

# "Fear of Insurrection"

Harriet Ann Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Written by Herself (Boston, 1861), pp. 97–104.

## As you read...

### HARRIET JACOBS

Harriet Jacobs was born in Edenton, North Carolina, in 1813. Although she was a slave, she was six years old before she realized her status. Her mistress, Margaret Horniblow, was relatively kind, and taught her to read and to sew. Then, when her mistress died, she became the property of James Norcom, an Edenton doctor. For several years she resisted the sexual advances of her master, until in 1835 she pretended to run away and hid for seven years in her grandmother's attic. In 1842 she escaped to the North, and ten years later she was freed.

In 1861 she published an account of her experiences in slavery, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, from which this story is taken.

A full biography of Harriet Jacobs (see <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/bio.html>) is available from UNC Libraries.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Here, Jacobs describes the response of whites in Edenton to Nat Turner's Rebellion and the impact the rebellion had on blacks, both slave and free.

1. How did whites in Edenton respond to the threat of a slave insurrection?
2. Does Jacobs believe that there was any real danger of insurrection?
3. What can we learn about the structure of white society from Jacobs' account? How did rich and poor interact, for example?
4. How does Jacobs feel about white people in Edenton? Does she feel differently about any particular group? How can you tell? Why did she feel that way?
5. Why was the black church demolished?
6. Why does Jacobs think whites acted as they did?
7. How does Jacobs present herself? What impressions do you get of her?

Not far from this time Nat Turner's insurrection broke out; and the news threw our town into great commotion. Strange that they should be alarmed when their slaves were so "contented and happy"!<sup>1</sup> But so it was.

It was always the custom to have a muster<sup>2</sup> every year. On that occasion every white man shouldered his musket. The citizens and the so-called country gentlemen wore military uniforms. The poor whites took their places in the ranks in every-day dress, some without shoes, some without hats. This grand occasion had already passed; and when the slaves were told there was to be another muster, they were surprised and rejoiced. Poor creatures! They thought it was going to be a holiday. I was informed of the true state of affairs, and imparted it to the few I could trust. Most gladly would I have proclaimed it to every slave; but I dared not. All could not be relied on. Mighty is the power of the torturing lash.

By sunrise, people were pouring in from every quarter within twenty miles of the town. I knew the houses were to be searched; and I expected it would be done by country bullies and the poor whites. I knew nothing annoyed them so much as to see colored people living in comfort and respectability; so I made arrangements for them with especial care. I arranged every thing in my grandmother's house as neatly as possible. I put white quilts on the beds, and decorated some of the rooms with flowers. When all was arranged, I sat down at the window to watch. Far as my eye could reach, it rested on a motley crowd of soldiers. Drums and fifes were discoursing martial music. The men were divided into companies of sixteen, each headed by a captain. Orders were given, and the wild scouts rushed in every direction, wherever a colored face was to be found.

It was a grand opportunity for the low whites, who had no negroes of their own to scourge<sup>3</sup>. They exulted in such a chance to exercise a little brief authority, and show their subserviency to the slaveholders; not reflecting that the power which trampled on the colored people also kept themselves in poverty, ignorance, and moral degradation. Those who never witnessed such scenes can hardly believe what I know was inflicted at this time on innocent men, women, and children, against whom there was not the slightest ground for suspicion. Colored people and slaves who lived in remote parts of the town suffered in an especial manner. In some cases the searchers scattered powder and shot among their clothes, and then sent other parties to find them, and bring them forward as proof that they were plotting insurrection. Every where men, women, and children were whipped till the blood stood in puddles at their feet. Some received five hundred lashes; others were tied hands and feet, and tortured with a bucking paddle<sup>4</sup>, which blisters the skin terribly. The dwellings of the colored people, unless they happened to be protected by some influential white person, who was nigh at hand, were robbed of clothing and every thing else the marauders thought worth carrying away. All day long these unfeeling wretches went round, like a troop of demons, terrifying and tormenting the helpless. At night, they formed themselves into patrol bands, and went wherever they chose among the colored people, acting out their brutal will. Many women hid themselves in woods and swamps, to keep out of their way. If any of the husbands or fathers told of these outrages, they were tied up to the public whipping post, and cruelly scourged for telling lies about white men. The consternation was universal. No two people that had the slightest tinge of color in their faces dared to be seen talking together.

