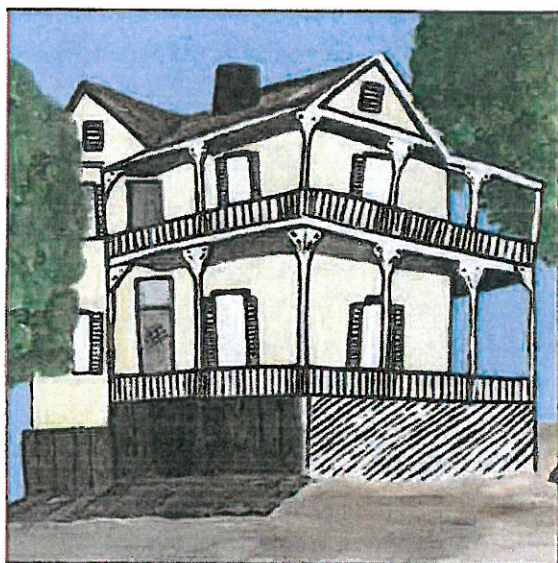


**OUT OF THE PAST**  
**A NOBLE LEADER**



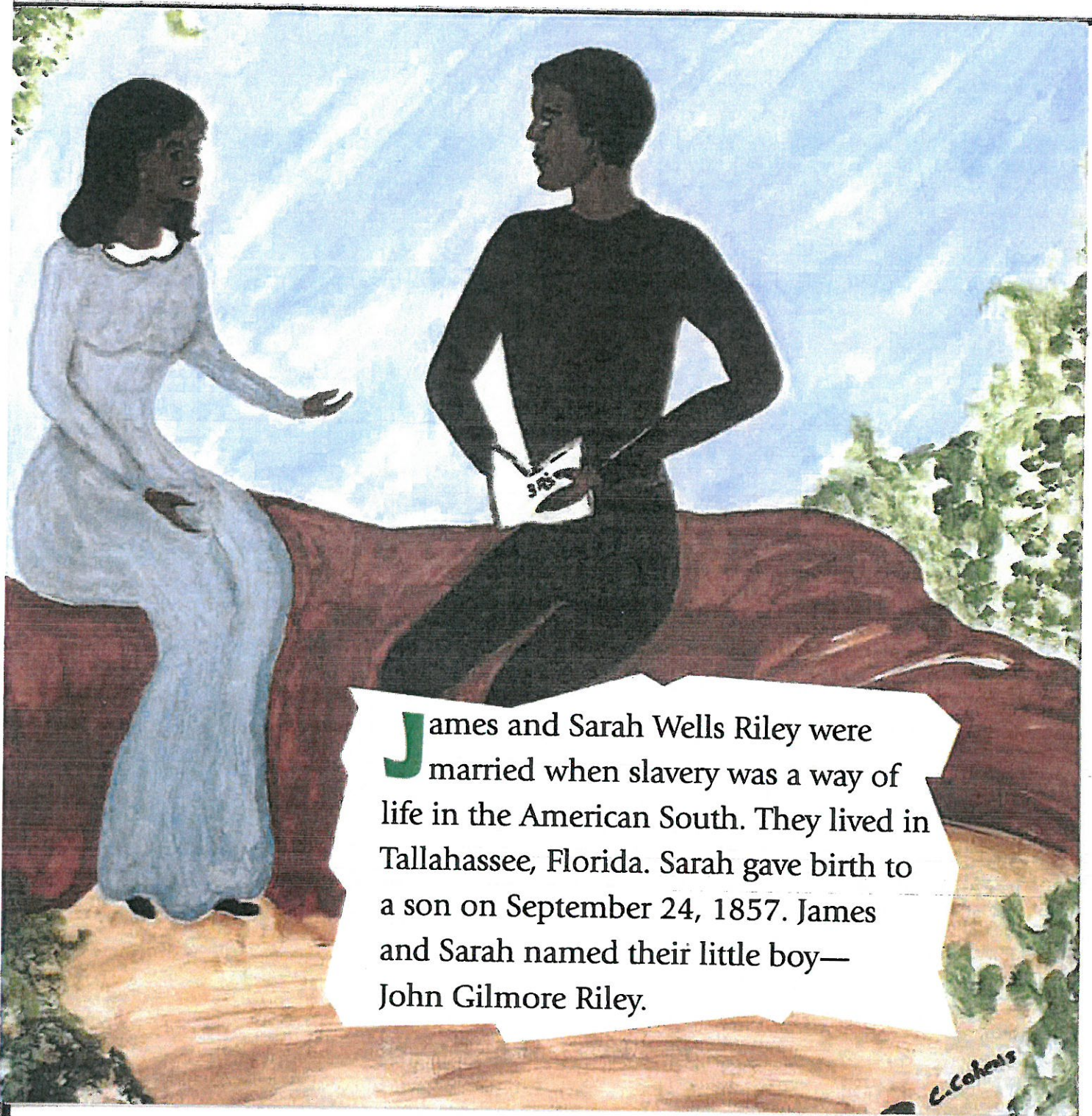




The John Gilmore Riley House (circa 1895)  
419 East Jefferson  
Tallahassee, Florida

Current home of the John G. Riley Center/Museum  
for African American History & Culture  
Contact 850-681-7881 for tour information.





**J**ames and Sarah Wells Riley were married when slavery was a way of life in the American South. They lived in Tallahassee, Florida. Sarah gave birth to a son on September 24, 1857. James and Sarah named their little boy—John Gilmore Riley.

