

# The education of Dori

Scholarly sources:

King, Wilma (1995). *Stolen childhood: Slave youth in nineteenth-century America*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana U Press.

*Slave Marriages*. New Discoveries in Black History series;

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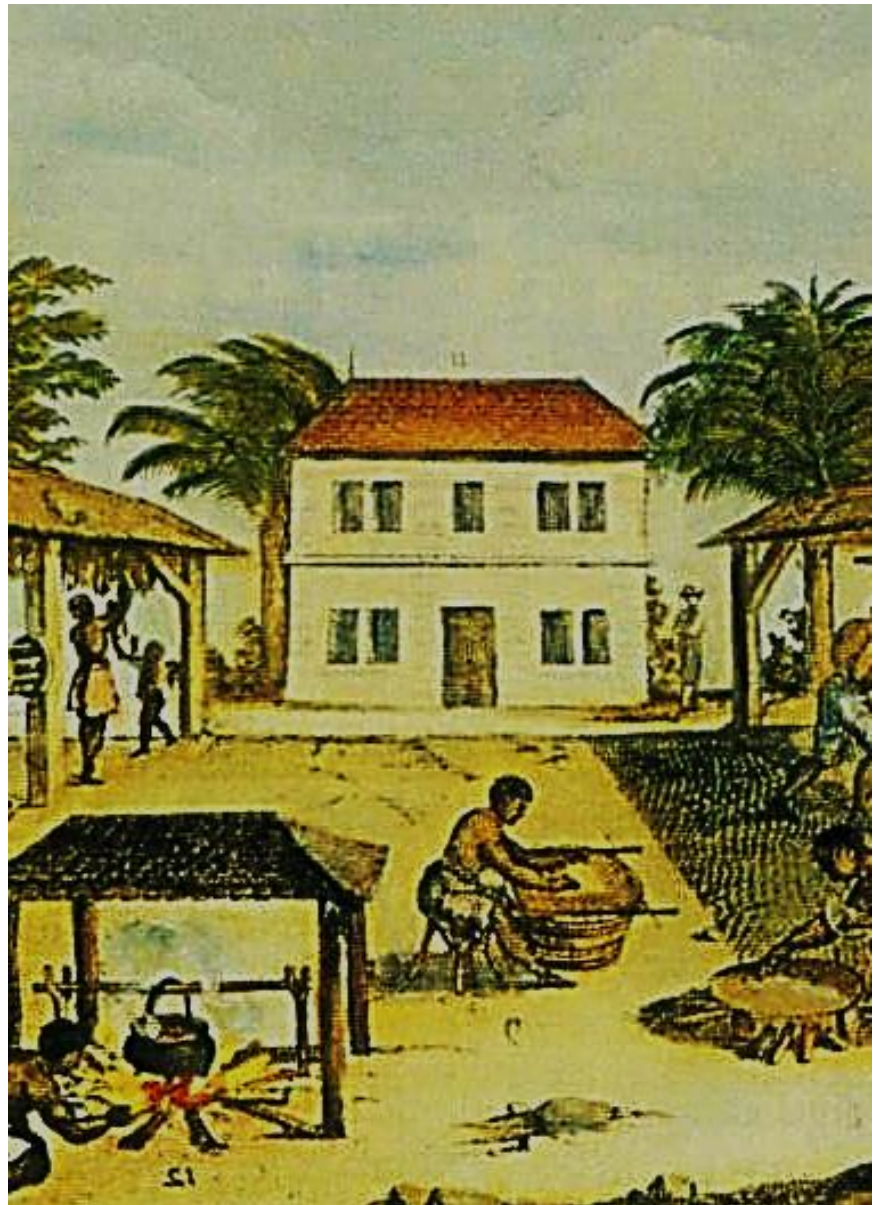
## Meet Dori

Dori was eight-years-old in 1837. She had a lively disposition, caring elders, and a loving mother and father.



But Dori was also a slave.

