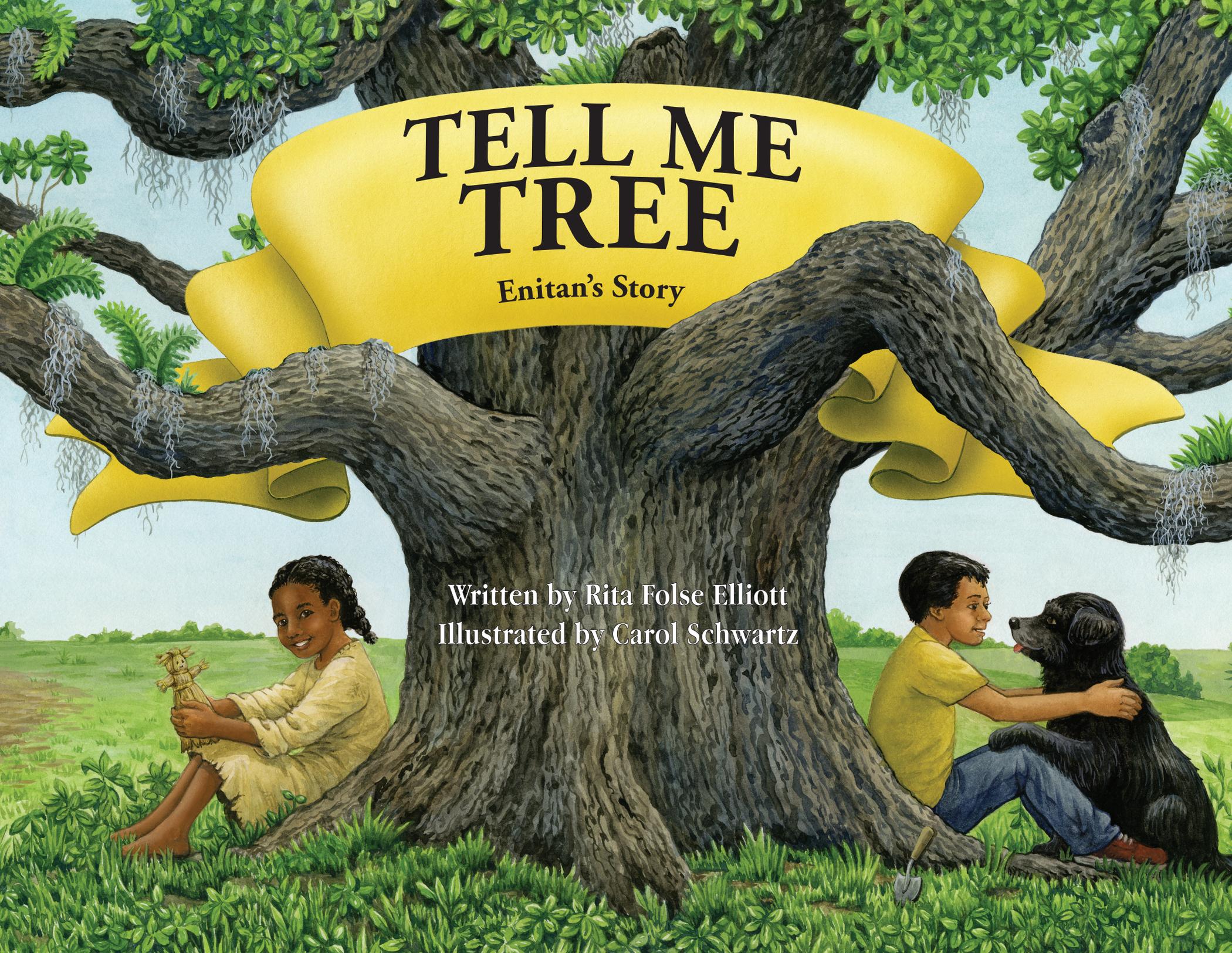


# TELL ME TREE

Enitan's Story

Written by Rita Folse Elliott  
Illustrated by Carol Schwartz





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New South Associates, Inc.  
Georgia Department of Transportation  
Federal Highway Administration  
2014

## Tell Me Tree

*This book is dedicated to Ian Yoonmyeong Lim (임윤명|林潤明)  
and the promise of all children.*

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Nita took the heavy hoe from Auntie Ife's calloused hand. "Thank you, Enitan." Old Auntie Ife was the only one that used Nita's entire name. Once Auntie Ife told her, "Enitan, never forget your name. It means 'person of story' in the language of the Yoruba, the African people from where your mother's mother came." They walked in twilight from the fields back to the village with

the others. The dust from the road coated their worn clothes and sweaty skin. Only Cato had shoes. Nita was always exhausted after hoeing for twelve hours in the 100 degree, humid Georgia summer.

"Auntie Ife, can I help you tomorrow?"

"Yes Enitan." Nita smiled. She liked nothing better.

Sunday was the one day master did not make the slaves work, but still they had their own chores. Last week the slave driver William told everyone in the village, “Georgia and the south are at war with the northern states. There is less food now and no new clothes for you.” Nita sensed the worry among the adults, who knew there was already too little food.

“Come, Enitan,” Auntie Ife said, taking her hand. “We will gather extra wild plants for food and medicine to share. Look here, these vines are smilax. Help me break off the tender ends.”

Nita gathered a large basketful. At the clearing on the edge of the woods, they gathered two baskets of poke for salad.

Auntie Ife said, “You must take care to prepare these as I tell you or they will make you sick.”

