

TOWN AS TEXT: HARRIET JACOBS AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF LITERARY
AND HISTORICAL MEMORY IN EDENTON, NORTH CAROLINA

by

Lauren Magnussen
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Committee:

_____ Director

_____ Department Chairperson

_____ Dean, College of Humanities
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Edenton, North Carolina

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
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by

Lauren Magnussen
Bachelor of Arts
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Director: Lisa Marie Gilman, Professor
Department of English

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DEDICATION

To a better South.

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First, foremost, primarily: Mom. I quite literally could not have done a single thing without you. I have no doubt that you will cry when reading this, but I won't make fun of you for it. Crucially, my heart and mind overflow with gratitude to Dr. Lisa Marie Gilman, Dr. Keith Clark, and Dr. Stefan Wheelock for being the role models in graduate school I dreamed of having, and for giving me the safe space and encouragement to think harder and more critically. I hope I have done right by the three of you. This is also for Allison Correll, in whose literature class over a decade ago I first read Harriet Jacobs, and everything changed forever. I owe so many thanks, as well, to those who helped in the research process: Alexis Tobias-Jacavone, the Edenton Historical Commission, Virginia and the librarians and curators at MESDA, and the Inner Banks Inn for being my go-to writing nook (with the best grits in North Carolina). The friends, colleagues, family, mentors, and professors following have played foundational roles in my development as a writer, woman, and human. My life is better because of them; my life is full because of them. Heather Andolina at the Melungeon Heritage Association. Dr. Paula Blank, whose memory lives on, I hope, in a few of these pages. Brian Castleberry, fiction writer extraordinaire. Julie Corsaro for reminding me that I was meant to work in children's literature. Dr. Melanie Dawson, whose incisive editing and teaching form the groundwork upon which I write at my best. Kat and Der Gaughan, two of the biggest hearts who spoil me when I don't deserve it. Frances Ramsay Hanna. Dr. Betsy Konefal, for bringing me back to Mexico. Jasmine Lynch, always and in all ways. Charlotte Nteireho. Jean Offholter. Dr. Suzanne Raitt—you won't be surprised to know that I agonized over how to properly thank you and, of course, have failed. Margaret Redman, for whom this is also partially dedicated. Dr. Kara Thompson.

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ABSTRACT

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Lauren Magnussen, M.A.

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Thesis Director: Dr. Lisa Marie Gilman

In her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs's relationships with and toward the constructed, physical spaces around her—plantation houses, hidden crawl spaces, jails, and churches—are intentionally obscured to create a patina of anonymity in her writing, yet the relational distance between and among locations nevertheless creates a map of an antebellum Edenton, North Carolina—the town of her enslavement—that can be read alongside her prose. Against this half-real, half-literary cartography sits present-day Edenton, where her work and life are signified more by their absence in the face of predominantly colonial and antebellum historical markers placed downtown and accompanying well-preserved architecture of Edenton's elite. Jacobs's use of both strategically abstract location markers, along with abolitionist rhetorical devices aimed at Northern White audiences, suggest that she is keenly conscious of her ability to shield Edenton by what she omits as much as what she shares, and thus asserts the power she

has to literally name names. Her decision not to is a threat as much as an anonymizing tool for conceptualizing Edenton for abolitionist readers as an “everytown.” However, the Edenton outside of her text is not every town—its specific traits unique to the region both contributed to her escape and caused the climate that necessitated the departure. Jacobs further uses her Edenton as a stand-in for all other slaveholding communities, a metonymic tactic which urges the reader to scrutinize their own towns and, in doing so, to condemn the institution of chattel slavery.

INTRODUCTION—HIDE AND SEEK

“A small shed had been added to my grandmother's house years ago. Some boards were laid across the joists at the top, and between these boards and the roof was a very small garret, never occupied by any thing but rats and mice. It was a pent roof, covered with nothing but shingles, according to the southern custom for such buildings. The garret was only nine feet long, and seven wide. The highest part was three feet high, and sloped down abruptly to the loose board floor. There was no admission for either light or air. My uncle Philip, who was a carpenter, had very skillfully made a concealed trap door... The air was stifling; the darkness total. A bed had been spread on the floor. I could sleep quite comfortably on one side; but the slope was so sudden that I could not turn on the other without hitting the roof. The rats and mice ran over my bed...”