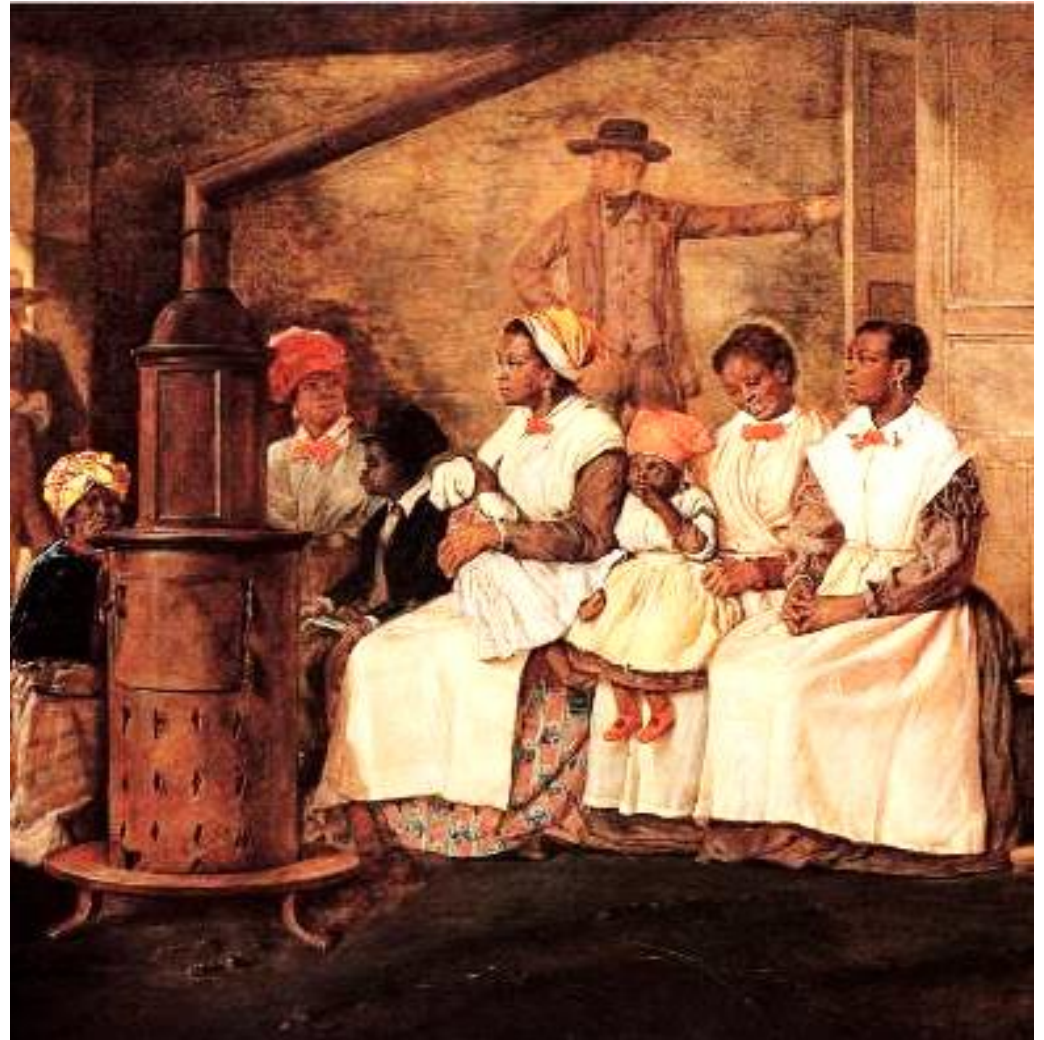
She was born into slavery on a large tobacco plantation in Virginia.



Dori always remembered the women singing to her as a little girl. "Poor child," they'd sing, "your life will be sorrow and tribulation."

But the women would tell her one good thing. "Dori you were blessed by the Maker that you were born a girl. You have more value to the white folks."