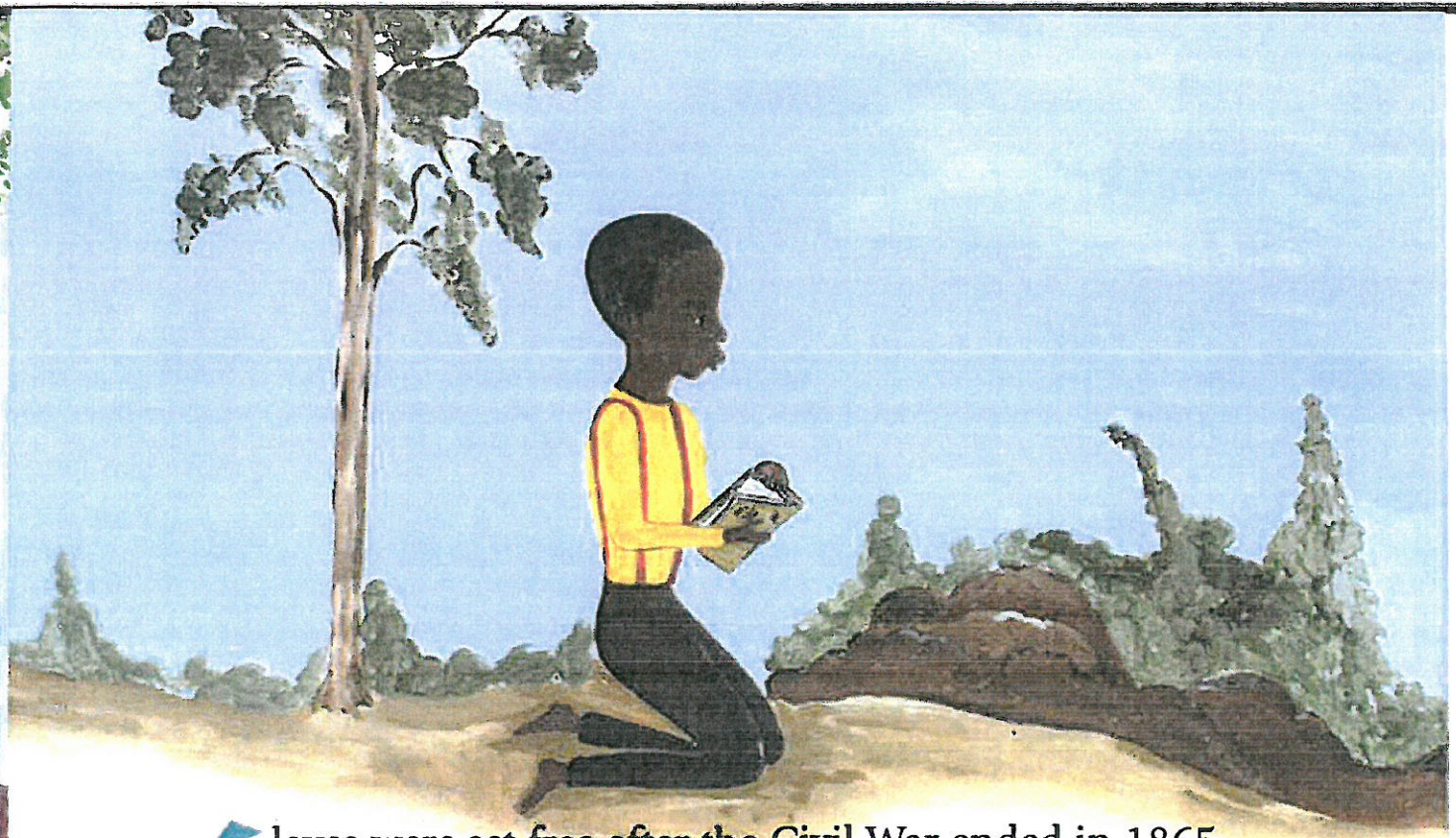
C. Cohen's



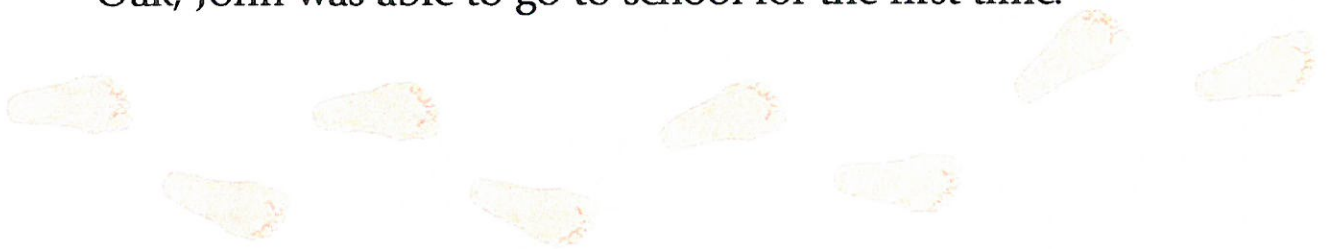
**J**ohn's mother Sarah had three sisters and three brothers. They were all born into slavery in Virginia. Sarah's family was brought to Florida to work for a man named James Kirksey. Kirksey was very wealthy. He owned a store, a large plantation and a big house in Tallahassee. Most of the Wells family worked at the house in town. Sarah's ancestors came from Africa. When she was a little girl, she learned stories about Africa. She told John stories about how African people lived before they came to America. He learned about their customs and the way they dressed.