“Auntie Ife, here are some blackberries!” They returned to the village to find that Ayo, Jupiter, and Sylvie had gathered two bushels of oysters and caught dozens of catfish. The villagers ate the fish, oysters, greens, rice, and blackberries under the big oak tree nearby. It was Nita’s favorite spot in the whole world.



Winter arrived as villagers were digging up the last acres of the plantation's sweet potato crop. The slaves were allowed to take some of the crop to their village. Nita and Auntie Ife had already dragged two burlap bags of sweet potatoes from the fields and laid them in a large hole beneath the shed. Nita knew the cool ground of the storage pit cellar would keep the root crops from rotting. Back in the fields, gunshots pierced the frosty morning air. William shouted, "Quick. Run back to the village!" Mundy and Jim carried Auntie Ife. Everyone ran as the gunfire got closer. Halfway down the road, Nita turned and ran back to the field to get her gourd water bottles. Just when she picked them up, she saw him - a soldier dressed in a blue uniform, carrying a rifle. Nita froze, dropping the bottles.

"Don't be scared, I won't hurt you," the soldier said. She could sense he was being honest.

"We are here to set you free."

"I am not afraid of you," Nita said quietly, looking him squarely in the eye.



For several weeks, Nita heard gunfire. Auntie Ife said, “We will stay in our village. It is not safe to gather plants when soldiers are camped everywhere.” Nita was glad. The wooden houses in the village weren’t fancy. Many were built with posts dug into the ground that rotted quickly. Others had solid wooden foundations that needed to be repaired often. Old Cinque had built his house with walls of clay mixed with sticks placed in a trench dug into the ground. Once, he told Nita about how his father’s father had taught him how to build that way. That was how houses were built in Africa. Old Cinque’s house was cooler than the other houses and didn’t rot. But the others had forgotten how to build African houses and made their houses of wood.

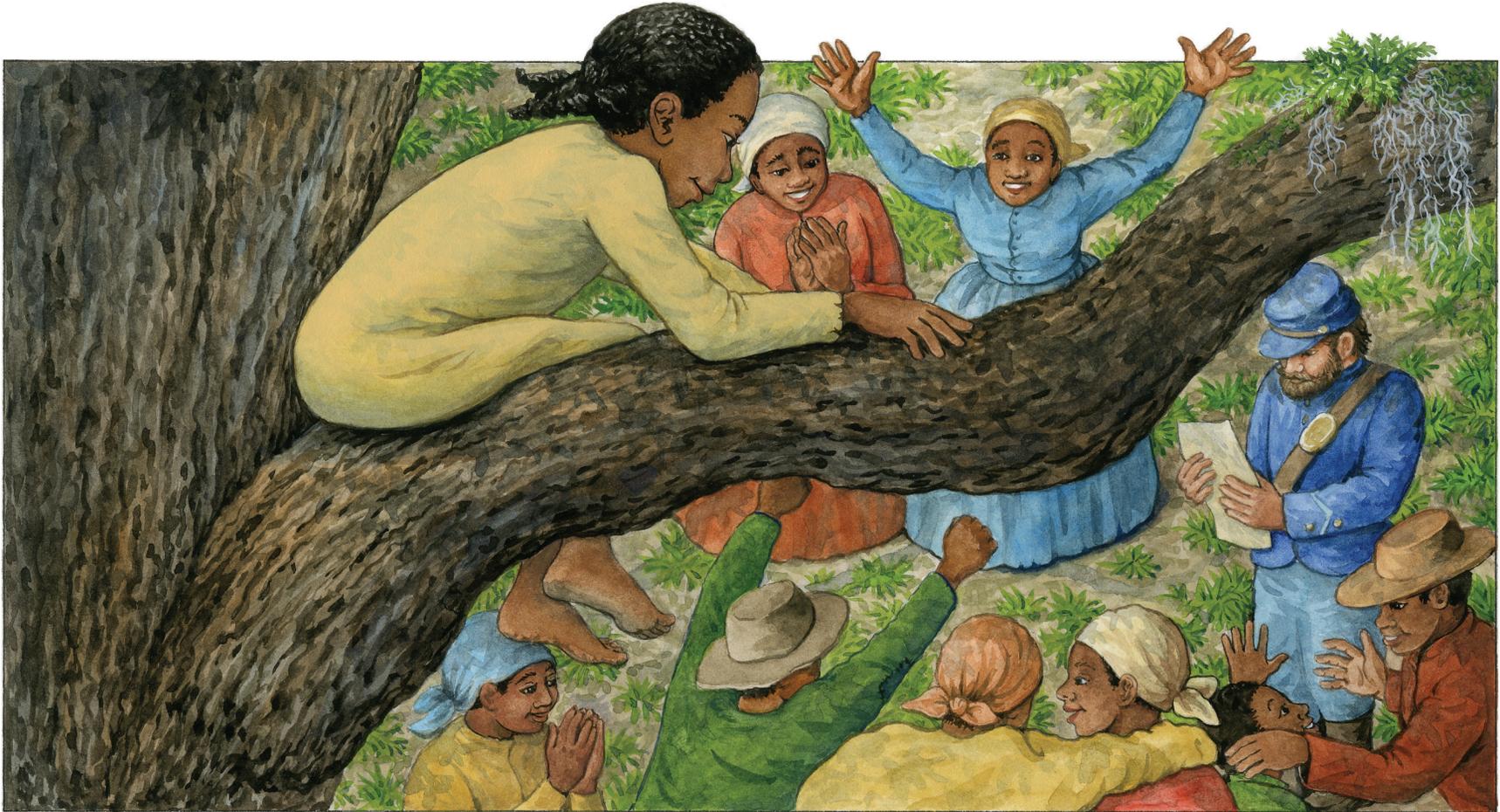
All the houses were crowded. Sometimes families, including aunts,

uncles, and cousins, all had to live together with as many as 10 people packed along the floor where they slept. Only two houses in the village had real brick chimneys. The others had chimneys made of clay and sticks. But the village was home to Nita.