—Harriet Jacobs, from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

“Located on the third floor of our inn, tucked under the eaves on the mansion’s north side, the family-friendly Harriet Jacob [*sic*] Suite boasts extra space with a private bath in a separate and adjoining wing. With cottage white furniture that includes dresser/mirror, night stand, side table and sitting area that faces a Palladian window flanked by two twin-sized pillow top mattresses on antique spindle beds. Oversized bath with tub/shower, premium towels and robes. The ultimate getaway awaits in our bed and breakfast.”

—From the website of the Inner Banks Inn and Restaurant in Edenton

The Harriet Jacobs Suite—in some online and print publications, The Harriet Jacob [*sic*] Suite—and The Samuel T. Sawyer Suite are adjacent to each other on the top floor of the Inner Banks Inn, one of Edenton, North Carolina’s bed-and-breakfast properties. Gold-colored placards with their names engraved are nailed to each door, looking askant rather than directly at each other. Their homes in the 1830s were situated similarly; on King Street, both residences were a short walk from the other, with proximities close but separated by the divergent circumstances of their lives. Also on

King was the office of Jacobs's enslaver, Dr. James Norcom, and his plantation sat on Eden Alley, one street over from Sawyer's and Jacobs's houses. That said, much of Jacobs's history is about homelessness and displacement—she is moved as economical ownership of her physical person passes hands, and upon her escape, she travels along the East Coast, rarely settling long in one place between and among Northern and Southern cities. There is little evidence of her presence in Edenton that remains in situ, and while her grandmother is buried in an unmarked lot among private residences and the site of her parents' resting places unknown, Norcom is earthed in the town center with the rest of his relations at St. Paul's Church, where Jacobs baptized the children she conceived with Sawyer. Instead of matching graves, the duo has matching rooms, which typically run for over \$200 per night. The practice of creating her memory and the actual life events she underwent overlap in parallel with each other.

In her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs's relationships with and toward the constructed, physical spaces around her—plantation houses, hidden crawl spaces, jails, and churches—are intentionally obscured to create a patina of anonymity in her writing, yet the relational distance between and among locations nevertheless creates a map of Edenton that can be read alongside her prose. Against this half-real, half-literary cartography sits present-day Edenton, where her work and life are signified more by their absence in the face of predominantly colonial and antebellum historical markers placed downtown and accompanying well-preserved architecture of Edenton's elite.

Alongside the Edenton of *Incidents* are other versions of Edenton; other versions of Jacobs. There can be no definitive history or exploration of any given person or place,

but in aligning the perspectives and collocating them, we can expose connections that perpetuate or subvert the White racial hegemony that Jacobs, personified in her book as “Linda,” relate. In the process of curating her life story for the public, what she chooses to say and chooses to hide about houses and architecture in Edenton is ever-evolving and indicative of her intended audience, her psychology, and the town itself. In describing the environs and the ways in which enclosures both manmade and natural sync to her state of mind, Jacobs layers an emotional map overtop the Edenton of *Incidents* and the Edenton of North Carolina in which she lived.

The combined particularities of the built topography, environment, and design structure of Edenton, North Carolina, during the years of Harriet Jacobs’s residence—from the year of her birth, around 1813, to her escape in 1842—were such that both imprisonment and flight were made possible by small town traits of close quarters and tightly bonded community ties and architectural conditions that could conceal as well as expose. The same can be said of Jacobs’s interpretation of Edenton in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, where the same juxtapositions of confinement and freedom are heightened by granular details she gives of the spatial relations between buildings, people, and homesteads; the portrayal of the house as a place of simultaneous danger to and respite for her; and the choice to obscure Edenton’s identity and residents from readers. In this way, the first half of *Incidents*, taking place as it does in the town and its public and private spaces, is marked by memories and experiences shaped by a specific geography that simultaneously contains and provides opportunities for subversion.