I entertained no positive fears about our household, because we were in the midst of white families who would protect us. We were ready to receive the soldiers whenever they came. It was not long before we heard the tramp of feet and the sound of voices. The door was rudely pushed open; and in they tumbled, like a pack of hungry wolves. They snatched at every thing within their reach. Every box, trunk, closet, and corner underwent a thorough

examination. A box in one of the drawers containing some silver change was eagerly pounced upon. When I stepped forward to take it from them, one of the soldiers turned and said angrily, "What d'ye foller us fur? D'ye s'pose white folks is come to steal?"

I replied, "You have come to search; but you have searched that box, and I will take it, if you please."

At that moment I saw a white gentleman who was friendly to us; and I called to him, and asked him to have the goodness to come in and stay till the search was over. He readily complied. His entrance into the house brought in the captain of the company, whose business it was to guard the outside of the house, and see that none of the inmates left it. This officer was Mr. Litch, the wealthy slaveholder whom I mentioned, in the account of neighboring planters, as being notorious for his cruelty. He felt above soiling his hands with the search. He merely gave orders; and, if a bit of writing was discovered, it was carried to him by his ignorant followers, who were unable to read.

My grandmother had a large trunk of bedding and table cloths. When that was opened, there was a great shout of surprise; and one exclaimed, "Where'd the damned niggers git all dis sheet an' table clarf?"

My grandmother, emboldened by the presence of our white protector, said, "You may be sure we didn't pilfer 'em from your houses."

"Look here, mammy," said a grim-looking fellow without any coat, "you seem to feel mighty gran' 'cause you got all them 'ere fixens. White folks oughter have 'em all."

His remarks were interrupted by a chorus of voices shouting, "We's got 'em! We's got 'em! Dis 'ere yaller gal's got letters!"

There was a general rush for the supposed letter, which, upon examination, proved to be some verses written to me by a friend. In packing away my things, I had overlooked them. When their captain informed them of their contents, they seemed much disappointed. He inquired of me who wrote them. I told him it was one of my friends. "Can you read them?" he asked. When I told him I could, he swore, and raved, and tore the paper into bits. "Bring me all your letters!" said he, in a commanding tone. I told him I had none. "Don't be afraid," he continued, in an insinuating way. "Bring them all to me. Nobody shall do you any harm." Seeing I did not move to obey him, his pleasant tone changed to oaths and threats. "Who writes to you? half free niggers?" inquired he. I replied, "O, no; most of my letters are from white people. Some request me to burn them after they are read, and some I destroy without reading."

An exclamation of surprise from some of the company put a stop to our conversation. Some silver spoons which ornamented an old-fashioned buffet had just been discovered. My grandmother was in the habit of preserving fruit for many ladies in the town, and of preparing suppers for parties; consequently she had many jars of preserves. The closet that contained these was next invaded, and the contents tasted. One of them, who was helping himself freely, tapped his neighbor on the shoulder, and said, "Wal done! Don't wonder de niggers want to kill all de white folks, when dey live on 'sarves" [meaning preserves]. I stretched out my hand to take the jar, saying, "You were not sent here to search for sweetmeats."

"And what were we sent for?" said the captain, bristling up to me. I evaded the question.

The search of the house was completed, and nothing found to condemn us. They next proceeded to the garden, and knocked about every bush and vine with no better success.

The captain called his men together, and, after a short consultation, the order to march was given. As they passed out of the gate, the captain turned back, and pronounced a malediction on the house. He said it ought to be burned to the ground, and each of its inmates receive thirty-nine lashes. We came out of this affair very fortunately; not losing anything except some wearing apparel.

Towards evening the turbulence increased. The soldiers, stimulated by drink, committed still greater cruelties. Shrieks and shouts continually rent the air. Not daring to go to the door, I peeped under the window curtain. I saw a mob dragging along a number of colored people, each white man, with his musket upraised, threatening instant death if they did not stop their shrieks. Among the prisoners was a respectable old colored minister. They had found a few parcels of shot in his house, which his wife had for years used to balance her scales<sup>6</sup>. For this they were going to shoot him on Court House Green. What a spectacle was that for a civilized country! A rabble, staggering under intoxication, assuming to be the administrators of justice!

