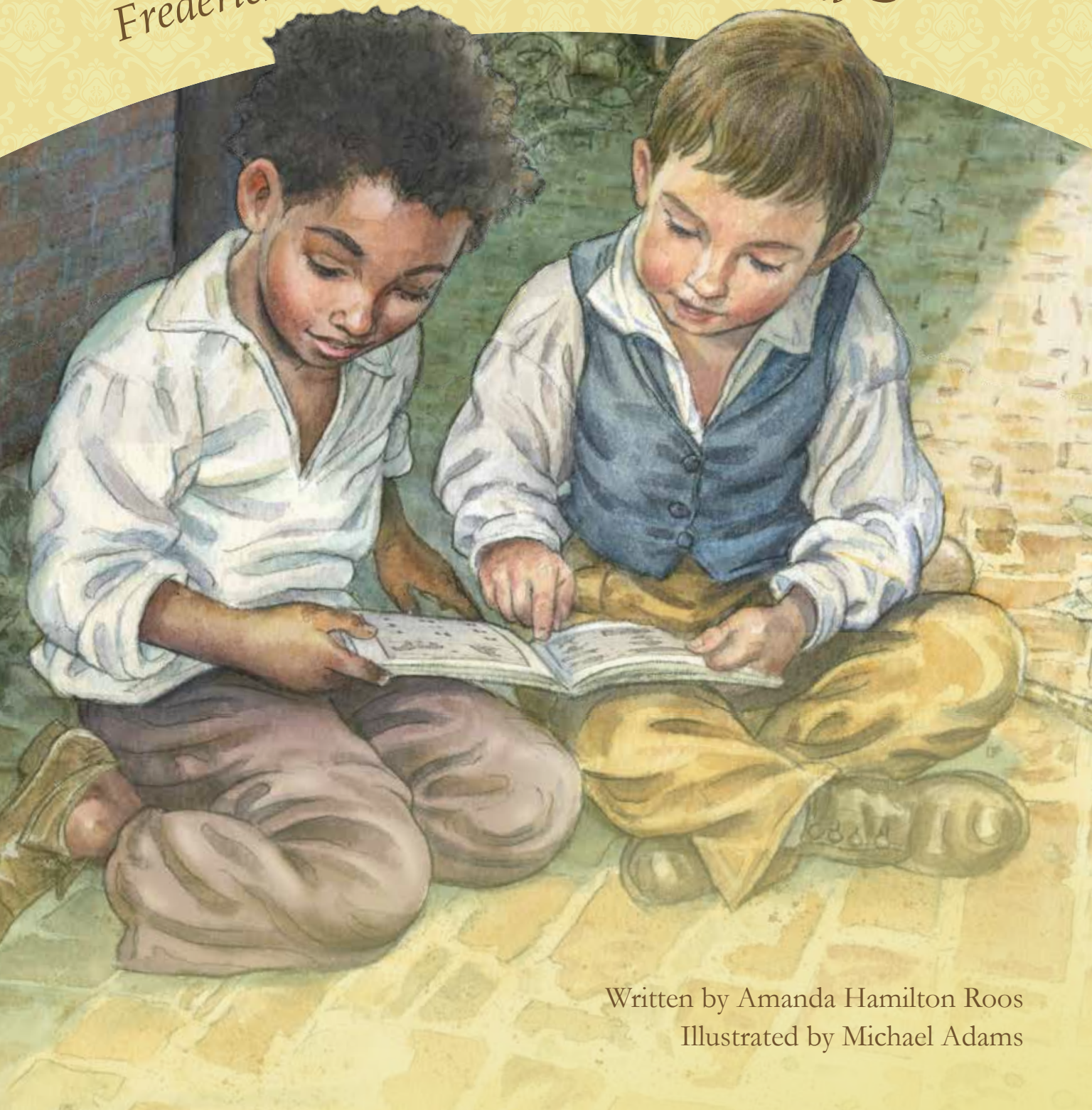


Turning the Page

Frederick Douglass Learns to Read



Written by Amanda Hamilton Roos
Illustrated by Michael Adams



*“Once you learn to read,
you will be forever free.”*

Frederick Douglass

Author's Note

This book is a fictional account of several episodes from Frederick Douglass's childhood. The story imagines what might have happened, based on *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and historical facts about both Douglass and the time period in which he lived.

