

# What it Takes to Unlearn

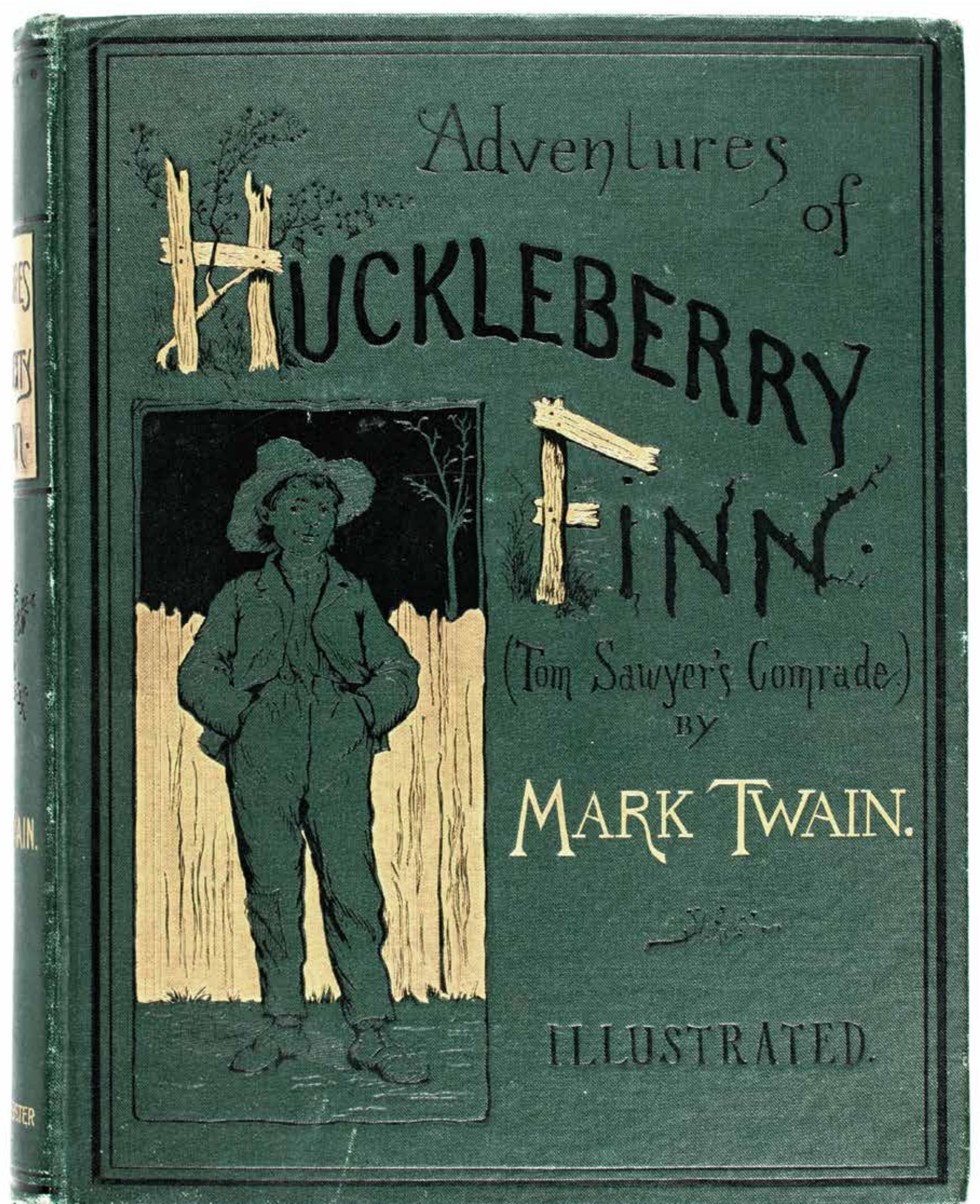
## Mark Twain's journey to Huckleberry Finn

*Mark Twain was so far ahead of his time that he shouldn't even be talked about on the same day as other people. Look what he did with his brilliant satire. For the first time in the history of literature a White man talked about a relationship between a Black man and a White boy. ~Dick Gregory, Callus on My Soul (2000)*

Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a fierce and penetrating critique of racism in America that was decades ahead of its time. So was Twain's own sustained commitment to combatting racism and speaking honestly about race relations.

Twain had grown up in Missouri before the Civil War. Missouri was among the States that allowed slavery; Twain's family owned slaves. **So, much like Huck himself, he had to "unlearn" all he'd been taught as a boy.**

In an 1895 notebook entry written when he was 60, Twain was describing himself – as well as Huck – in observing that “a sound heart and a deformed conscience come into collision.” For both Twain and Huck, the “sound heart” won out, teaching a conscience deformed by a racist upbringing in a slaveholding family. And in *Huck Finn*, it is **runaway slave Jim – of sound heart, mind and conscience – who teaches Huck to be a better person.**



*Published in New York by Charles L. Webster and Company, on February 18, 1885.*

Looking back on his childhood at age 41, Twain wrote a friend in 1876 that as late as age 19 or 20, he had been nothing but “ignorance, intolerance, egotism, self-assertion, opaque perception, dense and pitiful chuckle-headedness – and an almost pathetic unconsciousness of it all.” Twain even volunteered as a Confederate soldier shortly after the Civil War began. He lasted just two weeks before deserting.

*All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called “Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.” ~Ernest Hemingway*



# TWAIN IN HANNIBAL, MISSOURI

Both Twain's paternal and maternal grandparents were slave owners; so were his parents. His father's failures as a land speculator led him to sell the family's last slave in 1842, when Twain was seven years old.

