

Source Packet for Harriet Jacobs (1813 - 1897)

“When they told me my newborn babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women.”

I. Who was Harriet Jacobs?

There are few stories that illustrate the resilience and strength of enslaved women, and the myriad of ways they resisted enslavement, more than Harriet Ann Jacobs. Born enslaved in Edenton, North Carolina, after years of resisting her enslaver’s unwanted advances, Harriet made the brave choice to flee her oppressive situation. Her only option at the time became hiding in a small attic space, with only room to lay on a mattress. With unimaginable fortitude, she remained in that tiny space for almost seven years, when finally, in 1842, a free Black man named Peter helped her escape via ship as part of the maritime “Underground Railroad” network in North Carolina. Harriet went on to become an anti-slavery activist, an abolitionist author, and eventually post-Civil War, a relief worker dedicated to assisting the newly freed people in the South. Her powerful autobiography, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, was written using the pen name Linda Brent. The quote in Freedom Park is taken from that book.



Jacobs's only known formal photograph, 1894

II. Primary Source Evaluation

A. Runaway Ad

- Who created this document? For what purpose?
- How is Harriet described? What skills does she have, based on the document and based on additional inferences you might make?
- What is the stated reason for her running away? Why might she actually have chosen to flee?
- How reliable is this source?
- How much is offered for her capture and what might this tell us?
- What is Harriet risking by seeking her freedom? What might this tell us about her?

B. Video Clip: In this clip from The American Place Theatre, an actress plays Harriet Jacobs, reading words that Harriet wrote in her autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

- What does this clip tell us about Harriet's situation and life?



- What else can we glean about her personality and skills?

<https://youtu.be/26NPLHWthbM>

C. Letter from Harriet Jacobs: Ednah Dow Cheney was a Boston abolitionist and secretary of the New England Freedmen's Aid Society. Harriet, after returning to North Carolina to help those recently-freed after the Civil War, wrote to Ednah from her grandmother's old house.

- What do we learn about life for newly-freed people in the South from Harriet's letter?
- What do we learn about Harriet Jacobs's life from this letter?
- Why do you think she chose to return to North Carolina, despite it being where she was once enslaved?
- What emotions or attitudes can be inferred? What does this letter tell us (directly, or via inferences) regarding what kind of person Harriet Jacobs was (skills, personality, etc.)?

III. Quote: Consider Harriet Jacobs's words that are inscribed in NC Freedom Park: "*When they told me my newborn babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women.*" What message is Harriet conveying? Why do you think the creators of NC Freedom Park featured this particular quote from Harriet Jacobs? What did they want us to know (about her, and/or about freedom generally?)

IV. Discuss:

- Based on everything you have analyzed and discussed, what five words or phrases would you use to describe Harriet Jacobs?
- What about Harriet Jacobs do you find inspiring and why?
- Why do you think Harriet Jacobs is included in Freedom Park?
- What questions would you like to ask her if you could?
- Why will Harriet's life story important for us, both now and for as well as for future generations?

\$100 REWARD

WILL be given for the apprehension and delivery of my Servant Girl **HARRIET**. She is a light mulatto, 21 years of age, about 5 feet 4 inches high, of a thick and corpulent habit, having on her head a thick covering of black hair that curls naturally, but which can be easily combed straight. She speaks easily and fluently, and has an agreeable carriage and address. Being a good seamstress, she has been accustomed to dress well, has a variety of very fine clothes, made in the prevailing fashion, and will probably appear, if abroad, tricked out in gay and fashionable finery. As this girl absconded from the plantation of my son without any known cause or provocation, it is probable she designs to transport herself to the North.

The above reward, with all reasonable charges, will be given for apprehending her, or securing her in any prison or jail within the U. States.

All persons are hereby forewarned against harboring or entertaining her, or being in any way instrumental in her escape, under the most rigorous penalties of the law.

JAMES NORCOM.

Edenton, N. C. June 30

TT&W

Letter from Harriet Jacobs to Ednah Cheney

Edenton, April 25th, 1867

Dear Mrs Cheney

I felt I would like to write you a line from my old home. I am sitting under the old roof twelve feet from the spot where I suffered all the crushing weight of slavery. thank God the bitter cup is drained of its last dreg. there is no more need of hiding places to conceal slave Mothers. yet it was little to purchase the blessings of freedom. I could have worn this poor life out there to save my Children from the misery and degradation of Slavery...

I cannot tell you how I feel in this place. the change is so great I can hardly take it all in[.] I was born here, and amid all these new born blessings, the old dark cloud comes over me, and I find it hard to have faith in rebels.

the past winter was very severe for this region...it caused much suffering, and the freedmen with but few exceptions were cheated out of their crop of cotton. their contract masters shiped it for them, and when they ask for a settlement, they are answered I am daily expecting the returns. these men have gone to work cheerfully, planted another crop without the returns to live on until their present crop is made. many of the large plantations of the once wealthy Planter, is worked under the control of Colored Men. the Owners let [rent] their Plantations to the freedmen in preference to the poor Whites. they believe the Negro determined to make money, and they will get the largest portion of it. last years experience I think will be a proffitable lesson[.] many will learn to act for themselves. Negro suffrage is making a stir in this place. the rebels are striving to make these people feel they are their true friends, and they must not be led astray by the Yankees. the freedmen ask if Abraham Lincoln led them astray, that his friends is their friends his enemies their enemies.

I have spent much of my time on the Plantations distrubuting seed and trying to teach the women to make Yankee gardens. they plant everything to mature in the summer, like their corn and cotton fields. I have hunted up all the old people, done what I could for them. I love to work for these old people. many of them I have known from Childhood

there is one School in Edenton well attended. on some of the Plantations there is from 15 to 25 Chrildren that cannot attend School, the distance is so far. some of the freedmen are very anxious to establish Plantation schools, as soon as the more advanced Schools, can send out teachers. many of the freedmen are willing and will sustain their teachers...

my love to Miss Daisy [Cheny's daughter]. I send her some Jassmine blossoms[.] tell her they bear the fragrance of freedom.

Yours Truly

H Jacobs