Turning the Page: Frederick Douglass Learns to Read

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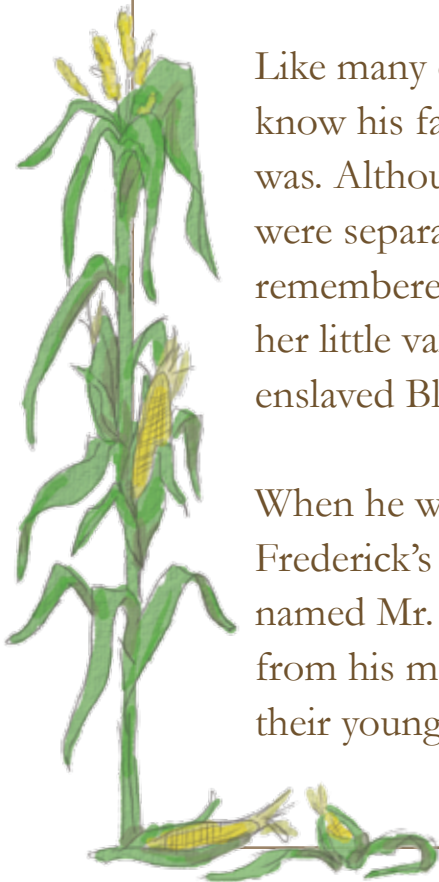
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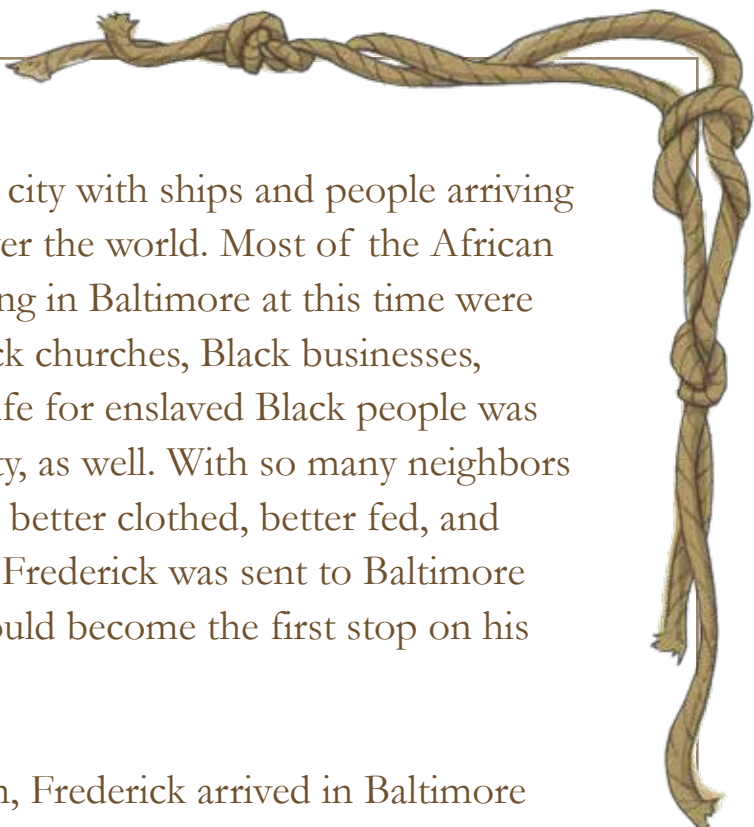
Frederick Douglass was born into slavery sometime in the early 1800s. Frederick lived on a large plantation in Maryland that used the labor of enslaved African American people to grow tobacco and other crops. People were bought and sold like property and forced to work from sunup to sundown, with no pay. Parents and children, husbands and wives were often separated, never to see each other again.

