

Jim

Harriet Jacobs: America's Forgotten Abolitionist

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Biographies of the Nation Instructional Plan

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Lesson Topic: Harriet Jacobs, abolition, biography vs. autobiography

Grade Level: 9-12

Essential Questions: Did Harriet Jacobs play a significant role in America's abolition movement? How does her impact compare with that of other more famous abolitionists?

National Standards (from Era 4, Expansion and Reform)

Standard 2D: The student understands the rapid growth of "the peculiar institution" after 1800 and the varied experiences of African Americans under slavery.

Standard 4A: The student understands the abolitionist movement.

Standard 4C: The student understands changing gender roles and the ideas and activities of women reformers.

Context and Content Historical Background: In 1861, the year that saw the beginning of America's deadly Civil War, a relatively unknown woman self-published *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*. The title page listed the editor's name but not her own (<http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/jacobs.html>). This image itself represents the author's reluctance to step into the spotlight and to instead let the events themselves tell of the horrors of America's "peculiar institution," slavery. Unlike the life of Frederick Douglass, for example, Harriet Jacobs (1813-1897) is woefully unknown to high school students. But her experiences during slavery—and in particular, her remarkable seven years of hiding from her master, right under his nose—rival the life of Douglass or any other well known slavery related figure.

Harriet Jacobs' work is in a rare category: the female slave narrative. This allows for unique insights into the role of the house servant, the complex web of slave-master relationships, and most disturbingly, the emotional abuse and sexual oppression of these women. In an attempt to anger her owner into selling her, Harriet engages in a relationship with a white man and bears his child. This indeed infuriates her master, but he does not sell her; instead, he declares that her children will become his slaves as well. Her next course of action is remarkably bold and daring: she pretends to flee to the North, all the while hiding in a 9' x 7' x 3' attic space at her grandmother's home which is on her master's property. Here she experiences grueling heat, frigid cold, physical deprivation, and nearly crippling muscle decline . . . for seven years. Harriet's autobiography recounts these years in aching detail, as well as her eventual escape to the North and freedom.

Lesson Focus: This instructional plan is designed to not only introduce Harriet Jacobs to high school students, but also to evaluate her role in America's abolition movement. Students will examine her contributions in this area. Another significant focus of the lesson is the role of autobiography in discussions of America's history. The Teaching American History project focuses on biography, but clearly there's a place for autobiography as well. Students will ultimately draw conclusions about the validity of more "I-centered" forms of expression.

Guided Discovery Activity (This can be done either in small groups or as individuals):

- 1) Write the following names on the board: Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe, William Lloyd Garrison, Harriet Jacobs. Ask students which names are familiar to them. Survey results will probably show the first two as the most well known.
- 2) If computers are available, have students Google the names and log the number of hits or results. (As of June 1, 2011, Douglass = 7.6 million; Stowe = 3.7 million; Garrison = 536 thousand; Jacobs = 264 thousand) Draw conclusions about worldwide interest in these individuals.
- 3) Provide the listing of "Life Events" (.pdf file attached). Have students try to guess which events go with which of the four individuals. (Students usually attribute most of them to Douglass; however, *all* are Jacobs.)
- 4) Show the *Incidents* slides.
 - a) Slide 1 shows a slave auction poster. Have students analyze the primary source document. Note the sale of human beings on a par with animals and farm tools.
 - b) Slide 2 is a photograph of Harriet Jacobs. This is the only known photograph of her. Have students discuss her appearance. Note that she is mulatto in features. How would that impact her life as a slave?
 - c) Slide 3 is her editor, Lydia Maria Child. Excerpted is her statement about Harriet Jacobs and the veracity of her autobiography. Ask students why such a statement might be necessary at the beginning of Jacobs' book.
 - d) Slide 4 is the title page of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. This is the primary image of this activity. Ask the students what they notice. What's missing? And what's the significance of the date of publication? (Later editions include Harriet Jacobs' name, but she felt that she needed to remain anonymous during this time. The publication date of 1861 places it at the outbreak of the Civil War, a crisis directly attributable to the issue of slavery.) This image is a metaphor for the lack of awareness about Harriet Jacobs. She performs such a crucial service, raising awareness about slavery, right at the outset of the American Civil War, and yet her name is "invisible" to most Americans.

- e) Slide 5 shows an image of the dastardly “Dr. Flint,” the slave owner who relentlessly pursues Harriet. Have a student read aloud the wanted poster for the runaway Harriet. What conclusions can we draw about Harriet in both appearance and attitude?
 - f) Slide 6 shows architectural renderings of the home in which Harriet hid for seven years. Ask students what conditions they would expect in a space 9' x 7' x 3' in North Carolina. If any students are familiar with the experience of Anne Frank during WWII, have them comment on the similarities and differences. Why isn't Harriet Jacobs as famous as Anne Frank?
- 5) At this point, students should begin reading *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Completion time can span from a week to several weeks. Formative assessments during the reading time can range from short answer quizzes to brief, written discussions. However, the summative assessment is more involved. See below.

Summative Assessment:

The focus question for this activity is this: Is Harriet Jacobs deserving of a visual reminder of her legacy? Tell students that there is indeed one monument. Then show them the wayside marker in her hometown of Edenton, North Carolina

<http://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WMT19>

After students vent their frustration, ask them if they could come up with something better. Building on their enthusiasm and determination to do so, introduce the Harriet Jacobs project assignment and the scoring rubric (see attached pdf. files).

Sample student projects are attached as well, including high, medium, and low levels of performance.

Note: In order to achieve differentiation in this lesson, students can opt to nominate Harriet Jacobs for the National Women's Hall of Fame at <http://www.greatwomen.org/> This avenue is best for students who prefer not to work in small groups and who enjoy research writing.

Reflection:

The most stimulating aspect of this lesson was the opportunity it provided for students to choose a creative alternative for celebrating the life of a lesser-known American. Project proposals ranged from the exceptional (parks, traveling exhibits, scholarships) to the mundane (a license plate? A credit card?) to the appalling (Freedom Flakes, a cereal with Harriet Jacobs' picture on the box). In the future, I would show students examples of previous projects and discuss strengths and weaknesses. This instructional plan has the potential for great creativity as well as poor outcomes, so frequent teacher monitoring of the process is paramount.

Sources and Resources:

Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. New York: Signet, 2000.

Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Ed. Jean Fagan Yellin. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.

Yale's Harriet Jacobs' site, including the Harriet Jacobs Papers Project:
<http://www.yale.edu/glc/harriet/>

Chronology of Jacobs' life:
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/Jacobs/hj-timeline.htm>

Podcast on Jacobs (University of North Carolina):
<http://flash.unctv.org/bif/2400/bif2416.html>

Africans in America (PBS) and Jacobs:
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2923.html>

NPR interview with Jean Fagan Yellin on Jacobs:
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=17897134>

Harriet Jacobs Historical Marker in North Carolina:
<http://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WMT19>

Images of first edition of *Incidents*:
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/jacobs.html>

National Women's Hall of Fame:
<http://www.greatwomen.org/>