

• INCIDENTS IN THE •

# Life of a Slave Girl

• WRITTEN BY HERSELF •

ENLARGED EDITION



Harriet A. Jacobs

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
JEAN FAGAN YELLIN

NOW WITH "A TRUE TALE OF SLAVERY"  
BY JOHN S. JACOBS

---

INCIDENTS IN THE

---

*Life of a Slave Girl*

---

WRITTEN BY HERSELF

---

*by Harriet A. Jacobs*

EDITED BY L. MARIA CHILD

ENLARGED EDITION

Now with "A True Tale of Slavery"  
by John S. Jacobs

EDITED AND

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

*Jean Fagan Yellin*



HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Cambridge, Massachusetts  
London, England  
2000

### Note on This Edition

The text of *Incidents* follows the first American edition (Boston, 1861). The text of "A True Tale of Slavery" is taken from its original publication in *The Leisure Hour: A Family Journal of Instruction and Recreation* (London, England), February 7, 14, 21, and 28, 1861. A few obvious typographical errors have been silently corrected.

The Correspondence is reproduced as accurately as possible from the holographs. Jacobs capitalizes important words but omits capital letters at the beginnings of sentences. Because in the early letters she also omits most punctuation, even final periods, in this edition spaces marking full stops have been inserted to aid the reader. For photographs of two of Jacobs's letters, see pages 248 and 274.

Copyright © 1987, 2000 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

Designed by Gwen Nefsky Frankfeldt

#### *Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Jacobs, Harriet A. (Harriet Ann), 1813–1897.

Incidents in the life of a slave girl / written by herself, by Harriet A. Jacobs;  
edited by L. Maria Child. Now with A true tale of slavery / by John S. Jacobs;  
[both] edited and with an introduction by Jean Fagan Yellin.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-674-00278-4 — ISBN 0-674-00271-7 (pbk.)

1. Jacobs, Harriet A. (Harriet Ann), 1813–1897. 2. Slaves—United States—Bibliography
3. Women slaves—United States—Biography. 4. Slaves—United States Social conditions
- I. Child, Lydia Maria Francis, 1802–1880. II. Jacobs, John S., 1815–1875.  
True tale of slavery. III. Yellin, Jean Fagan. IV. Title.

E444 J17 A3 2000c

305.5'67'092—dc21

[B]

99-088151



## PREFACE

I FIRST read *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* more than a decade ago and, accepting received opinion, dismissed it as a false slave narrative. But I didn't forget it. Later, researching the black and white antislavery feminists in an effort to make amends for ignoring women in my earlier writing, I read through the works of Lydia Maria Child and again encountered *Incidents*. This time, schooled by the women's movement, I was struck by its radical feminist content. And this time, knowing more about Child, I took her seriously when she said she was the book's editor, not its author. I now knew that long before *Incidents* appeared, the abolitionists had withdrawn a slave narrative from circulation after the southern press publicized its inaccuracies, and I was sure that Child would not have published a fictional slave narrative for fear of harming the cause.

The editors of the Child Papers put me in touch with archivists at the University of Rochester who had recently acquired Harriet Jacobs's letters to the abolitionist-feminist Amy Post. Reading these letters, I became convinced that Jacobs had written *Incidents* "by herself"—as her subtitle asserts.

The letters identify Nathaniel Parker Willis as Jacobs's New York employer, so I started looking through Willis's books for corroboration. I found it. Then, searching for more correspondence, I discovered at the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College the letter identifying Edenton, North Carolina, as Jacobs's home town.

After locating Edenton on a map, I reread *Incidents*, this time as a historical record. Writing to state and local historical societies about the identity of the narrator's family and of the white family that owned them, I learned about the tavernkeeper John Horniblow, his slave Molly Horniblow, and his son-in-law, Dr. James Norcom.

Norcom's papers are in the State Archives, and when the North Carolina archivists recognized *Incidents* as a first-person account of antebellum life in Edenton, they used their considerable resources to help document Jacobs's text.

Readers of this edition will perhaps be dismayed (as I am) by parts of the book that are not yet documented—for example, the story of Jacobs's uncle Joseph, whom she calls Benjamin. But I think they will also be amazed (as I am) by how much has been established—including the identity of Jacobs's father, whose only monument is in the narratives his daughter and son wrote.