Like many other enslaved children, Frederick didn't know his father, his birthday, or even how old he was. Although Frederick and his mother, Harriet, were separated when he was just a baby, he always remembered the way she would hold him and call him her little valentine. Harriet was also one of the few enslaved Black women who knew how to read.

When he was about seven or eight years old, Frederick's life changed. A couple in Baltimore City named Mr. and Mrs. Auld asked to borrow Frederick from his master. They wanted him to take care of their young son, Thomas.







Baltimore was a port city with ships and people arriving every day from all over the world. Most of the African American people living in Baltimore at this time were free. There were Black churches, Black businesses, and Black schools. Life for enslaved Black people was often better in the city, as well. With so many neighbors watching, many were better clothed, better fed, and better treated. While Frederick was sent to Baltimore as a slave, the city would become the first stop on his journey to freedom.

One windy afternoon, Frederick arrived in Baltimore Harbor on a ship packed with sheep. As he climbed onto the wharf, he could already tell that life here would be different. People of every shade hurried by, well dressed and full of purpose. Carriages, wagons, carts all clattered by, packed with goods. With the salty scent of the sea, even the air smelled different. Different might mean better, Frederick thought. He couldn't imagine a life worse than the one he'd left behind.

He set off into the city, following one of the sailors to the Aulds' home.

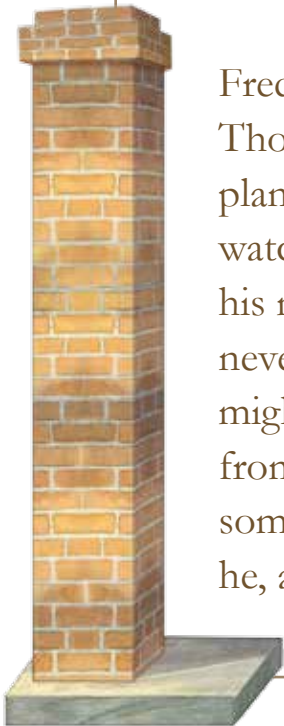


Arriving at the Aulds' door, Frederick saw the whole family waiting to meet him: Mr. Auld, Mrs. Auld, and small Thomas, peeking from behind his mother's skirts.

"Hello, dear," said Mrs. Auld, with a gentle smile. Frederick could barely reply. Never had a White person spoken to him with such warmth. Could this be his new mistress?

It was. Frederick soon learned that Mrs. Auld had been born and raised in the North, where slavery was outlawed. To her, Frederick was a person, not property, and she treated him as she would want to be treated. She smiled at him, spoke kindly to him, even invited him to watch her sing.

Frederick was unsure how to react to this kindness. Though grateful to be away from the brutality of the plantation, he knew that nothing had really changed. He watched as little Thomas ran about, gleefully ignoring his mother's instructions. Frederick knew he would never be allowed to disobey Mrs. Auld. Life at the Aulds' might be more comfortable, but Frederick wanted more from life than kindness and clean clothes. Unless he did something, he would be a slave for life. But what could he, as a child, do?



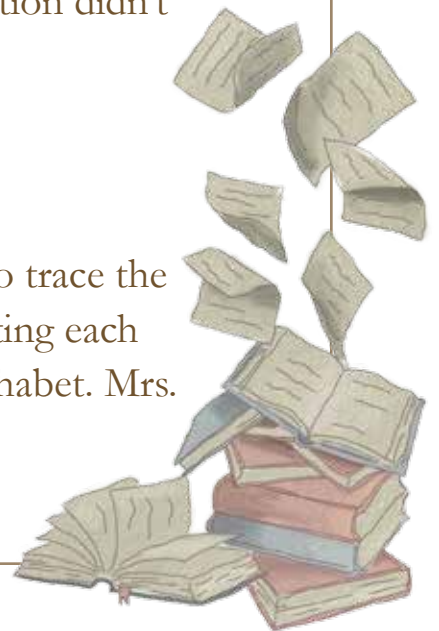


One day, Mrs. Auld handed Frederick an open book.
“Frederick, do you know how to read?”