Such patterns do not hinge on an author's explicit purposefulness. While Jacobs makes conscious choices in this type of (non)exposure—and it is clear in her letters with editor Lydia Maria Child, whose correspondence throughout the editing of the book is published in painstaking detail in Yellin's *The Harriet Jacobs Family Papers*—that *Incidents* was not a memoir written in an off-the-cuff manner or even in a brief flurry. Not every word or passage is likely to have been composed with the meta-knowledge of architecture, interior/exterior spaces, and her relationship to them. The composition was laborious and took place over a period of years, with extensive revision and editing by Jacobs alongside Child's mentorship, but even still, Jacobs as a writer is not—cannot—always be aware of the traces and sequences left behind in paragraphs and pages. Her readers—past, present, and future—on the other hand, did, do, and will.

Jacobs's use of both strategically abstract location markers, along with abolitionist rhetorical devices aimed at Northern White audiences, suggest that she is keenly conscious of her ability to shield Edenton by what she omits as much as what she shares, and thus asserts the power she has to literally name names. Her decision not to is a threat as much as an anonymizing tool for conceptualizing Edenton for abolitionist readers as an "everytown." However, the Edenton outside of her text is not every town—its specific traits unique to the region both contributed to her escape and caused the climate that necessitated the departure. Jacobs further uses her Edenton as a stand-in for all other slaveholding communities, a metonymic tactic which urges the reader to scrutinize their own towns and, in doing so, to condemn the institution of chattel slavery. This technique is appropriate for the topic and the time during which it was written, but it

believes the impact Edenton's streets, houses, land plotting, and topography had on her own narrative, real and as represented in *Incidents*. The arch awareness of Jacobs's prose betrays an understanding of genre, which is underscored by her use of strategically withholding and doling out locale information. Edenton's business fronts, plantations, churches, and other built structures play symbolic yet purposeful roles in Jacobs's creation of an Edenton that is opaque enough to lend a veneer of privacy to herself and living relatives and acquaintances, but detailed enough to provide clues and subtext for discerning readers to identify, especially in the town she escaped but never completely left behind.

CHAPTER ONE—THE ARCHITECTURE OF OPPRESSION

The baroque and deeply intertwined connections between the residents of Edenton, as portrayed in *Incidents* and in tandem with Jacobs's lived experiences, also extends to their relationships with and to the landscape and mapped environment around them. Jacobs outlines a cartography of the town based on association and relational structures as much as measured distance, a type of vernacular mapmaking referred to by Anne Godlewska and Neil Smith, and building upon Edward Said, as “rival geographies” (8).¹ Jacobs attests more than once in *Incidents* to Edenton's particular layout as being instrumental to her situation and decision-making:

It was lucky for me that I did not live on a distant plantation, but in a town not so large that the inhabitants were ignorant of each other's affairs. (29)²

How often did I rejoice that I lived in a town where all the inhabitants knew each other! If I had been on a remote plantation, or lost among the multitude of a crowded city, I should not be a living woman at this day. (33)

It is the very attributes of Edenton and the spread of the town in relation to its more rural areas that allow Jacobs access to the resources and contacts necessary for escape.

Isolation from areas of commerce and sociality would have made Jacobs more vulnerable

¹ Anne Godlewska and Neil Smith, editors. *Geography and Empire*. (Blackwell, 1994).

² Harriet Jacobs. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. (W. W. Norton, 2019). All direct quotations indicated in the text as sourced from *Incidents* refer to this Norton edition of the text, which reprints the 1861 publication.

to violence and fleeing exponentially more complicated; plantation owners often held more sway on archipelagos apart from external eyes. In the three decades of Jacobs's time in Edenton, from about 1813 to 1842, the port city on the banks the Albemarle Sound was heavy with maritime and industrial trading. This was possible due to Edenton's proximity to the water and the output of its enslaved population who labored on the plantations on the outer limits of the town and in the shops lining the wharf. While it was possible to purchase one's freedom and live somewhat independently, like Jacobs's grandmother, Molly Horniblow, it was not the norm. Free men and women did orbit Jacobs's life, but the agony of enslavement was a lifelong fate for most Blacks in the area. A colonial-era trading post that reached its zenith prior to the Civil War, Edenton was known for its ability to generate state and federal politicians (among them, Samuel Sawyer), and its prime environmental real estate, located as it was on the accessible Albemarle which ultimately leads to the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Despite the location, the population of Edenton has always measured only in the low thousands, which speaks to the feelings of surveillance and claustrophobia that Jacobs articulates in her writing.