She walked to the big tree and leaned against its trunk. Nita loved the tree. It was probably 200 years old, she thought.

“Hello tree! Tell me, tree, have you kept my treasures safe?” she asked, crouching down to reach into the space beneath one of its huge roots. She pulled out a doll that Cesar had made for her out of corn husks. She liked it even more than the doll with real porcelain hands that Auntie Ife found in the master’s trash pile. It had been thrown away when one hand shattered.





The plantation bell chimed loudly in the distance sending soldiers and villagers hurrying toward the tree. Nita sensed excitement and nervousness. The tree's limbs began swaying furiously. She recognized the Union soldier now standing under the tree. "By General William Sherman's Special Field Order No. 15, I hereby proclaim that you freed people will get 40 acres of land each." Nita looked around in confusion. The tree limbs swayed wildly in a gust of wind. Loud cheering erupted among the villagers.

Auntie Ife said, "Child, not only are we free, but we will have our own land!" Tears welled up in her eyes. That night everyone in the village celebrated. Akan and Jim beat gourd drums. Later, women joined the ring shout, moving in a rhythmic circle to the beat of a stick and the shouter's call. Nita had never in her life known such happiness as she felt that night.

“Tell me tree, how long do we have to wait for our promise?” Nita asked as she sat in her favorite spot. She was 13 now, and it had been three years since the soldier’s announcement. Nita cut the top off another gourd, pulling out all the seeds she could catch to save and plant. “Several in the village say they are willing to fight for property.

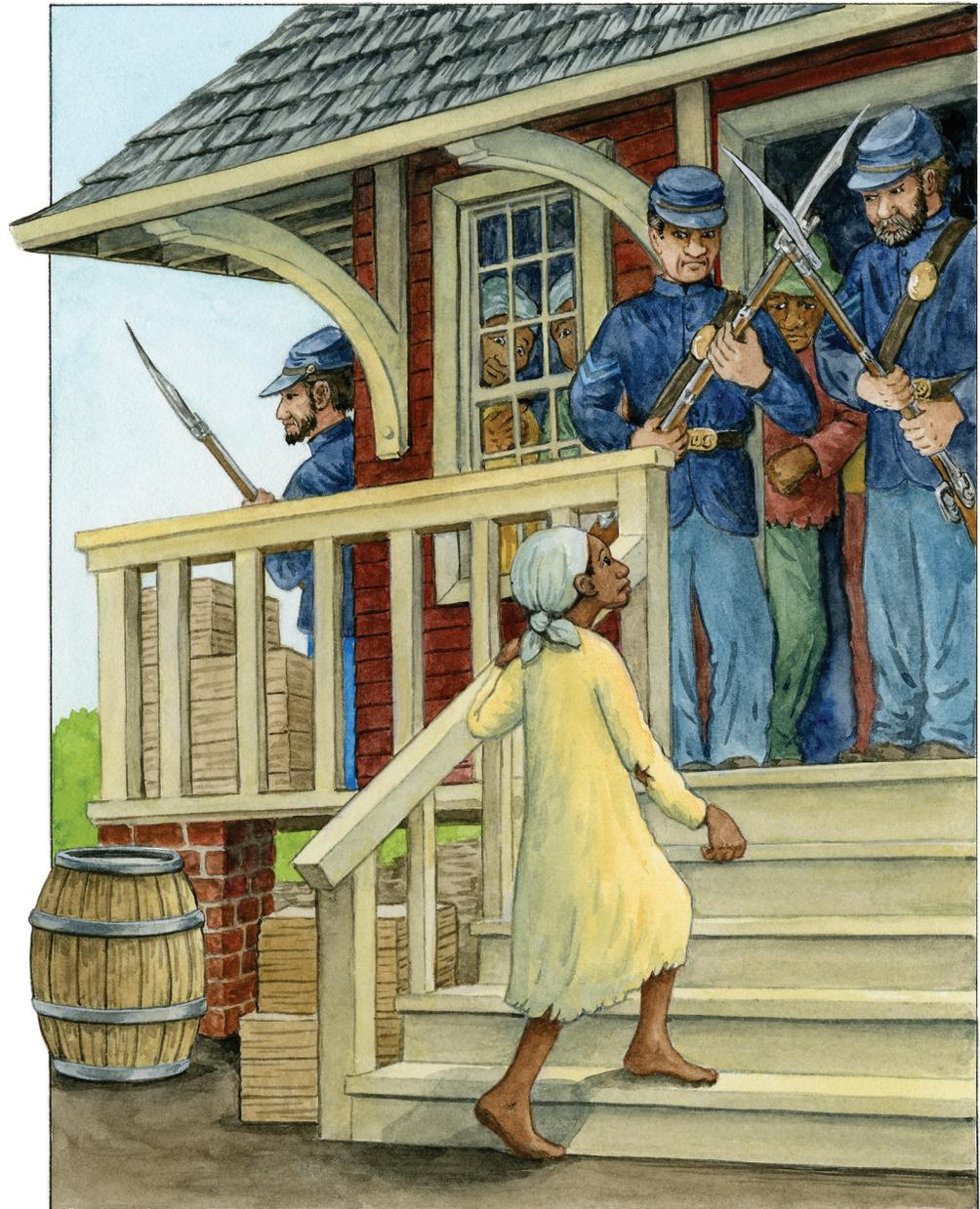
They want to farm their own land and work hard to earn an income.” Nita heard a slight rustle in the tree’s leaves. “Auntie Ife says for me to stay away from them and stay out of trouble.” The wind blew stronger through the leaves. Nita felt the sturdiness of the oak tree in the wind. “Be strong....be strong...” she thought she heard as the leaves rustled.