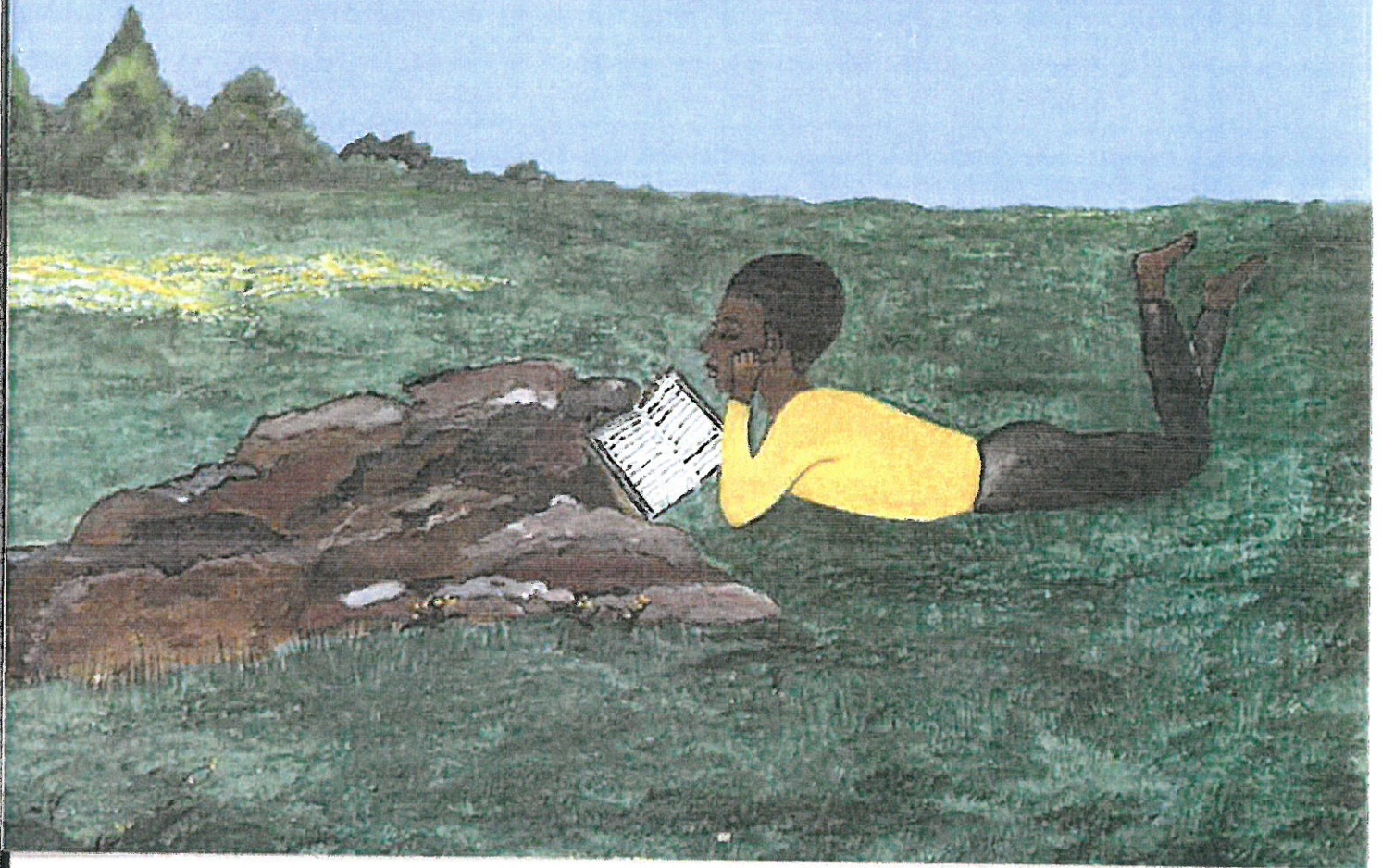


Slaves were set free after the Civil War ended in 1865. John's family moved to Live Oak, Florida to start a new life. Most slaves did not know how to read or write, but Sarah's sister—John's Aunt Henrietta—knew how. She taught these skills to John when he was very little. In Live Oak, John was able to go to school for the first time.