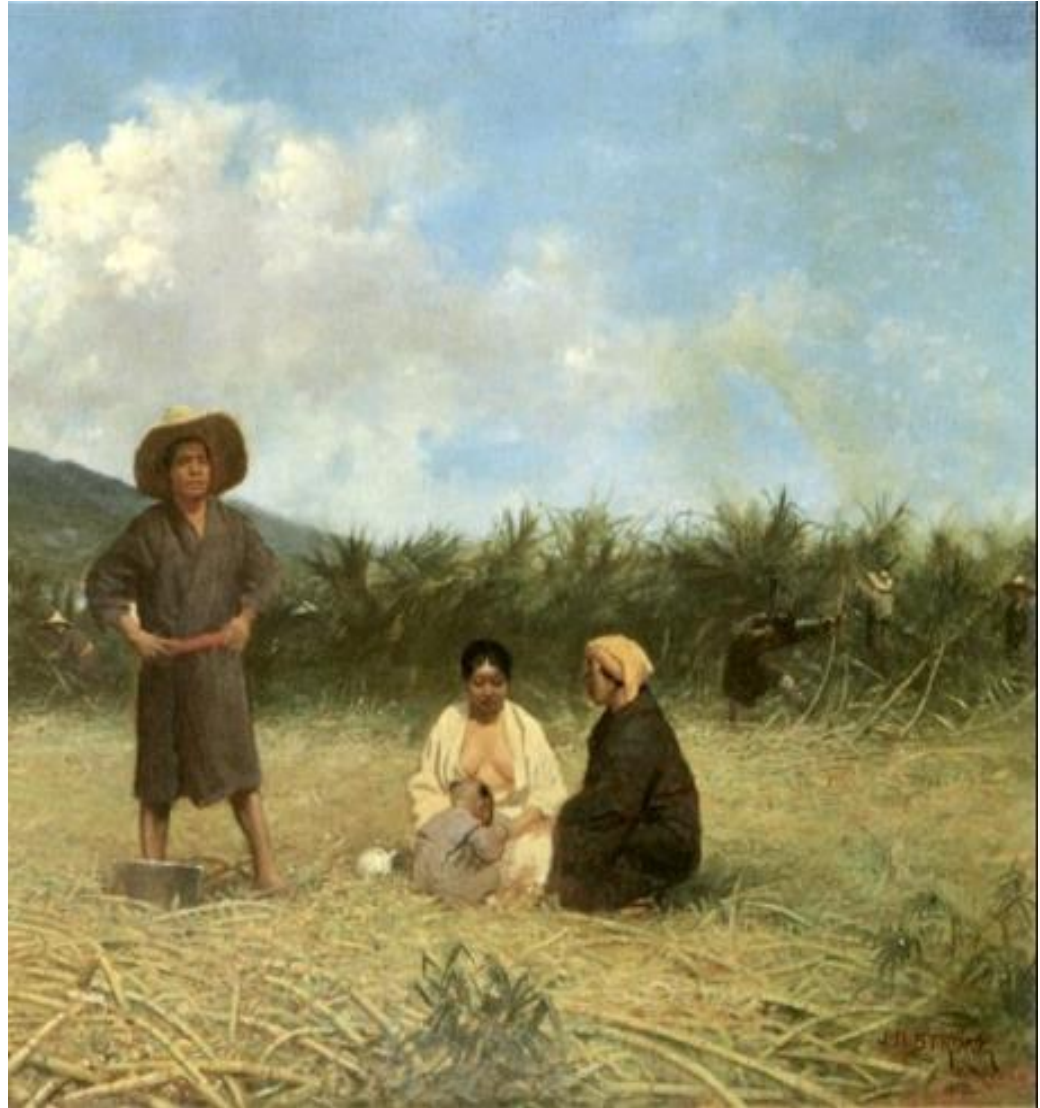
And the slave women on the plantation would stick together and educate Dori on ways to add to that value. "It's for your security," they always reminded her.



Dori learned about that value *on her own* one day when she heard the overseer bragging about his business dealings. He was talking about Hannah and her daughters, right in front of them while they were eating.

"I bought this here woman in 1817 for \$500 when she was still a girl . I admit she was lazy and made me nothing worth her victuals and clothing. But now she has two children worth over \$3,000."

The women were just plain good investments for any slave owner.



"You must never do anything to lessen that value," Dori's mother Esther would remind her daughter daily. "Or else they'll take you away from us and sell you at auction."



Esther knew from experience about the auctions. Her mother and her grandmother were separated when the grandmother failed to pick her quota of crops one year and stopped having children. The grandmother was sold at auction.

Esther herself had been torn apart from her mother at a young age.