Since I first published an edition of *Incidents*, I have been thinking about—and annotating—the narrative Jacobs's brother serialized in London in 1861. John S. Jacobs's "A True Tale of Slavery" certainly provides testimony corroborating *Incidents*. But it does more. It presents the perspective of a male narrator on the people, places, and events in Jacobs's female-centered narrative. With the inclusion of "A True Tale of Slavery," this expanded edition of *Incidents* offers multiple layers: the text Jacobs published, her private correspondence discussing its creation and publication, and her brother's retelling of her story. This triple view is unique among slave narratives.

*Incidents* continues to fascinate me. Trying to place it within its multiple historical and literary contexts has engaged me and enmeshed me in a supportive scholarly network. And I am enthralled by Jacobs herself. She was, in Emerson's sense, "representative"; expressing the idea of the struggle for freedom, her life empowers others. On my desk her portrait, smiling, urges me onward.

J. F. Y.



## INTRODUCTION

I have My dear friend – Striven faithfully to give a true and just account of my own life in Slavery – God knows I have tried to do it in a Christian spirit . . . I ask nothing – I have placed myself before you to be judged as a woman whether I deserve your pity or contempt – I have another object in view it is to come to you just as I am a poor Slave Mother – not to tell you what I have heard but what I have seen – and what I have suffered – and if there is any sympathy to give – let it be given to the thousands – of of Slave Mothers that are still in bondage . . . let it plead for their helpless Children . . .<sup>1</sup>

THESE WORDS were written in 1857 by Harriet Ann Jacobs, a recently freed fugitive slave and an activist in the abolitionist movement. Addressed to her white Quaker friend Amy Post, they describe the manuscript Jacobs was completing, an account of her life in slavery and her victorious struggle for freedom for herself and her children. After repeated efforts to find a publisher, Jacobs brought out the book on her own; it appeared in 1861 as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*. Its title page credited the well-known abolitionist L. Maria Child as editor, but omitted the name of the author. The first-person narrator, who claimed to be relating her own autobiography, called herself Linda Brent.<sup>2</sup>

Like all slave narratives, *Incidents* was shaped by the empowering impulse that created the American Renaissance. Jacobs's book expressed democratic ideals and embodied a dual critique of nineteenth-century America: it challenged the institution of chattel slavery with its supporting ideology of white racism, as well as traditional patriarchal institutions and ideologies. Jacobs's achievement was the transformation of herself into a literary subject in and through the creation

of her narrator, Linda Brent. This narrator tells a double tale, dramatizing the triumph of her efforts to prevent her master from raping her, to arrange for her children's rescue from him, to hide, to escape, and finally to achieve freedom; and simultaneously presenting her failure to adhere to sexual standards in which she believed. Unmarried, she entered into a sexual liaison, became pregnant, was condemned by her grandmother, and suffered terrible guilt. She writes that still, in middle age, she feels her youthful distress. But she also questions the condemnation of her behavior; reaching toward an alternative judgment, she suggests that the sexual standards mandated for free women were not relevant to women held in slavery. Further, by balancing her grandmother's rejection with her daughter's acceptance, she shows black women overcoming the divisive sexual ideology of the white patriarchy and establishing unity across the generations.

Contrasting literary styles express the contradictory thrusts of the story. Presenting herself as a heroic slave mother, Jacobs's narrator includes clear detail, uses straightforward language, and, when addressing the reader directly, utilizes standard abolitionist rhetoric to lament the inadequacy of her descriptions of slavery and to urge her audience to involve themselves in antislavery efforts. But she treats her sexual experiences obliquely and, when addressing the reader concerning her sexual behavior, pleads for forgiveness in the overwrought style of popular fiction. These melodramatic confessions are, however, subsumed within the text. What finally dominates is a new voice. It is the voice of a woman who, although she cannot discuss her sexual past without expressing deep conflict, nevertheless addresses this painful personal subject in order to politicize it, to insist that the forbidden topic of the sexual abuse of slave women be included in public discussions of the slavery question. By creating a narrator who presents her private sexual history as a subject of public political concern, Jacobs moves her book out of the world of conventional nineteenth-century polite discourse. In and through her creation of Linda Brent, who yokes her success story as a heroic slave mother to her confession as a woman who mourns that she is not a storybook heroine, Jacobs articulates her struggle to assert her womanhood and projects a new kind of female hero.<sup>3</sup>



God . . . gave me a soul that burned for freedom and a heart nerved with determination to suffer even unto death in pursuit of . . . liberty.<sup>4</sup>