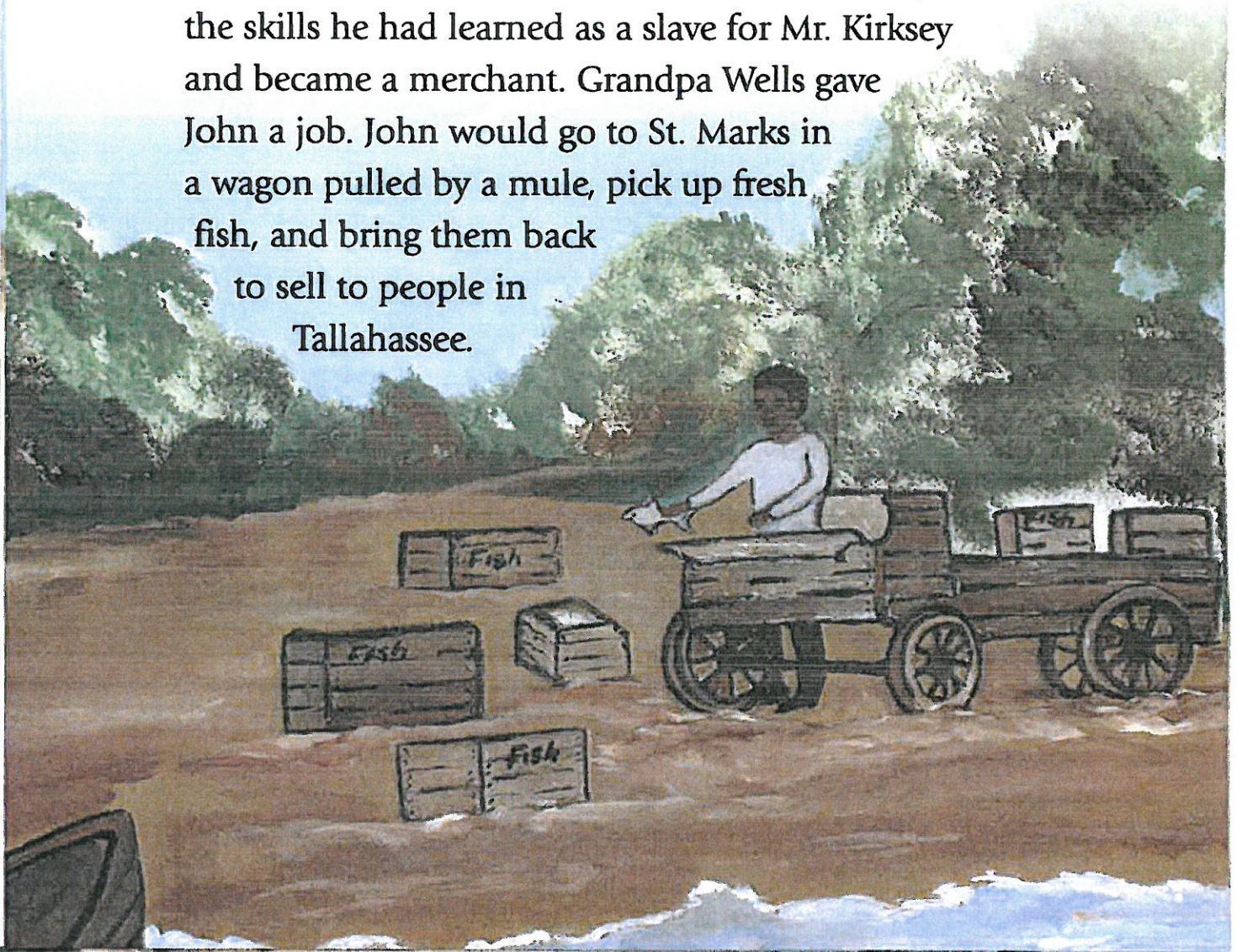


John loved school and read everything he could find to read. He would read sitting up. He would read sitting down. He would lie down on his tummy and read some more. John wanted to learn everything he could. He was a very good student. Before long, other people were asking John if he would teach them to be good readers too.