The frontier town of Hannibal in which Twain was raised had only 30 inhabitants as late as 1830; it was not incorporated as a town until 1845, when Twain was ten. **While the town grew and thrived rapidly during Twain's childhood, it was also the scene of violence and cruelty he'd never forget.**

As a boy, Twain saw a slaveholder throw a piece of burning iron into a slave's face. "It bounded from the man's skull," he would later write. "He was dead in an hour."

Also as a boy, Twain was playing with a gang of boys on the Mississippi River island that would become Jackson Island in *Huck Finn*. While doing so, the body of a drowned runaway slave surfaced in the water. **The onetime slave, named Neriam Todd, had been secretly fed for weeks by a white boy who became the model for the character of Huck.** When bounty hunters tracked Todd down, he drowned in trying to flee. The bounty hunters mutilated the corpse and left it in the river, confident that when it surfaced it would serve as a lesson for others.

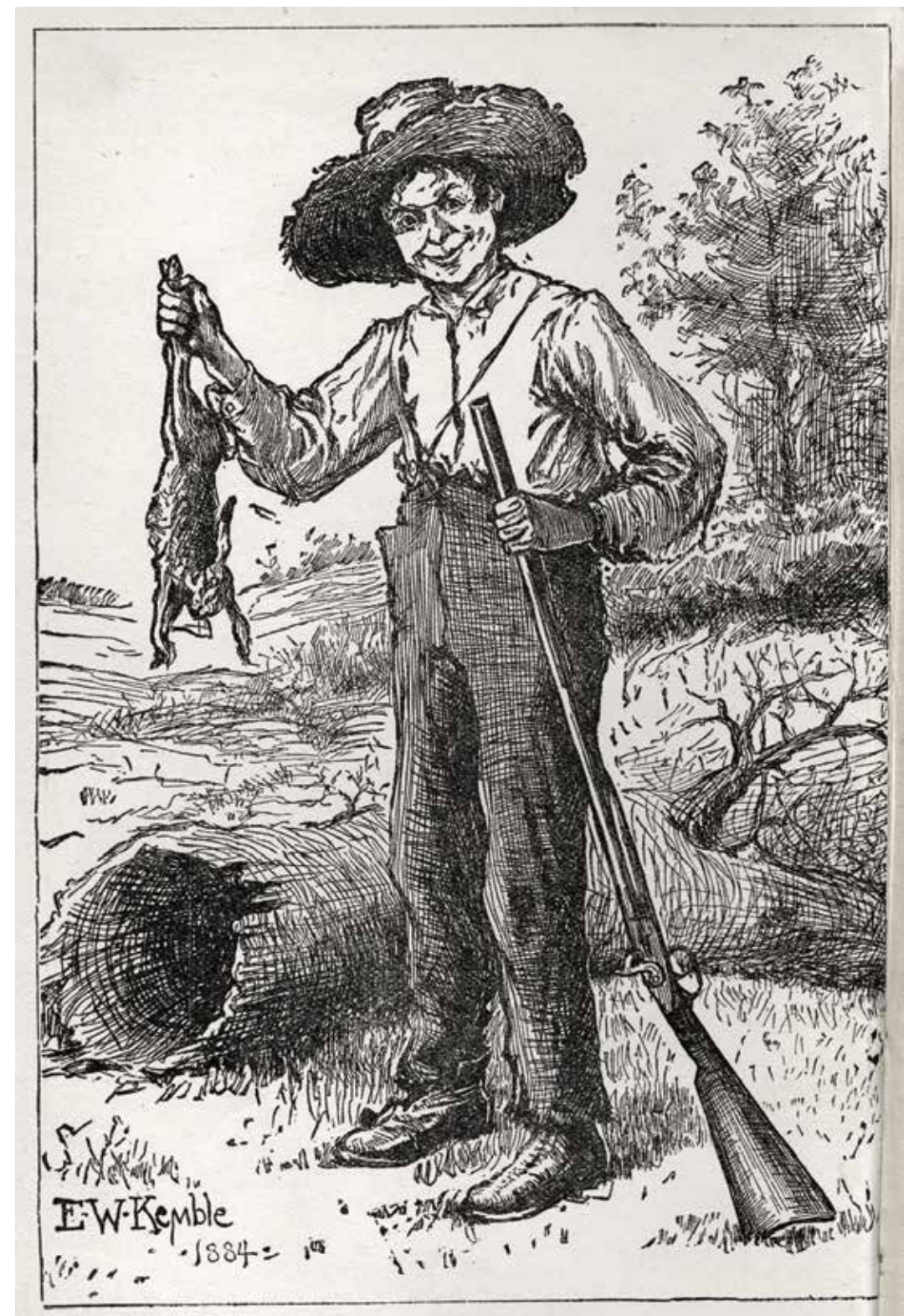
Twain's attitude toward black Americans continued to evolve through his encounters with a slave called Daniel Quarles, known to children like Twain as "Uncle Dan'l." Quarles was an outstanding storyteller; at night, black and white children would gather around

him as he told folk stories in which prey like rabbits always outwitted vicious and cunning predators like foxes. **Jim would be modeled in part on**