NEWLY found documents make it possible to trace Harriet Jacobs's life, to establish her authorship of *Incidents*, and to identify the people and places she presented pseudonymously in her book.<sup>5</sup> She was born a slave in Edenton, North Carolina, around 1813. Her maternal grandmother, Molly Horniblow (called Aunt Martha in the book), who had been freed in middle age, owned a house on West King Street in Edenton and earned her living there as a baker. Jacobs's father was apparently the skilled carpenter Elijah, a slave of Dr. Andrew Knox and perhaps the son of Henry Jacobs, who lived near the old Knox plantation. Her mother, Delilah, was owned by Elizabeth Pritchard Horniblow, widow of Edenton tavernkeeper John Horniblow.

Harriet Jacobs and her younger brother John S. (William) were orphaned as children. Her first mistress, Margaret Horniblow, who taught her to read and sew, died when Jacobs was eleven and willed her to Mary Matilda Norcom (Miss Emily Flint), whose family lived a block away from Jacobs's grandmother. The father of her three-year-old mistress, Dr. James Norcom (Dr. Flint), had earlier bought her brother John S. Jacobs. Norcom proved to be a licentious master. As Jacobs matured he subjected her to unrelenting sexual harassment. In her teens she became sexually involved with a neighbor, the young white lawyer Samuel Tredwell Sawyer (Mr. Sands), and gave birth to two children, Joseph (Benjamin) and Louisa Matilda (Ellen).

In 1835 Norcom threatened that if Jacobs refused to become his concubine she would have to work on one of his plantations. She would not yield and was sent to Auburn, a plantation several miles from town. Then, learning that he planned to move her son and daughter from her grandmother's home to Auburn, she resolved to rescue them from plantation slavery. Believing that if she were gone her master might find the children troublesome and sell them, she ran away. She was temporarily sheltered by sympathetic black and white neighbors, then for years was hidden in a tiny crawlspace above a storeroom in her grandmother's house. She succeeded in protecting her children. Shortly after she went into hiding, their father, Sawyer, bought them and her brother. Sawyer allowed the children to continue to live with her grandmother, and later he took Louisa Matilda to a free state, but he failed to keep his promise to Jacobs to emancipate the children.

In hiding Jacobs sewed, practiced writing, and read to fill her days. The easy use of biblical quotations and references throughout her narrative testifies to her familiarity with the Scriptures, particularly the books of Isaiah and Job. In 1842, after nearly seven years in hiding, she



escaped to the North. She went to Brooklyn to make contact with her daughter and arranged for her son to be sent to her brother, who had escaped from Sawyer and was living in Boston. (Joseph had been left in the care of her grandmother, who evidently believed that Sawyer planned to free him and would not object to his going north.) Jacobs found work as a nursemaid in New York City, caring for Imogen, the baby daughter of Mary Stace Willis (Mrs. Bruce) and the magazine writer and editor Nathaniel Parker Willis (Mr. Bruce).<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Norcom repeatedly traveled to New York to catch his runaway slave. Forewarned, Jacobs explained to Mrs. Willis that she was a fugitive and that both she and her children were in danger. Aided by her brother and Mrs. Willis, she fled to Boston with Louisa Matilda in October 1844. The following spring Mrs. Willis died. Willis prevailed upon Jacobs to accompany him and little Imogen on a visit to his late wife's parents in England. When Jacobs returned to America after ten months, she learned that in her absence her son, whom she had apprenticed to a printer, had been subjected to racist abuse in the print shop and had shipped out to sea. Enrolling her daughter in a boarding school run by abolitionists in Clinton, New York, Jacobs moved to Rochester to join her brother, who was now lecturing for the abolitionist movement.

A decade earlier, when John S. Jacobs had walked away from Sawyer in New York, he had gone to New Bedford, Massachusetts, then shipped out on a whaling vessel. After three and a half years at sea, he returned to port able to read and write. He quickly involved himself in Boston's vibrant black community, joining the Adelphic Union Library Association and the Young Men's Literary Society and using his new literacy skills in serving as Corresponding Secretary of the New-England Freedom Association.<sup>7</sup> By 1846 he was an abolitionist activist. He spoke from the platform "in the name of three millions of American Slaves" at a meeting honoring the *Liberator's* editor William Lloyd Garrison, demonstrated his commitment by spending all night on the docks in a futile attempt to aid the escape of a fugitive who was being hunted in Boston, and, acting as liaison between the black community and the Garrisonian movement, kept his abolitionist colleagues aware of his sister's danger of being kidnapped.<sup>8</sup>