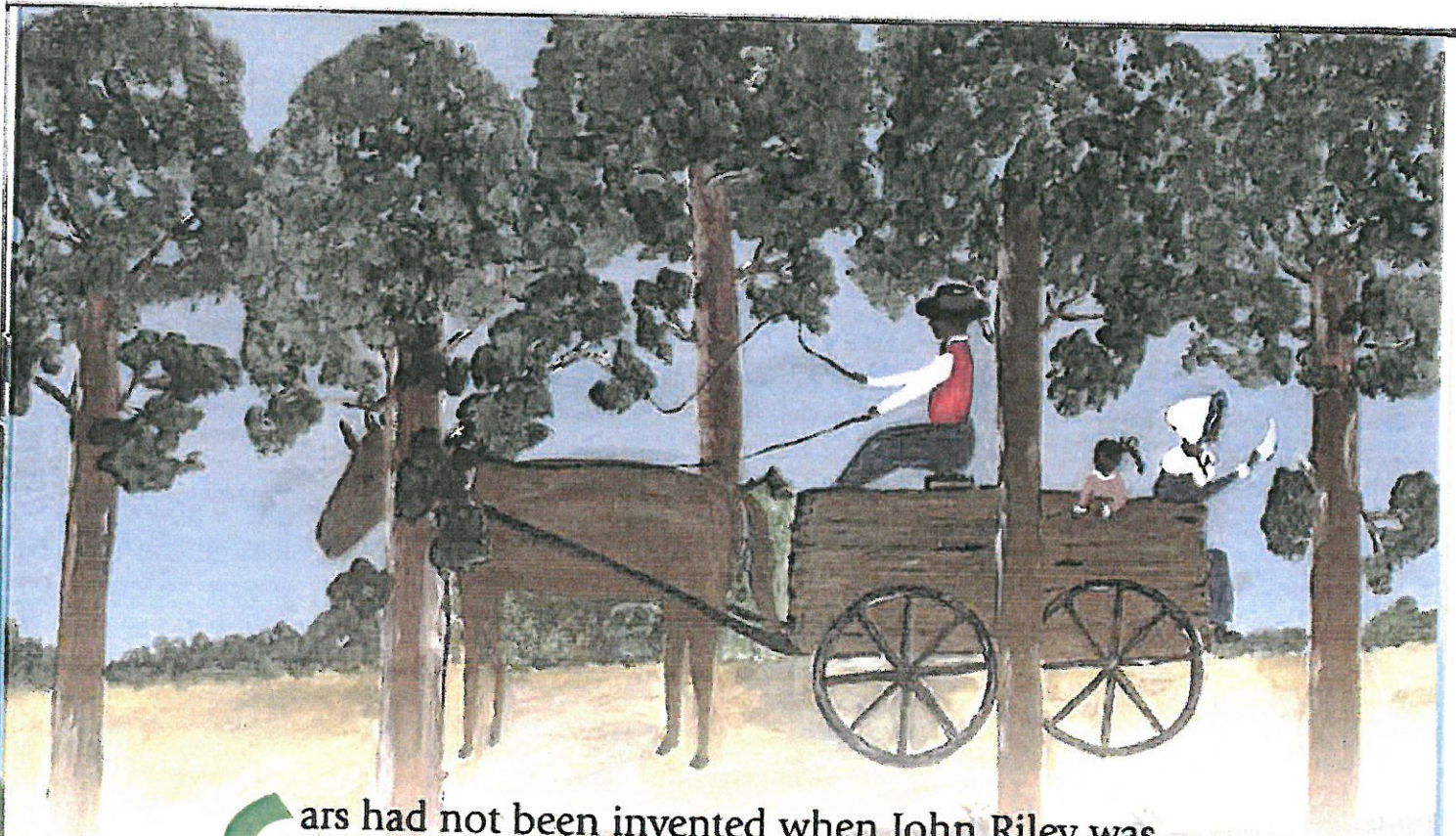




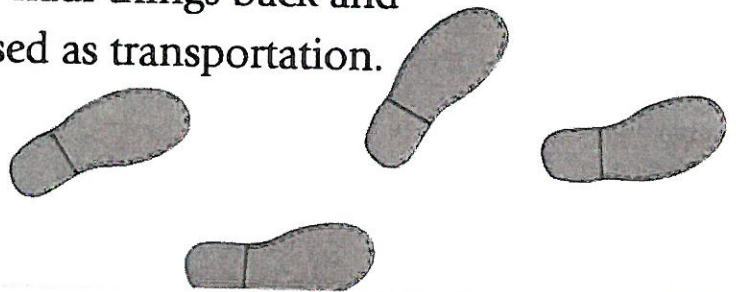
**W**hen John was a teenager, his family moved back to Tallahassee. John's grandfather—Samuel Wells—worked very hard after he was freed from slavery. He used the skills he had learned as a slave for Mr. Kirksey and became a merchant. Grandpa Wells gave John a job. John would go to St. Marks in a wagon pulled by a mule, pick up fresh fish, and bring them back to sell to people in Tallahassee.







Cars had not been invented when John Riley was a young man. Most people walked wherever they wanted to go. Some people owned horses, mules or oxen. These animals were used in the fields to help plow and carry things. They were also used to pull wagons. A wagon was a very valuable thing to own. Farmers and merchants used wagons to haul things back and forth. Wagons were also used as transportation.





**J**ohn wanted to be a teacher. First, he taught in Wakulla County, Florida. They gave him a small salary, food to eat and a place to live. The second year, the school could not pay him. The third year, Mr. Riley moved to the Hinson School in Gadsden County. He continued his studies. John was one of the first African American men to earn a Florida teaching certificate. He was hired by the Lincoln Academy in Tallahassee. Lincoln was of the biggest schools in the

