

Jacobs, John S.

(1815–19 Dec. 1873),

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fugitive and abolitionist, like his more famous sister Harriet A. Jacobs, was the child of slaves and born in Edenton, North Carolina. Their father, Elijah, was a carpenter; their mother, Delilah Horniblow, was the daughter of a woman who had been freed but re-enslaved around the time of the American Revolution.

In his 1861 “A True Tale of Slavery,” published anonymously in four installments in the English serial the *Leisure Hour*, Jacobs stated that he had four masters in his first eighteen years. Jailed late in 1833 after his sister's escape from their owner, Dr. James Norcom, John Jacobs and the children were later purchased by the Edenton lawyer Samuel Tredwell Sawyer, the father of Harriet's two children. Aware that Norcom recognized his loathing of slavery, Jacobs effectively engineered the sale. “My mind was made up,” he wrote, “that I must, in order to effect my escape, hide as much as possible my hatred to slavery, and affect a respect to my master, whoever he might be.... I must change owners in order to do that” (108).

John Jacobs became Sawyer's body servant, and when Sawyer was elected as a Whig to the U.S. Congress in March 1837, Jacobs went with him to Washington, D.C. Jacobs accompanied Sawyer on his wedding trip to Chicago and back through Canada, but rather than effect his escape Jacobs returned with Sawyer to New York because he wished to help his sister, still in hiding in Edenton. Consulting with friends in New York, however, persuaded Jacobs that returning to Washington with Sawyer would not serve Harriet's cause. He spirited his clothes and then his trunk away from the Astor House, left a note for Sawyer signed “no longer yours,” and took a boat to Providence, Rhode Island.

From Providence, Jacobs went to New Bedford, Massachusetts. In his autobiography he stated that he was introduced in that city to “Mr. William P—, a very fatherly old man, who had been a slave in Alexandria” (126). Most likely Jacobs had met William Piper, a hostler in his early fifties who had been born in Alexandria and had come to New Bedford sometime between 1825 and 1830. At that time Piper worked for the whaling merchant William Rotch Rodman, whose mansion was the finest on the city's finest street. In 1838 a city assessor's document places Jacobs too in Rodman's household, suggesting that Piper had helped place him there. On 1 August 1839 Jacobs took out a seaman's protection paper at the U.S. Custom House in New Bedford and three days later joined the crew of the whaling ship *Frances Henrietta*, bound for the Pacific. (William Rotch Rodman's son and brother-in-law together owned one-half of the *Frances Henrietta*.) Jacobs vowed that whatever he earned “would be an inducement to any one to bring my sister off from the south” (126). Yet when he returned from the highly successful cruise more than three-

and-a-half years later, he learned that Harriet Jacobs had escaped slavery, had come to New Bedford seeking him, and was then in New York City. John Jacobs immediately effected a reunion with the sister he had not seen in a decade.

In 1843 John and Harriet Jacobs moved to Boston, and for the next several years he worked to keep his sister's whereabouts a secret from the Norcom family. In an 1846 letter to the New York City abolitionist Sydney Howard Gay, Jacobs wrote that the Norcom family's wish to restore Harriet "to her former happiness" was in fact a desire to return her to "hell ... as my sister ... finds these cold regions [*sic*] more healthy than the suny [*sic*] South they will have to love each other at a distance the sweetest love that can exist between master and slave."

By 1846 John Jacobs had begun to work for "the oppressed the world over," as he wrote to Gay. He assisted fugitives in Boston, and in the late fall of 1847 he began an antislavery lecture tour with Jonathan Walker, whose attempt to help seven men escape slavery in Pensacola, Florida, ended in the branding of his hand with the initials "S.S.," for "slave stealer." For the Massachusetts and New England Anti-Slavery Societies, the two toured extensively in New England and New York State through May 1848. Jacobs, according to the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, was a speaker "scarcely excelled by any of his predecessors." Jacobs spoke on the circuit by himself in the summer and fall of 1848, and early in 1849 he became the manager of the Anti-Slavery Office and Reading Room in Rochester, New York. After the Fugitive Slave Act became law in September 1850, Jacobs told a meeting at New York's Zion Chapel to "arm yourselves; aye, and I would advise the women to have their knives too.... I advise you to trample on this bill" (*National Anti-Slavery Standard*, 10 Oct. 1850).

Jacobs left soon afterward for California, just admitted to the Union as a free state, and by 1852 he was seeking gold in Australia. By 1857 he was in England working as a mariner, and four years later he published his serialized autobiography. When the Civil War began, Jacobs wrote to his sister that he would offer himself "on the altar of freedom ... if I am wanted" if the North intended to place the American flag on that altar. But "if it must wave over the slave, with his chains and fetters clanking, let me breathe the free air of another land, and die a man and not a chattel" (*National Anti-Slavery Standard*, 19 June 1861).

Jacobs married in London, and early in 1873 he returned to the United States. He lived near his sister Harriet and niece Louisa in Cambridge, Massachusetts, until his death in December that same year. He is buried with his sister and niece at Cambridge's Mount Auburn Cemetery.

Further Reading

Jacobs, John S. "A True Tale of Slavery," *Leisure Hour: A Family Journal of Instruction and Recreation* (28 Feb. 1861).

Fleischner, Jennifer. *Mastering Slavery: Memory, Family, and Identity in Women's Slave Narratives* (1996)

Jacobs, Harriet A. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1987)

Yellin, Jean Fagan. *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (2004).

See also

Jacobs, Harriet <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-34481>>