

Teaching the U.S. Antislavery Movement through Music

Curriculum created for public use by Rebecca Edwards, Vassar College, under auspices of the Mid-Hudson Antislavery History Project, Poughkeepsie, NY
mhantislaveryhistoryproject.org

Lesson 4: The Turn to Electoral Politics

The song: Have the students sing, listen to, or read the lyrics of “Get Off the Track.” This was perhaps the most famous of all antislavery songs; published during the campaign of 1844, it was denounced by Whigs because of its rejection of their candidate, Henry Clay (“Railroads to Emancipation cannot rest of Clay foundation”) as well as Democrat James K. Polk. The lyrics suggested, instead, that voters choose the newly formed abolitionist Liberty Party.

The Hutchinson Family Singers, who wrote and sang this piece, were one of the country’s first protest musicians.

Suggested accompanying documents: As students to analyze the image on the attached sheet music cover illustration for “Get Off the Track.” Students could use the song as a jumping off point to explore electoral politics in the 1840s and 1850s. They might compare and contrast the Liberty Party platform of 1844 with later Republican Party platforms.

Liberty Party Platform of 1844:

https://inside.sfuhs.org/dept/history/US_History_reader/Chapter5/libertyparty1844.htm

Republican Platform of 1860: <https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.0180010a/?st=text>

Creative assignment: Stage a debate during the 1844 election. Students might debate:

- 1) whether voters should choose Democrat James K. Polk, Whig Henry Clay, or James Birney of the Liberty Party; or
- 2) whether Birney’s campaign was wise, given that many abolitionists supported the Whigs on other political issues, and support for Birney in New York, a key swing state, may have thrown the election to Polk. (New York’s popular vote in the presidential election: Polk 48.9%; Clay 47.85%; Birney 3.25% or 15,812 votes).

Alternatively two teams, both abolitionists, could debate whether their movement should get involved in electoral politics or should remain apart from politics and work for education and “moral suasion” from the outside.

Related Assignment: Listen to or sing the lyrics to **“We’re Free!”** (1856). Ask students to use this as a starting point to research the Kansas--Nebraska Act and the rise of the Republican Party. Based on their research, explain the song’s lyrics.

Jesse Hutchinson, c. 1844

15. Get Off the Track!

Ol' Dan Tucker (Emmett/trad.)

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S. A. Ho! the car E - man - ci - pa - tion
Men of var - ious pre - di - lec - tions
All true friends of Eman - ci - pa - tion,

T. B.

11

S. A. Rides ma - jes - tic thro' our na tion Bear - ing on its Train the sto - ry,
Fright - ened, run in all di - rec - tions: Mer - chants, Ed - i - tors, Phy - si - cians,
Haste to Free - dom's Rail Road Sta - tion; Quick in - to the Cars get sea - ted,

T. B.

15

S. A. LI - BER - TY! a Na - tion's Glor - y Roll it a - long, Roll it a - long,
 Law - yers, Priests and Pol - i - ti - cians, Get out the way! Get out the way!
 All is rea - dy and com - ple - ted. Put on the Steam! Put on the Steam!

T. B.

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S. A. Roll it a - long, Thro' the Na - tion Free - dom's Car, E - man - ci - pa - tion
 Get out the way! Ev - ery sta - tion, Clear the track of 'man - ci - pa - tion,
 Put on the Steam! All are cry - ing, And the Lib'r - ty Flags are fly - ing,

T. B.

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S. A. Roll it a - long, Roll it a - long, Roll it a - long, thro' the Na - tion
 Get out the way! Get out the way! Get out the way! ev - ery sta - tion,
 Put on the Steam! Put on the Steam! Put on the Steam! All are cry - ing,

T. B.

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S.
A.

Free - dom's Car, E - man - ci - pa - tion.
Clear the track of 'man - ci - pa - tion.
And the Lib'r - ty flags are fly - ing.

T.
B.

[1844]

Railroads to Emancipation
Cannot rest of Clay foundation,
And the road that Polk erects us
Leads to slav'ry and to TEXAS.
Pull up the rails! Pull up the rails!
Pull up the rails! Emancipation,
Cannot rest on such foundation. *[repeat]*

See the people run to meet us;
At the depots thousands greet us;
All take seats with exultation,
In the Car Emancipation.
Huzza! Huzzah! Huzzah! Huzzah!
Huzza! Huzzah! Emancipation,
Soon will bless our happy nation. *[repeat]*

[1856 election]