Nita heard and felt the rapid drum beats coming from Miller's Station train depot nearby. She ran quickly across the fields and found a large group of villagers at the station. "We demand you free Solomon, who is trying to get us our land!" shouted one. "Let's take over the station!" shouted another. And with that, the group pressed into the building. Nita was surprised to see they had guns. Soon soldiers surrounded the depot. Nita was scared of the soldiers and worried that her friends would be shot. "Be strong," she chanted to herself and before she could change her mind she walked firmly up the steps to the door of the station.

"What are you doing here, girl?" a soldier shouted. Nita's stomach churned.

"Please," she said loudly, "Please don't hurt my friends. They just want a chance to work their own land...to raise families. We just want to be free." With that she walked into the depot and joined the cheering group. Nita was the only child among them.





Unlike the train depot, the jail was cold and dark and crowded. It smelled of mold. Someone in the group began to sing and soon others joined in the soft, comforting hymn. “Girl, come forward!” the sheriff demanded. The singing stopped and the crowd cleared a path for Nita to get to the cell door.

As she walked through the crowd, someone patted her back, another touched her shoulder, and someone called out, “Enitan!” The sheriff slammed the door and took Nita outside, where Auntie Ife waited.

He said sharply, “You better see that she stays out of trouble!”

Auntie Ife lowered her head and took Nita by the hand, “Come, child.” When they had walked five miles down the road, Auntie Ife

turned to Nita. “You have disobeyed me.”

“I am so sorry, Aunt Ife,” she said. Tears ran silently down her cheeks.

“Enitan, while it was wrong for you to disobey me, it was right for you to stand up for your family, friends, and yourself. I have always known that you have a strong Yoruba spirit. You sense others’ feelings. You have learned the medicine and food of the plants. And now you have shown that you are a leader.” Auntie Ife put something into Nita’s hand. It was the special pin Auntie Ife never wore but kept hidden in a wooden box in a small hole in the dirt floor of the house. “This was your mother’s before she died. You keep it now,” Auntie Ife said as she hugged Nita tightly.

Several weeks later Nita was washing clothes outside. Her back ached from leaning over the big iron cauldron of hot water and lye soap. She stood up as she heard singing down the path. The jailed villagers were returning home. She dropped the wet dress and ran to them, "I'm so glad you are back!"

Scipio raised his hat to her and nodded in respect. "We may not

get our land right now, but we are free."

"But that isn't fair," Nita said. "Shouldn't we keep fighting? Let's go back to the depot!"

"Nita you are wise for your age, but there are still things to learn. There are many ways to fight for justice." He tipped his hat again and continued walking with the others down the village road.





“Tell me tree, how can I be the leader Auntie Ife thinks me to be?” Nita asked after climbing the big tree and curling up at the top of its trunk, right where its gnarly branches began. “How can I help my friends and the village when I don’t even know Scipio’s different ways to fight? Oh, tree, tell me,” Nita sighed.

The leaves fluttered in the gentle breeze, “read... lead...read...fight... read...write...” she thought she drowsily heard as she drifted to sleep. A wagon rumbled by noisily, awakening her. She looked down and saw Samuel running behind it.

“Who is that?” she called to him.

“That’s the school teacher lady. She says they have a school to teach freed people to read and write!” he hollered.

“Reading and writing!” Nita thought. Even at 13, Nita didn’t know how to read. Slaves weren’t allowed to read and write, but she was free now. “If I can read I can help my village. Maybe that is one way to fight for justice, tree!” As she scampered down the tree, the branches swayed. “Enitan...Enitan...Enitan...person of story...” she heard as she sprinted to follow the wagon.

“And so that is what we know of the story of your great, great, great grandmother Enitan,” LaTasha’s mother said, as she tucked LaTasha into bed. “This is her photograph taken the first day she began at the new school. It was started by the Freedman’s Bureau for freed slaves in Georgia.” LaTasha studied the photograph. The girl had tattered clothes but a beautiful woven head scarf wrapped her hair. On it was a fancy pin with a gemstone in the center.

“Momma, I think her eyes look like yours.”

“I agree. And you know people say your eyes look like mine.” LaTasha smiled, glad that she also had her grandmother Enitan’s eyes.

“Momma, I am so excited to fly from Chicago all the way to Georgia with you tomorrow. I can hardly wait to see where you think Enitan may have lived when she was my age! “Me too honey. Now get some sleep. We have a big day tomorrow!” she said, turning off the light. She hoped the archaeological site she read about on the Internet really was the village where Enitan once lived. She didn’t want to disappoint LaTasha or herself.







Vicente looked down, kicking at a root. Liz began to speak when Vicente said, "Its O.K., Mom. I'm sorry, but we can't give LaTasha the pin either. Everything we find and all of our notes go to a university where they are saved forever. Sometimes, some of the artifacts are put in exhibits or used for movies. Lots of times, they get studied by other archaeologists who make new discoveries." He glanced up at LaTasha and her mother.

"Well, that is even better, isn't it LaTasha? Then everyone can learn about Eritan and the village here. Imagine exhibits about the Gullah-Gechee people and their unique African American culture!

Vicente exhaled. Suddenly, Quercus' limbs swirled overhead. Leaves were falling. LaTasha looked at Vicente and grinned. Vicente grinned back, sensing that Quercus was quite pleased with all that had happened.

