

哈丽雅特·雅各布斯所著之
《女奴生平》教学指导

Harriet Jacobs'
*Incidents in the Life
of a Slave Girl*

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Introduction: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as World Literature

Harriet Jacobs' narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, represents one American voice in the global literary movement towards human freedom. This movement existed in European and American societies since at least the 18th-century Enlightenment, if not before, and Atlantic slave narratives are a vital element of its collective voice.

It is important to contextualize Harriet Jacobs as more than an isolated black slave woman in the mid-19th-century United States. We recognize in her writing an early manifestation of spreading opposition to racial, gender and social subjugations. This opposition was not local: it was emerging in Asia, Africa, Europe, the Americas, and elsewhere.

Teaching *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in China begins with this conceptual realization of globality in the literature of freedom. Teaching this text might call upon Chinese readers to contextualize the story of Harriet Jacobs in relation to the situation of Chinese women at the same period.

How, for instance, might the story of a sexually-exploited black slave woman in the southern US state of North Carolina speak to the subordination and abuse of slaves and maids during the Qing dynasty? Could they recognize each other's lives and difficulties? What narrative forms did they employ to describe their conditions of daily life? Are there shared structures to their narratives? What rhetorical and aesthetic practices of autobiography do they have in common? What sort of emotional lives do these texts relate?

Rather than conceive of literature as praise for 'national masterpieces,' we re-encounter literature as a vehicle for social self-discovery and historical inclusion. Instead of reading literature as a celebration of the national imaginary – standard treatments of Whitman and Emerson, in the case of the United States – we read it as a text of daily life.

Stretching across continental geographies helps create a globalized critical practice. National boundaries do not limit human expression and the flow of stories. Language and cultural barriers continue to erode, especially given the rapid expansion of the Internet. Stories such as those of Harriet Jacobs or women from other nations may originate within one culture, but they do not belong to that culture.

Nonetheless, global narratives do require learning about specific historical and social contexts in order to read and study them most effectively. That is the purpose of this teaching guide. It provides teachers in China with a tool to employ in class preparations.

In the United States, *Incidents* is a text that has become popular in classrooms only within the past thirty years approximately. Before that it was an obscure nineteenth-century text known only to scholars and there were no contemporary editions. There has

been a proliferation of tens of new editions, from deeply scholarly to cheap student editions to several digital editions available via the Internet. *Incidents* now is available in translation in Spanish, Japanese, German, French, and other languages.

Prior to this Antislavery Literature Project edition of Harriet Jacobs, the only previously available North American slave narratives in Chinese have been by Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington. A significant number of scholarly articles on *Incidents* have appeared in European journals. This is a remarkable global renaissance for a remarkable story.

The popularity of *Incidents* in the United States is due both to a desire to address slavery and its legacies in that country, and a desire to ensure that representation of slavery comes from the perspective of women as well as better-known men such as Frederick Douglass.

As world literature, this text raises many themes relevant to readers in far distant locales. Interrelated negative themes concerning denial of human freedom, social discipline regimes, sexual exploitation, emiseration of women, and fractured families comingle with positive themes of the pursuit and achievement of freedom, resistance to oppression, intergenerational family support, and love for children.

This is the story of a young woman who perseveres in order to achieve freedom for herself and her children, although she endures prolonged psychological and physical suffering that continues long after her escape from slavery. In some important ways – particularly Jacobs’ story of seven and a half years in hiding – this book resembles that of another major text of twentieth-century world literature, Ann Frank’s *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1947).

Both Jacobs and Frank take us into the troubled interior worlds of two young women attempting to escape personal destruction by retreating to limited safety, a safety that ultimately was untenable. These are texts of psychological asylum, that re-create a small world and introduce readers into its tight confines, and that enable us to understand the quiet heroism of their authors.

In describing such ‘heroism of the weak’ *Incidents* joins such texts of world literature as Ronald Fraser’s *In Hiding: The Life of Manuel Cortes* (1972), documenting the life of a Spanish socialist who hid for thirty years to escape execution after the Spanish Civil War. It reminds us that those who lack means of direct confrontation with oppressive power or existential threats search for other means to preserve their integrity or lives.

Expanding to a broader and less literal sense, the theme of hiding speaks to many societies where practices of hiding – opinions, associations, or sexualities – shape daily life. *Incidents* points towards the need for an understanding of freedom as the right to live and speak openly, without fear for exercising such freedoms.