“No, Ma’am.” Frederick shook his head. He didn’t want to tell her that children on the plantation didn’t learn to read.

“Well, let’s start with the A, B, Cs.”

Frederick was an eager learner. He loved to trace the crisp, black letters with his finger, committing each one to memory. He raced through the alphabet. Mrs. Auld rejoiced in his success.





One day, Mr. Auld discovered them reading together.

“What are you doing?!” demanded Mr. Auld. “Are you teaching Frederick to read? You must stop at once.”

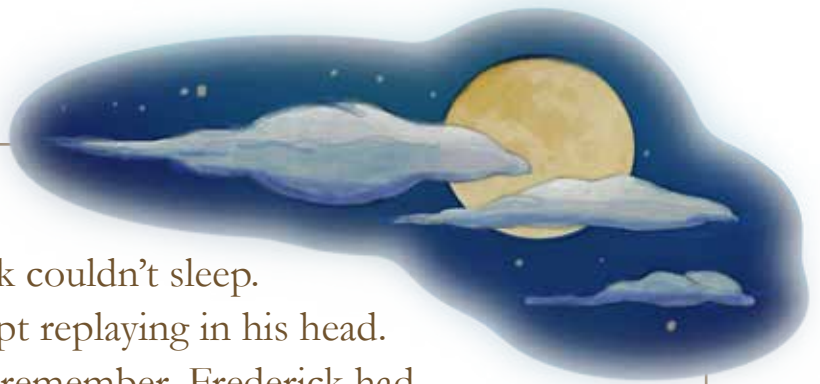
“But, Husband...” Mrs. Auld looked shocked.

“My dear, you must understand,” Mr. Auld explained. “It is against the law to teach a slave to read. And for good reason. It will do him no good. Learning will spoil him. He will become unhappy with his place. You will make him unfit to be a slave. He will start to want freedom.”

Mrs. Auld wouldn't meet Frederick's eyes. Reluctantly, she gathered up the books and put them away.

As for Frederick, Mr. Auld's words sank deep into his heart.





That night, Frederick couldn't sleep. Mr. Auld's words kept replaying in his head. As long as he could remember, Frederick had struggled to understand how it was that one group of people could enslave others. He considered Mr. Auld's words. Was Mr. Auld telling the truth? Why would reading spoil him? And why did Mr. Auld say that reading would make a slave unhappy in his place? Frederick was already unhappy.

Outside the window, Frederick saw the moon peek out from behind the clouds. A shaft of brilliant light struck the distant water of the harbor.

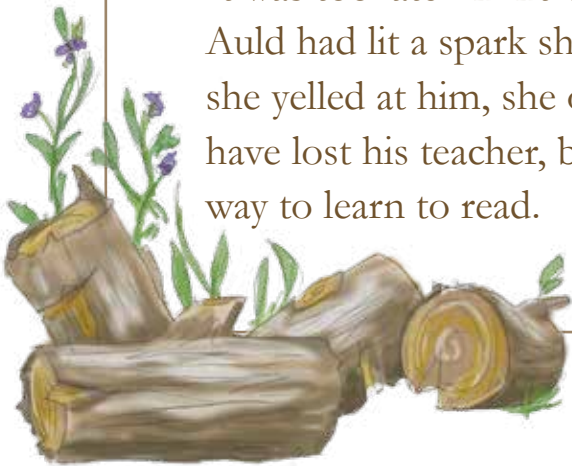
Mr. Auld wanted to keep Frederick enslaved. Frederick was determined to free himself. Mr. Auld had clearly said that a person who could read would be unfit to be a slave. Frederick knew he wasn't meant to be a slave. This was it! The pathway from slavery to freedom was clear. No matter what, he would learn to read.



