

## Topic Page: [Jacobs, Harriet \(1813 - 1897\)](#)

Definition: **Jacobs, Harriet Ann** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

US author. She was born into slavery but escaped and, under the pen-name Linda Brent, she wrote the story of her experiences in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* 1861. The book was long forgotten until 'rediscovered' in the 1980s.

She was born a slave in Edenton, North Carolina. She was threatened by the sexual advances of her owner, James Norcom, but escaped and hid for seven years in her grandmother's attic. She made her way to New York City and worked there as a domestic servant. She worked as a nurse during the US Civil War.

### weblinks

[Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl](#)



Image from: [Harriet Jacobs: title-page of Incidents in the... in The Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing in English](#)

Summary Article: **Jacobs, Harriet**  
From *Gale Biographies: Popular People*

Antislavery activist and author, 1842-97.

Born Harriet Ann Jacobs in 1813 in Edenton, NC; died on March 7, 1897, in Washington, DC; daughter of Elijah and Delilah Jacobs (both slaves); children: Joseph, Louisa.

Harriet Jacobs, born a slave in North Carolina in 1813, wrote the most important autobiographical slave narrative from a female point of view, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, first published in 1861 under the pen name Linda Brent. The book deals frankly with the sexual pressures and abuse that Jacobs endured, as did many female slaves of the time, as well as the added suffering that came from trying to meet the demands of motherhood while enslaved. After escaping to freedom in the North in 1842, Jacobs worked as a domestic servant and began writing about her experiences as a slave in the early 1850s. During the Civil War she ministered to freed and escaped slaves in the Alexandria, Virginia, area, providing them with basic necessities and helping establish schools, churches, and hospitals for them. She lived out her last years with her daughter Louisa in Washington, DC, where she died in 1897.

Harriet Ann Jacobs was born into slavery in Edenton, North Carolina, in 1813. She claimed that during her first six years of life, she did not know that she was a slave. Although her mother and father, Elijah and Delilah, were the property of different families, they were allowed to live together in one home with Harriet and her younger brother John.

Jacobs's father was a skilled carpenter who was allowed to keep some of the proceeds of his work; her mother was owned by an unmarried invalid, and so she escaped some of the indignities typically visited on female slaves. For example, Delilah Jacobs's children were not displaced at the breast in infancy, as was typical for slave children, whose mothers' milk was reserved for their owners' children. As Jacobs wrote in *Incidents*, she had no notion that she was a slave until she was six years old, when her mother died.

## Fled to Avoid Sexual Abuse

After her mother's death Jacobs was sent to live in the home of her mother's mistress, Margaret Horniblow, and for a time her life was comparatively comfortable. Though she was conscious of her lack of freedom as she had not been at her parents' home, she was treated well and was taught to read and write. Horniblow died in 1825, bequeathing Jacobs to her three-year-old niece, Mary Matilda Norcom.

Practically speaking, this meant that Jacobs, now an adolescent, was owned by Mary Matilda's father, Dr. James Norcom. Norcom was the father of 11 slaves, according to Jacobs, and he immediately set about trying to pressure her into a sexual relationship. In addition to the anxiety that Norcom's pursuit of her aroused, she also was the target of reprisals from her jealous mistress, Norcom's wife.

In retaliation for her refusals of his advances, Norcom denied Jacobs permission to marry a free black man. She sought refuge in an illicit relationship with Samuel Tredwell Sawyer, an influential white attorney living nearby who would go on to serve in the North Carolina legislature and then the U.S. Congress. As Norcom's social superior, Sawyer was able to insulate Jacobs from her master's advances. But Norcom was undeterred and continued his attempts to control her.

Jacobs had two children by Sawyer, Joseph and Louisa. They were initially allowed to live with Jacobs's grandmother (their great-grandmother), who lived in relative comfort as a free woman, but Norcom used the children to influence Jacobs in his continued bid to make her his concubine. After sending Jacobs to a plantation owned by his son, he made preparations to send her two children there as well. The thought that her children would be made plantation slaves and subjected to all of the brutality that implied convinced Jacobs that she had no choice but to escape her enslavement once and for all. In her absence the children would not be sent to the plantation.

Jacobs was shielded by friends and family before moving to a hiding place built for her in the attic crawlspace of her grandmother's house. This allowed her glimpses of her children, but she could not speak to them without endangering everyone. She spent almost seven years in the attic, a space measuring approximately 9 feet by 7 feet, with a roof no more than 3 feet high, before she managed to escape to freedom in the North. There she eventually reunited with her children, who had been purchased and sent there by Sawyer.

## Wrote Landmark Autobiography

Jacobs lived in New York City and in Rochester, New York, as well as at the Hudson River estate of her employer, Nathaniel Parker Willis, a prominent writer for whom she worked as a domestic servant. She was active in the antislavery movement, as was her brother John, who had also found freedom in the North. Through John she became acquainted with prominent Quaker abolitionist Amy Post, who urged Jacobs to write her life story.

Jacobs lived in fear for the first decade after her escape, suspecting that Norcom would not rest until he had tracked her down and returned her to slavery. That fear was made very real by the passage in 1850 of the Fugitive Slave Law, which mandated legal and financial penalties for those who did not aid in the return of escaped slaves to their masters in the South. In 1852 Norcom's son-in-law, Daniel Messmore, Mary Matilda's husband, arrived in New York, and Jacobs was forced to go into hiding. Willis's second wife, Cornelia, secretly purchased her freedom from Messmore at that time.

While working days in the Willis home during the 1850s, Jacobs wrote *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* at night. It was published in installments in the *New York Tribune*, the newspaper of abolitionist

editor Horace Greeley, beginning in 1855 under the pseudonym Linda Brent. Jacobs's frank account of the sexual politics of slavery violated the norms of polite society, however, and the installments ceased without reaching the end of her narrative. Jacobs had difficulty finding a publisher for the book, and it did not appear in its finished form until 1861, when it was published in Boston. The following year saw its publication in London.

Jacobs worked to aid refugee slaves in the Alexandria, Virginia, area during the Civil War, providing basic necessities as well as educational instruction. She performed similar duties on behalf of the thousands of newly freed slaves living in poverty in Savannah, Georgia, at the war's end. In the postbellum period Jacobs ran a boarding house in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and worked for a time as a domestic in the home of another writer, journalist Charles Nordhoff. She lived with her daughter Louisa in Washington, DC, in her later years, until her death in 1897.

## Real Identity Finally Established

Although the impact of Jacobs's book on the abolitionist cause was limited because of the lateness of its publication, appearing on the brink of the war that would fulfill the hopes of the movement, the value of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* goes far beyond the politics of its period. The book provides crucial insights into the unique difficulties that female slaves faced in the antebellum South, a contribution that is particularly valuable, as few enslaved women left any written record of their lives.

For much of the twentieth century, historians and literary scholars cast doubt on the veracity of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* because of its pseudonymous publication and the fact that its actual author had never been conclusively identified. This changed as a result of the discoveries of Jean Fagan Yellin, a literature professor at Pace University, who located the extensive correspondence that Jacobs carried on with friends, family, and associates as she composed her narrative. Those letters enabled Yellin to establish Jacobs's authorship, the identities of the book's major characters, and the reality of many of the events depicted.

## Related Information

### Selected writings

- (As Brent, Linda ) *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, Boston, 1861.

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- Harriet Jacobs, <http://www.harrietjacobs.org> (accessed October 6, 2012).

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