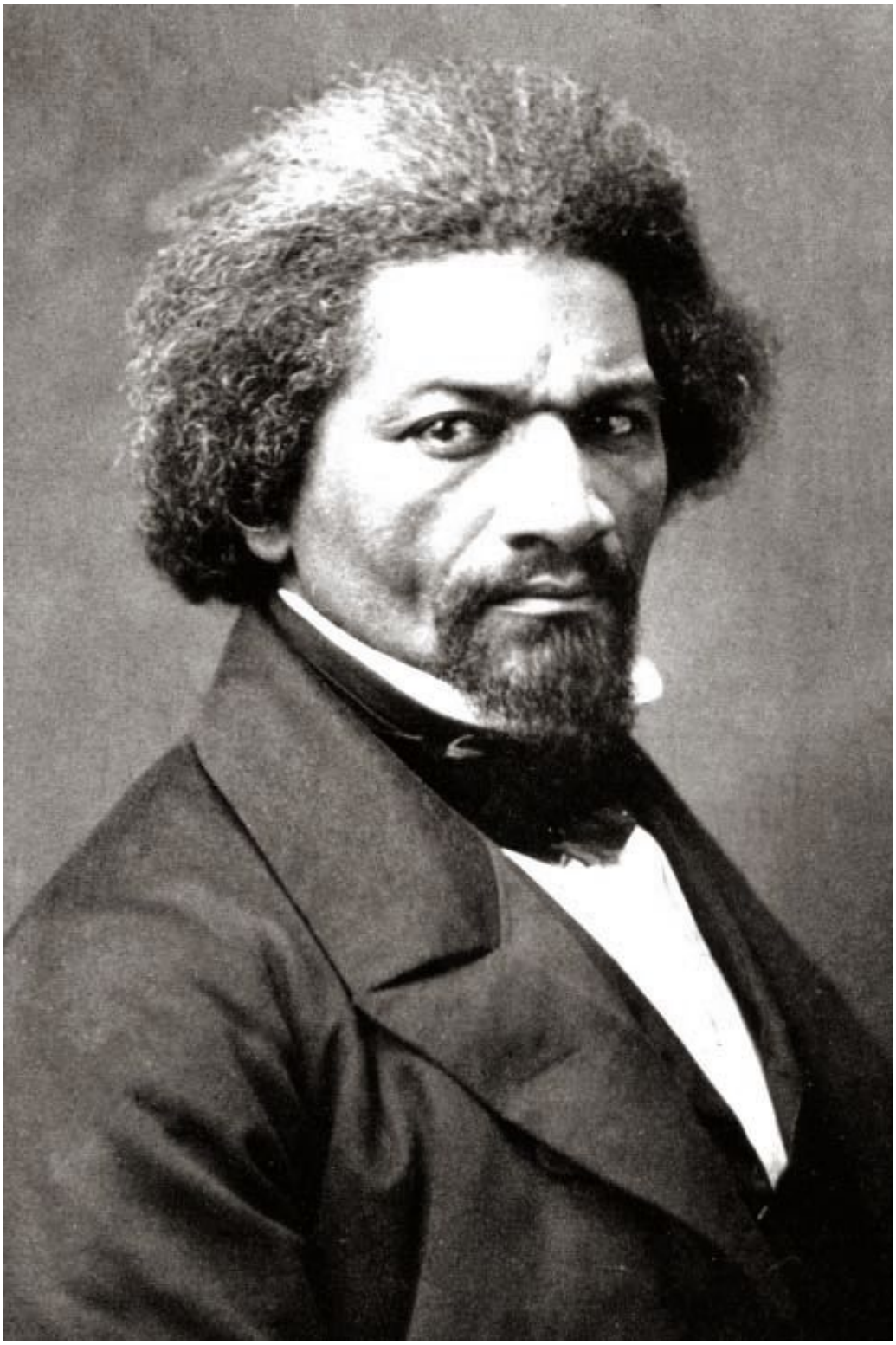
# Harriet Tubman

Source: Wikimedia Commons

# Frederick Douglass



Source: Wikimedia Commons

# Freedom Bag

You are an enslaved person preparing for your journey to freedom. What would you pack in your freedom bag to help you on your way? Check off each item that you plan to take with you.

- ● candle
- ● axe
- ● fresh fruit
- ● spare clothes
- ● knife
- ● frying pan
- ● shoes
- ● lantern
- ● corn
- ● blanket
- ● dried biscuits
- ● Bible
- ● candle
- ● cup and plate
- ● pet dog
- ● paper and pen

*This activity is based on one found in the National Park Service's Junior Ranger Activity Booklet.*

ADKINS ARBORETUM

# Primary Source Quotes (Nature As Nourishment)

"We walked all night, carrying the little ones, and spread the comfort on the frozen ground, in some dense thicket, where they all hid, while I went out foraging."
--Harriet Tubman

"We lived, or rather sustained life, by eating raw corn, potatoes, pine roots, and sassafras buds."
--John Brown

"I ran; but did not know what way to go, and took into the pines. Now, after I had done this, I began to study what I should do for something to eat. I continued there for four days without any food except sassafras leaves, and I found water. After that, I found an old colored man. I told him how the case was with me, and asked for a bit of bread. He told me to come to his house at night, at a certain hour, and he would give me a mouthful to eat."
--Edward Hicks, who escaped from Virginia

Sassafras; Source: Wikipedia

ADKINS ARBORETUM

# Edible Native Plants

walnut

paw paw

blueberries

pine needles

sassafras

acorns