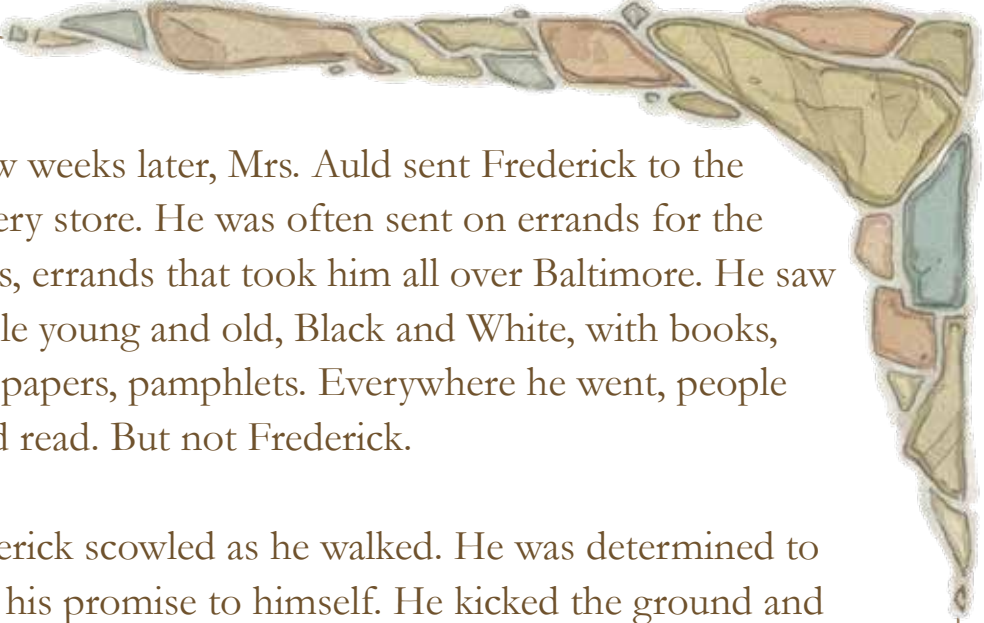
Mrs. Auld had decided something, too. The next morning, instead of offering to read to him after breakfast, she said, “Boy, run out and get the firewood. Don’t be lazy!” It was the first time Mrs. Auld had talked to him with such coldness, and he felt something inside him being twisted and squeezed.

The days became weeks, and Mrs. Auld became more and more intent on undoing what she had done. Whenever he moved slowly, she yelled at him. Whenever he touched a book, she snatched it away.

It was too late. In introducing Frederick to reading, Mrs. Auld had lit a spark she could never put out. Each time she yelled at him, she only fanned the flames. He might have lost his teacher, but he was determined to find a way to learn to read.







A few weeks later, Mrs. Auld sent Frederick to the grocery store. He was often sent on errands for the Aulds, errands that took him all over Baltimore. He saw people young and old, Black and White, with books, newspapers, pamphlets. Everywhere he went, people could read. But not Frederick.

Frederick scowled as he walked. He was determined to keep his promise to himself. He kicked the ground and watched the pebbles scatter before him. How would he learn without a teacher?

Today, his route took him down a back alley behind the grocery store. Frederick watched a White boy about his age playing alone. The boy's schoolbook lay discarded on the cobblestones beside him. Frederick noticed the boy's faded clothes. He got an idea.



“Hi,” Frederick said nervously. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing really. My mama says I’m not to come home until dinner. She says to stay out of the way and just wait for dinner.”

