



Joe's Footsteps

By Sasha Harriman

Dedicated to **Joe**, the pressman

This book is based on the true story of Joe, a young African-born man who was enslaved by William Brown and Thomas Gilmore, co-owners of the first printing office in Quebec. Much that we know about Joe's life comes from the runaway slave advertisements that were printed for his numerous escapes, by Brown and Gilmore in their newspaper, the Quebec Gazette. Although this story uses these ads as a starting point, it is not a true representation of Joe's life because much information about him is now lost and cannot be recovered. This is true of most enslaved people because they were treated like property. By using research to understand what Joe's life may have been like, details have been created to produce a more complete narrative.

This is a story about a boy named Joe. It is not a happy story, but it is a story about **strength**. It is a true story about bravery and never giving up. It is a story that Joe was not allowed to tell, or write down, but one that he showed us anyway, through what he did. It is a story about **resistance**.

Joe was born in Africa, where he could play, run, and laugh with his friends. He lived there with his family. His mother and father, sisters and brothers, uncles, aunts, cousins, and grandparents, everyone loved him dearly and he loved them.

But one day, he was taken far from his home. Stolen from his family, he was forced into the bottom of a large ship, where he felt cold, and sad, and sick. Surrounded by many other people, he was not alone, but he was still lonely and afraid. He did not know anyone, and many people did not speak his languages. The sailors on the ship kept repeating the word “slave”. Joe did not know what it meant, but he knew it was a bad thing to be because of how he and the others were mistreated.



The first ship took him all the way across an ocean to a land that was sunny and warm like Africa. The place they called Jamaica had many African people who looked like him, but like on the ship, the people with power had white skin and called themselves Europeans. They liked to talk about the beauty of their far-off land, their special foods, and music, but they were horribly cruel. They yelled and hit and growled and spit and shook their fists in anger.