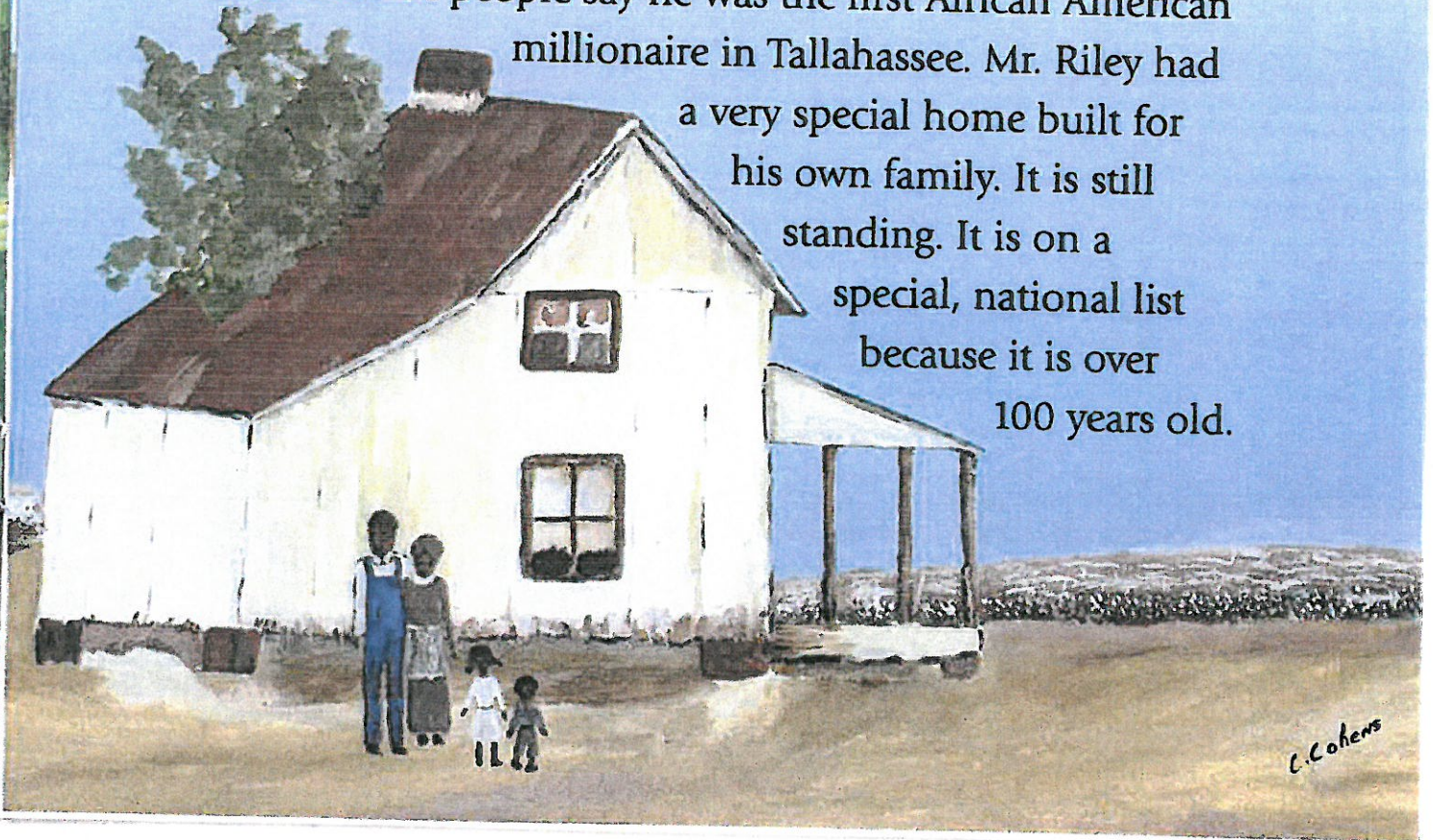
whole state. In those days,

teachers dressed up for school. Ladies wore dresses and men wore suits. Mr. Riley was a natural leader and was very good at his job. He was promoted to Principal in 1893. He retired in 1926. He was 69 years old.