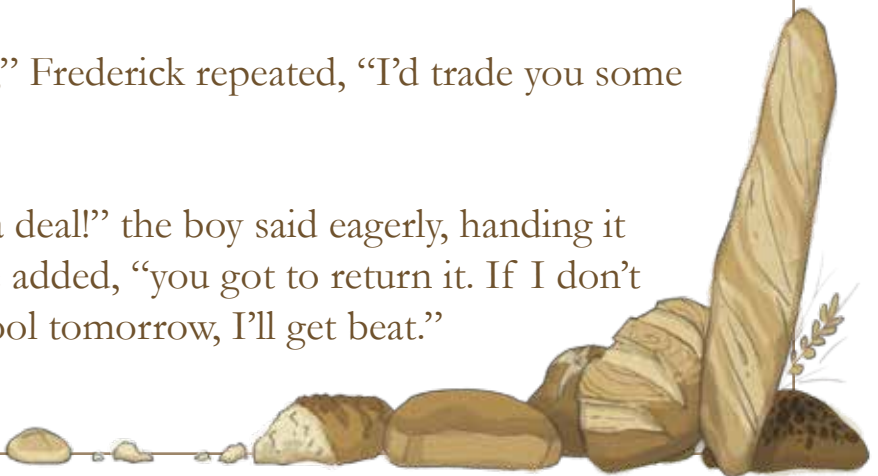
Frederick remembered the bread he had in his pocket. He knew that the poor White children in his neighborhood were often hungry. Living with the wealthy Aulds, Frederick had plenty of food.

“Look here, I have some bread,” Frederick said, pulling a roll from his pocket. “You can have it if you’ll show me your book.”

“What? This book here?” The boy picked up the forgotten book. “You don’t want to see that. It’s only my school primer.”

“Just the same,” Frederick repeated, “I’d trade you some bread for it.”

“Ha! You got a deal!” the boy said eagerly, handing it over. “But,” he added, “you got to return it. If I don’t bring it to school tomorrow, I’ll get beat.”







Frederick opened the book with trembling hands.

“You know how to read?” asked the little boy, through a mouth full of bread.

“No, I don’t.”

“What? You don’t know any words?”

“Not that one,” Frederick said, pointing to the first page.

“Oh, well, that one is easy. Here, let me show you.”

And with that, Frederick had his first new teacher.

Later, as Frederick returned to the Aulds’ home, he was filled with hope about his new plan. He knew Mrs. Auld would be waiting, ready to lash out at him. But beyond the Aulds, beyond Baltimore, he could see the vast, open sea, wild and full of promise.