LaTasha and her mother caught up with Vicente and listened intently to his discovery of Eritan's feature and what it meant. Just then, Liz came over carrying a labeled bag.

"Vicente, would you like to show them this?"

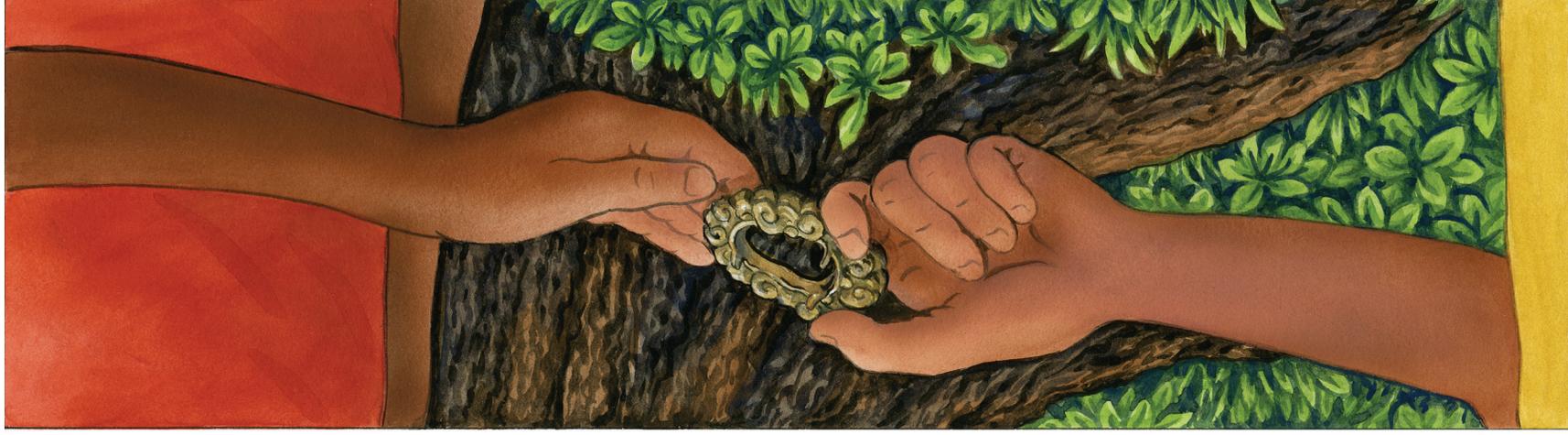
"Thanks, Mom!" He opened the bag as carefully as his excitement would allow and pulled out a plastic vial. "This is one of the things we found in the feature." He opened the vial and placed the broken jewelry pin into LaTasha's hand.

"Momma, look! Its grandma Eritan's pin!" LaTasha beamed.

"Oh, my word! Now we truly know that this was her village. We HAVE found her. Will you keep this pin, Vicente?"

"No ma'am. Archaeologists don't keep anything we find."

"May LaTasha have it then? It would be a special keepsake for her."





great grandmother, whose name was Enitan. She grew up in Georgia, maybe in a village near this one. LaTasha don't you have something to show Vicente?"

LaTasha shyly held out a copy of a very old photograph of a young girl. "This is Enitan when she was 13 years old." Vicente stared, captivated. Her dress was frayed and patched. A pin on her head scarf caught his eye.

"This is the same pin David and I found in the feature under Quercus! With the doll and marbles! Come see!" Vicente didn't wait for a reply, but ran towards Quercus. He knew instantly that Enitan was the girl who played under Quercus so many years ago, who broke her doll, who made things out of gourds, who grew up in the village. He shouted as he ran, "Quercus, did Enitan talk to you like I do?"

"Hi, Quercus!" Vicente ran through the gate to the site. "Today's your lucky day. There's going to be a press conference about you being put on the Georgia Historic Tree Registry! They say you are an important and historic tree! And people are coming to find out what archaeology has uncovered about those who lived here ... things you probably already know."

After the press conference, Liz walked over with a woman and a young girl and said, "Vicente, I want you to meet LaTasha and her mother. They have something to tell you."

LaTasha's mother smiled. "Hi, Vicente. We live in Chicago, but we've been following your work at the site on the Internet. I often tell LaTasha the stories told to me by my mother, and her mother, and her mother's mother all the way back to LaTasha's great, great,

“But Mom, I HAVE to help in the lab. I HAVE to find out about my feature!” Vicente pleaded as he jumped off the stool.

“OK, but follow instructions!” she said. “Let’s go to the lab.”

“David, can I see what you have discovered about the feature we dug in Area 10?”

“Sure. Here you go,” David handed Vicente a list of the artifacts from the feature. “Happy reading.”

Vicente slid down the wall and sat next to Julio and began reading. “Hmmm... an 1873 dime in the top level. And way down at the bottom of the feature, there is a piece of a bottle made in 1862. Clay marbles and a porcelain doll hand... Children WERE playing here, Julio! ... And near the top of the feature was the jewelry pin without its gemstone.

“Hey V, look at this!” David was carrying a clear bag of seeds. “We analyzed the soil and found these gourd seeds in our feature. We also found evidence of corn husks. So, Mr. Scientist,” David grinned, “What do you make of all these clues?”

Vicente said slowly, “Well, I think mostly children made our feature when they played beneath Quercus’ branches. Maybe they made things with gourds and played with clay marbles. The girls had a worn porcelain doll, and maybe cornhusk dolls. And as they played they lost or broke things. And wind blew soil and leaves on top of the broken things and they became buried. This all happened between 1862 and 1873.”