But now Esther vowed to make herself and her daughter as valuable on the plantation as she could, so they would never be separated.



With the help of the other slave women, Esther had learned important domestic skills. She now worked inside the plantation manor as a cook and seamstress. She had also given birth to Dori and might have more children.





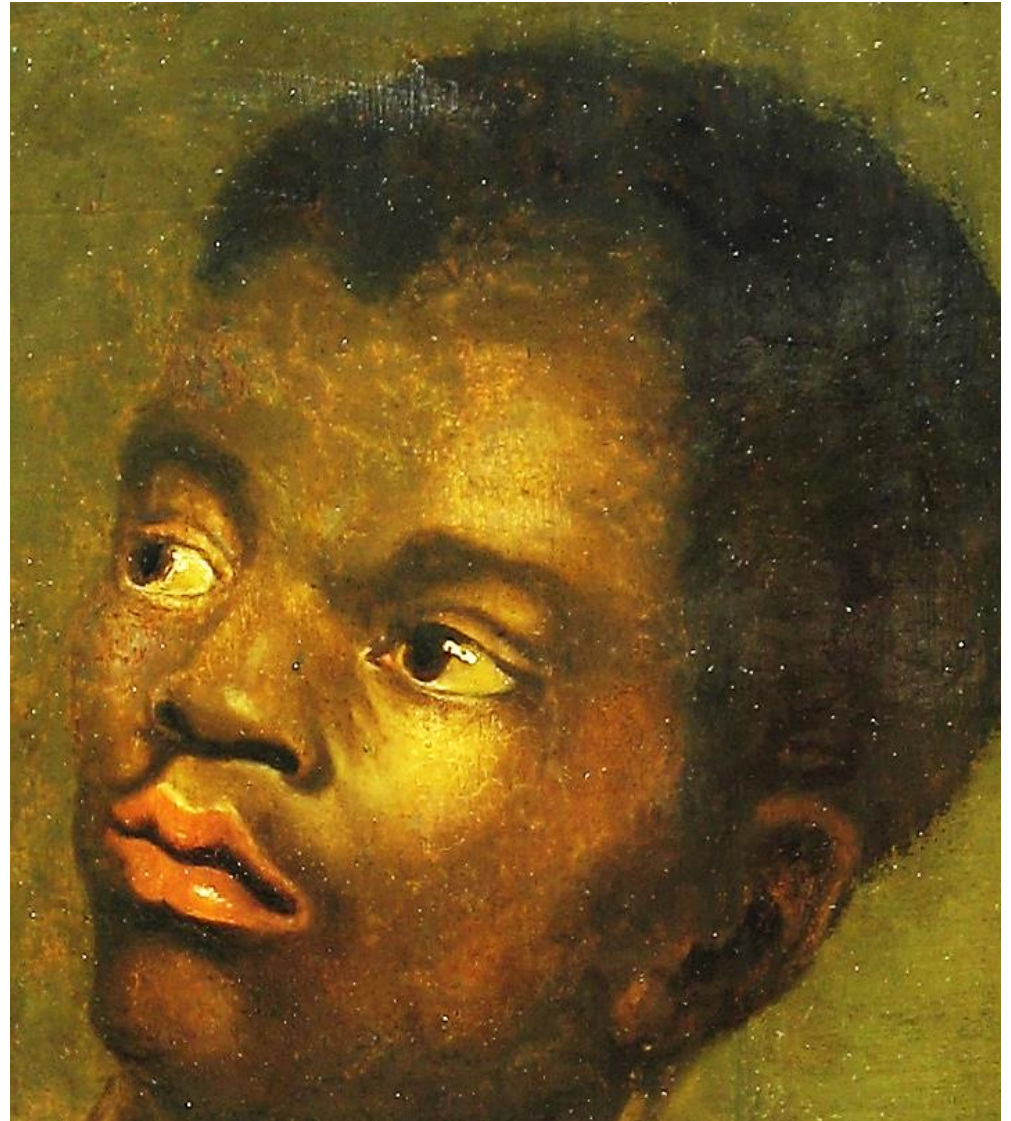
Esther had a husband. Many of the slaves married, although this did not stop the slave masters from forcefully separating them. Dori's father's name was Daniel.

