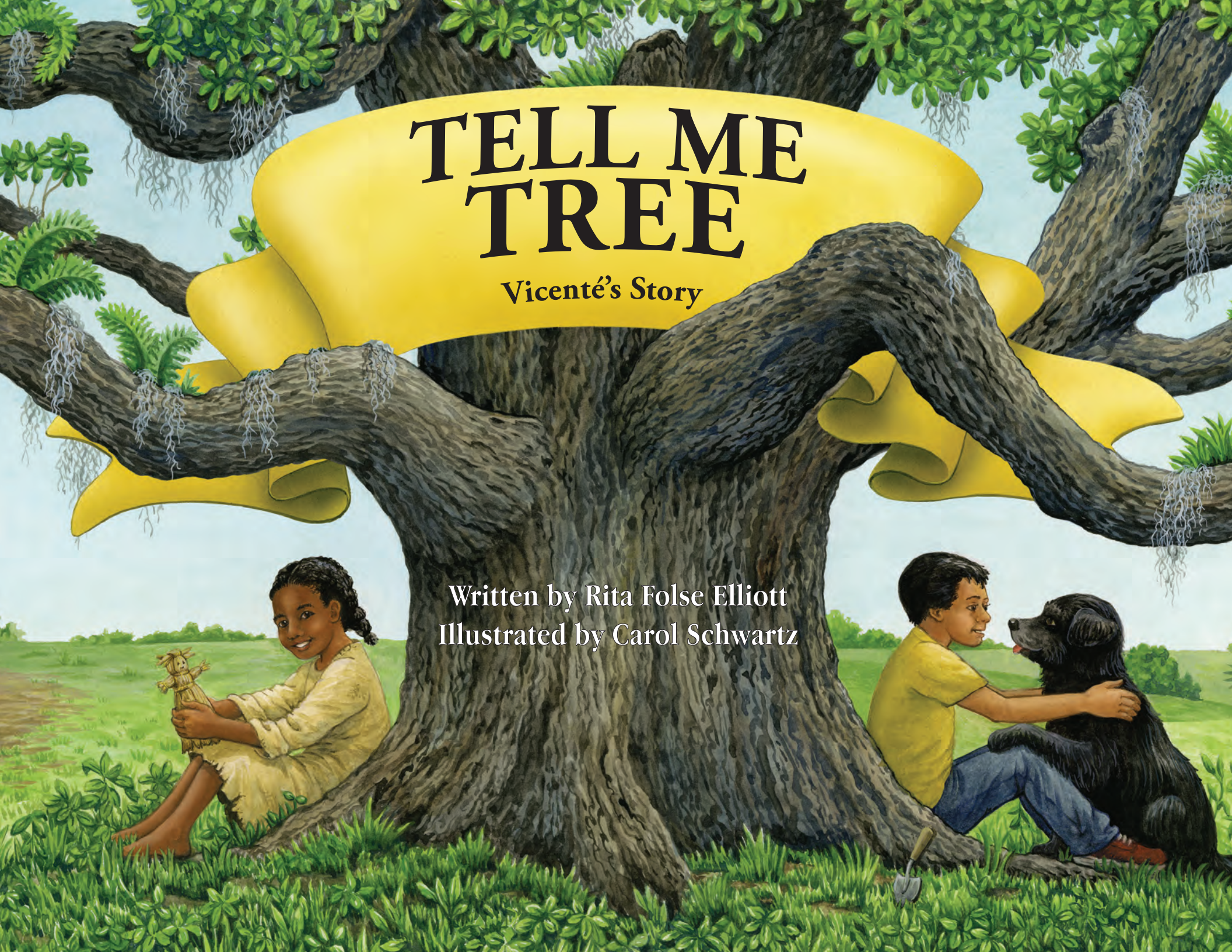


# TELL ME TREE

Vicenté's Story

Written by Rita Folse Elliott  
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New South Associates, Inc.  
Georgia Department of Transportation  
Federal Highway Administration  
2014

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*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.*

Vicenté 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.