**Daniel Quarles**, who also made a guest appearance as "Uncle Dan'l" in Twain's novel, *The Gilded Age* (1873).



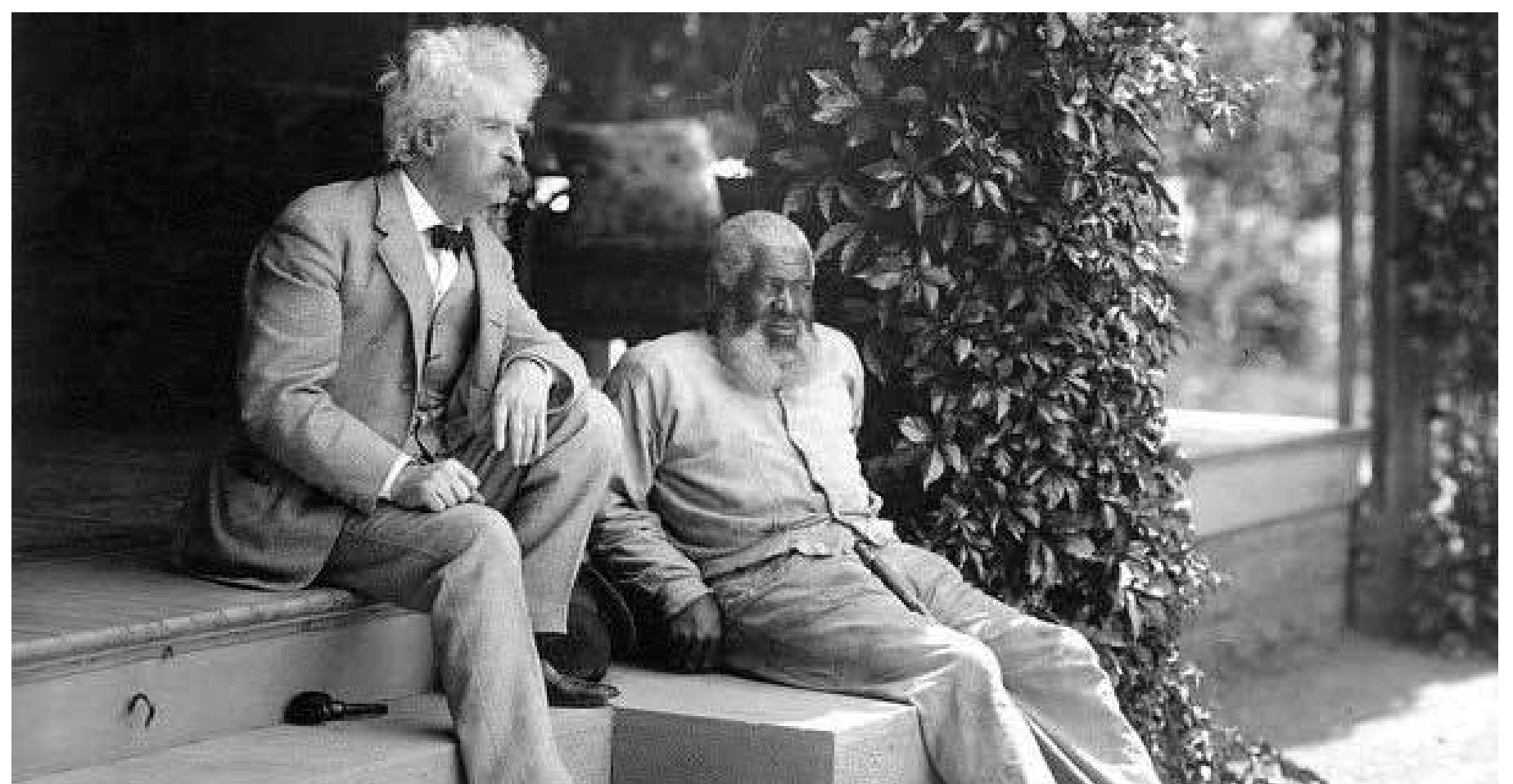
Samuel Clemens, age 15. Hannibal, Missouri, 1850



Edward W. Kemble, young illustrator from New York, created 174 illustrations for this groundbreaking novel.



"Uncle Dan'l Grinding an Axe"  
Watercolor by Barry Moser



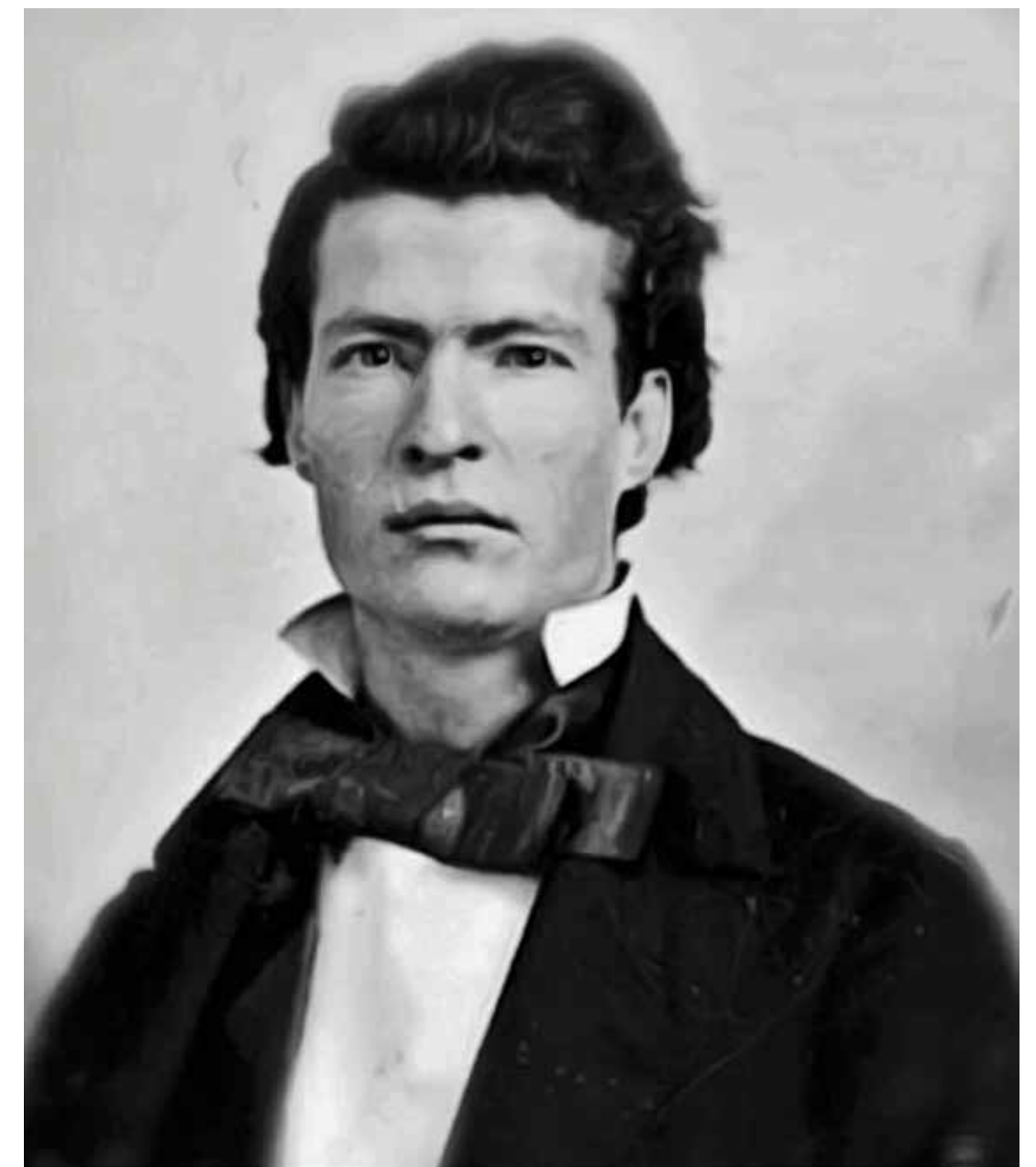
Twain with his longtime friend John T. Lewis, of whom the author remarked "I have not known an honest man nor a more respect-worthy one." Lewis is said to have inspired in part the character of Jim in *Huck Finn*.