Sexual abuse denominates the life of Harriet Jacobs. This narrative's portrait of systematic coercion and rape of black slave women is not what many Americans, from either the northern or southern states, wanted to read. A reluctance to acknowledge the central truth Harriet Jacobs spoke helps explain the disappearance of this volume from public consciousness for over a century.

Narratives arising from the wide-scale abuse, rape and forced prostitution of women can be difficult to find, especially given the feelings of shame, self-loathing, depression and despair that such experiences produce. While not directly comparable to Jacobs in terms of immediate brutality, similar histories of sexual slavery occurred during World War II among women in Korea, China, the Philippines, Indonesia and elsewhere.¹ These stories disappeared from public consciousness too until a handful of elderly women in these countries began speaking out in the 1990s, many overcoming their shame with great difficulty.

Shame and anguish characterize the voice of Jacobs, who attempted to hide behind a pseudonym. Even though she was able exert a small degree of free will, nonetheless she had to make a choice she did not want to make. Most other slave women were not able to achieve this much and *Incidents* was the first slave narrative by an African American woman to directly address the sexual exploitation of slavery.

Incidents joins a global literature of witness to violence against women. These are narratives that document and trace the continued prevalence and acceptance of crimes against women's persons. In the end, *Incidents* is the story of a crime scene.

This is a deeply conflicted and troubled text over issues of sexuality. If on the one hand there is the pursuit and coercion of a female slave and her public regret of a loss of "purity," there are also elements of the seduction novel and her use of sexuality to make a severely limited choice of partners and so frustrate her master. Yet the question remains obvious: is Harriet Jacobs' choice a real choice, or is it self-defense? Jacobs turns a situation of duress to the best advantage possible. While she recognizes the Victorian code of domestic propriety, she recognizes too that this is a code meant for white women rather than black women. But Jacobs refuses to be consigned to the role of a kept woman; she demands equality.

As the narrative continues, *Incidents* speaks to many readers due to its portrait of resilient motherhood under extreme duress. Jacobs is a woman caught in a dilemma between self-preservation and the emotional call and responsibilities of motherhood. She becomes a mother due to lack of free choice, but is a devoted mother nonetheless. In the end hiding is insufficient: a labor system that places capital value on each enslaved family member causes her separation from her children and the family's fragmentation.

¹ See, for example, Rosa Maria Henson, *Comfort Woman: A Filipina's Story of Prostitution and Slavery Under the Japanese Military* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1999); Dai Sil Kim-Gibson, *Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women* (Mid-Prairie Books, 1999); Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women* (Cassell, 1996); Sangmie Choi Schellstede (ed.), *Comfort Women Speak: Testimony by Sex Slaves of the Japanese Military* (Holmes & Meier, 2000).

Despite its dispersal, the Jacobs family refuses to accept separation as a permanent condition. What begins as a story of a master's relentless pursuit of a young slave woman becomes a story of a woman's relentless pursuit of her children and their safety. The conversion of this narrative into a triumph of family reunification means a victory over slavery. It remains, however, a bittersweet reunification. As Jacobs writes near the conclusion:

“Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free! ... The dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. I still long for a hearthstone of my own, however humble. I wish it for my children's sake far more than for my own.”

For Jacobs, a domestic servant in New York State at the time, a search for the benefits of freedom remains incomplete. As a woman in domestic service, she is separated from her family in order to take care of another family. Jacobs is a predecessor to the Filipina *ayi*, Indonesian maid, or Indian housekeeper, all Third World expatriates from their own homes in order to labor and create comfort for others.

In its ‘incidents’ and forward-facing conclusion, Jacobs’ text relates a search for restorative justice, a quest for as much wholeness as can be obtained from writing and publication. Like Latin American *testimonio* literature that emphasizes the relationship between history and autobiography, Jacobs’ slave narrative points towards social action as a desired goal for both narrator and readers.

Writing *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* prefaced Jacobs’ own social work during and after the war in education and service to African American children, war refugees, and communities in Virginia and North Carolina. Giving witness to her own story and that of her family enabled Jacobs to confront the past and address present exigencies. In the end Jacobs asks us not only to understand her personal story of American slavery, but to respond to calls to act against injustice. Her narrative speaks to outrages against women, labor and people of color in the twenty-first century as much as to those of the nineteenth century.

Textual History

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl originally began appearing as a series of essays in the *New York Tribune*, probably the best-known US newspaper prior to the American civil war. It remained incomplete as a series and was published in book form in 1861, at the outbreak of the war. While the book was well-received in the United States and England, it went out of print and remained so for over a century.