David arched his eyebrows, “Vicente, I think you’ve got it! Let’s go tell your Mom!”





"Liz, look what we found!" David called. Liz stopped writing notes in her field book to come over.

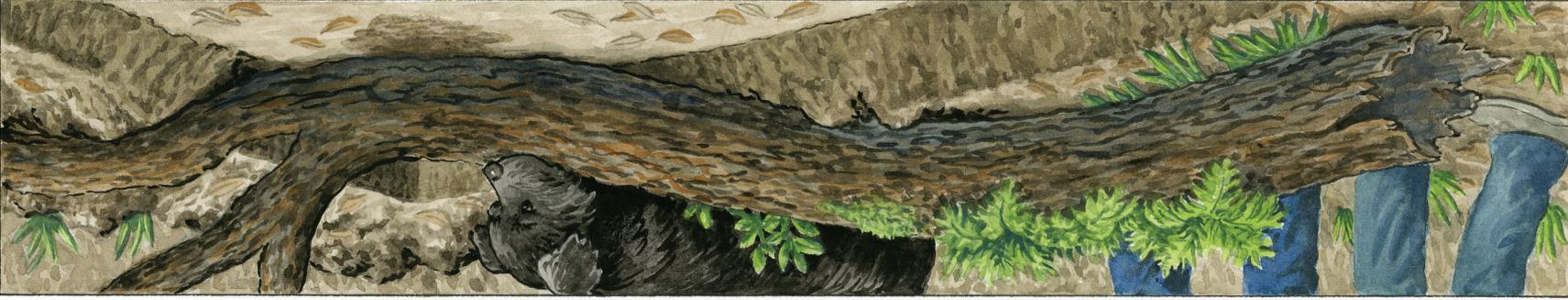
"A feature! Good work. Looks like your hypothesis was right!" It took David and Vicente the rest of the morning to trowel, photograph, and map the feature before they could begin digging.

"What are you finding?" David asked as he shoveled soil into the screen.

"Lots of dishes and bottles, but they are all itty, bitty pieces. And three clay marbles. Oh, what's this?" David looked at it. "Neat! It's part of a piece of jewelry - a broken pin."

"Hey look, it's a coin!" Vicente excitedly poured water from his bottle over it. "1...8...7...3...1873!"

Three layers later, they found the flat bottom of the feature, just in time to hear Liz say, "Let's pack up!"



“But David, it MUST be here!” Vincente exclaimed, squeezing his own hands until they hurt.

“Why do you think something should be here and what should it be?” David asked, puzzled.

“You know how my Mom has to make a hypothesis, a smart guess, about what she expects to find? Well last night I thought, ‘If I was a kid here in the 1800s, then where would I play?’ It would be right around this tree.”

“That’s a very good hypothesis, V. But you do know that a hypothesis can be proven wrong, don’t you? Maybe we just proved this one wrong.” Just then, a limb from Quercus crashed to the ground, landing on the corner of Area 10. Both he and Vincente jumped. They dragged the limb out of the block.

“Hey, David, look at this dark soil in the very corner of the block!”

“Good morning, everyone!” Liz said quickly. “As you know, we have only one week left. We have done well to find the remains of four houses and many features like trash pits and storage pits.”

“Mom, can I work in Area 10, near the big live oak tree?”

“No, Vincente, we need to focus on other areas.”

“Please Mom, there might be something there!”

“No, son; besides, you can’t work by yourself, you don’t have enough training.”

“Liz, I’m almost finished with my work. Vincente and I can check out that area fairly quickly,” David said.

“Well, OK, but let’s only spend today on it.”

“Thanks, Mom, and thanks David!” Vincente said, practically skipping to the spot.

After one hour of work, David said softly, “Well, Vincente I hate to say it, but I don’t think there are any features here. We’ve troweled almost the entire thing and all I see is this normal tan sand.”

“Liz, can Vicente help me make a map of the houses we are uncovering?” Abigail asked.

“But Abigail, I don’t see any houses to map!” Vicente said, alarmed.

“That’s because you don’t have on your ‘archaeology glasses,’” she giggled. “What we find are the REMAINS of houses, like round stains where house posts rotted or bricks where a chimney once stood.

Abigail and Vicente mapped house clues until the end of the day when Liz called, “Pack up!”

“Julio!” Vicente hollered until he saw the dog curled up among Quercus’ roots. “There you are!” he said as he walked towards them. Vicente whispered, “Tell me tree, did you know any children who lived here long ago? I wish I could learn about them.”

As he walked away, Vicente thought he heard a soft whisper in the leaves, “...child play...child work...child play...child work...”

Vicente awoke and ran to the site, eager to do better.

“Hi Jamal. I brought the camera. Should I label the chalkboard for the photo?”

“That would be super, V. Please write ‘Feature 57, South Profile.’”

Vicente knew that meant Jamal had dug half of the feature, showing its side view. Like a detective, Jamal photographed the soil before digging away the evidence.

After lunch, Vicente helped Nari take soil samples from a feature pit. “It’s too bad there weren’t any artifacts in your feature, Nari.”

“Sometimes NOT finding things also gives us information, V. No artifacts means this wasn’t a trash pit. I think this feature was a storage pit. Seeds and pollen from the soil will tell us what food the villagers were gathering, planting, storing, and eating.”





he had made a big mistake. If it hadn't been for Lilly's notes, the artifacts would have been almost worthless in telling the story of this place. "Pack up!" Liz called to the crew. "Storm's coming!" Thunder rumbled louder. Vicente looked up at Quercus.