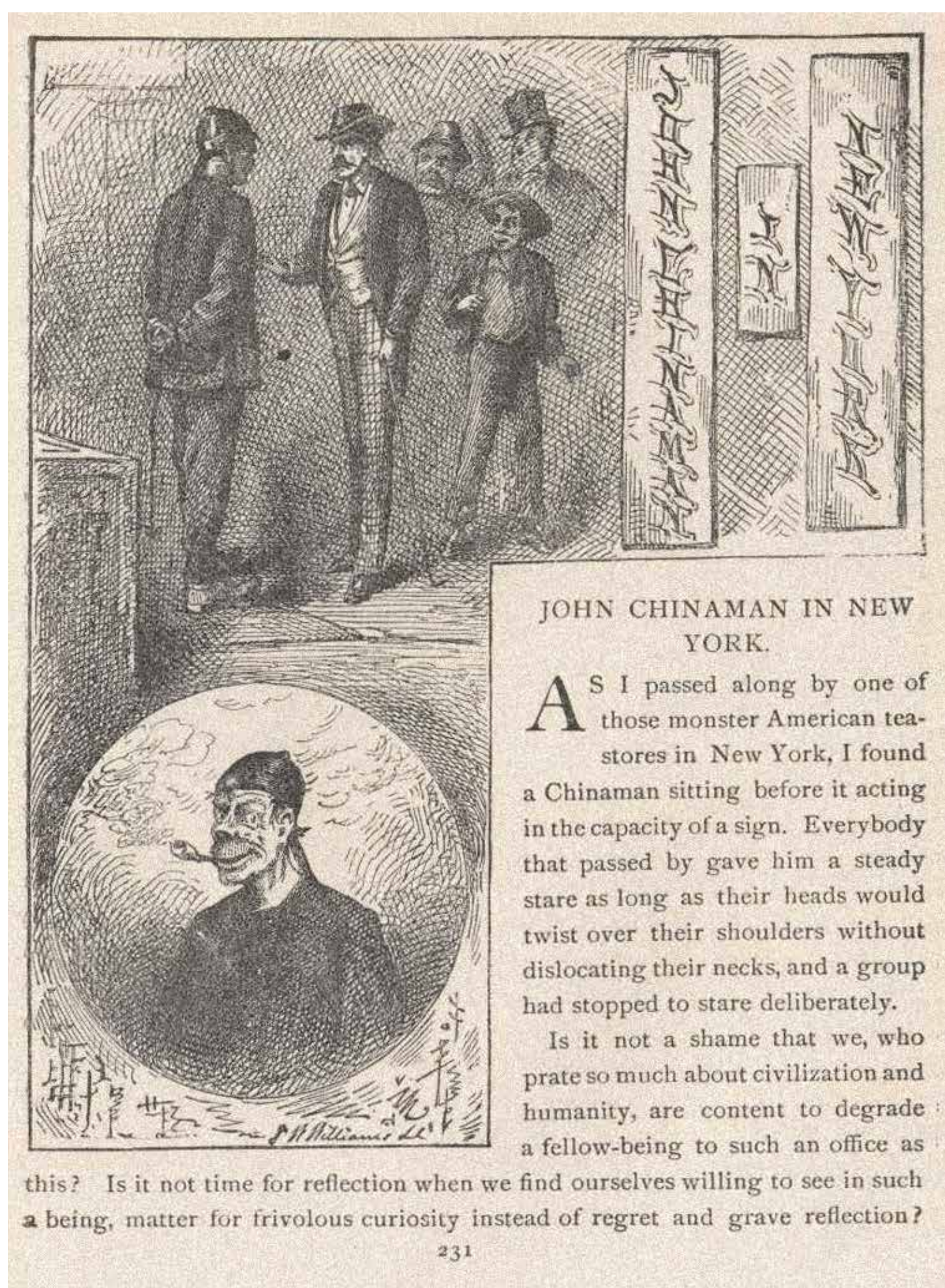
# FROM HANNIBAL TO HUCK FINN

It was as a young reporter in California during the 1860s that Twain began writing critically about race while covering stories involving the oppression of California's growing Chinese population. "One Sunday afternoon," he recalled in his 1906 Autobiography, "I saw some hoodlums chasing and stoning a Chinaman...and I noticed that a policeman was observing this performance with amused interest – nothing more."