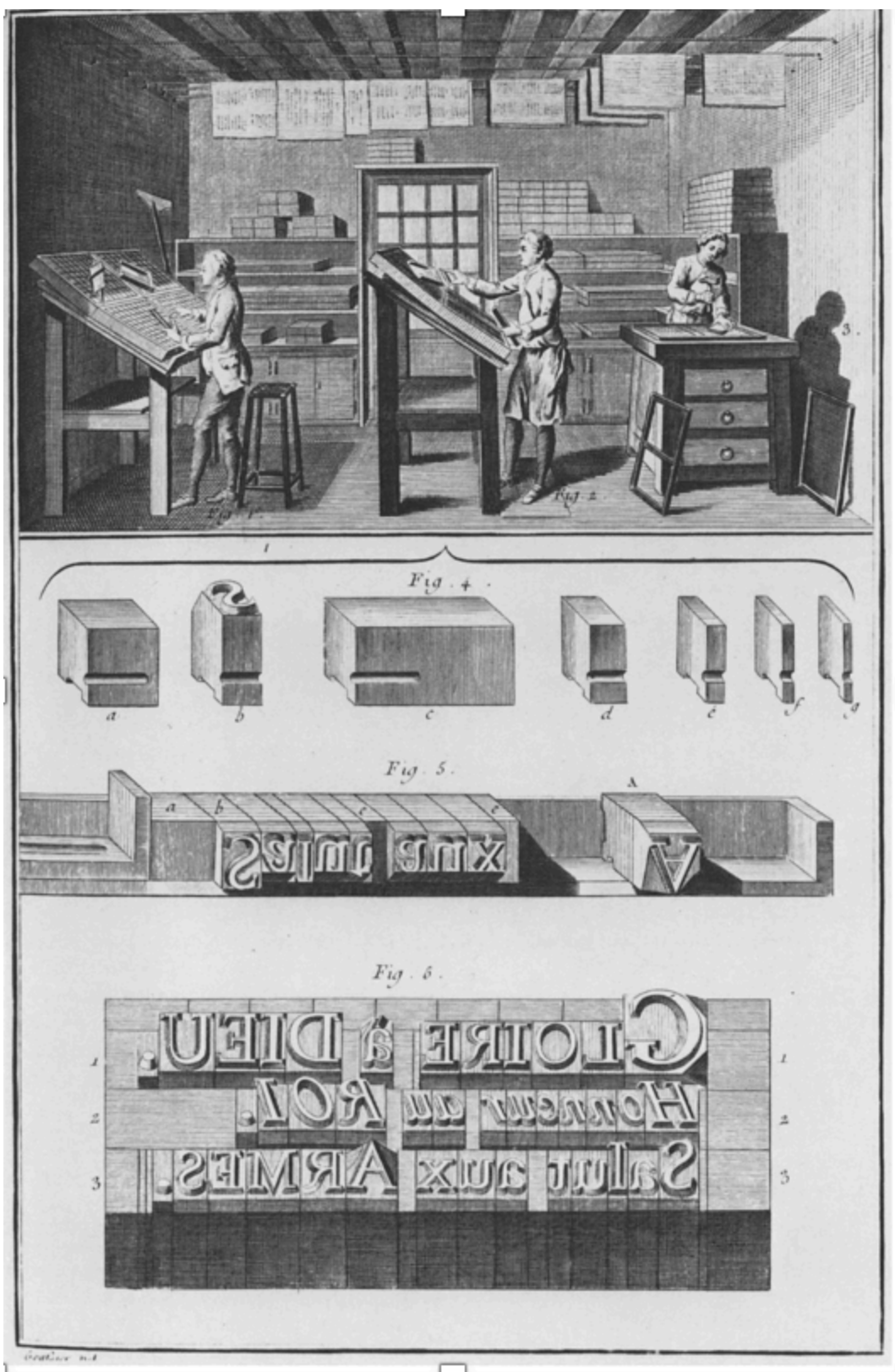


But another ship awaited Joe. Back onboard he went, and down, down, into the cargo hold again. But this time there were only a few people, some African and some African Jamaicans who spoke English. Together they invented a new language with words and hands making pictures in the air. The Jamaicans told the Africans like Joe that the large hogsheads to their left and right were containers full of rum, sugar, and molasses that they had been forced to make in small villages known as plantations. “We are sailing north now!” they said, eyes wide with fear. “We have heard that the same cruel whites are more plentiful there, and we are fewer. Brothers and sisters, take heart. We must be strong now!”



As the large waves churned, the ship rolled and spun like a toy on the pond where Joe once played. Day after day, night after night, many were sick below deck. Joe could hear other people crying as his own tears were wet on his cheeks. The ship finally sailed to a port the white sailors called Quebec City. The people there spoke another language that Joe did not understand, but he knew it was not the one he had heard in Jamaica. Soon Joe was sold to two white men who called themselves printers. They took him to a place they called the printing office. They told him his new name was Joe. And they forced him to stay there all the time. He worked, ate, and slept in that office, the place that their workers made their newspaper.

In the printing office, Joe worked long days and long nights. He worked alongside white men who were free to come and go and earn money for their work. At first Joe did the work that no one else wanted to do. But he learned so much so quickly that he soon did the work that no one else understood. The language of the whites in Jamaica (English) and the language of the whites in Quebec (French) were both used in the newspaper. So, although most enslaved people were not allowed to learn to read and write, Brown and Gilmore forced Joe to learn two languages. The men who worked for them had to know how to read, spell, and write. You see, there were no computers in the 1700s. Newspapers were printed by hand and the workers had to take individual letters and put them next to each other, one by one to create words, sentences, and stories. This was very hard work that took a long time and a lot of care.



Even though Joe had never learned English or French back home in Africa, he learned to separate and sort letters quickly. When Joe did his work quicker, he still didn't have time to rest or to do what he wanted to do. "You must work longer and later than everyone else," Brown and Gilmore commanded, "because you belong to us!" But while his hands were moving, his brain was too. He dreamed of **freedom**, of **friends**, of his **family**. So, one spring Saturday night, after everyone else had gone home, Joe crept out the back door. He didn't take much with him but the clothes he was wearing.

At first softly and slowly, he kept his head down and his chin tucked in as he passed townspeople, and kept walking, walking, walking. Then faster and faster, he ran as fast as he could, only stopping when he needed to rest.

Each step took him closer to freedom, his family, loved ones, Africa. His heart grew bigger with every step. While he was hopeful, he knew he was in danger, too. The printers would look for him. They would print an advertisement like those they had forced Joe to print, one that said he had broken the law and needed to be caught. They would describe his coat, shoes, and hat. They would say he stole something from them, although it was they who stole daily from Joe! They would say he was bad and offer to pay money to the people who helped to catch him. They would do anything to get him back because Joe was their best worker, and Joe did not get wages.

each other in the public declarations of their loyalty.

A D V E R T I S E M E N T S.



RANAWAY from the Printing-office

in QUEBEC, on Saturday evening the twenty-second instant, A Negro Lad named JOE, born in Africa, about twenty years of age, about five feet and an half high, full round fac'd, a little marked with the small-pox, speaks English and French tolerably; he had on when he went away an old green sur-cap, an old sky-blue broad-cloth coat, an old grey ratteen jacket, leather breeches, brown leggings and Canadian macassins. All persons are hereby forewarned from harbouring or aiding him to escape, as they may depend on being prosecuted to the utmost rigour of the Law, and whoever will give information where he is harboured, or bring him back, shall have FOUR DOLLARS Reward from

THE PRINTER.