After Nat Turner's 1831 uprising in Southampton, Virginia, Jacobs points out in *Incidents* that, "Colored people and slaves who lived in remote parts of the town suffered [reprisals] in an especial manner" (57). Though this doesn't diminish the macabre realities of slavery in towns and cities, Jacobs does make clear distinctions between plantation life and urbanity. Indeed, she overhears Norcom saying about her, "I'll soon take the town notions out of her head" (75), which reinforces living in downtown

Edenton as a separate psychology from a rural mindset, which he equates with not having “broke her in” (75). Norcom eventually takes Jacobs to his working plantation miles away from her support network and children. She becomes part of that “distant” geography that she so feared, away from familial protection and community oversight from all races. The traumatizing, brief stint outside of town is part of what jumpstarts her plans for escape. The descriptions of a grim and lethal passageway that links Norcom’s distance from Edenton proper gives an indication of Jacobs’s state of mind in this topographical isolation:

I had been three weeks on the plantation, when I planned a visit home. It must be at night, after every body was in bed. I was six miles from town, and the road was very dreary. I was to go with a young man, who, I knew, often stole to town to see his mother. One night, when all was quiet, we started. Fear gave speed to our steps, and we were not long in performing the journey. I arrived at my grandmother’s. Her bed room was on the first floor, and the window was open, the weather being warm. I spoke to her and she awoke. She let me in and closed the window, lest some late passer-by should see me. A light was brought, and the whole household gathered round me, some smiling and some crying. (76)

No window, room, house, or street is immune from signifiers or layered meaning in Jacobs’s telling. Everything about the architecture invites Jacobs in: the window is “open,” with the bedroom mentioned explicitly, its intimacy frequently underlined throughout the text in terms of simultaneous vulnerability *and* companionship. A “light is brought” and even the weather has become “warm” in the process of reunification. Here, the “fear” that gave “speed to [her] steps” has dissipated, although the omnipresent, careful attunement to who is around—“lest some late passer-by should see me”—justifiably persists even in the midst of this emotional reunion. In the same chapter, Jacobs refers to her grandmother’s home as a “...dear, old sheltering roof” (79). With

pointed metonymy, she is surrounded figuratively and literally by “the household.”

Conversely, that same invocation of the home and hearth is inverted by Norcom in his obsessive, recurring entreaties for Jacobs to become his concubine. The jeopardy when faced with geographic isolation and the very real danger that she is in when separated from kin and town is borne out in a different kind of house. That one of his coercive tactics is to lure her with a domicile of her own is telling about how a home is seen and manipulated by people in her community, as well as, perhaps, to his mapping of her psychology from years of sadistic inspection and surveillance.

In the blandest tones, he told me that he was going to build a small house for me, in a secluded place, four miles away from the town. I shuddered; but I was constrained to listen, while he talked of his intention to give me a home of my own, and to make a lady of me. Hitherto, I had escaped my dreaded fate, by being in the midst of people. My grandmother [Molly] had already had high words with my master about me. She had told him pretty plainly what she thought of his character, and there was considerable gossip in the neighborhood about our affairs, to which the open-mouthed jealousy of Mrs. Flint contributed not a little. When my master said he was going to build a house for me, and that he could do it with little trouble and expense, I was in hopes something would happen to frustrate his scheme; but I soon heard that the house was actually begun. I vowed before my Maker that I would never enter it: I had rather toil on the plantation from dawn till dark; I had rather live and die in jail, than drag on, from day to day, through such a living death. (48-49)