"I wish I were a tree. Trees never do dumb things." The wind grew stronger and Vicente felt cold drops of rain starting to fall. Quercus' branches were swaying and Vicente thought he heard, better...do better...can do better..." And suddenly, a cold downpour sent Vicente running with the crew to the apartments.

"Uh-oh." He realized he was putting artifacts into two bags, the bag for the layer of the pit they already dug and the bag for the new level they were digging below it.

"Vicente, it is as important to know WHERE the artifacts were found as to know what they are. Let's fix this. According to our notes, Jackson and I found two pieces of a dark green bottle and one piece of a blue and white bowl in the previous level." She emptied the bag onto a clipboard. "So all these other artifacts are from the layer we are now digging and need to be put in a separate bag. Good thing we take notes, huh?" Lilly as trying to make him feel better, but Vicente knew

“Hey, V, can you give me a hand?” Jackson asked.

“Sure. What are you doing?”

“I need help measuring these 20 features so I can draw a map of them.”

“What do you think these features are?” Vicente asked as he held one end of the tape measure for Jackson. Vicente knew that features were vital clues in the ground showing where something happened in the past.

“Well, I think they used to be small posts from a fence. When the wooden posts rotted, they left a line of round, brown stains in the ground. They finished mapping the features just in time for lunch.

“Super job, V,” Jackson said, as he tousled Vicente’s hair.

After lunch, Vicente helped Lilly.

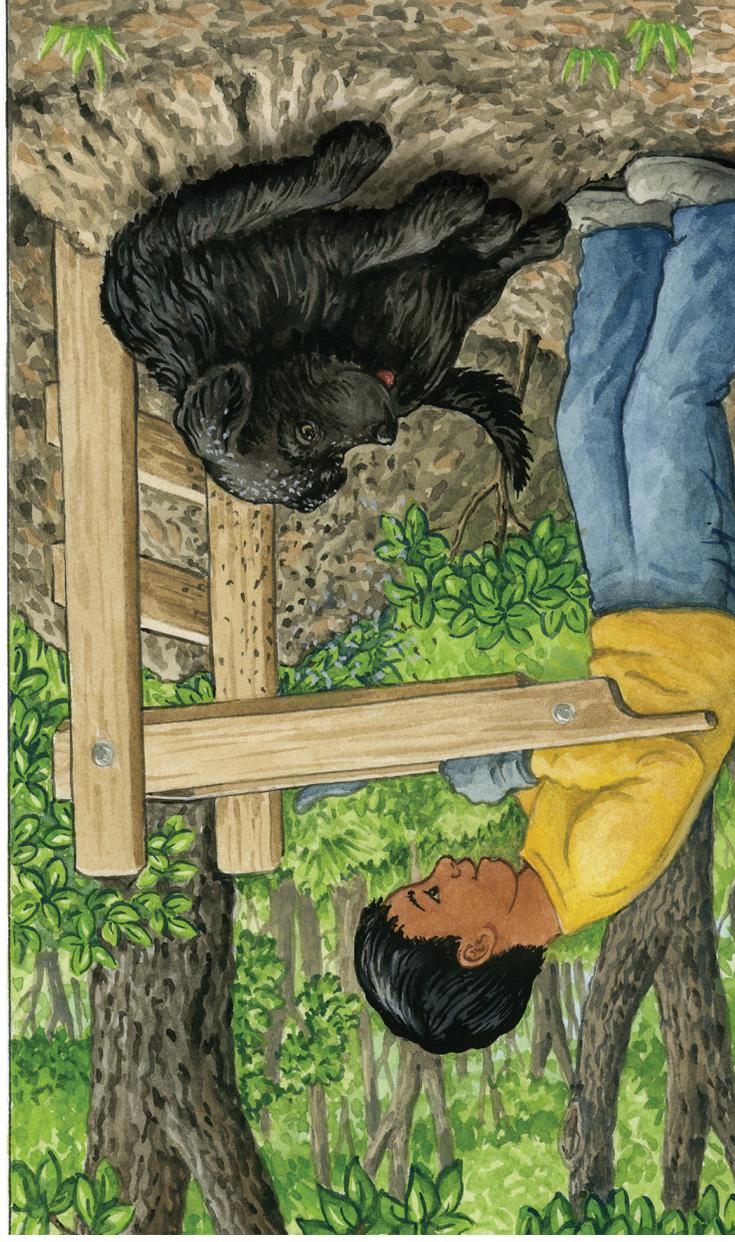
“You know the drill,” she grinned, as she shoveled dark soil into a wooden frame.