Late in 1847 John S. undertook a four-and-a-half-month lecture tour with Captain Jonathan Walker, "the man with the branded hand"—who, tried for the crime of helping slaves escape, had been convicted, fined, imprisoned, pilloried, and branded with the letters

“SS” (for “Slave Stealer”). John S. then began lecturing on his own and was hired by the abolitionists to speak at their highly publicized 100 Conventions, whose audiences numbered from 25 to 125 on weekdays and more on Sundays.<sup>9</sup> Moving west to Rochester, early in 1849 he began a sixteen-day tour with the militant Frederick Douglass that took them to fourteen hamlets, villages, and towns, where they delivered twenty speeches and sold twenty subscriptions to Douglass’s newspaper *The North Star*.<sup>10</sup>

In Rochester Harriet Jacobs met her brother’s circle of antislavery activists, and early in March 1849 she began working in the antislavery reading room, office, and bookstore they had established above the offices of *The North Star*. The breadth of the references to literature and current events in *Incidents* suggests that during her eighteen months in Rochester she read her way through the abolitionists’ library of books and papers. “The latest and best work on slavery and other moral questions” they advertised for sale included polemics, personal accounts of the violence of slavery, and antislavery fiction. Jacobs also had the opportunity to join the circle of abolitionist women who met each Thursday in the reading room “to sew, knit, read, and talk for the cause.”<sup>11</sup>

With her brother often on the road lecturing, Jacobs lived for nine months in the home of the Quaker reformers Isaac and Amy Post. A participant in the first Woman’s Rights Convention at Seneca Falls in July 1848, Amy Post had helped organize the follow-up Rochester Convention. Jacobs later admitted, “when I first came North I avoided the Antislavery people as much as possible because I felt that I could not be honest and tell the whole truth.” In Rochester, however, with slavery seven years behind her, she made Post her confidante. Post urged her to make her personal history public to aid abolitionism.<sup>12</sup>

Jacobs’s letters to Post spell out the close friendship between the two women and detail Jacobs’s personal and political relationships with other black and white members of the circle of Rochester reformers. They also demonstrate the sophistication of Jacobs’s vocabulary and syntax and trace the growth of her writing skills. Jacobs apologized for her “unconnected scrawl,” but she felt comfortable enough with Post to maintain a regular correspondence from this period forward.<sup>13</sup>

In 1850 Congress passed a Fugitive Slave Law ruling that all citizens, including those in northern states where slavery had been abolished, were subject to punishment if they aided fugitives. Jacobs’s brother,

joining the protestors denouncing the law, urged armed defiance. He then headed west to pan for gold in California, where he was joined by Jacobs's son Joseph, back from the sea. By 1852 both men had gone on to try their luck in the Australian gold rush.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, in 1850 Jacobs returned to New York City. Visiting Imogen, she met Nathaniel Parker Willis's new wife, Cornelia Grinnell Willis, and was employed to care for her newborn baby.

Mary Matilda Norcom, who had inherited Jacobs, was an adult by midcentury. Asserting that her father had had no right to sell Jacobs's children, she traveled to New York after his death with her husband, Daniel Messmore (Mr. Dodge), to seize Jacobs and her daughter under the provisions of the new Fugitive Slave Law. It seems likely that Jacobs was unaware that Dr. Norcom had legalized the sale of her children from his daughter's estate by substituting other slaves of equal value, but that Messmore knew of this substitution and, gambling on Jacobs's lack of information, threatened to seize Louisa Matilda if Jacobs did not surrender herself to him. Jacobs again went into hiding. To free her, and to reassure her about her children's freedom, Mrs. Willis arranged for the American Colonization Society to act as an intermediary and early in 1852 bought Jacobs from the Messmores for \$300.00. Eager to use her freedom "to be useful in some way" to the abolitionist cause, Jacobs now seriously considered Post's suggestion that she tell her life story.<sup>15</sup>



I have kept Louisa here this winter so that I might have my evenings to write. but poor Hatty [Harriet's] name is so much in demand that I cannot accomplish much. if I could steal away and have two quiet Months. to myself. I would work night and day though it should. all fall to the ground.<sup>16</sup>