The better class of the community exerted their influence to save the innocent, persecuted people; and in several instances they succeeded, by keeping them shut up in jail till the excitement abated. At last the white citizens found that their own property was not safe from the lawless rabble they had summoned to protect them. They rallied the drunken swarm, drove them back into the country, and set a guard over the town.

The next day, the town patrols were commissioned to search colored people that lived out of the city; and the most shocking outrages were committed with perfect impunity. Every day for a fortnight, if I looked out, I saw horsemen with some poor panting negro tied to their saddles, and compelled by the lash to keep up with their speed, till they arrived at the jail yard. Those who had been whipped too unmercifully to walk were washed with brine<sup>7</sup>, tossed into a cart, and carried to jail. One black man, who had not fortitude to endure scourging, promised to give information about the conspiracy. But it turned out that he knew nothing at all. He had not even heard the name of Nat Turner. The poor fellow had, however, made up a story, which augmented his own sufferings and those of the colored people.<sup>8</sup>

The day patrol continued for some weeks, and at sundown a night guard was substituted. Nothing at all was proved against the colored people, bond<sup>9</sup> or free. The wrath of the slaveholders was somewhat appeased by the capture of Nat Turner. The imprisoned were released. The slaves were sent to their masters, and the free were permitted to return to their ravaged homes. Visiting was strictly forbidden on the plantations. The slaves begged the privilege of again meeting at their little church in the woods, with their burying ground around it. It was built by the colored people, and they had no higher happiness than to meet there and sing hymns together, and pour out their hearts in spontaneous prayer. Their request was denied, and the church was demolished. They were permitted to attend the white churches, a certain portion of the galleries being appropriated to their use. There, when every body else had partaken of the communion, and the benediction had been pronounced, the minister said, "Come down, now, my colored friends." They obeyed the summons, and partook of the bread and wine, in commemoration of the meek and lowly Jesus, who said, "God is your Father, and all ye are brethren."

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### Notes

1. Slaveholders often claimed that their slaves were “contented and happy,” as Jacobs says. If slaves were “contented and happy,” then slaveholders could justify the institution of slavery to themselves and to others. Slaves, for their part, would have tried to appear contented and happy to their masters, because anything else would have risked punishment.
2. The militia, which consisted of all white men of an age to bear arms, still *mustered* or gathered for drill in antebellum North Carolina. The militia’s job was to defend a community or state against invasion or — increasingly, as slavery grew — insurrection. Typically, militia musters were casual affairs. In the wake of Nat Turner’s Rebellion, though, this muster apparently turned serious.
3. Whip.
4. A bucking paddle was a paddle used for soaking clothes in lye for bleaching.
5. African Americans with light skin were referred to as “yellow” (or, as Jacobs transcribes the dialect of poor whites, “yaller.”)
6. *Scales* (see photo) were used to weigh ingredients for food or medicines. The material to be weighed would be placed in one pan, and standard weights in the other. In 1830, shot (ammunition) would have made an excellent standard weight, since each piece of shot would have weighed the same.
7. Brine, saltwater, was used to wash the wounds of someone who had been whipped bloody. The salt helped to cleanse the wounds and prevented infection, but it was also excruciatingly painful and thus served as further punishment.
8. Apparently, a number of African Americans “made up a story” after being whipped or in hopes of avoiding a whipping. They believed that if they admitted to knowing something about an insurrection, their punishment would be lighter. They were wrong, of course, and these desperate stories only encouraged white violence.

Although it’s often hard to understand, victims of torture frequently make “false confessions” in hopes of ending their torture, a fact that been widely discussed in present-day debates about fighting terrorism. In fact, studies (like this one (see <http://www.learnnc.orghttp://truth.boisestate.edu/jcaawp/9901/9901.pdf>), available online as a PDF) have found that even ordinary coercive police interrogation can produce false confessions.

9. Bonded or bound to someone — that is, enslaved.