It is not the structure itself as a source of confinement that constitutes the main threat—writing that she would “rather live and die in jail” and ultimately confining herself in her grandmother’s garret for years—as it is the distance from her protectors. Jacobs puts emphasis on this fact when she describes the location not by its aesthetics or even the house itself, but in relation to the populated center of Edenton: it is in a “secluded place, four miles away from the town.” Jacobs continues, “When I found that

my master had actually begun to build the lonely cottage...seeing no other way of escaping, I made a headlong plunge” (50). When the “...cottage was completed” (51), Jacobs admits her arrangement with Samuel Sawyer—the “headlong plunge”—to Norcom. Sawyer’s protection and impregnation of Jacobs as a White elite with political sway in Edenton would keep Norcom at bay, though the latter would continue to find ways to stalk and oppress her, prompting her flight to the garret. Sawyer’s promises to free the children he sired with her is never fulfilled, further calling into question notions of consent between Jacobs and the man she viewed as her protector from Norcom. Sexual violence and obligation are intricately bound to the erection of the enclosure meant for Jacobs, just as it is the foundation of Norcom’s interest in her body. The association between the carceral cottage and his abuse is made manifest here; the degradation Jacobs feels upon thus having to resort to a sexual liaison with Sawyer to evade Norcom is framed also as a rejection of the house that he constructs. The representation of the house as a sexual maw—in which Norcom will, in Jacobs’s typically elliptical prose, “make a lady of [her]”—perverts the pervasive domestic, cultish notion of the home in the 1800s; this deviance, among his many others, is one Jacobs seeks to reclaim throughout her life. Biographer Jean Fagan Yellin argues that Jacobs had a lifelong “...dream of a haven for herself and her children. Grandmother’s refuge in Edenton could become the model of homes...” (161),³ which is echoed by Jacobs herself at the conclusion of *Incidents*: “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” (167). This “small house” of

³ Jean Fagan Yellin. *Harriet Jacobs: A Life*. (Basic Civitas Books, 2004).

Norcom's design sits in opposition to that vision; constructed to imprison, it would be used only for the doctor's abuse.

By contrast, the downtown streets of Edenton and around the wharf, surrounded as she would have been by residents who knew each other's intimate affairs (and frequently intermarried amongst each other)—as well as close and extended members of her family—allowed for the type of overt and coded protection that kept her alive and enabled her flight. Jacobs notes in *Incidents*: “[My grandmother Molly's] presence in the neighborhood was some protection to me” (28). Further, the endless ships in and out of port added to the useful liminality in such a way that communication between relatives in the North and around the South could send news, intelligence, and information on escape.

In tension with this benefit of closely congealed communities is its inverse: the actual fact of the proximity of Jacobs to her tormentor, Dr. James Norcom, and all of those who would be eyes and ears in his stead. The microscope under which Jacobs operated in Edenton hindered her even as it gave her the literal and figurative shelter she needed for survival and escape. Jacobs describes a stifling town where the density of streets and tightly-situated houses created an atmosphere of hyper-awareness in herself and in the residents of Edenton itself, wherein surveillance of Jacobs—and Black bodies overall—was the norm. This is compounded even more by Norcom's office and living quarters being located in the immediate vicinity of Molly's homestead (and eventually Jacobs's hiding place). When called to render medicine to a sick resident in town, Norcom, as Dr. Flint, “...did not return till near morning. Passing my grandmother's, he saw a light in the house...” (89). He, Sawyer, and other key figures in Edenton had

constant access to Jacobs and her family in town. Even in the garret, she is perpetually under the unknowing gaze of an obsessively searching Norcom. She frequently writes of eternally being under close scrutiny. Throughout *Incidents*, Jacobs comments regularly on this ritual, which occurs both when she is in hiding and in public, eventually growing to include family and friends: “No animal ever watched its prey more narrowly than [Norcom] watched me” (38); her “...movements were very closely watched” (40); “...Every one who went in or out of [Molly’s] house was closely watched” (84); and a family friend’s “...dwelling was searched and watched, and that brought the patrols so near me that I was obliged to keep very close in my den. The hunters were somehow eluded...” (125). The small town which provided Jacobs with a modicum of safety due to her nearness both to Molly and Sawyer was the same town whose residents were just as likely to patrol and report her behavior and actions.