Today the book has far more influence than when it was published. Significant literary scholarship on this text began with Jean Fagan Yellin’s 1981 article “Written by

Herself: Harriet Jacobs' Slave Narrative" in *American Literature*. Yellin established herself as the leading Jacobs scholar and her work has provided the best edition and definitive history of Harriet Jacobs.

Prior to Yellin, the few scholars that addressed the text largely believed it to be the fiction-writing of a white abolitionist hiding behind the pseudonym of Linda Brent. In particular, they considered the story of hiding under a roof-space for seven and a half years too fantastic to be true.

Adding to such disbelief, white abolitionists had published several invented slave narratives. The well-known white author and abolitionist Lydia Maria Child aided Jacobs with publishing the text and there was some suspicion she was its true author. In the mid-nineteenth-century, African American authors had to struggle to be heard and to make white readers believe that they were capable writers.

Yellin's engagement with feminist scholarship emphasizing the speakerly authority and value of women's reports convinced her that the text was authentic, despite some scholarly doubts. Yellin's 1987 edition of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, published by Harvard University Press, is a recognized masterpiece of literary reconstruction. In this edition Yellin carefully assembled detailed historical information that documented each real-life character behind the false names given in the text, which is how Jacobs tried to tell her story while safeguarding the privacy of herself and her children. Yellin continued her work to publish a biography of Harriet Jacobs in 2005 and *The Harriet Jacobs Family Papers* in 2008.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl is now a very popular text in US university classrooms. *Incidents* became popular in large degree through recognition that slave narratives by men, notably Frederick Douglass, provided only half a social description of slavery in the United States. Women had different experiences under slavery and often had to find their own means of resistance to its dehumanization. This narrative provides a direct, unmediated voice of slavery that even acclaimed texts such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* cannot.

As scholarship on African American women's literature and history of the nineteenth century continues to emerge, the literary recovery of *Incidents* has provided a meticulous and inspiring model for such work.

There are a number of good critical editions of *Incidents*, notably the Bedford edition. Open-access English-language online editions of *Incidents* may be useful for further study of the original text.

Documenting the American South (University of North Carolina) digital edition:
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/jacobs.html>

University of Virginia digital edition:
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/JACOBS/hjhome.htm>

Project Gutenberg offers several digital formats:
<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/11030>

Teaching Approaches

Various effective teaching approaches are available to present this text to students. These suggestions are meant to suggest possible directions for classroom discussion rather than provide a comprehensive statement of teaching possibilities.

Historical knowledge: global slavery. Students tend to know little of slavery, globally or in the United States, other than that it existed. First, it may be useful to locate US slavery within a continuum of human slavery: few societies in the world have not employed slavery in different forms, and the institution continues to exist today. According to United Nations estimates, there are approximately 27 million slaves in the world today – more in quantitative terms than at any time in history, but also fewer as a proportion of global human population.² Thus, for example, the sexual abuse that Harriet Jacobs and other women slaves endured might be discussed as part of a history of exploitation of women and sexual violence against them. How, for instance, might the sexual vulnerability and exploitation of Jacobs be related to women and children trafficked for sex around the world today? It is important to emphasize that although slavery has been banned near-universally by legislation, it continues in practice and constitutes a continuing social problem.

Historical knowledge: transatlantic slavery and the Middle Passage. It may assist students in reading to understand historic slavery in the United States as chattel slavery – forced labor where people are held against their will and slaveholders treat them as living property – that emerged from the demand for labor as European imperialism conquered the American hemisphere. Enslavement of labor began with the native American peoples and then extended to traffic in African slaves. Traffic to South America was even greater than to the American colonies and then the United States: Portuguese slave ships carried nearly 6 million Africans to Brazil between the 16th-19th centuries.³ Much of this traffic – which came to be known as the Middle Passage – was driven by the labor demands of colonial plantations, especially those cultivating sugar.

Historical knowledge: slavery in the United States. In the United States in the late 18th century, slavery appeared to be dying out. Northern states were establishing legal processes for gradual emancipation. However, a combination of new technology,

² For further information on contemporary slavery, see Free the Slaves at <http://www.freetheslaves.net/>. Recommended texts include Kevin Bales, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy*, 2nd ed. (University of California, 2004); Kevin Bales & Zoe Trodd, *To Plead Their Own Cause: Personal Stories by Today's Slaves* (Cornell University Press, 2008); and E. Benjamin Skinner, *A Crime So Monstrous: Face-to-Face with Modern-Day Slavery* (Free Press, 2009).

