

# CliffsNotes.com® About the Author for **INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL**

## Harriet Ann Jacobs

### Personal Background

"God . . . gave me a soul that burned for freedom and a heart nerved with determination to suffer even unto death in pursuit of liberty."

In this excerpt from a letter written by Harriet Jacobs to her friend, the abolitionist Amy Post, Jacobs expresses her determination to continue her quest for freedom. Dated October 9, 1853 — less than two years after Jacobs was freed — the letter was written in response to Post's suggestion that Jacobs tell the story of her abuse and exploitation as an enslaved black woman. Eight years later, in 1861 — the same year that marked the beginning of the Civil War — *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* was published in Boston. According to the chronology of Jacobs's life compiled by her autobiographer, Jean Fagan Yellin, the events described in *Incidents* narrated by "Linda Brent" mirror key incidents of Jacobs' life.

### Early Years

Harriet Ann Jacobs was born at Edenton, North Carolina, in 1813 to Delilah, the daughter of Molly Horniblow (Aunt Martha), the slave of Margaret Horniblow, and to Daniel Jacobs, a carpenter, the slave of Dr. Andrew Knox. When she was only six years old, Jacobs' mother died, and Jacobs was taken into the household of her mistress, Margaret Horniblow, who taught her to read, spell, and sew. When she was 12, Margaret Horniblow died and willed Harriet to her five-year-old niece, Mary Matilda Norcom (Miss Emily). As a result, Harriet and her brother, John S. Jacobs (William) moved into the household of Dr. James Norcom (Dr. Flint). Shortly after Jacobs' arrival to the Norcom house, her father dies. Feeling sad and alone, Jacobs' life is made even more unbearable by Norcom's determination to make her his concubine. Desperate to escape Norcom, Jacobs entered into a sexual relationship with Samuel Tredwell Sawyer (Mr. Sands) at age 15, with whom she had two children: Joseph and Louisa Matilda (Ben and Ellen).

Undaunted, Norcom continued to pursue Jacobs. When she repeatedly rejected his advances, he sends her to work on a plantation several miles from Edenton. Secure in the knowledge that her children are safe with her grandmother, Jacobs adjusts to plantation life, but when she learns that Norcom plans to send her children to the plantation, she runs away, hiding out at the homes of friends, both black and white. Thinking she has escaped, Norcom sells Jacobs' children and brother to a slave trader, unaware that the slave trader is acting on behalf of Sawyer, who allows the children to return to Jacobs' grandmother's house. Determined to be near her children, Jacobs spends seven years hiding in her grandmother's attic, where she passes the time sewing and reading the Bible.

### After the Escape

Between 1838 and 1842, three events occurred that convinced Jacobs to escape. Sawyer took Louisa Matilda to Washington, D.C., to live with him and his new wife, Lavinia Peyton, and then sends her to his cousins in Brooklyn, New York. Jacobs' brother John ran away from Sawyer, his master. Aunt Betty (Aunt Nancy) died, plunging her grandmother into near-inconsolable grief at the loss of her daughter.

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Following her escape, Jacobs spent several years as a fugitive slave, alternately living in Boston and New York and supporting her children by working as a seamstress.

In 1849, Jacobs moved to Rochester, New York, where she helped her brother run an antislavery reading room, office, and bookstore in the same building that also housed the offices of Frederick Douglass' newspaper, *The North Star*. In Yellin's "Introduction" to her 1987 edition of *Incidents*, she notes that "the breadth of the references to literature and current events in *Incidents* suggests that during her eighteen months in Rochester [Jacobs] read her way through the abolitionists' library of books and papers" which included "the latest and best works on slavery and other moral questions." During this time, Jacobs also began working with a group of antislavery feminists, which led to her meeting with the abolitionist Amy Post. Post became one of her closest friends and encouraged her to publish her story, despite her understandable reluctance to reveal her painful private life to the public.

## Career Highlights

Although Jacobs escaped from slavery at age 27, she did not write her book until nearly 10 years later, following numerous attempts to gain support for the publication of her manuscript. She had initially sought support from Harriet Beecher Stowe, who had gained renown with her publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. But instead of helping her, Stowe offered to include Jacobs' story in her book, *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Disappointed and determined to tell her own story, Jacobs began compiling her narrative in 1853, completing it in 1858.

After traveling to Boston to obtain letters to abolitionists abroad, she sailed to England to sell her book. She was unsuccessful, and she returned home and approached Boston publisher, Phillips and Sampson, who agreed to accept the manuscript, and then went bankrupt. Undaunted, Jacobs sent her manuscript to Thayer and Eldridge, another Boston publisher, who agreed to publish it on the condition that it included a preface from Lydia Maria Child. Jacobs' friend, William C. Nell, introduced Jacobs to Child, who agreed to write the preface and act as Jacobs' editor. Shortly after the contract is signed (with Child acting for Jacobs), Thayer and Eldridge also went bankrupt.

At this point, Jacobs decided to purchase the plates of her book and publish it herself. It was finally published in 1861 by a third Boston printer. In 1862, the English edition, *The Deeper Wrong*, was published in London.

## Public Service

Following the publication of her book, which received little public acclaim until it was rediscovered more than 100 years later as part of the new renaissance of black women writers, Jacobs spent the remaining years of her life as an activist, supporting herself by working as a seamstress and later running a boarding house in Cambridge, Massachusetts. After her brother's death in 1875, Jacobs and her daughter moved to Washington, D.C., where Louisa Matilda, following her mother's example, helped organize meetings of the National Association of Colored Women. Jacobs died on March 7, 1897, in Washington, D.C. She is buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge.

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## **Achievements**

In addition to the extraordinary incidents of her life as a heroic woman who fought for — and won — freedom for herself and her two children, one of the most intriguing aspects of Jacobs' life revolves around her relationship with her editor, Child, who was frequently cited as the “real” author of Jacobs' book by critics who believed that Jacobs' style was too sophisticated for a former slave who lacked formal education. But Child insisted that she did very little editing, crediting Jacobs with authorship of the manuscript. As further evidence that Jacobs wrote the narrative in her own words, Yellin cites numerous letters written by Jacobs, which exemplify an identical style. By encountering skepticism concerning the originality of her work, Jacobs — who is credited to be the first black woman to write a book-length narrative — suffered the same criticism as her predecessor Phillis Wheatley (1753–1784), the first black woman to publish a book of poetry. Today, critics point out that, due to their lack of models and the freedom to develop their own author voice, both women simply emulated the writing style of white authors popular at the time.

Harriet Jacobs was one of the few ex-slaves to write his or her own slave narrative. She was a heroic woman and a loving and fiercely protective mother. She was a writer and activist who fought for the rights of all women.

As a woman who — after spending 27 years in slavery — lived a full, active life until her death at the age of 84, her life stands as a testament to women everywhere who struggle for freedom and survival, demand dignity and respect, and refuse to settle for less than equal representation and full participation in society.