



Harriet Jacobs

“

I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself, on the contrary, it would have been more pleasant to me to have been silent about my own history. . .I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the free states what slavery really is. Only by experience can anyone realize how deep, and dark, and foul that pit of abominations. May the blessings of God rest on this imperfect effort on behalf of my persecuted people.

— Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

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Quick Facts

- * 1812-1897
- * African-American memoirist and educator
- * Her only book, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, was published in 1861

Biography

Harriet Jacobs was born in North Carolina in the early 1800s. Jacobs never realized she was a slave until her mother died when she was six. Jacobs then moved in with her grandmother and her white mistress. The mistress died when Jacobs was eleven, and she was then sent to Dr. James Norcom (known as “Dr. Flint” in her autobiography). Jacobs suffered physical and sexual abuse from Dr. Norcom for numerous years, and she became involved with a white neighbor, Samuel Sawyer, simply so she could stay away from Norcom. They had two children together, Joseph and Louisa. Joseph was born when Jacobs was only sixteen years old.

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Harriet Jacobs

Biography continued

In 1835, Jacobs escaped from Norcom and went into hiding for seven years. In an attempt to get Norcom to sell her children, Jacobs wrote numerous letters to him, mentioning that she had escaped to the North. She thought Norcom would sell her children if he thought she wasn't coming back, but that never happened. In 1842, Jacobs made her escape to the North and managed to have her daughter, Louisa, sent to Brooklyn to be with her. They then moved to Rochester to escape Norcom, who was looking for her, and joined a circle of abolitionists that worked for Fredrick Douglass's newspaper, *The North Star*.

In 1853, her employer bought her from Norcom's family, thus releasing her from being a fugitive. In 1863, Jacobs moved to Alexandria, Virginia, with her daughter. There they organized medical care for the Civil War victims and provided emergency relief supplies. In Alexandria, Jacobs made perhaps her greatest contribution by establishing The Jacobs Free School. This was an institution that provided black teachers for the refugees. In 1865, they then relocated to Savannah, Georgia, where they continued their relief work. After two short stops in Cambridge and England, they made their final move to Washington, D.C. , in 1877.

Jacobs wrote her only book in 1861, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. She used the name Linda Brent, and the book was published pseudonomously. The book ended with the freedom of Jacobs and her daughter. Besides her novel, Jacobs made great strides for the black community. Jacobs helped organize the National Association of Colored Women in Washington DC, established The Jacobs Free School, and helped many black refugees. Jacobs died on March 7, 1897 at the age of 84.



Harriet Jacobs

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