It is often into and toward Molly’s house in Edenton—or the domiciles of relations close by—that Jacobs’s proximity to safety can be called upon. A moment is recounted in *Incidents* where Linda, Jacobs’s pseudonymous avatar and the narrator of the text, threatens to “raise the whole house” (71) when Flint physically accosts her in Molly’s residence. The specter of the “house”—by Jacobs’s usage, metonymically referring to her nearby family, rather than the literal, physical building—can be thrown back at her tormentor as much as it can be violated by Flint. When he tries to convince Jacobs to become his concubine, he attempts to entice her by building her a cottage. That he frequently enters freely and without permission likewise also makes Molly’s home a place of uncertainty and apprehension.

Recalling in *Incidents* a night raid after going into hiding in preparation to move into the garret, Jacobs writes of the intensity of prying eyes, so much so that spies seem to infiltrate perhaps the most intimate room in a household: the bedroom.

The search for me was renewed. Something had excited suspicions that I was in the vicinity. They searched the house I was in. I heard their steps and their voices...the movements of all my relatives, and of all our friends, were very closely watched...the extreme vigilance of my persecutors made it impossible to carry [escape plans] into effect. One morning I was much startled by hearing somebody trying to get into my room. Several keys were tried, but none fitted. I instantly conjectured it was one of the housemaids; and I concluded she must either have heard some noise in the room, or have noticed the entrance of Betty. When my friend came, at her usual time, I told her what had happened. "I knows who it was," said she. "Tend upon it, 'twas dat Jenny. Dat nigger allers got de debble in her." (95)

The sudden nearness of an intruder presumed to be allied with Norcom right outside of the door hammers home the breadth of his reach and influence, as well as Jacobs's vulnerability to watchful eyes in close quarters. The heightening of tension for the reader reemphasizes the high stakes, a suspenseful plot element that alludes to the Gothic genre of the sexualized lock and key, a repeating image throughout *Incidents*. For scholar Katja Kanzler, Jacobs "...takes narrative possession of those rooms literary conventions would picture in the Gothic mode—rooms that are neither fully ownable or knowable...Next to its appropriation of sentimental conventions, the text uses architectural conventions as a touchstone to both connect with its readers and to flesh out its indictment of slavery." *Incidents*, in its heavily domestic settings, makes ample use of the haunted house trope and melodrama, conveyed above in the form of mortal rather than supernatural peril.

Try as they might, the malefactor presumed to be “Jenny” cannot completely enter the bedroom, even though she has “several keys,” none of which “fitted.” The erotic, allegorical wordplay is a rhetorical trademark of *Incidents*, with Jacobs often using euphemisms or veiled language to tell that audience that which she cannot directly say. That she is placed inside a bedroom during this fright further underscores the relationship between nighttime terror and the Norcoms; both husband and wife frequently harassed and abused Jacobs in her sleeping quarters at night when she was under their roof.⁴ Community ties are also on display—Betty intuitively names the spy, alleged to be a fellow enslaved woman, “Jenny,” which suggests not only a preexisting relationship, but also a counter-knowledge of the comings and goings of others. Watching can go both ways, and Jacobs and her advocates repurpose surveillance as resistance, capitalizing on the knitted ties of Edentonians to carry out their own plans.

⁴ From *Incidents*: “Sometimes I woke up, and found [Mrs. Norcom] bending over me. At other times she whispered in my ear, as though it was her husband who was speaking to me” (32).

