

Author Q&A

Interview with Susan VanHecke, author of **Under the Freedom Tree**



Photo courtesy Hampton University.

• What inspired this book?

I saw this full-page photo in a local magazine here in southeastern Virginia. The gorgeous tree caught my eye; the caption describing it as the place local slaves first heard the Emancipation Proclamation sent me on the research trail. I was astonished to learn the full story—about the contrabands at Fortress Monroe, the illegal reading and writing lessons taught under the tree's branches, the African American-built communities of Slabtown and Grand Contraband Camp, how the contrabands launched the beginning of slavery's end.

I'd never been taught these documented aspects of the Civil War; I wanted to make sure my children and their peers learned this amazing history. We so often accept the "classic" version of the end of slavery, with the passive, helpless slaves liberated by the kindness of the white man, when, really, African Americans were bold and active participants in determining their own freedom.

I was also very much primed to receive this story. At the time, I was deeply ensconced in Underground Railroad research. My New York ancestors assisted fugitive slaves on the UGRR, and I was working on a middle-grade novel based on the true story of a slave girl they helped who traveled twenty-one days in a wooden box on the back of a horse-drawn produce

cart (SCBWI had given me a research grant). So I was already well attuned to the stunning sacrifices slaves were willing to make for their freedom. This was yet another story of that era that simply needed to be told.

• How did you decide to use the tree as a central focus for the story?

It was because of Virginia Hamilton. When I ran across the tree photo, I was preparing to interview the late author's husband, poet Arnold Adoff, for an online column I write, so I was reading a collection of Hamilton's speeches and essays. I was especially struck by her concept of "rememory," which she defines as "an exquisitely textured recollection, real or imagined." When I learned about the tree and what went on around and under it during the Civil War, I drove over to Hampton University to view it in person. It was a beautiful early summer day, the campus was quiet, and standing alone under those branches was a truly magical thing. I may have broken a rule, but I simply had to touch the tree. With my fingers on the bark, I could literally feel all that history, like I was absorbing those tears, that determination, the sacrifice, the hope and joy—all in that moment. It made me weep, and I'm very glad no one was around to see me.

So how best to express that? Poetry—rememory—seemed the way to go, with this spectacular tree as the axis around which the events would revolve.

• What was the most exciting or memorable thing about researching and writing the book?

Finding the full circle. I was intrigued to learn that it was in the waters off Fort Monroe that the first African slaves were brought to the English colonies in 1619. There's a satisfying congruency or closure to both the beginning of slavery and the beginning of the end of slavery in America occurring at the same place, just two miles from the Emancipation Oak. Imagine, when those first Africans were brought to the colonies for the purpose of slavery, the Emancipation Oak was likely just a newly sprouted acorn.

• How far away do you live from Emancipation Oak? From Fort Monroe? Do you have any special or personal connections to either?

I live about twelve miles from the Emancipation Oak, ten from Fort Monroe, and six from Sewell's Point in Norfolk, the starting point of Frank, James, and Shepard's amazing journey. I'd driven by Emancipation Oak dozens of times over the years without even knowing it was there. And I'd pulled fish from the water at Sewell's Point without ever knowing its rich history. It makes me realize how incredibly fragile history is. It must be protected, promoted, cultivated, shared, or it can be so easily forgotten or overlooked.

• Talk about illustrator London Ladd's visit to Virginia. What did the two of you do to help bring the story to life for him?

London was able to see firsthand the locations in the story: Sewell's Point, Fort Monroe, the Emancipation Oak. We also visited some area wetlands so he could see how the shoreline likely looked in 1861. When we went to Sewell's Point, the wind was up and the waters choppy; the moonlit waves you see in the book are exactly how the river looked that day. We both marveled at the courage it took for Frank, James, and Shepard to navigate their nighttime passage in a tiny rowboat, not knowing if they would make it across the river—or what lay in store for them on the other side. Heroic.

On a lighter note, London was heroic in his willingness to try two local delicacies while he was here, the crab cake and the hush puppy. I'm pleased to report the New Yorker gave thumbs up to both!