³ To explore the historical dimensions of slave traffic between Africa and the Americas, students can visit the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade database: <http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/index.faces>. The database is located at Emory University and provides authoritative information.

new commodity agriculture practices (especially cotton grown for textile mills in northern states and England), and territorial expansion of the United States reinvigorated slavery in the southern states and helped solidify its 'peculiar institution.' A process of increasing social watchfulness and disciplinary severity took place, one that began seriously after the Haitian revolution of 1791-1804 that was the first and only successful mass slave revolt in the Americas. Although there were a few slave revolts in the United States, these were local and put down quickly. Overall, the system of slavery in the United States was very successful in its disciplinary control, even in areas where blacks out-numbered whites. The slave resistance that arose tended to come through social practices that expressed a passive opposition through disobedience. It is within such forms of passive resistance – including the Underground Railroad that helped about 10,000 fugitives escape to freedom – that we can locate the story of Harriet Jacobs. Her escape northwards was comparatively rare considering that there were nearly four million slaves by 1861, and her story was rarer still for being one of the 120-some slave narratives published prior to the US civil war.

Genre studies: captivity narratives. Another question that arises in teaching such materials is that of the slave narrative and its history. It has been argued often that the slave narrative is a sub-genre that belongs to a larger genre of North American captivity narratives, perhaps – and unfortunately – the most original American contribution to world literature. Commonly-taught examples of this genre include Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca's *La Relacion*, a 1542 report by a Spanish explorer describing his captivity and trek along the southern US coast, and Mary Rowlandson's 1762 narrative of her capture by Indians in Massachusetts. Later in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, American merchant sailors captured along the North African coast published popular accounts of their imprisonment, sufferings, and freedom. This genre of American literature originally had a strong religious orientation and praised divine providence for salvation of a Christian soul, but later grew more secular and adopted elements of adventure stories. A central concept of this genre lies in a challenge to the injustices of imprisonment and enslavement, an idea that lies at the heart of *Incidents*.

Genre studies: mixed-genre text. One way of reading and teaching this text is as an example of mixed genres. *Incidents* contains elements of concealed autobiography, slave narrative, eighteenth-century English and American seduction novels, and sentimental novels. Seduction novels such as Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1790) and Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* (1797) were enormously popular novels that chronicled the temptation, seduction, and fall of young women. Such novels presented themselves as morality tales while catering to public taste for mild sexual titillation. *Incidents* employs the convention of a 'down-fallen woman' and her confession, but differs from the usual sort of seduction novels because its narrator is an enslaved black woman. Unlike the white women protagonists of nearly all seduction novels, black women in antebellum America were not presumed to have the same claim on virtue as a white woman. So as an enslaved autobiographer, Jacobs asserts an equal claim on virtue by framing her narrative as a seduction novel. Jacobs borrows also from common themes found in sentimental novels. These themes include motherhood; family unity, dispersal, and reunification; an emphasis on emotional expression; household

function and dysfunction; character development; and religious piety. Part of the pedagogical appeal of *Incidents* lies in pointing out to students how such genres intertwine throughout the text.

Reception studies: reading audience. Teaching attention can be paid to the role of the reading audience. Jacobs maintains a close relationship with her readers throughout the text, sometimes breaking through the narrative frame to address them directly. While most of her early readership was certainly white, Jacobs' story spoke to the intimate histories of black women readers in the North and the private knowledge of many blacks concerning their families' mixed heritage in consequence of white men forcing themselves upon black women. If this sort of story might be a shocking revelation to some white readers, similar stories were well-known among black readers. Teachers can address how audience reception shapes understandings of a story. What is the difference, for example, between sympathetic reading from those with racial privilege and those whose personal or family histories were marked – or shaped entirely – by such sexual violence?

Thematic studies: disciplinary surveillance society. The text of *Incidents* makes clear how intense surveillance characterized slave society in the United States. Jacobs describes how Dr. Flint watches Linda; Mrs. Flint watches them both; Linda's family watches Dr. Flint; Linda watches the doctor, her children and others from her hiding place; whites watch blacks, and blacks watch whites in return. When Linda escapes north, Dr. Flint spends years searching for her in order to re-capture and return Linda to slavery. The disciplinary order of slavery demands constant surveillance in order to establish and maintain control. Once surveillance was lost, slavery diminished or ended. One useful way to discuss *Incidents* is to consider how this surveillance regime is constructed. Who watches who and why?