But this wasn't his real name.



He'd been born in Africa and his given name was Ngozi.

At night, Dori's father would tell her stories about his childhood back in Igboland.



He'd describe the wonderful and protective village he'd lived in.



He talked about how his townsmen had once saved him from a group of slave traders.



But alas, one day he and several of his age mates fell prey to slave traders they could not get away from.

The boys were transported to America in a crowded slave ship and then sold to the highest bidders. Ngozi was just happy he was not tortured, as many were



Ngozi was renamed Daniel and ended up on the Virginia tobacco plantation. He worked the fields under the hot southern sun.

Early on he learned how hard he had to work.



As a boy, his job was to pick the worms off the tobacco plants. If he ever missed a worm, the overseer would force him to bite into and chew the next worm he found.



In a few years Daniel was moved closer to the plantation manor where he worked in processing the tobacco.

Here is where he met Esther.





After he and Esther married, Daniel moved into her slave quarters where Esther gave birth to Dori. There they enjoyed the company of other slave families.

They also had a few hours to themselves to share stories and plan ways to avoid getting separated.



Dori was too young to have much value yet in service. While she was occasionally sent to the manor yard to weed the lawn, most of her time was spent in a kind of daycare center.

It was run by slaves who were too disabled or old to work. Dori helped out by caring for the younger children.



The elderly slaves taught the children to make crafts from potatoes, corn husks, and feathers.

Dori surprised all by making her own corn husk doll.



One day Alice, the white daughter of the plantation owner walked by. She saw Dori playing with the corn husk doll. She went back to the manor and got her own porcelain doll and invited Dori to play.



"You want to play with me?" Dori asked.  
She was very surprised, but agreed to go  
outside with her. They played dolls that  
day and every day for the next week.



One day, as three other slaves were working in the fields, they saw Dori playing dolls with Alice.

They went to Esther and reported this.



That evening Esther pulled Dori aside.  
"Have you been playing with that white  
girl of the manor?"

"Yes, mama, she asked me to play," Dori  
responded.

Esther sighed. "This is not good."

"But why?" asked Dori.