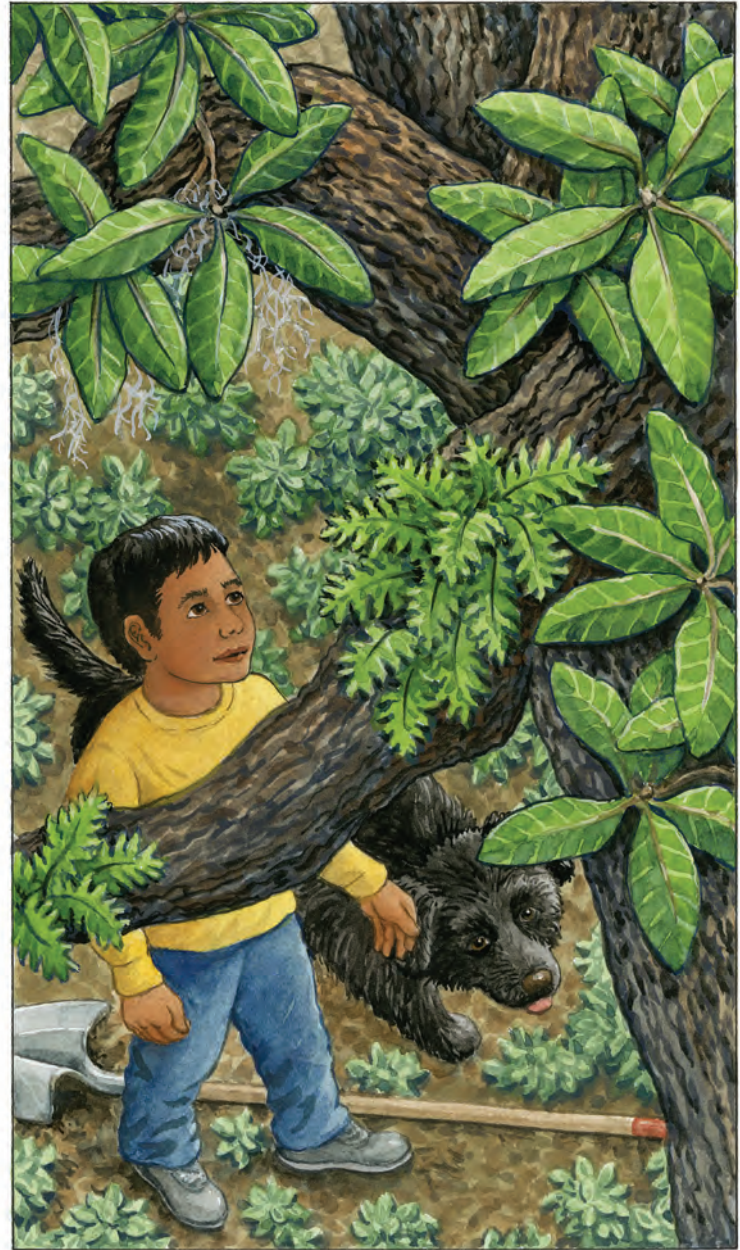
“Tell me tree, how old are you?” The live oak branches swayed. “If I am 10, you must be... 400 hundred years old!” He ran his hand slowly across the rough bark. The huge tree seemed wise and strong. “Don’t worry, they won’t cut you down when they build the road,” he whispered.

Behind Vincenté, a voice called out, “Vicenté, 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!” Vincenté 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!” Vincenté exclaimed.

“O.K. everyone, gather round,” Vincenté’s mom, Liz, called.



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. Vicenté’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. Vicenté grinned. He alone knew Quercus liked the idea of an archaeology dig around him.





“Good Morning, Quercus,” Vicenté 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, Vicenté?” 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.”

“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 Vicenté 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.



“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?” Vicenté asked as he held one end of the tape measure for Jackson. Vicenté 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 Vicenté’s hair.

After lunch, Vicenté helped Lilly.

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

Vicenté 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.” Vicenté 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 Vicenté! Make sure you’re putting the artifacts from this layer of the feature into the correct bag!”





“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.

“Vicenté, 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 Vicenté knew

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. Vicenté looked up at Quercus.

“I wish I were a tree. Trees never do dumb things.” The wind grew stronger and Vicenté 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 Vicenté running with the crew to the apartments.

Vicenté 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.’”

Vicenté 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, Vicenté 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.”

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

“But Abigail, I don’t see any houses to map!” Vicenté 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 Vicenté mapped house clues until the end of the day when Liz called, “Pack up!”

“Julio!” Vicenté hollered until he saw the dog curled up among Quercus’ roots. “There you are!” he said as he walked towards them. Vicenté 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...”





“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, Vicenté, 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. Vicenté 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!” Vicenté said, practically skipping to the spot.

After one hour of work, David said softly, “Well, Vicenté 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.”

“But David, it **MUST** be here!” Vincenté 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 Vincenté jumped. They dragged the limb out of the block.

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



“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 Vicenté 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!” Vicenté 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 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.”

Vicenté 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, “Vicenté, I think you’ve got it! Let’s go tell your Mom!”





“Hi, Quercus!” Vicenté 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, “Vicenté, I want you to meet LaTasha and her mother. They have something to tell you.”

LaTasha’s mother smiled. “Hi, Vicenté. 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,

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 Vicenté?”

LaTasha shyly held out a copy of a very old photograph of a young girl. “This is Enitan when she was 13 years old.” Vicenté 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!” Vicenté 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?”

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

"Vicenté, 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 Enitan'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, Vicenté?"

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

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

Vicenté looked down, kicking at a root. Liz began to speak when Vicenté 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 Enitan and the village here. Imagine exhibits about the Gullah-Geechee people and their unique African American culture!"

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