When Twain's San Francisco newspaper refused to publish his report of what had happened, he rewrote the story as a scathing satire and published it in Nevada as "What Have the Police Been Doing?" (1866) Harshly critical of corrupt police officers who continually victimized the local Chinese population, the article earned Twain the hatred of San Francisco's chief of police.



Young Mark Twain



In *John Chinaman in New York*, an ensuing sketch that Twain published at age 35, he did for the Chinese what he would later do for black Americans like Jim: he treated them as human beings, with a history and a culture expressed through private reflections, at a time when most white Americans viewed them as subhuman.

By the time Twain published *John Chinaman* in 1870, he was living in New York State and writing editorials like the one that appeared in the *Buffalo Express* in 1869, in which he angrily decried the white mob that had lynched a black man – cleared after death of committing the crime that had triggered his lynching.

By the 1870s, Twain was also writing oral histories of blacks he met, including the remarkable *A True Story* (1874), in which a onetime slave describes how seven of her children were sold away from her.

Already, at this point, Twain was exhibiting his commitment to accurately capturing dialects – black and white – of his characters; he saw this as a sign of his respect for them and the truth. In chapter 16 of *Huck Finn*, Huck recalls Jim "saying how the first thing he would do when he got to a free State he would go to saving up money and never spend a single cent, and when he got enough he would buy his wife...and then they would both work to buy the two children, and if their master wouldn't sell them, they'd get an *Ab'litionist* to go and steal them."



Huck and Jim. Illustration by Edward W. Kemble.



*I have no color prejudices nor caste prejudices nor creed prejudices. All I care to know is that a man is a human being, and that is enough for me; he can't be any worse.*

~Mark Twain, Harper's Magazine, September, 1899

By the decade in which he published *Huck Finn*, Twain had gone still further, adopting positions on topics such as **reparations for slavery** that would still strike many as radical today. Writing to *Atlantic Monthly* editor William Dean Howells, Twain vowed that he would do his “part of the reparation due from every white man to every black man.”

“He held himself responsible for the wrong which the white race had done to the black race in slavery,” Howells later wrote, in *My Mark Twain*.

In 1882, Twain created an endowment at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania to **pay the tuition of black students**; by the end of the decade, he was also paying the tuition of other students, including **Warner T. McGuinn**, who was one of the first black students to attend Yale Law School. McGuinn graduated first in his class and became the mentor to Thurgood Marshall, who would one day be the first black justice to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court. A legendary lecturer and speaker, Twain also frequently performed his lectures in Black churches without receiving compensation; the monies he would have earned went to charity instead.



Twain also became friendly with **Helen Keller**; he was instrumental in helping to finance Keller's education and was deeply impressed by her courage in overcoming her deaf blindness. In 1929, Keller wrote in *My Mark Twain in Midstream: My Later Years*: “He never embarrassed me by saying how terrible it is not to see, or how dull life must be, lived always in the dark... He knew that we do not think with eyes and ears, and that our capacity for thought is not measured by five senses. He kept me always in mind when we talked, and he treated me like a competent human being. That is why I loved him.”

Mark Twain and Helen Keller



In the spring of 1883, Twain wrote to Karl and Hattie Gerhardt: “Whenever a colored man commits an unright action, upon his head is the guilt of only about one tenth of it, and upon your heads and mine and the rest of the white race lies fairly and justly the other nine tenths of the guilt.”