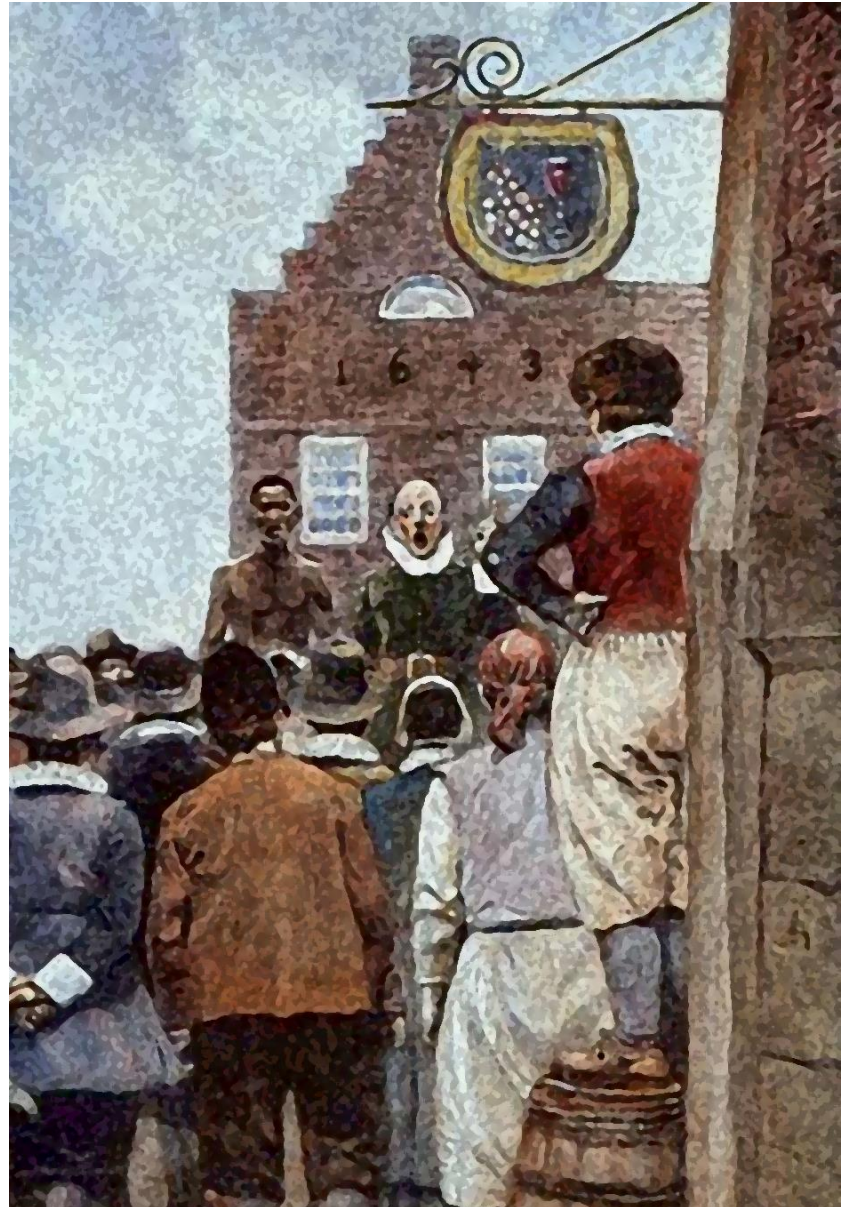


"Because her mother at the manor will see this. And she will think that their daughter is becoming too friendly with a slave. She will want to stop this."





"See, this is what happened to me. I also played with a white child at the plantation where my mother served. When their parents saw that the white child was getting fond of me, they tore me from my mother and sold me at auction. I had lost all value to them."



Dori cried. "Please mama, I didn't know. Please don't let them separate us."

Esther told her daughter that she must not play with Alice another day.

"But mama, won't she go and complain about me because I've refused to play with her?"



"That's a good point, my child," Esther conceded. "Let me take this issue to the other women and we'll devise a solution."



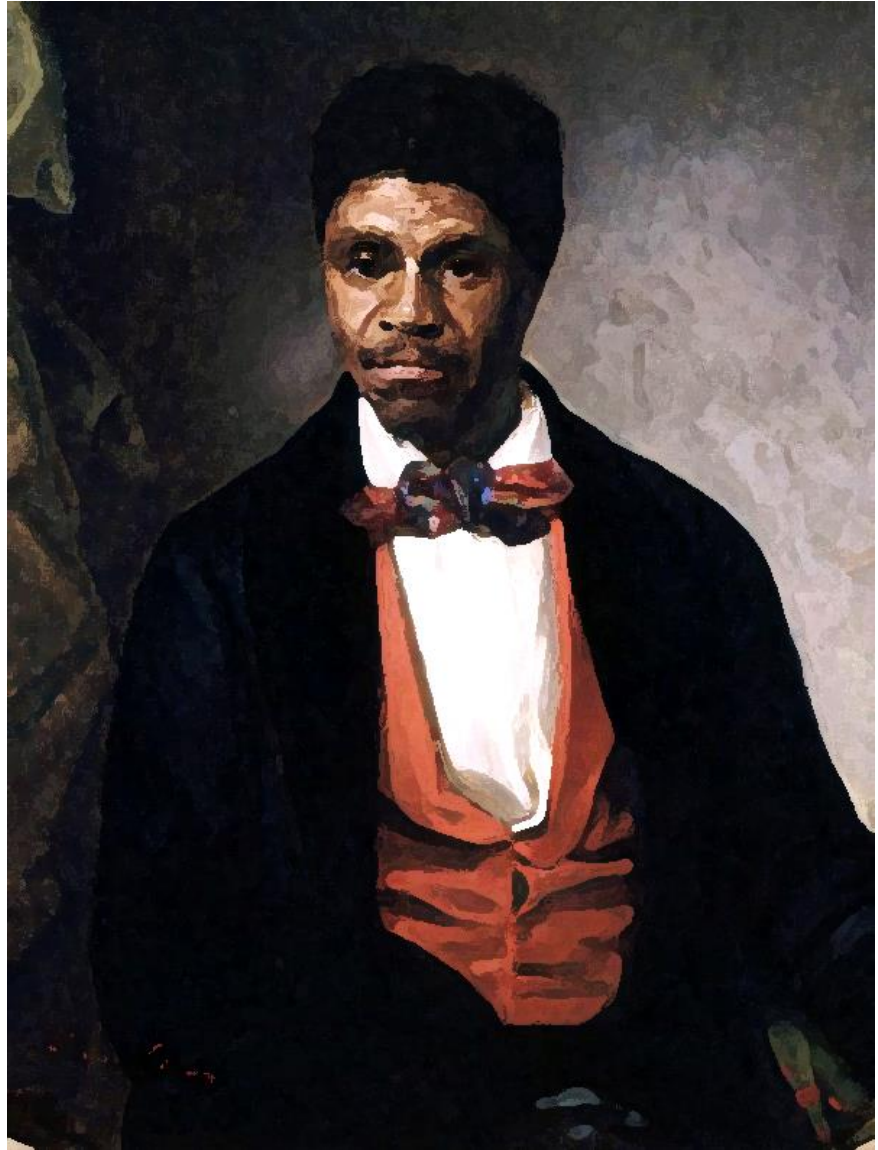
And Esther took her issue to the women. Within hours they had a plan. Dori was to enter service.