In her letters to Post, Jacobs thrashed out the conflict she felt about making her life public. How could she tell all, when she had not been chaste? But how could she refuse, if telling her story would win converts to the movement? After finally deciding to make her sensational life public, she committed herself fully to the project. Her correspondence with Post provides a running account of her determined efforts to write and publish her autobiography, clarifies the role of her editor, Lydia Maria Child, and yields new information about an unlikely grouping of midcentury writers: litterateur Nathaniel Parker Willis

and best-selling author Harriet Beecher Stowe, neither of whom Jacobs trusted, and black abolitionist William C. Nell and white abolitionist Child, whose aid she gratefully received.<sup>17</sup>

Jacobs was convinced that, unlike both his wives, Nathaniel Parker Willis was proslavery. Because of this, while she sought the time and privacy to write, she consistently refused to ask for Willis's help. She did not even want him to know she was writing. Although with her Rochester friends she openly discussed her efforts to complete her book, for years while living under Willis's roof she wrote secretly and at night.<sup>18</sup>

Jacobs also distrusted Harriet Beecher Stowe, not because of Stowe's attitudes toward slavery but because of her ideas about race. Jacobs's brief involvement with Stowe was decisive in the genesis of *Incidents*. When Jacobs first agreed to Post's urging that she produce a public account of her life, she thought the American Anti-Slavery Society could "propose" it. She did not intend to write it herself, but planned to enlist Stowe's aid in producing a dictated narrative, perhaps like the book Olive Gilbert had recently written for Sojourner Truth. To this end, Jacobs asked Post to approach Stowe with her story. Then, when the papers reported that the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* planned a trip to England, Jacobs persuaded Mrs. Willis to write suggesting that Jacobs's daughter accompany her. Jacobs thought that Louisa could interest Stowe in Jacobs's story, Stowe's patronage would benefit Louisa, and "Louisa would be a very good representative of a Southern Slave" for the English to meet.<sup>19</sup>

Stowe evidently responded by writing to Mrs. Willis that she would not take Jacobs's daughter because the British would spoil the girl with attention; that she was forwarding Amy Post's sketch of Jacobs's sensational life to Mrs. Willis for verification; and that, if Jacobs's story was true, she herself would use it in her forthcoming *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Jacobs was devastated. She had never revealed her sexual history to Mrs. Willis, and she felt Stowe had betrayed her as a woman, denigrated her as a mother, and threatened her as a writer. She later expressed her racial outrage to Post: "think dear Amy that a visit to Stafford House would spoil me as Mrs Stowe thinks petting is more than my race can bear well what a pity we poor blacks cant have the firmness and stability of character that you white people have."<sup>20</sup>

Jacobs decided to write her story herself and began sending apprentice pieces to the newspapers.<sup>21</sup> The first appeared anonymously in Horace Greeley's New York *Tribune* under the heading "Letter from a

Fugitive Slave” with a note that the only editorial changes were “corrections in punctuation and spelling, and the omission of one or two passages.” Jacobs’s letter suggests both the content and the form of the narrative she would write. Here—as in *Incidents*—she discussed the sexual abuse of slave women. Here—as in *Incidents*—she used contrasting voices. Perhaps reacting to her rebuff from Stowe, she began with the straightforward announcement that she would tell her tale herself. “Poor as it may be, I had rather give [my story] from my own hand, than have it said that I employed others to do it for me.” Then, as she would in her book, she adopted a dramatic style to express the pain she felt as she recalled and wrote about her life: “I was born a slave, raised in the Southern hotbed until I was the mother of two children, sold at the early age of two and four years old. I have been hunted through all of the Northern States—but no, I will not tell you of my own suffering—no, it would harrow up my soul.”<sup>22</sup>

Revealing her authorship of this letter, Jacobs requested Post’s help with the mechanics of writing:

I cannot ask the favor of any one else without appearing very Ludicrous in their opinion I love you and can bear your severest criticism because you know what my advantages have been and what they have not been . . . the spelling I believe was evry word correct punctuation I did not attempt for I never studied Grammer therefore I know nothing about it but I have taken the hint and will commence that one study with all my soul<sup>23</sup>

Jacobs secretly wrote more letters for publication. Her correspondence during this period reveals that she was determined to write, apprehensive about her ability to do so, and fearful of being discovered: “No one here never suspected me [of writing to the *Tribune*] I would not have Mrs W[illis] to know it before I had undertaken my history for I must write just what I have lived and witnessed myself don’t expect much of me dear Amy you shall have truth but not talent.”<sup>24</sup>

