



# Harriet A. Jacobs

(1813?–1897)



**S**lave, fugitive, abolitionist, author, and mother—Harriet A. Jacobs led an extraordinary life. Born into slavery in Edenton, North Carolina, Jacobs was orphaned when she was only six years old. She was then taken into the home of her first mistress and trained as a house servant. There Jacobs learned how to read and write—vital skills usually forbidden to slaves. When her mistress died, Jacobs was “willed” to her mistress’s young niece and sent to live at the home of Dr. James Norcom.

As a teenager, Jacobs was subjected to repeated harassment by her second owner, Dr. Norcom. Furious at her refusals of his advances, he sent her away to do hard labor as a plantation slave and then threatened to do the same to her two young children. Luckily Jacobs escaped from the plantation and found shelter with sympathetic relatives and friends, both black and white.

In her grandmother’s house in Edenton, she found the safest place of all, a tiny crawl space above a storeroom. Jacobs hid there for seven years—reading (mainly the Bible), writing, sewing, and catching treasured glimpses of her children. All she ever wanted, she said, was freedom and a home for her children and herself. In 1842, Jacobs escaped to New York City, where she found work as a nursemaid and was eventually reunited with her children. She spent the next ten years as a fugitive, but in 1852, she finally gained her freedom.

Jacobs began writing the story of her life in 1853 and published it herself in 1861, using the pen name Linda Brent. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* is an emotionally charged personal account and a fierce

indictment of the slave system. Jacobs wrote on the title page:

“Northerners know nothing at all about Slavery. They think it is perpetual bondage only. They have no conception of the depth of *degradation* involved in that word, *Slavery*; if they had, they would never cease their efforts until so horrible a system was overthrown.”

After the publication of her book, Jacobs became active in the abolitionist movement. During the Civil War she worked tirelessly to relieve the poverty and suffering of other former slaves. Jacobs distributed clothes and supplies, raised money, and helped to establish schools and orphanages in Philadelphia, New York, Washington, D.C., Alexandria, and Savannah.

Although Jacobs’s writing at times resembles the popular melodramas of her day, her story nevertheless retains an authentic power. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*—its raw facts of experience told with skill and honesty—provides modern readers with a chilling first-hand look at the particular plight of someone who was both a woman and a slave.

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