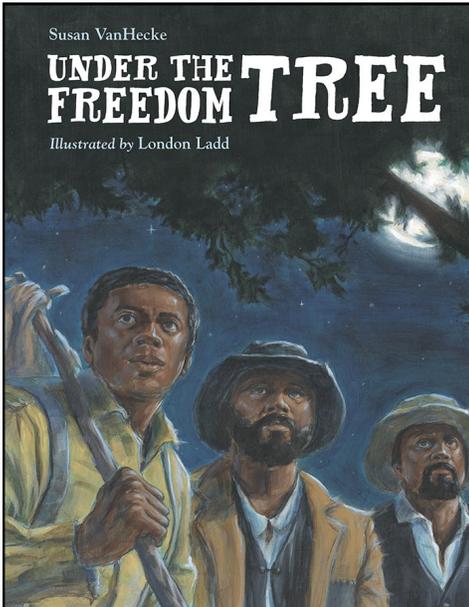


# UNDER THE FREEDOM TREE

## A Readers Theater

Developed by Charlesbridge



By Susan VanHecke

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One night in 1861, three escaped slaves made their way from the Confederate line to a Union-held fort where they were declared “contraband of war” and granted protection. As word spread afterward, thousands of runaway slaves poured into the fort. These “contrabands” made a home for themselves, building the first African American community in the country. In 1863 they bore witness to one of the first readings of the Emancipation Proclamation—beneath the sheltering branches of the tree now known as Emancipation Oak.



**A Junior Library Guild Selection**

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E-book editions available

### Getting Started

Read the book aloud so children can get acquainted with the story and the language. This Readers Theater script has twelve parts. If you need to increase the number of parts, you may create additional narrators, or have more than one student read a part together.

### Planning the Performance

After practicing with the script, ask students to think about what kinds of props they might want to use for their performance. Perhaps the class can paint the Emancipation Oak on a large sheet of paper to serve as a backdrop for their play. Then invite another class or parents to watch the performance.

### Cast of Characters

*Narrator 1*

*Narrator 2*

*Narrator 3*

*Frank Baker*

*James Townsend*

*Shepard Mallory*

*Colonel's Messenger*

*General Benjamin Butler*

*Slave 1*

*Slave 2*

*Slave 3*

*Mary Smith Peake*

**Narrator 1:** The date was May 23, 1861. It was nighttime.

**Narrator 2:** A civil war was being fought right here in America. The North versus the South.

**Narrator 3:** The southern states had seceded from the United States. They called themselves the Confederates, while the northern states were the Union.

**Narrator 1:** One of the reasons the southern states wanted to leave the United States was because they wanted to keep black people as slaves.

**Narrator 2:** But the northern states, led by President Abraham Lincoln, did not agree.

**Narrator 3:** The Confederate army forced slaves to work long and hard, and on the night of May 23rd, three of those slaves had had enough.

**Frank Baker:** Shh!

**James Townsend:** Quiet!

**Shepard Mallory:** Quick now!

**Narrator 1:** Frank Baker, James Townsend, and Shepard Mallory were slaves from Virginia.

**Narrator 2:** They decided to try to escape across the harbor of Hampton Roads in a skiff to the Union-held Fortress Monroe.

**Narrator 3:** “Skiff” is another word for boat.

**Frank Baker:** If we get caught, we’ll be beaten.

**James Townsend:** Or sold.

**Shepard Mallory:** Or worse.

**Frank Baker:** We can’t stay here.

**James Townsend:** These Southern soldiers will keep us slaves forever.

**Shepard Mallory:** Better forward than back.

**Frank Baker:** Paddle softly.

**James Townsend:** What will we find on the other side?

**Shepard Mallory:** Anything is better than this.

**Narrator 1:** When Frank, James, and Shepard arrived at Fortress Monroe, they stood before the Union commander, General Benjamin Butler.

**Narrator 2:** Meanwhile the Confederate Colonel, Charles K. Mallory, learned of the three slaves' escape.

**Colonel's Messenger:** On behalf of Colonel Charles K. Mallory, I am here to take back the three slaves who escaped. 'Tis the rule of the land, these United States. You must return our chattel.

**Narrator 3:** "Chattel" is another word for property.

**Frank Baker:** Oh no! This can't be happening!

**James Townsend:** We made it all the way here, just to be sent right back?

**Shepard Mallory:** Back to the Confederate army?

**Narrator 1:** Under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, all escaped slaves were supposed to be returned to their masters.

**Narrator 2:** But General Butler thought of something . . .

**General Butler:** Didn't you hear? Virginia seceded from the union of states just a few days ago. Virginia is no longer protected by US laws, so I claim and seize your 'chattel' as contraband of war.

**Narrator 3:** "Contraband" is another word for enemy property.

**Narrator 1:** So Frank, James, and Shepard were allowed to stay in Union territory.

**Narrator 2:** And word of their successful escape spread to their friends still behind Confederate lines.

**Slave 1:** Let's follow in Frank, James, and Shepard's footsteps and escape to the Union side!

**Slave 2:** There we'll be contraband. We still won't be free.

**Slave 3:** But it's a step in the right direction.

**Narrator 3:** Hundreds of slaves poured into Union territory.

**Narrator 1:** They were put to work for the Union army.

**Narrator 2:** They created their own community, called Slabtown. The first contraband camp.

**Slave 1:** Days are for Union work.

**Slave 2:** Dragging, hauling, digging, stacking.

**Slave 3:** But Slabtown is *ours*. A home for our own. Better forward than back.

**Narrator 3:** As more slaves escaped, they formed another contraband camp.

**General Butler:** Our Union army is not prepared to provide food, clothing, and medical care for all these people.

**Narrator 1:** The American Missionary Association from the North offered to help.

**General Butler:** Yes! Please!

**Narrator 2:** And a free black woman named Mary Smith Peake of Hampton, Virginia, even offered to educate the escaped slaves.

**Mary Smith Peake:** I will teach all those who wish to learn.

**Slave 1:** You will teach us how to read? And write?

**Slave 2:** We've never been allowed to learn before.

**Slave 3:** Isn't it illegal to teach us how to read and write?

**Slave 1:** What if you are caught?

**Slave 2:** And where will you teach us?

**Slave 3:** There is no schoolhouse here.

**Narrator 3:** There was an old oak tree nearby. Just two miles from Fortress Monroe.

**Mary Smith Peake:** Right under this tree's branches, I will teach you all how to read and write.

**Narrator 1:** Mary's lessons are considered the first classes at what is now Hampton University.

**Narrator 2:** Almost two years after James, Frank, and Shepard escaped to Fortress Monroe, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation.

**Narrator 3:** On New Year's Day of 1863, Frank, James, Shepard, and all the slaves who'd followed in their footsteps stood beneath the old oak tree.

**Slave 1:** Everyone! We've heard good news!

**Slave 2:** Hush now, and quiet!

**Slave 3:** 'By the President of the United States of America, all persons held as slaves, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free.'

(Everyone cheers.)

**Narrator 1:** The old oak tree became known as the Emancipation Oak.

**Narrator 2:** It still stands today at the front gates of Hampton University.

**Narrator 3:** A symbol of shelter, perseverance, and hope.

*For a complete Educator's Guide that's aligned with Core Curriculum State Standards and the Virginia Standards of Learning for English, history/social studies, and Virginia studies, visit [www.underthefreedomtree.com](http://www.underthefreedomtree.com).*