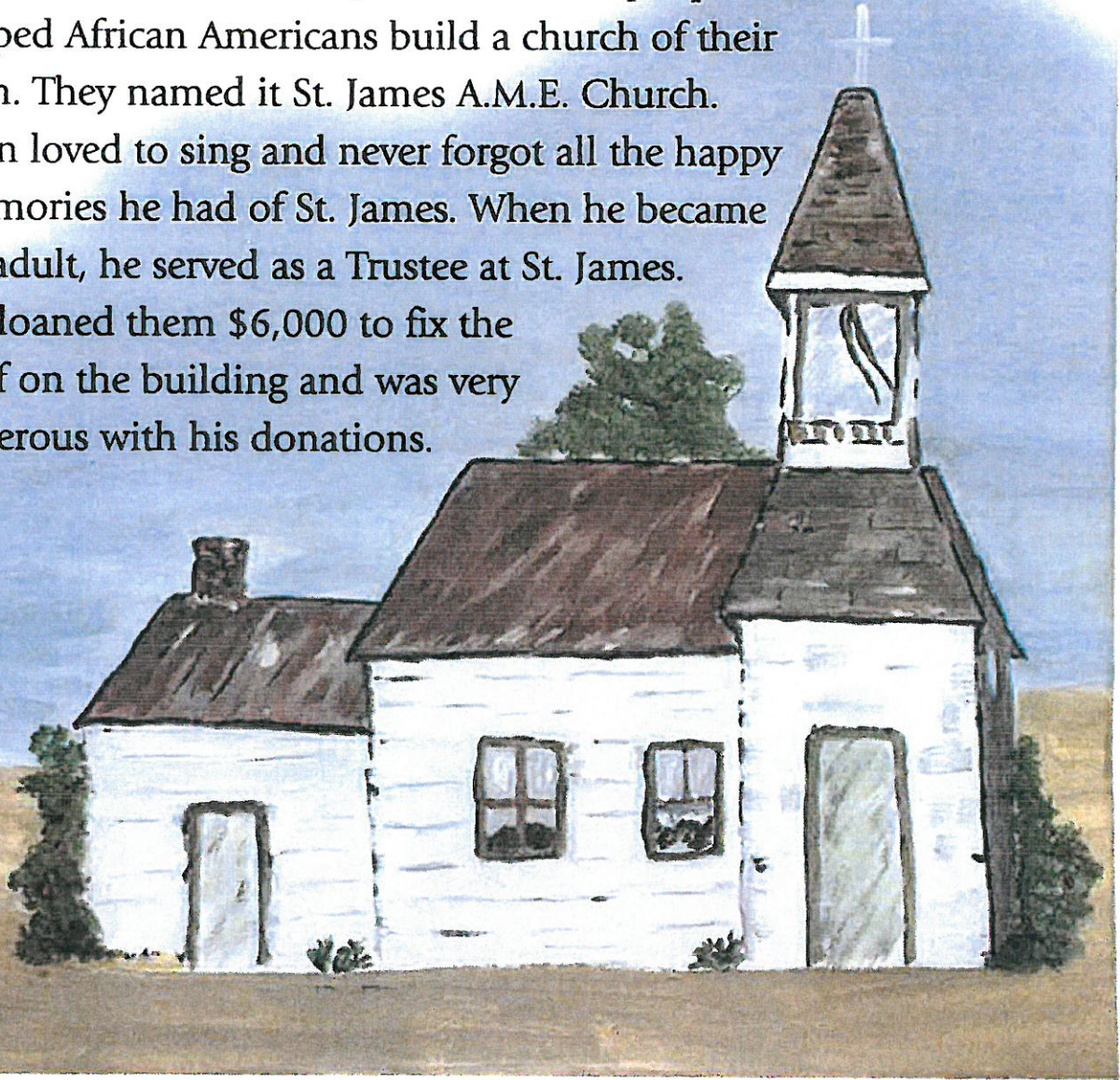


**J**ohn Riley was a very good teacher. He was also a smart businessman. Riley spent his money wisely and saved enough to buy some land. He sold that land and bought some little houses. He fixed them up and rented to them to families who could not afford to buy homes of their own. Instead of spending the rent money he collected, he bought more property. Soon he owned many rental houses. Some people say he was the first African American millionaire in Tallahassee. Mr. Riley had a very special home built for his own family. It is still standing. It is on a special, national list because it is over 100 years old.





**M**ost slaves were not allowed to go to church, but in Tallahassee, slaves were invited to worship at the Methodist Church. Later, the Methodist people helped African Americans build a church of their own. They named it St. James A.M.E. Church. John loved to sing and never forgot all the happy memories he had of St. James. When he became an adult, he served as a Trustee at St. James. He loaned them \$6,000 to fix the roof on the building and was very generous with his donations.