Thematic studies: marriage and the domestic sphere. Jacobs published *Incidents* during the American Victorian period when a new concept of middle-class family advocated it as a place of safety and retreat from the world. Yet, as for many or most Americans during the nineteenth century, Jacobs' terms of existence do not accord with this domestic ideal. For her, legal marriage to a preferred partner – another slave – is unavailable. She chooses to become the mistress of a socially powerful white man, Mr. Sands, in order to escape the pursuit of her master Dr. Flint. The domestic sphere is not a protected domain of refuge for women; instead, it is the scene of endless threats. Even for Mrs. Flint, nominally a privileged white woman, her marriage is a nightmare from which she has no escape. How might this situation deform Mrs. Flint's behavior? A good teaching approach lies in exploratory discussion of the terms of marriage in *Incidents*. To whom is marriage available and why? How do male supremacy and patriarchy shape marriage and households in this text? It is useful to consider the household of Linda's grandmother as a counter-example in discussion of this theme. How does *Incidents* contradict romantic and sentimental concepts of marriage and family life? By the end of the narrative, does Jacobs continue to believe in such ideals? Should we believe in romantic ideals of gender roles and marriage?

Thematic studies: racial and gender double-standards. Jacobs' narrative is based on a set of institutionalized and legal double-standards based on race and gender. One of her major goals lies in exposing, outlining and detailing the consequences of such mutually-reinforcing double-standards and social inequalities. Jacobs makes public these behaviors an American Victorian public refused to discuss as unmentionable yet was common. Narratives such as *Incidents* had unacceptably radical implications concerning the unequal foundations of US society, in part explaining why this account remained so obscure for so long. A good teaching approach to *Incidents* might ask students to identify the racial and sexual double-standards in the text, then use these to formulate questions about the role of literature in discussing and challenging the injustices created by double-standards? In terms of world literature, for instance, how might we locate *Incidents* in relation to the social challenge to gender and sexual hypocrisy voiced a few years earlier in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856)? How does the racial subordination of blacks enable stereotyping of their sexual availability? How does Jacobs resist subordination and social double-standards?

List of Characters

Jacobs published her narrative under the pseudonym Linda Brent. Historical research has established the following correspondence between the narrative's pseudonyms and real-life personalities.

| | |
|----------------|--|
| Linda Brent | Harriet Jacobs |
| William Brent | John Jacobs – brother to Harriet |
| Mr. Bruce | Nathaniel Parker Willis – a leading US author, now largely forgotten |
| Gertrude Bruce | Cornelia Grinnel Willis |
| Dr. Flint | Dr. James Norcom – physician in Edenton, North Carolina |
| Emily Flint | Mary Matilda Norcom – daughter to Dr. Norcom |
| Aunt Martha | Molly Horniblow – Harriet's mistress and caretaker after her mother died |
| Ruth Nash | Emily Horniblow |
| Mr. Sands | Samuel Tredwell Sawyer – a congressman from North Carolina |
| Benny Sands | Joseph Sawyer |
| Ellen Sands | Louisa Sawyer |

Cross-cultural Study Questions

1. Nearly all human societies have histories of slavery. Identify the forms of slavery in Chinese history, such as 包衣阿哈 (slave) and 奴僕 (bond-servant), and discuss them. How were these Chinese slaveries like or different from chattel slavery in the United States?
2. In chapters 2 ('The New Master and Mistress') Jacobs describes the sale and sexual abuse of young black slave girls by white masters. In chapter 5 ('The Trials of Girlhood') she describes how Dr. Flint begins to pursue her as a twelve-year old girl. In China, child brides were sold at young age to a wealthy family. Many were from families that could not support them. When their husbands were not of age, child brides performed labor until their husbands were old enough to have sex with them. Lu Xun's short story "New Year's Sacrifice" in *Hesitation* (彷徨 -- 1924) tells the story of a child bride who is sold twice and goes insane. Read this story and compare or contrast it with the situation Jacobs describes. [For English-language readers, see Lu Xun, *The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China: The Complete Fiction of Lu Xun*, Julia Lovell (trans.), Penguin Classics, 2010 – pages 161-177].
3. Jacobs adheres to a quite strict Victorian morality in describing her life and its difficulties. She conceals much more than she reveals. What she is forced to reveal she does unwillingly and because her story demands telling. The inner tension of *Incidents* springs from Jacobs being torn between a desire for privacy and concealment versus a narrative demand for exposure in order to make her story – and by extension many similar stories – known to the public. This contradiction suggests why she adopted a pseudonymous authorship and provided pseudonyms for the figures appearing in the narrative. How does similar reluctance to reveal private life characterize traditional Chinese culture, particularly regarding sexual issues, and how is that reluctance changing?
4. Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng (兰陵笑笑生)[pseud.] wrote the recognized masterpiece *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (金瓶梅) in the sixteenth century. The figure of Dr. Flint, a sex-obsessed leading citizen of a provincial southern town, bears some similarities to that of Ximen Qing, a dishonest merchant with similar erotic preoccupations. Can you compare Dr. Flint and Ximen Qing, or find similar characters in Chinese literature?
5. Many contemporary societies continue to discover that slavery persists, despite legislation against the practice. In China, slavery was banned legally in 1910. Yet there have been news reports of present-day slavery in this country. Can you employ newspaper database searches via the Internet to identify and discuss instances and practices of contemporary slavery and trafficking in China?