CHAPTER TWO—ANONYMIZING EDENTON

With *Incidents* primarily serving as a tool for an abolition movement that had a pre-existing canon of both Black and White authors in which to wedge Jacobs, the text was published as rapid-run, mass printing was only becoming more sophisticated, allowing easier and faster circulation of missives. Heralded Black contributors to the abolitionist publishing circuit prior to Jacobs's *Incidents* were overwhelmingly male and included Solomon Northup (*Twelve Years a Slave*), William Wells Brown (*Narrative of William Wells Brown, a Fugitive Slave*), and even her brother's own *A True Tale of Slavery*. As such, the (ex-)slave narrative as a genre was a pre-existing model which Jacobs drew upon as she wrote her memoir, knowing that her readers would also be familiar with the generic conventions. (Yellin reminds us that Jacobs's "...reading had been a help...narratives, like those by Frederick Douglass...were very important [to her]" [145].) While she conforms to devices frequently employed in such texts—direct addresses to Northern audiences; appeals to motherhood or family values; the necessity for White introductions; sentimentality contrasted with the macabre; Christianity as contradicting poles of hypocrisy and true salvation—there are deviations that result from the particularities of Edenton and its location, architectural sprawl, and intimate relational ties between Jacobs, her family, and members of the town.

Dealing with sexual violence and the female experience under slavery in a way that made *Incidents* singular in the market at the time (and taking ownership of her life story by writing it as a mixed-race woman), Jacobs did so as a result of both the circumstances of her upbringing in Edenton *and* by strategically obscuring that upbringing. In attempting to portray Edenton as a stand-in for many other Southern, slave-holding locations, Jacobs intentionally strips identifying features—churches, first and last names, streets, plantations—which ironically has the effect of amplifying the unsaid or openly hidden, thus in some ways creating a map for the discerning reader to decipher.

In a chapter in the abolitionist tradition of a blistering essay or broadside, and unambiguously titled “The Church and Slavery,” Jacobs refers to the racism of the “Episcopal clergyman” (61), and further separates this figure from the other “Methodist and Baptist churches” (61) in Edenton. Before introducing his pseudonym—“Rev. Mr. Pike” (61)— she distinguishes him by his denomination, which would have been instantly recognizable to Edentonians. Pike, the alias for John Avery, the minister of the Episcopalian St. Paul’s whom Jacobs describes in *Incidents*, is uninformative as a moniker; rather, the emphasis on the oblique actually pinpoints the physical location of St. Paul’s by the relationship Jacobs draws between it and the other churches in town. Later, Avery as Pike allows members of Edenton’s enslaved community to worship in his “own kitchen” (62) but only after he “...descended from his comfortable parlor” (62). Here, Jacobs uses the topography of the minister’s house to demonstrate Pike’s attitudes toward his congregants, thus reinforcing on a microcosmic level that which she

denounces as an overall trend in the Christian church as practiced by many Whites in Edenton (and, by extension, other slaveholding Southern regions, with Edenton leveraged as archetype).

There would have been little doubt, too, which members of Edenton were the ones attending a “Methodist shout” (62), although she is a little more careful when referring to “...slaves...[and] their little church in the woods, with their buying ground around it...built by the colored people” (60), although she allows for stronger identification once she announces that “...the church was demolished” (60) in response to Nat Turner’s uprising. In towns with a limited geography such as Edenton, this event is easily traceable. The oscillation between showing and hiding is a constant of *Incidents*, with Jacobs often alluding to the network of alternative space used by the enslaved as a form of resistance. Stephanie M.H. Camp captures this and underlines Jacobs’s usage of forests, swamps, and other natural elements as location markers:

Geography has provided both a way of seeing new aspects of enslaved women’s lives and the language to describe those sights...In violation of slaveholders’ orders and the state’s laws, though, enslaved people left...at night to the very woods and swamps that were indeed to distinguish legitimate and illicit plantation space...enslaved people ran away and created other kinds of spaces that gave them room and time for their families...Others simply looked for landmarks —distinctive trees and shrubs or outbuildings—that could guide their way along clandestine trails to secret meeting places. (6)⁵

Like Jacobs’s own studied verbiage and parsing of words, these pathways were often hidden in plain sight by appropriating “trees [and] shrubs,” with the language of

⁵ Stephanie M. H. Camp. *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*. (The University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

Incidents serving a similar linguistic purpose of co-opting the tools at her disposal—the written word—to elucidate a cartography of Edenton that exposes as much as it covers up.