Her letters record other pressures. During the years in which Jacobs composed her narrative, the Willises built Idlewild, an eighteen-room country estate at Cornwall in the Hudson highlands. Despite her move to the country, Jacobs’s comments about antislavery meetings, conventions, and speakers attest to her continuing participation in the organized abolitionist movement. Writing to Post, she expressed her longing for the political sisterhood of Rochester and her desire for

more current involvement: "I wish we were both at the Boston [antislavery] Bazar with busy hands doing much good."<sup>25</sup>

At Idlewild, with the addition of two more children to the Willis family, Jacobs's workload increased. In letters to Post she voiced the frustrations of a would-be writer who earned her living taking care of other people's children. She went on to say, however, that she preferred the endless interruptions to revealing her project to her employers: "to get this time I should have to explain myself. and no one here accept Louisa knows that I have ever written anything to be put in print. I have not the Courage to meet the criticism and ridicule of Educated people."<sup>26</sup>

Jacobs arranged for her daughter, who had been educated as a teacher, to copy the manuscript, and doubtless Louisa Matilda standardized her mother's spelling and punctuation. But there is no evidence to suggest that Louisa Matilda had any significant impact on either the subject matter or the style of the book. Some modern readers, responding to the tensions between its traditional forms and its untraditional content, have characterized the style of *Incidents* as genteel and, judging this an incongruous mode of expression for a former slave, have questioned the authenticity of the text. Both its style and its content, however, are completely consistent with Jacobs's private correspondence and with her pseudonymous public letters to the newspapers—which unquestionably she wrote by herself. However inappropriate these readers may find the form of Jacobs's narrative, the language and syntax of her letters make gratuitous the suggestion that *Incidents* was written by anyone else.<sup>27</sup>

Presenting her struggle for freedom, Jacobs's narrator characteristically writes in a straightforward fashion: "The war of my life had begun." When addressing the reader directly in connection with this subject, she uses the language of Garrisonian abolitionism to offer political instruction: "Talk to American slave-holders as you talk to savages in Africa. Tell *them* it is wrong to traffic in men." Passages presenting her sexual history, however, are full of omissions and circumlocutions. Addressing the reader on this issue, Linda Brent transforms herself into a penitent supplicant begging forgiveness: "Pity me and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave."

Jacobs acknowledged the obscurity of her treatment of this subject—"There are somethings I might have made plainer, I know"—and explained to Post that it was much easier for a woman to "whis-

per” of sexual activities and abuses to a “dear friend” than to “record them for the world to read.” Both determined and reluctant to address her sexual history, she consciously omitted “what I thought – the world might believe that a Slave Woman was too willing to pour out – that she might gain their sympathies.” Lacking an appropriate form for her revelations, she used the style of the seduction novel.<sup>28</sup> Then, troubled about her story’s sensational elements, as the manuscript neared completion she asked Post to write a public endorsement that would lend it respectability.



when I returned home from Europe I said that I would not mention my M.S. to my friends again until I had done something with it – little dreaming of the time that might elapse – but as time wore on difficulties seemed to thicken—and I became discouraged.<sup>29</sup>

Jacobs tried for several years to get her book into print. In 1858 she sailed to England with letters of introduction from Boston antislavery leaders to British abolitionists, but was unable to arrange for publication.<sup>30</sup> Back home, her persistence finally brought results. She reported to Post what the lack of an endorsement from Stowe or Willis had cost her, in a letter announcing that she had found a publisher willing to take the manuscript if she could provide an introduction by Lydia Maria Child: “I had never seen Mrs. Child – past experience made me tremble at the thought of approaching another Sattellite of so great magnitude . . . but I . . . resolved to make my last effort through W C Nells ready kindness I meet Mrs Child – at the A.-S. [Anti-Slavery] Office – Mrs C is like your self a whole souled Woman—we soon found the way to each others heart – I will send you some of her letters . . .”<sup>31</sup>

The character of Child’s editorial help is revealed in these letters to Jacobs, where she describes her editorial procedures much as she later does in her Introduction to *Incidents*. In addition to routine changes, she made two substantive suggestions that Jacobs followed. She proposed that Jacobs expand the description of the antiblack violence after the Nat Turner rebellion; the result stands as Chapter 12. And she advised that a final chapter on John Brown—which Jacobs evidently had added to the end of her completed manuscript after the 1859 attack on Harpers Ferry—be dropped.<sup>32</sup>