That night one of the women went to Benjamin, the head slave of the manor.

"Sir, the women have been concerned about the increasing wardrobe needs of Madam and her daughter Alice."

Benjamin frowned. "I hadn't really noticed that."

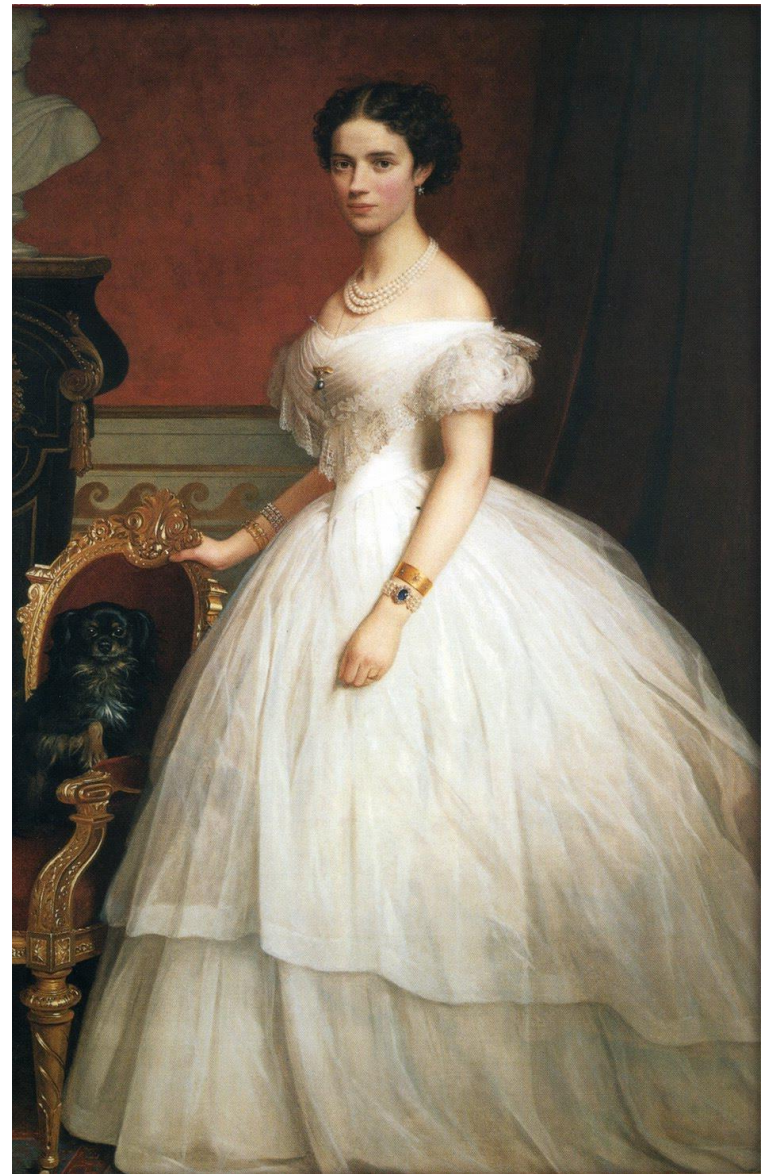


"Oh, but it is so true," stated the woman. "There are hardly three days when Madam doesn't require a new piece of apparel. We can't keep up with the spinning, weaving, cobbling, and sewing."

