

Harriet Jacobs

The earliest known female slave to author her own narrative, the strikingly original *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), challenged conventional ideas about black women in slavery as victims of white male manipulation, brutality, and lust. Harriet Jacobs, a native of Edenton, North Carolina, was determined to speak frankly about how sexual exploitation made slavery peculiarly oppressive for black women. But she had no intention of casting herself as either a heroine or a victim in her life story. Aware of the risks she took by broaching a subject that most whites, especially white women, would have found distasteful and even obscene, Jacobs faced a huge challenge in daring to write her story for publication. One indication of how conflicted she was over presenting her autobiography to the world emerges as soon as one opens her book. A glance at the title page divulges a remarkable omission. The book identifies no one as author, though the reader is assured that *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was *Written by Herself*.

In light of how important it was for male slave narrators to lay claim to their individual identities and proclaim them through writing, it is all the more significant that the author of the first female slave narrative in American letters declined to name herself or publicize her victorious selfhood except behind a pseudonym, Linda Brent. To read *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is to learn why Linda Brent would not acknowledge her own identity, why she refused to identify the other major figures in her own life, and why in other ways she screened her reader off from some of the more disturbing facts of her life.

Harriet Jacobs was born a relatively fortunate town slave in a North Carolina seaport in 1813. In her early teens her master, a prominent doctor in Edenton, began to subject Harriet to persistent and increasingly threatening sexual harassment with a goal of converting her into his personal concubine. To repulse the doctor and to protect herself, 15-year-old Harriet accepted the advances of another white man in Edenton, an unmarried lawyer, with whom she had two children by the time she reached the age of twenty. Hoping that by seeming to run away she could induce the doctor to sell her children to their father, Jacobs hid herself in a crawl space above a storeroom in her grandmother's house in the summer of 1835. In that "little dismal hole" she remained for almost seven years, sewing, reading the Bible, keeping watch over her children as best she could, and writing occasional letters designed to confuse the doctor as to her actual whereabouts.

Meanwhile Jacobs's lover, who never acknowledged their daughter or son, was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1837. In 1842 Jacobs escaped to the North by boat, determined to reclaim her daughter, who had been sent to Brooklyn, New York, to work as a house servant. From 1842 to 1852, Jacobs lived the tense and uncertain life of a fugitive slave. Forced to keep on the move because of slave catchers sent north by her Edenton master, in 1849 Jacobs took up an eighteen-month residence in Rochester, New York, where she worked with her brother in an antislavery reading room and bookstore above the offices of Frederick Douglass's newspaper, *The North Star*.

There Jacobs met and began to confide in Amy Post, an abolitionist feminist who gently urged the fugitive slave mother to consider making her story public. After receiving, early in 1852, the gift of her freedom from the wife of her New York employer, Jacobs decided to write her autobiography, which took her almost ten years to complete and publish. Overshadowed by the outbreak of the Civil War, *Incidents* did not go into a second printing. But now its multiple paperback editions sell more than tens

Solomon Northup's Twelve Years a Slave and the Slave Narrative Tradition

of thousands of copies annually in the United States alone. *An incident has* been translated into numerous languages.

Dramatizing how she fought back and ultimately gained both her own freedom and that of her two children, Jacobs proved the inadequacy of the image of victim that had been pervasively applied to female slaves in the male-authored slave narrative. Her autobiography joined *Twelve Years a Slave* and Douglass's *Narrative* and *My Bondage and My Freedom* in celebrating the enduring commitment of African Americans, female and male, enslaved and free, North and South, to freedom.