

THE SELF-EMPOWERMENT OF HARRIET JACOBS

TEACHER TOOL 1: THE STORY OF HARRIET JACOBS

Harriet Jacobs was a remarkable woman who was born into slavery in 1813 in Edenton, North Carolina, and died free in Washington, DC, at the age of eighty-four. In her writing, she put an individual face on major social and political events of her era, particularly one of the most inhumane aspects of enslaved womanhood, sexual abuse and molestation by white men.

Jacobs is best known for her abolitionist work and for her narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). She was born into a comparatively benevolent white household and described her childhood as comfortable. After the death of her beloved mother, she was taught by her white mistress to read and sew, skills that would serve her well throughout her life. When her mistress died, Jacobs was willed to the family of Dr. James Norcom, a prominent physician in Edenton. Some of the most memorable parts of Jacobs's autobiography describe how as a teenager she resisted Norcom's persistent sexual demands. After Norcom built a cabin outside of town for intimate meetings with Jacobs, she decided her only alternative to the doctor's control was to accept the advances of an unmarried white lawyer who seemed to care about her future. Jacobs wrote, "It was something to triumph over my tyrant in that small way." Besides, Jacobs thought, "I was sure my friend would buy me." After becoming pregnant, Jacobs hoped that the jealous Norcom would sell her, but the doctor refused. Even after the birth of a second child by the same lawyer, Norcom's harassment continued. Convinced that the only way to save her children from enslavement was to escape from Norcom, twenty-year-old Jacobs devised an ingenious plan.

At first, Jacobs hid in the houses of both black and white Edenton neighbors, but finally she settled into a small 9' x 7' x 3' crawlspace above the porch of her grandmother, a former slave who had been freed. There was neither light nor ventilation in the space, and vermin crawled over her at night, but it was a secure hiding place. Once Norcom concluded that Jacobs had fled to the North, he allowed the father of her children to purchase them. They went to live with Jacobs's grandmother. Meanwhile, Jacobs hid in the same home in which her children lived, although they were unaware that their mother was there. Through a peephole she bored in the wall, Jacobs watched them grow up. For seven long years, Jacobs endured in the space she called "my dismal little hole," emerging only occasionally late at night to try to walk. In 1842, after both of her children had been sent to the North, she followed them to freedom by sailing from Edenton on a ship to Philadelphia.

Jacobs eventually ended up in Rochester, New York, where she became actively involved with abolitionists associated with Frederick Douglass's newspaper, *The North Star*. In the years that followed, a friend arranged for Jacobs's purchase from Dr. Norcom. She did not want to write her autobiography but did so in order to appeal to white women on behalf of exploited black women. When *Incidents* was published she enjoyed brief celebrity. Today *Incidents* is read worldwide because it exemplifies "a heart nerved with determination to suffer even unto death in pursuit of that liberty which without makes life an intolerable burden" (Harriet Jacobs to Amy Post, October 9, 1853).

REFERENCES

Garfield, Deborah M. and Rafia Zafar. *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: New Critical Essays*. Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture, 1996.

Jacobs, Harriet A., and Farah Griffin. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*. 1861. Reprint, New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005.

Jacobs, Harriet A., Nellie McKay, and Frances Foster. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Contexts, Criticisms*. 1861. Reprint, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001.

Yellin, Jean F. *Harriet Jacobs: A Life*. Cambridge: Basic Civitas Books, 2004.

Zafar, Rafia, and Deborah Garfield. *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: New Critical Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Teachers may use and reproduce the material on the Crafting Freedom website for instructional purposes.