"Do you have a suggestion?" asked Benjamin.

"Yes, we thought it might be time to bring little Dori into service. We could teach her how to help us."

"Well, she's surely awfully young, but if you think so . . ."

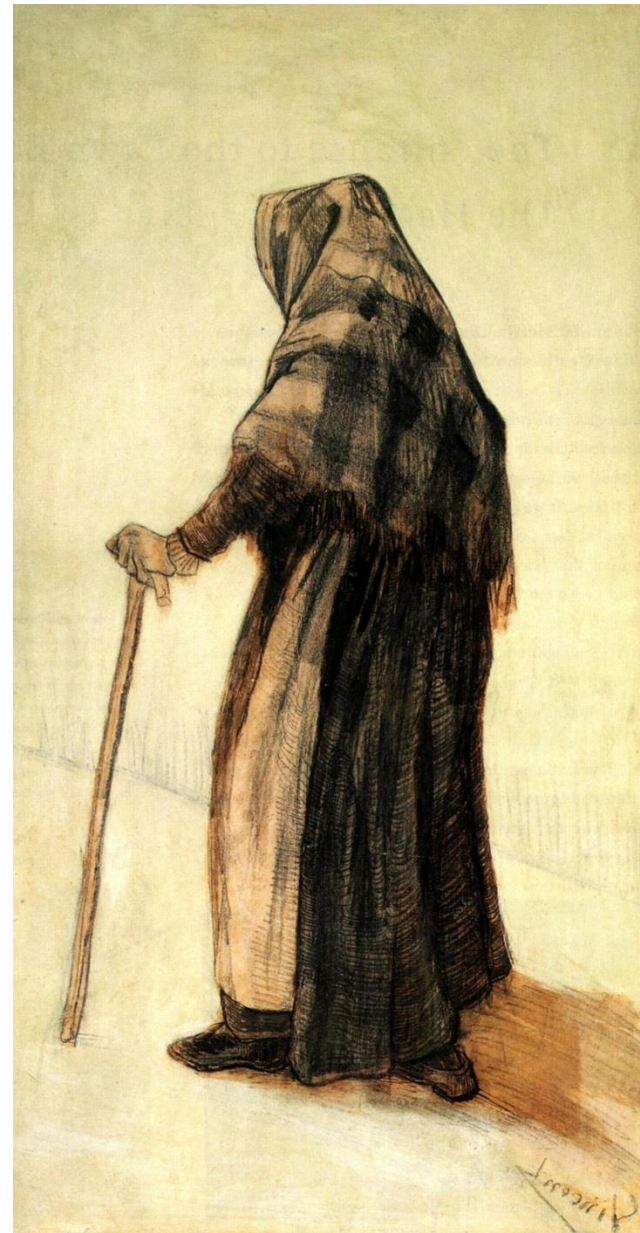


And so the women gave Dori a little corner in one of the outbuildings far away from young Alice. They taught her how to spin.



As Dori grew older the women taught her how to sew, spin, weave, and cobble shoes. For the next 28 years, Dori served as the head seamstress at the manor.

She toiled all the way through the Civil War. Her value was so high at the plantation that she was never separated from her aged mother or father.





Then suddenly one day in 1865 something shocking happened. The news came that a man named Abraham Lincoln from the north had gotten a law passed that freed the slaves.

They were all free to go and now sell their labor.



A short time after her family was freed, Dori opened a little dress shop in Williamsburg. She hired only the women who had helped her so much at the plantation.

The dress shop grew to be one of the largest boutiques in all of Virginia. Even white women demanded Dori's gowns.

Such was the education of Dori. Dori had learned to increase her value, but now it was for her own people.



The end

Let's Talk!!!