Harriet Jacobs: A Chronology

- 1621 - First African slaves land in the Virginia colony.
- 1767 - Phillis Wheatley, the first major African American writer, begins publishing her poetry in Massachusetts.
- 1800 - Gabriel Prosser's planned slave revolt in Virginia is foiled; 26 blacks are hung.
- 1808 - Importation of African slaves into the United States is forbidden by law.
- 1813 - Harriet Jacobs born in North Carolina.
- 1819 - Delilah Horniblow, Harriet's mother, dies. Jacobs lives with her mother's mistress, Margaret Horniblow.
- 1822 - Denmark Vesey's planned slave revolt in South Carolina is prevented; 35 blacks are hung.
- 1825 - Margaret Horniblow dies; Jacobs is willed to Mary Norcom.
- 1830 - The abolitionist movement begins, led by William Lloyd Garrison. US abolitionism was characterized by *immediatism* – a demand for immediate emancipation of slaves, a new emphasis on human equality, and evangelical Protestant Christianity.
- 1831 - Nat Turner's slave revolt kills 55 whites in Virginia. Fifty-six blacks are executed; many more are killed in public lynchings throughout the region. Regulation of slaves grows stricter.
- 1835 - Following prolonged sexual harassment by Dr. Norcom, Jacobs hides in a space beneath her grandmother's roof.
- 1842 - Jacobs escapes to Philadelphia by sea. The Philadelphia Vigilance Committee, an Underground Railroad organization, assists her in Philadelphia.
- 1845 - Frederick Douglass publishes *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, the most widely-read US slave narrative. Li Wenjun Yi translates the narrative in 1988.
- 1845 - Jacobs travels to New York City. Obtains a position in the home of Nathaniel Parker Willis, one of the best-known US writers of the period.
- 1846 - Jacobs travels to England with the Willis family. After returning to the US, she quits her position and moves to Boston.
- 1850 - Fugitive Slave Law enables southern slaveholders more easily to pursue, capture, and return escaped slaves living in northern states.
- 1852 - Harriet Beecher Stowe publishes an antislavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Life among the Lowly*. It quickly becomes the best-selling book in US history. Lin Shu translates the novel to Chinese in 1902.
- 1856 - Jacobs joins the household of Fanny Fern – a famous writer and sister of Willis – as a governess.
- 1859 - White abolitionist John Brown leads a raid on a federal armory in Harpers Ferry, Virginia; Brown and surviving members of his multiracial band are captured and hung. Sentiments caused by the raid assist outbreak of the civil war.

- 1861 - The US civil war breaks out, caused by the slavery issue and the divisions it has caused between northern states (the Union) and southern states (the Confederacy). Abraham Lincoln is US president through nearly the entire war, until his assassination in 1865. As the war begins, there are nearly 4 million slaves in the United States.
- 1861 - Jacobs publishes *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.
- 1863-5 - Jacobs and her daughter Louisa establish a school for freed black children in Virginia.
- 1865 - The civil war finishes, with about 620,000 military deaths – more casualties than any US war since.
- 1865 - 13th amendment to the US constitution bans slavery.
- 1870 - Operates a boardinghouse business in Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- 1880s - Moves to Washington, DC to live with her daughter.
- 1897 - Jacobs dies in Washington, DC.

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