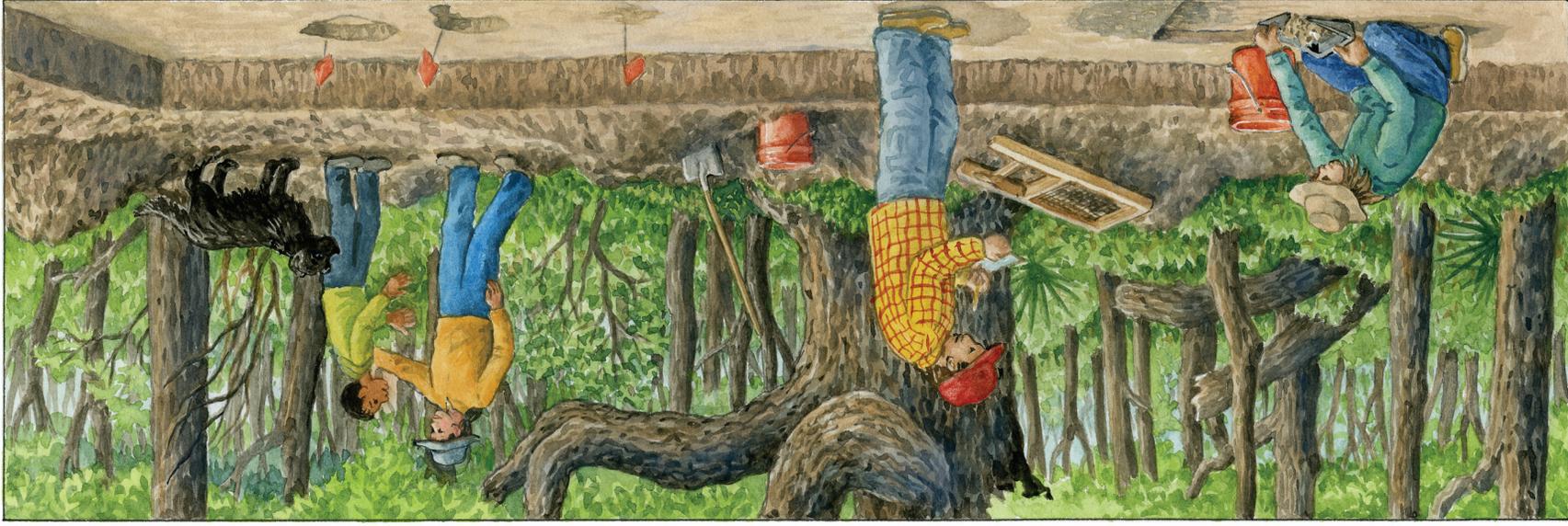
Vicente shook the soil through the screen and picked out the artifacts that were too big to fall through the mesh. “Remember to put the artifacts into the correct bags so we know where they came from.”

“I know, I know.” He began collecting pieces of painted dishes caught by the mesh. “Wow, there are lots of artifacts!”

“Yes. We think this feature we are digging was a pit where people threw their trash.” Vicente nodded. He knew people buried trash long ago, and he knew you could learn a lot about people from their trash. He began to wonder who threw things here when suddenly he heard Lilly say,

“Hey Vicente! Make sure you’re putting the artifacts from this layer of the feature into the correct bag!”





“It was illegal for slaves to learn to read and write, so there are no books about this site. And planters who wrote didn’t really know what it was like to be a slave. That’s why the archaeology we do is so important to discover what life was really like.” Liz answered, pleased that Vicente was so interested.

“Can I dig by myself today, Mom?”

“Honey, you know there is more to it than just digging. Why don’t you help Jackson and Lilly today?”

“O.K.,” he grumbled.

“Good Morning, Quercus,” Vicente said. He was glad the crew got to rent apartments next to the site because he could walk to the site before anyone else. The woods were silent then, except for songbirds, and he could talk with Quercus. “Tell me tree, what have you seen over the years? I saw a really old map of this place last night. There were houses on the map and that’s why we think we’ll find houses here. The map was cool, but it can’t tell us what the houses looked like or what it was like to live here so long ago.”

“What did you say, Vicente?” Liz asked, arriving on the path.

“Oh, uh ... Hi Mom. I was just wondering out loud why you didn’t find any books about who lived here when you found that old map.”

The crew of six archaeologists filed through the gate carrying equipment.

“More than 150 years ago African Americans lived in a village here, first as slaves before the Civil War and then as freed people,” his mother told the crew. Vicente’s eyes scanned the woods but he saw no houses. “The highway department is sponsoring an archaeology dig here before they build a road and destroy the site. We’ll excavate, or scientifically dig this site during the next three months.” She looked slowly at each of them, “It is our job to uncover the stories of those who lived here long ago.”

Suddenly, a strong gust of wind whipped through the great tree and leaves rained down.

“Goodness!” Liz said. Vicente grinned. He alone knew Quercus liked the idea of an archaeology dig around him.



Vicente dropped the heavy shovels on the ground. Why did it feel like someone was watching? He spun around and gasped. A huge, gnarled oak tree looked down at him.

"Tell me tree, how old are you?" The live oak branches swayed. "If I am 10, you must be... 400 hundred years old!" He ran his hand slowly across the rough bark. The huge tree seemed wise and strong. "Don't worry, they won't cut you down when they build the road," he whispered.

Behind Vicente, a voice called out, "Vicente, call Julio, he's digging a hole." "Yes, Mom. Julio, come here boy!" A furry black mutt bounded up to his side.

"Julio, you better be good, or they won't let you stay on the dig - even if you like to dig!" Vicente chuckled. Julio trotted over to the great tree and lay down, resting his chin on a root. "That's my favorite tree in the woods, too. I'm going to call it 'Quercus'. Yes, 'Kwhere-kus' it is!" Vicente exclaimed.

"O.K. everyone, gather round," Vicente's mom, Liz, called.



Rita Folse Elliott has excavated hundreds of archaeological sites and served as the Public Archaeologist at the "Tell Me Tree" site. She holds a M.A. in Maritime History and Underwater Research from East Carolina University. School social studies fair projects began her trajectory toward exhibit design and archaeological public outreach. She lives in the Savannah area with fellow-archaeologist and husband Daniel Elliott.

Carol Schwartz has illustrated over 50 books for children, most of which have a strong nature theme. She has an MFA in illustration from the University of Hartford and teaches illustration at Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design. She lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where she combines her love of science and nature in book illustrations for children.

Quercus is an actual 400-year-old oak tree that lives on the "Tell Me Tree" site. It is listed on the Georgia Urban Forest Council's Landmark and Historic Tree Register and will be protected, along with several other old live oak trees there. New South Associates is an archaeology and history consulting firm headquartered in Stone Mountain, Georgia.

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