**Months later, it was this Mark Twain who completed *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.**

**LIKE HUCK, HE'D JOURNEYED FAR SINCE LEAVING HANNIBAL.**

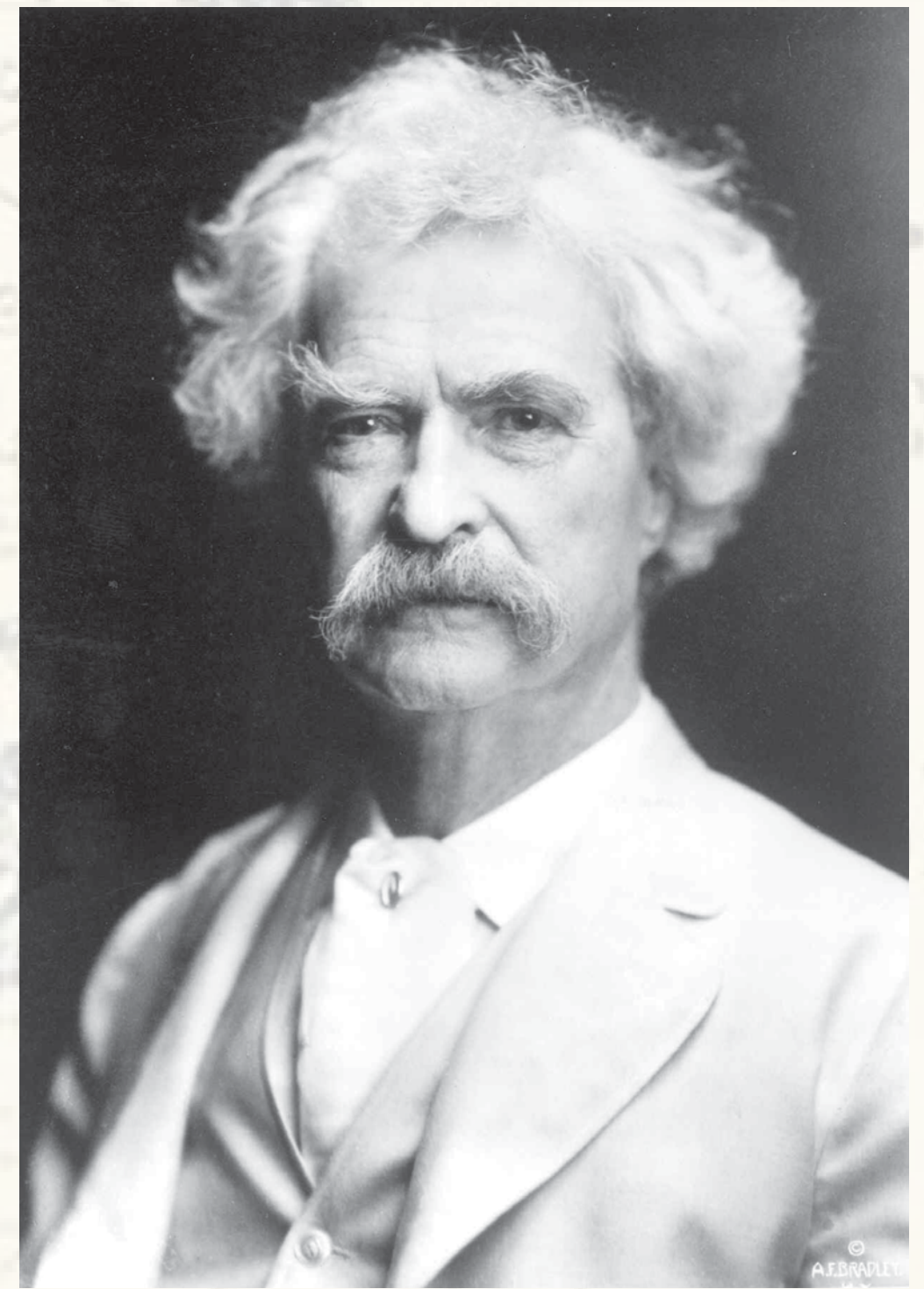


# MORE ABOUT MARK TWAIN

Renowned writer Ursula L. Le Guin once wrote that “Mark Twain is always on the side of the underdog.” He came by that trait honestly.

Born **Samuel Clemens** on November 30, 1835, the boy who became Mark Twain was very poor. After his father died when Twain was 11, he was forced to work; he became a **printer’s apprentice** in his hometown of Hannibal, Missouri on the Mississippi River.

While he would read to improve himself all his life, Twain received almost no formal schooling after age 13. But that didn’t stop him from writing. He published his **first known sketch at age 15**, and continued writing during the four years he worked as a printer in St. Louis, New York, Philadelphia, Iowa and Cincinnati. Active in printer’s unions during this time, **Twain became a lifelong supporter of workers and organized labor.**



Beginning in 1857, Twain spent four years as apprentice and then full-fledged **river pilot** on Mississippi River steamboats. It was shortly after this time that he began calling himself **Mark Twain** – a term used on the Mississippi to signify that the water was now deep enough for a steamboat to move forward.



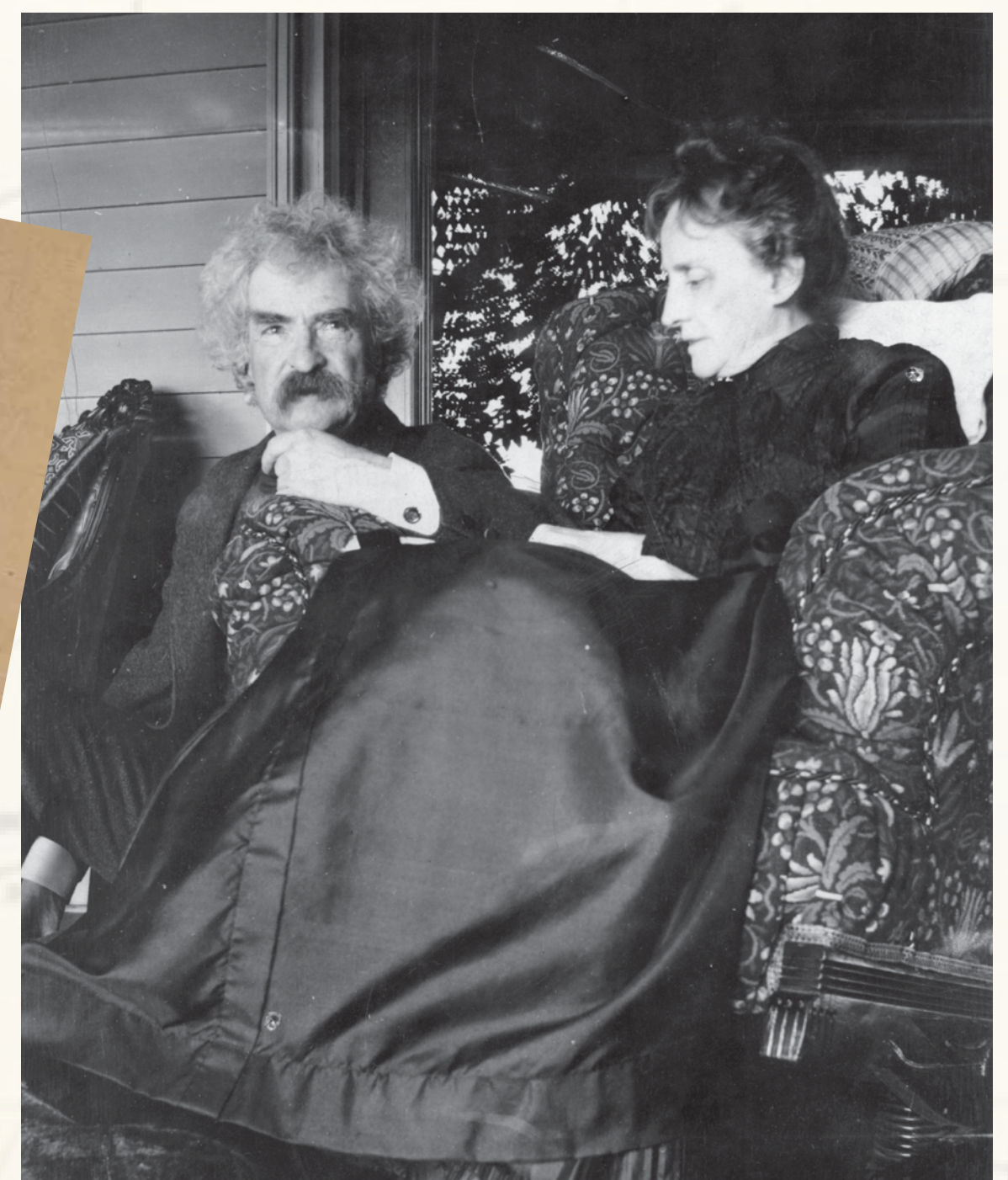
Twain’s riverboat days ended in 1861, when the **American Civil War** closed the Mississippi. After a brief and embarrassing stint as a Confederate soldier, Twain headed west to Nevada, where he briefly worked as a **miner** before becoming a **writer** for the local newspaper.