Child wrote to a friend about her editorial work on Jacobs’s book:

"I abridged, and struck out superfluous words sometimes; but I don't think I *altered* fifty words in the whole volume." She did note that she had drastically rearranged sections of the manuscript: "I put the savage cruelties into one chapter, entitled 'Neighboring Planters,' in order that those who shrink from 'supping upon horrors' might omit them, without interrupting the thread of the story." Child's characterization of her editorial role was later corroborated in a British review that quoted an anonymous source who read the text both before and after publication and attested "that the manuscript and the printed volume are substantially the same; whilst the narrative has been condensed and rendered more fluent and compact by the friendly assistance of Mrs. Child."<sup>33</sup> Child did significantly change the text when she dropped the final chapter and ended the book on a private, personal note with the death of the narrator's grandmother instead of on a public, political note with a discussion of the recent armed attack on slavery. But in doing so she restored Jacobs's manuscript to its original shape.

Twentieth-century scholars of Afro-American literature assign considerable significance not only to the role of the white editors of slave narratives but also to the authenticating documents that accompany these texts. Jacobs's narrative is not endorsed by prominent white males but by a white woman and a black man, both Jacobs's personal friends. Her correspondence reveals that she had arranged for Amy Post and George Lowther to write these documents before she met Child. Although she initially agreed to Child's proposal to use them instead to publicize *Incidents* in the press, when the book was published the letters appeared in it as Jacobs had originally planned.<sup>34</sup>

With Child committed to the project, arrangements for publication proceeded. In late September 1860 Child negotiated a contract for Jacobs with the Boston publishers Thayer and Eldridge. This apparently provided that Child would donate her services and that Jacobs would receive royalties of 10 percent on the list price. Initially Thayer and Eldridge had spoken to Jacobs in terms of an edition of only a thousand copies, but evidently Child, who had tried to convince the Anti-Slavery Society to get out Jacobs's book, persuaded the Hovey Committee—leading abolitionists in charge of a discretionary fund—to buy a number of copies for resale by antislavery agents. With this guaranteed sale, Thayer and Eldridge contracted to stereotype the book (an expensive printing process), and to publish a first edition of two thousand. Child committed herself to correcting proofsheets, Jacobs arranged to meet her in Massachusetts to make final decisions,



and publication was set for November. Then on October 31 Cornelia Willis prematurely gave birth. In the absence of a doctor, Jacobs delivered the baby, who died the next day. Jacobs wrote Post that she was “very thankful” she had been able to care for Mrs. Willis, but disappointed she had missed the meeting with Child. Using discreet phrasing, she expressed a writer’s determination not to relinquish control of her book, even to a famous editor. “I know that Mrs. Child will strive to do the best she can more than I can ever repay but I ought to have been there that we could have consulted together, and compared our views—although I know that hers are superior to mine yet we could have marked her great Ideas and my small ones together.”<sup>35</sup>

November came and went. Thayer and Eldridge were in financial trouble; although early in December Wendell Phillips, acting for the Hovey Committee, apparently renegotiated the contract with them and guaranteed sales, they went bankrupt before they got the book out. Arrangements were somehow made enabling Jacobs to buy the plates from the Boston Stereotype Foundry and to have a Boston printer publish the book “for the author.”<sup>36</sup>

Marketing *Incidents* proved no easier than writing or publishing it had been. The black and antislavery press publicized the book, although not as strenuously as Child urged, perhaps because in those weeks, as the nation moved toward civil war, yet another slave narrative seemed of minor importance. Jacobs, however, was eager to promote her work. She went to Philadelphia, made contact with local abolitionists, and by mid-January had sold fifty copies herself. Late that month her friend William C. Nell ran two items in the *Liberator*: an advertisement announcing *Incidents* for sale and a letter stressing its careful adherence to fact.

It presents features more attractive than many of its predecessors purporting to be histories of slave life in America, because, in contrast with their mingling of fiction with fact, this record of complicated experience in the life of a young woman, a doomed victim to America’s peculiar institution . . . surely need not the charms that any pen of fiction, however gifted and graceful, could lend. They shine by the lustre of their own truthfulness—a rhetoric which always commends itself to the wise head and honest heart.

In Ohio the Salem *Anti-Slavery Bugle* printed a review and urged western abolitionists to order the book, at a dollar a copy, from the Boston Anti-Slavery Office.<sup>37</sup>

The Hovey Committee paid Jacobs \$100.00 for books, presumably