IL s'est évadé de l'Imprimerie à Québec, Samedi 22

du courant au soir, un Garçon Negre nommé JOE, né en Afrique, âgé d'environ vingt ans, de la taille d'environ cinq pieds et demi, le visage rond et plein, un peu marqué de la petite vérole, il parle passablement Anglois et François; il portoit quand il s'est évadé un Casque vert, un vieux Habit de drap fin bleu-céleste, une vieille Veste de ratine grise, des Culottes de cuir, des Mitasses vinées et des Souliers Sauvages. Il est défendu à toutes personnes de le retirer ou de l'aider à s'évader, vu qu'elles seront poursuivies selon toute la rigueur des Loix, et quiconque l'arrêtera et le ramènera, recevra QUATRE PIASTRES de récompense de

L'IMPRIMEUR.

A L L Persons indebted to the Estate of *William*

Joe kept going for minutes, then hours, then days. Each foot he put forward was cautious, but **hopeful**, just like the budding trees in spring around him. The days turned into weeks and his freedom seemed certain. But one day, he started hearing another pair of footsteps behind him. He quickened his steps to a run, but so did the others. Soon, a man's shadow appeared next to his. The next thing he knew, there was a man right behind him. Joe tried to keep running, but the man grabbed him, and stopped him dead in his tracks. Although the man gave no explanation, Joe knew: he must have seen the newspaper.

Just like Joe thought, the man took him straight to the nearest jail. It was cold, and dark, and empty. Joe's hope of freedom melted away like the winter snow in April. Each day the light of freedom seemed to dim. Although his memory of his family would not fade, it was harder and harder to picture being reunited with his loved ones again. His sadness kept him awake. When the sun rose the next morning, he could not see it from inside the cold jail.

The printers came to get him. Back to work, back to the printing office, to the Quebec Gazette and its endless letters and ink. Back to printing ads for cruel white enslavers who hunted for his fellow Africans. It seemed that almost everything went back to how it was before he ran away. Except now, he felt the coldness and the sadness of the jail all the time. Wasn't the printing office just another jail? For Joe it was. At first, nothing could warm his body or lift his spirits, not his hands busily working at the press, not the wood burning in the fireplace at the printing office. But over time, he started to remember how his steps almost took him far away from the place called Quebec.

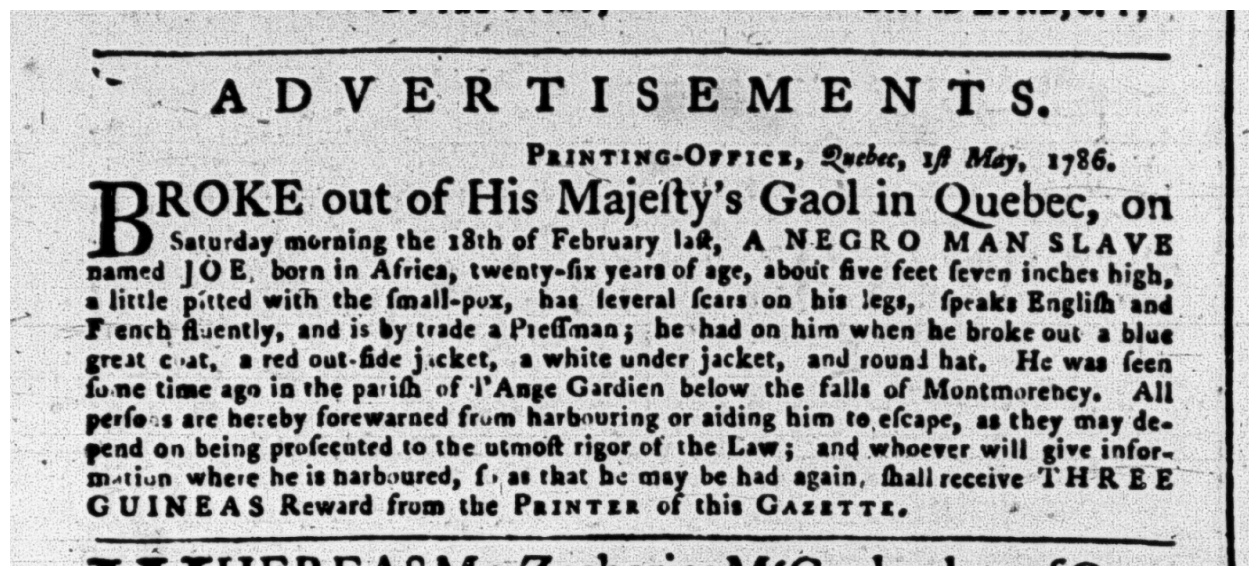
His hope for freedom made him warm again. “What if I make another plan, a better one?” Joe thought to himself, “Surely, I can escape and return home!” While many enslaved people tried to escape, unlike most, Joe knew how to read and write, he knew when the ships would come and go, he knew how the printers would hunt for him with their advertisements. But more than that, Joe remembered the joy of being free. He was not this thing they called him, a “slave”. He must escape again. As his hands moved letters around on the press all day, his feet raced in different imaginary paths around his head. He knew that it would be colder this time, but he knew he had to leave anyway.