In the next decade, Twain rocketed to fame as a **journalist** whose combination of humor, sharp wit, and satire resulted in popular sketches and travelogues.

His best-known novels – *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) – made him an international superstar.

In 1866, Twain also made his debut as a **wildly popular lecturer**, telling stories with deadpan humor and famously long pauses that mesmerized audiences. For the rest of his life, his lecture tours would sell out auditoriums around the world.

In 1870, Twain had married **Olivia Langdon**, the wealthy daughter of a coal merchant. Living first in Buffalo (where Twain ran a newspaper) and then in Hartford, Twain and Olivia had four children. Their only boy died as a baby; two of their three girls died prematurely (one from meningitis and one following an epileptic fit) in their twenties.



Samuel and Olivia Clemens, 1903, the year before Olivia died.  
Credit: The Mark Twain House & Museum, Hartford, Connecticut.





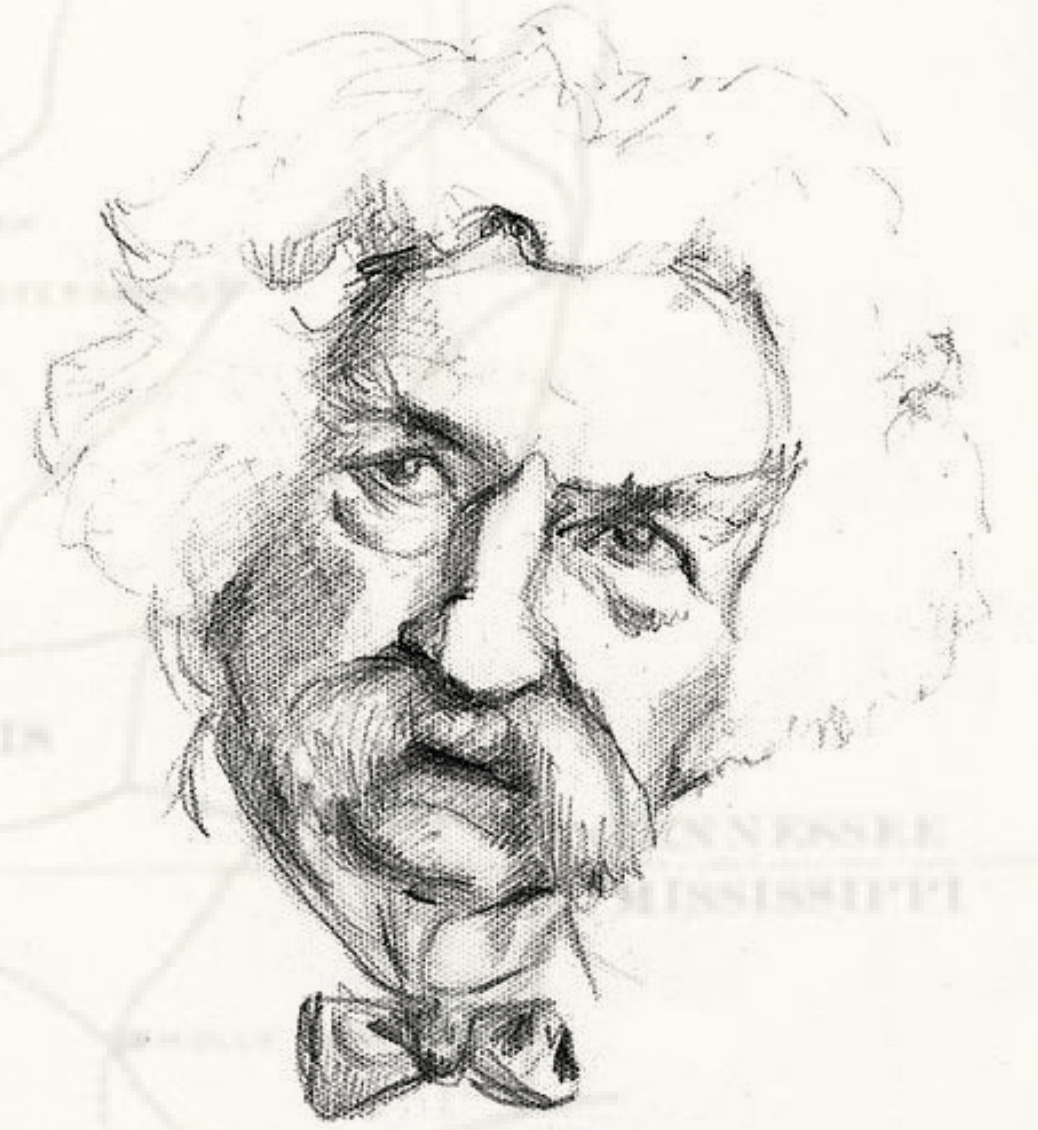
Their deaths – along with the death of Olivia in 1904 – were the latest in a series of personal tragedies that Twain had experienced since childhood, deepening a dark streak that runs through much of his writing alongside his humor.

