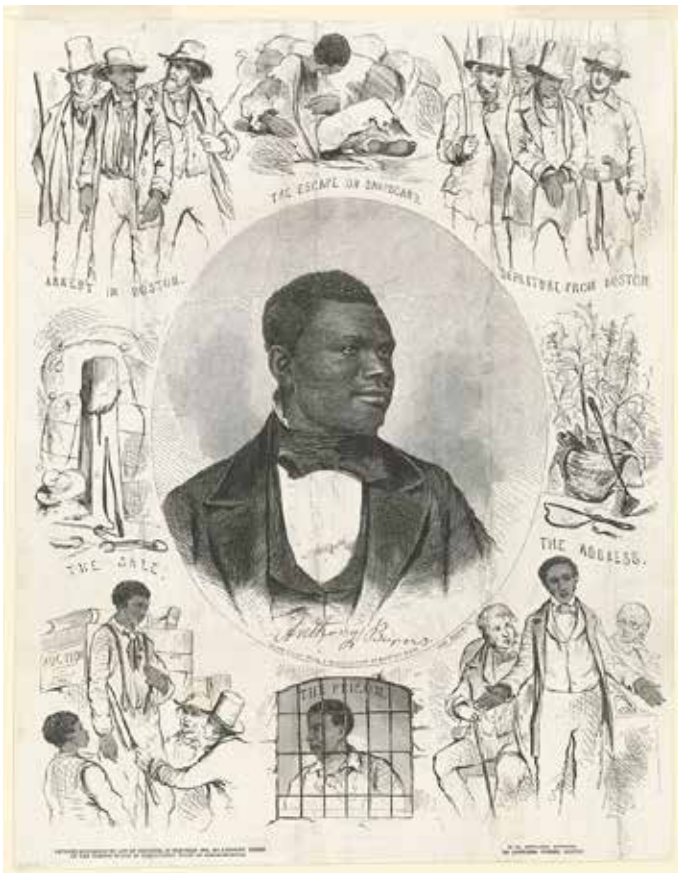




Poster supporting Anthony Burns, c. 1855. Burns was an escaped slave who was arrested in 1854. His trial attracted support from abolitionists. Ultimately Burns lost his case and was returned to Virginia the following year.

Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

Railroad, was an act that involved complex wayfinding, relying on visual cues of space and place. “Runaway slaves had to look carefully for the most promising places of entry into the Northern states and then cautiously determine the safest routes for further travel,” wrote architectural historian John Michael Vlach, adding that successful fugitives had to be “skilled at reading and using the landscapes through which they traveled.”¹⁷ This was a visual experience that required cautious looking. Well-known images from the nineteenth century showing self-emancipated people, including [Theodor Kaufmann’s *On to Liberty*](#) (1867) and Eastman Johnson’s *A Ride for Liberty* (1862), show escapees scanning behind them for signs of pursuit.

The stars were important guideposts for self-emancipated people, who usually had to travel at night to avoid being seen. Navigation by the stars helped



Eastman Johnson, *A Ride for Liberty*, 1862.

Virginia Museum of the Fine Arts

orient them northward. The asterism known as the Big Dipper (a part of Ursa Major) was known colloquially by African Americans as the “drinking gourd.” Two stars in this constellation, which can be seen year-round in the northern hemisphere, point toward the North Star, or Polaris, allowing runaways to chart a course toward safety. From folklorists to children’s books, popular media have spread the idea that the lyrics of the song “Follow the Drinking Gourd” provided travelers with a specific road map to freedom.¹⁸ However, no single “map” could be followed safely. It is more useful to see these journeys in terms of a process, requiring travelers to think quickly while on the move, constantly evaluating the security of possible routes.

Crossing bodies of water was also a crucial part of the journey: the Ohio River formed much of the border between the slave and free states and many fugitives saw it as their final major obstacle to cross. In paintings by the artist [Robert S. Duncanson](#), who was of mixed Black and European American heritage, bodies of water served as metaphors for the safe traversal of a dangerous landscape. In views of his home city, [Cincinnati, from across the Ohio River](#), Duncanson mapped visual geographies of slavery and freedom.¹⁹ Twenty-first century photographer Dawoud Bey’s series *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* picks up this journey on the other side of the river.