So once again, Joe waited until no one was around and then slipped out of the shop. Again, his feet carried him far, far away, skating across ice and skidding through the snow. This time, he didn't even walk at first. He ran, to keep himself warm. He ran to put distance between himself, and the jail called the printing office. His footsteps were strong, stomping through the snow and the ice. But the snow made his body ache, and his feet were so cold, he could not feel his toes. The snow also made it harder to run. This time, the printers' advertisement came faster than he could run. Their advertisement created a web of words, words that lied about Joe calling him a "slave". Like spiders catching flies, they spun their sticky stories and trapped Joe in their tale with their power and money. Yes, another reward was offered for Joe's return! You see, Joe was too valuable to their printing office. Soon the printers' ad led angry men straight to Joe.

Joe was once more back in the cold jail. But he could still feel his footsteps pounding like his heart. His heart knew he had to run. And so, he did.

He escaped the jail in time to see the sun rise.

He put out his hand to greet the sun. He noticed how good his fingers felt, not curled around letters on the press. He paused for just a minute to stretch them out to the sun, the same sun his parents and siblings looked at each day, wondering where he had gone. It was time to run again.



And again, his feet took him far, but the newspaper ads got further. He knew how fast his hands could create words out of letters. He knew how many pages they could print in a day. He knew people would read those words and try to find him. He knew all this, but he knew even more that he had to keep running. So, when they found him and took him back to the printing office, he found a way out again. And again. He ran through the snow, through the rain, in the winter, in the fall.

Every time they brought him back, the printers thought it was the last time he would run away. They didn't know that Africa was in his heart. They didn't know that his family had never left his memory. They didn't realize he remembered being free. They couldn't comprehend that the letters they forced him to place, started to feel like footsteps to him. In Joe's mind, each letter rose up and fled in a new direction out of the printing office and away from Quebec.

Joe learned what they didn't want him to know. That there were others, just like him, whose footsteps were taking them far away, just like his. The printers made him print ads to try to catch these people. On those days, Joe slowed his hands.

Joe printed these ads for days, weeks, months, and years.
When the enslavers gave up, Joe rejoiced, because he understood that the person had escaped to freedom.

So, he could too. He knew he had to keep his heart beating and his footsteps running.

And so, he did.

Plates:

Page 5

George Morland, Slave Trade (Execrable Human Traffick, or The Affectionate Slaves) (ca. 1788), oil on canvas, 85.1 × 123.2 cm, Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington , D.C, U.S.A.

Page 6

William Clark, “Carting and Putting Sugar-Hogsheads on Board,” from Ten Views in the Island of Antigua, in which are represented the Process of Sugar Making, and the Employment of the Negroes, in the Field, Boiling-House, and Distillery, from drawings made by William Clark during a Residence of three years in the West Indies, upon the Estates of Admiral Tellemach (London: Thomas Clay, 1823) hand-coloured aquatint, 31.5 cm x 45 cm, Folio A2010 10, 4515711-00037, Paul Mellon Collection, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut, USA.

Page 8

Robert Auchmuty Sproule, “View of the Harbour, Montreal” (1830), watercolour, pen, ink and graphite on wove paper mounted on paper, 23 x 35 cm, McCord Stewart Museum Montreal, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

Page 11

Unknown, “Imprimerie en lettres, l’opération de la casse” (1769), engraving from the Encyclopédie Recueil de planches, sur les sciences, les arts libéraux, et les arts mécaniques, avec leur explication. vol. 7, MIT Libraries, Massachusetts, U.S.A.

Page 14

William Brown, “RANAWAY from the Printing-office in Quebec...” Quebec Gazette, 27 November 1777, vol. 639, page 3

Page 21

William Brown, “BROKE out of his Majefty’s Gaol...” Quebec Gazette, 4 May 1786, vol. 1081, page 3