Even Twain's most light-hearted and humorous works are flecked with sadness – as well as often **savage satire against unfair treatment of black Americans, Asian Americans, the poor, women, workers, and victims of imperialism from the Belgian Congo to the American-occupied Philippines.** Novelist and frequent Twain editor

William Dean Howells pinpointed what was distinct about Twain's writing: beneath the humor, one almost always finds “a bottom of fury,” an “indignant sense of right and wrong,” and an “ardent hate of meanness and injustice.”

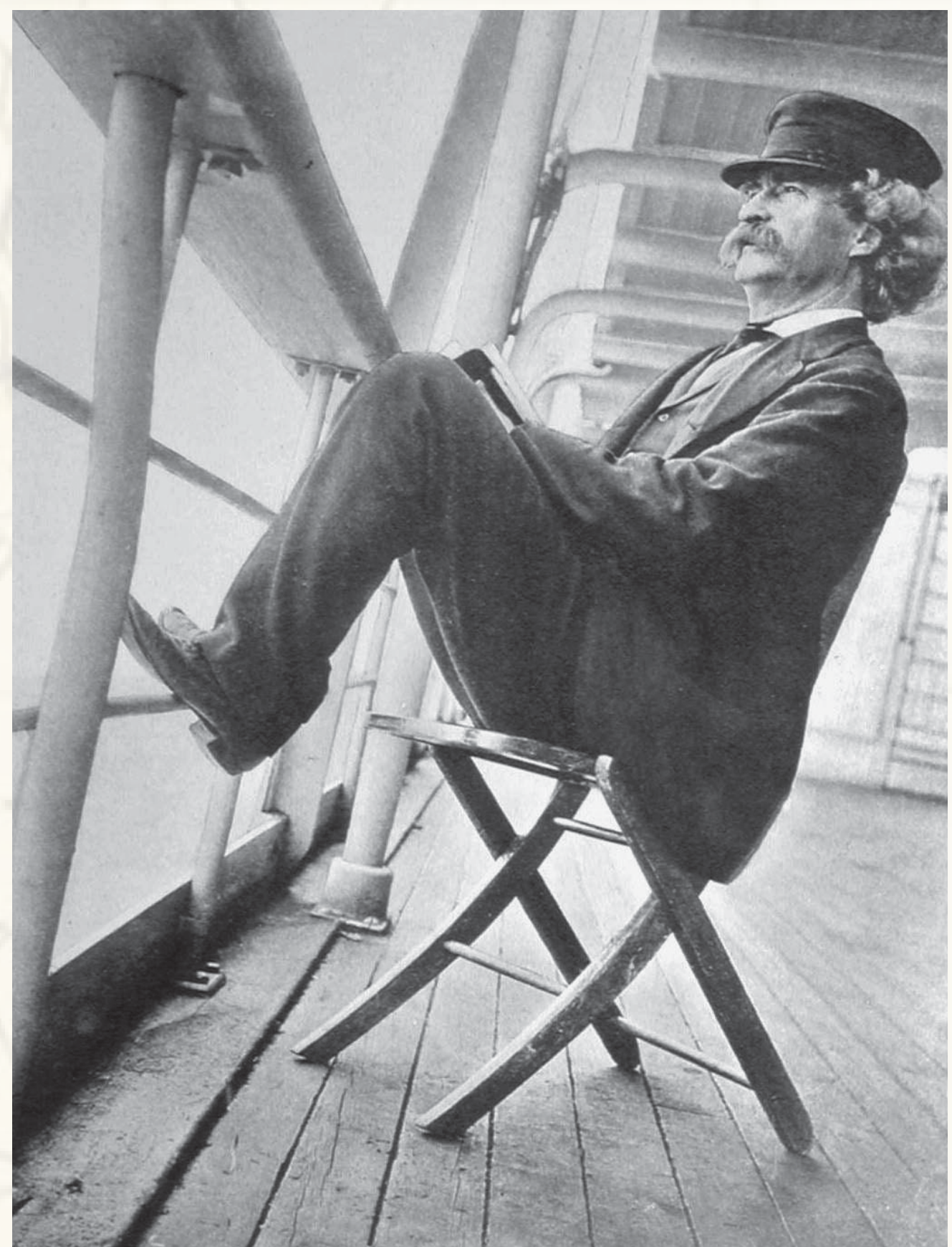
Novelist Richard Wright captured the unique relationship between Twain's humor and his fiercely held views: “Twain hid his conflict in satire and wept in private over the brutalities and the injustices of his civilization.” And George Bernard Shaw similarly recognized a kindred spirit, observing that Twain “has to put matters in such a way as to make people who would otherwise hang him believe he is joking.”

Twain died of a heart attack in his Connecticut home on April 21, 1910. He was 75 years old.



*Well, humor is the great thing, the saving thing, after all. The minute it crops up, all our hardnesses yield, all our irritations and resentments flit away, and a sunny spirit takes their place.*

~Mark Twain, *What Paul Bourget Thinks of Us* (1895)



Text for this exhibit written by Mike Fischer, Production Dramaturg and Assistant Director for First Stage's BIG RIVER: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. We wish to acknowledge the Greater Milwaukee Foundation for their generous support.