**J**ohn Riley earned the respect of all the people of Tallahassee. They liked to call him "Professor" because he was very wise and always willing to share his knowledge with others. He collected food and clothing for poor families. He was an early leader in the fight for civil rights. Mr. Riley was a positive role model for generations of children. People of all colors were always welcomed in his home. In 1954, the John Gilmore Riley Elementary School was named in his honor.

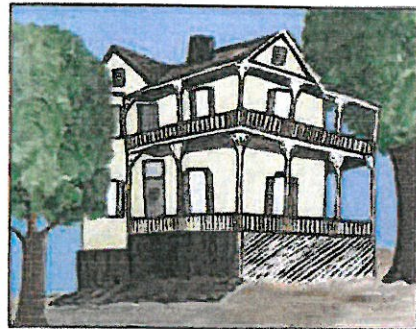




This book is a companion piece to *Out of the Past—A Noble Witness*.

*Out of the Past—A Noble Witness* is a long-distance learning course that includes text, images, web links, and interactive exercises relating to the African American community in Florida and Tallahassee during the years 1855-1955. It can be accessed through the web site of the John G. Riley Center/Museum at [www.rileymuseum.org](http://www.rileymuseum.org). Teaching aids, self-contained CDs and additional copies of this book can be purchased from:

The John G. Riley Center/Museum  
for African American History & Culture  
419 E. Jefferson  
Tallahassee, FL 32301  
850-681-7881



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