

Decoding “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”

Negro spirituals often have hidden meanings within their lyrics. The first column below lists some of the lyrics to “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” a negro spiritual written by Wallace Willis, a freedman, in 1840. The second column provides a literal meaning—a modern translation—of each lyric, and the third column shows the coded meaning of each lyric.

Original Lyrics	Literal Meaning	Coded Meaning
<i>Swing low</i>	<i>Come down</i>	<i>Come down south where there are slaves</i>
<i>Sweet chariot</i>	<i>Heavenly vehicle</i>	<i>The Underground Railroad</i>
<i>Comin’ for to carry me home</i>	<i>Taking me to heaven</i>	<i>Take me to freedom in the Northern states or Canada</i>
<i>I looked over Jordan, and what did I see?</i>	<i>I looked over the River Jordan, and what did I see?</i>	<i>I looked over the Mississippi or Ohio River, and what did I see?</i>
<i>A band of angels coming after me</i>	<i>A group of angels coming after me</i>	<i>Workers of the Underground Railroad coming to help me</i>