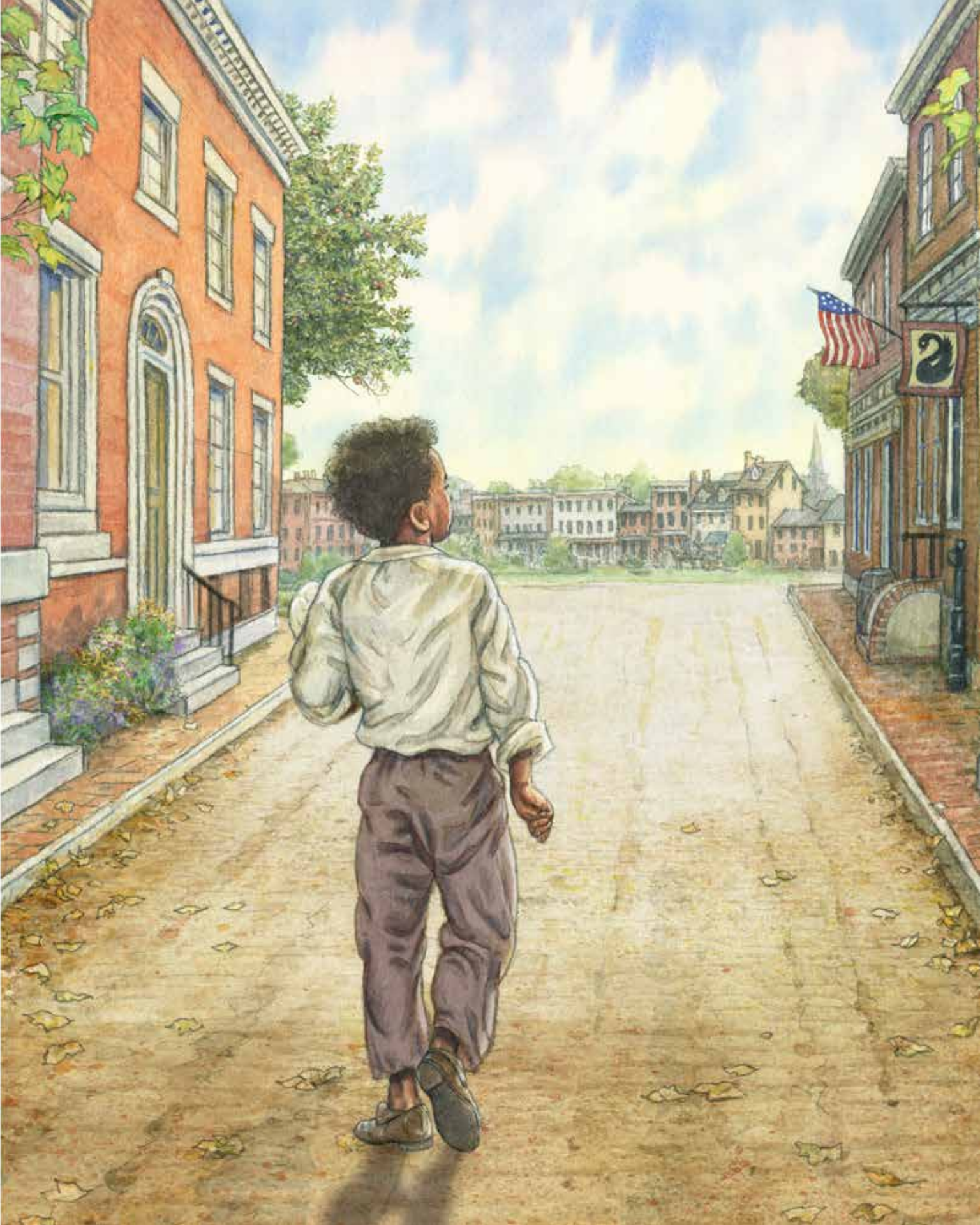
Afterword



For Frederick, this was just the beginning. He turned many of the young White boys in Baltimore into his teachers and learned to read and write.

When he was about 20 years old, after multiple attempts, Frederick finally escaped slavery for good.

As an adult, Frederick worked tirelessly for the abolition of slavery and was a champion for the rights of both African Americans and women of all races. Not only did Frederick learn to read, he spent the rest of his life using words to fight for the freedom of all people. He was one of America's greatest speakers, writers, and thinkers, changing the world with his voice and pen.





A special thanks to Dr. Ka'mal McClarin for lending his expertise to this project.

Dr. McClarin is the curator of the
Frederick Douglass National Historic Site in Washington, D.C.

Visit the Frederick Douglass National Historical Site to explore Douglass's
home, Cedar Hill, and to learn more about this amazing American.