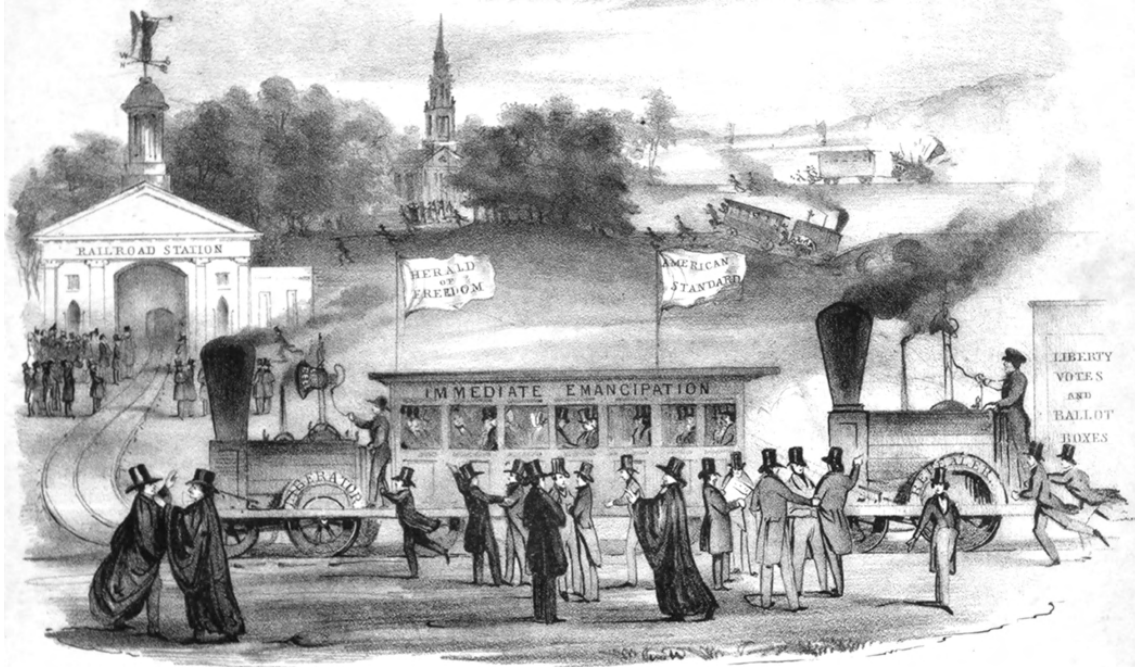
Fremont's train has got along,
Just jump aboard ye foes of wrong;
Our train is bound for Washington
It carries Freedom's bravest son, so
Get off the track, Filibusters,
Now's no time for threats and blusters.
Get off the track, e'er you dream on't
You'll be 'neath the car of Fremont.

[1860 election]

We'll dry up disunion screechers
And wipe out the slave code teachers,
And cashier the slave-trade preachers,
We're for Freedom and Reform.
Put on the steam! Put on the steam!
Put on the steam! All are calling,
We're for Freedom and Reform. *[repeat]*

With Old Abe to go before us
And the flag of Freedom o'er us
We will shout the sounding chorus,
We're for Freedom and Reform!
With Old Abe, with Old Abe,
With Old Abe to go before us,
We're for Freedom and Reform. *[repeat]*

“GET OFF THE TRACK!”



A song for Emancipation, Sung by
THE HUTCHINSONS,
Respectfully dedicated to
NATHAN P. ROGERS,

As a mark of esteem for his intrepidity in the cause of Human Rights.— By the Author.

JESSE HUTCHINSON JUNR.

Thayer & Co. Lith. Boston

Price 25 cts. net

BOSTON.

Published by the Author

Entered according to act of Congress in the year 1846 by J. Hutchinson Junr in the clerk's office of the District Court of Massachusetts.

John Greenleaf Whittier, 1856

29. We're Free

minstrel song, Lucy Neal
James Sanford, 1844

Allegretto

The musical score for the first system consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 2/4 time signature. It begins with a whole rest followed by a quarter rest, then a series of eighth notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4. The piano accompaniment is in grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with the same key signature and time signature. It starts with a whole rest, then a quarter rest, followed by a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in the right hand and quarter notes in the left hand.

The rob - ber o'er the prai - rie stalks and
Oh watch - er on the ou - ter wall, how
The hands that hold the sword and purse e're

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The second system continues the vocal and piano parts. The vocal line has a melodic line with a fermata over the first measure. The lyrics are: "calls the land his own; And they who talk as Sla - very talks are free to talk a - lone. So wears the night a - way? 'I hear the birds of morn - ing call I see the break - of day!' long shall lose their prey; And they who blind ly wrought the curse, the curse shall sweep a - way."

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wears the night a - way? 'I hear the birds of morn - ing call I see the break - of day!'
long shall lose their prey; And they who blind ly wrought the curse, the curse shall sweep a - way.

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The third system continues the vocal and piano parts. The vocal line has a melodic line with a fermata over the first measure. The lyrics are: "tell the knaves we are not slaves and slaves we'll ne - ver be; Come weal or woe, the world shall know, we're"

tell the knaves we are not slaves and slaves we'll ne - ver be; Come weal or woe, the world shall know, we're

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The fourth system continues the vocal and piano parts. The vocal line has a melodic line with a fermata over the first measure. The lyrics are: "free, we're free, we're free!"

free, we're free, we're free!