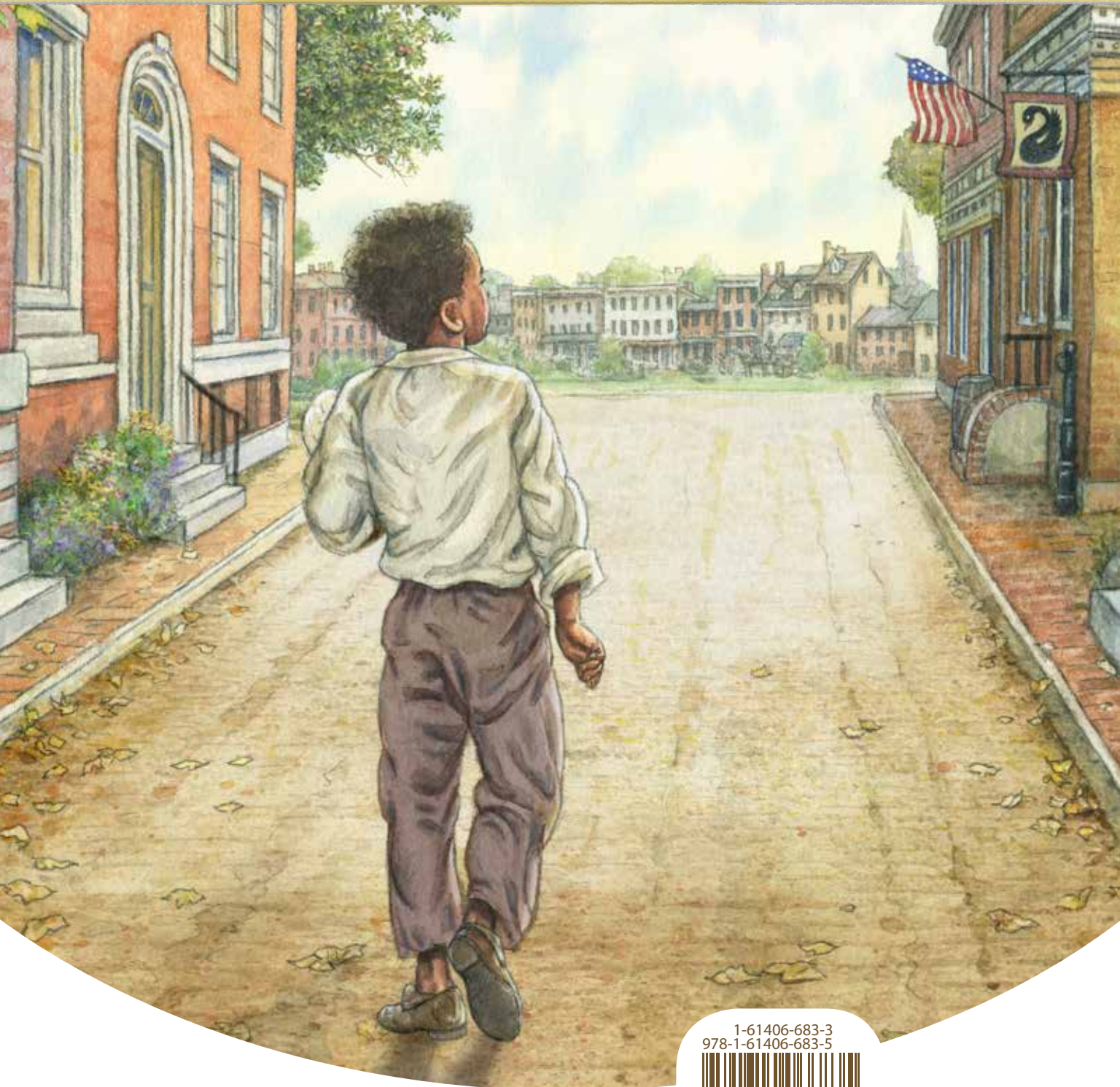
<http://www.nps.gov/frdo/index.htm>

About the Text

This story is a work of historical fiction. As such, although much of the information is true, some specific events described here are inventions of the author. All information about Baltimore City, Maryland, and the conditions of slavery are accurate. The information about Frederick's early life, his move to Baltimore, and the methods by which he learned to read are based on the facts he himself reported about his life. In his narrative, Douglass does not describe his initial inspiration for the plan to use White boys as his reading teachers, nor does he describe any "first" encounter. This story imagines one way this might have happened.

About the Illustrations

Michael Adams did extensive research to create the illustrations in this book. In addition to interpreting this text, he also read the early chapters of *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, written by Douglass 20 years after this story takes place. Professor Adams looked into a variety of subject matter related to the era, including the troubling reality of slavery in the 1820s; agriculture in Talbot County, Maryland; and the port city of Baltimore. The landscape, architecture, and clothing are based on references from museums, historical societies, and paintings from that period. Adams included some very specific subject matter, like the Baltimore oriole, the state flower (black-eyed Susan), and the *Pride of Baltimore* schooner.



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