Furthering the attempt to present an “everytown,” and in the process continuing to contradictorily anonymize and amplify Edenton, Jacobs omits the names of plantations, streets, and buildings, yet identifies them for an Edentonian audience by how they are situated against one another. Unlike Frederick Douglass, in whose eponymous *Narrative* William Lloyd Garrison⁶ prefaces that, “Mr. Douglass has frankly disclosed the place of his birth, the names of those who claimed ownership in his body and soul, and the names also of those who committed the crimes which he has alleged against them. His statements, therefore, may easily be disproved, if they are untrue” (10),⁷ Jacobs does the opposite by refusing to make named accusations—outwardly. The people in her memoir are given pseudonyms, and Jacobs often employs double entendres when choosing monikers, although it is impossible to confirm to what degree the sly language is conscious or subconscious.

These pseudonyms can be grouped by different characteristics, among them those that can be interpreted metaphorically (Norcom’s cruelty is borne out as “Flint” and his daughter, in pursuit of Jacobs as her property, is “Dodge” and a similar pursuant is a

⁶ In his 1845 prefatory note to Douglass’s text, Garrison also directly refers to tropes of the slave narrative genre, including the role of Christianity in slavery; macabre violence; clear appeals to the reader; and letters of introduction by prominent White abolitionists, the latter of which Garrison himself participates.

⁷ Frederick Douglass. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. (Penguin, 2020).

prickly “Thorne”),⁸ with others seeming to act more as placeholders (“Nancy” replaces the real-life counterpart of Molly’s daughter, Betty, who dies in Norcom’s home). Cornelia Willis, the purchaser of Jacobs’s freedom, becomes “Mrs. Bruce.” Whether this name was picked at random or was an inside joke for Jacobs can only be speculated upon. Meanwhile, an astute analysis of the similarly ambiguous moniker of Mr. Sands—Sawyer—comes from Donald B. Gibson, who posits that the name “...evokes images of the least substantial of foundation materials” (166).⁹ Whether Jacobs’s intention was aimed in that direction or not (Sands can just as easily be an in-reference or code intended for a private group or individual long since gone, perhaps even Sawyer himself), the intent of anonymizing remains and the origins of “Sands” will forever be subject to interpretation. Situating Sawyer in the language of architecture as Gibson does also doubles down on the association between Jacobs and the concept of house and home. In academia, her life is routinely seen through the gaze of domesticity—unsurprising, given that many of the events take place within a series of domiciles and one of Jacobs’s primary audiences to whom she wrote explicitly was the Northern White woman-mother.¹⁰

⁸ Jacobs may have repurposed “Thorne” from the religious allusions she makes early in the text of *Incidents*: “I wondered for what wise purpose God was leading me through such thorny paths, and whether still darker days were in store for me” (21).

⁹ Gibson, Donald B. “Jacobs, Douglass, and the Slavery Debate: Bondage, Family, and the Discourse of Domesticity.” *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: New Critical Essays*, edited by Deborah M. Garfield and Rafia Zafar, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 156-178.

¹⁰ Scholar William Andrews, in *To Tell a Free Story*, notes that Jacobs’s readers were “...nineteenth century whites [who] read slave narratives more to get a firsthand look at the institution of slavery than to become acquainted with an individual slave. Many ex-slaves were quite willing to accede to this expectation, especially when told by their abolitionist sponsors...” (5-6). Sandra Gunning reminds us, too, in her essay “Reading and Redemption in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*” that “...Lydia Maria Child

When it comes to her family, Jacobs presents her parents (Delilah Horniblow and Elijah Knox) only as avatars—“Mother” and “Father”—which seamlessly glosses over the complicated human relationships they had, though she does delve into the hyper-detail of the etymology of forced surname bequeathed onto slaves in compensation. Yellin’s exhaustive and groundbreaking scholarship in her biography of Jacobs reinscribed for the record the real-life family with the pseudonyms used in *Incidents*. Molly Horniblow—Jacobs’s grandmother and de facto mother—is displaced onto “Aunt Martha” in the text, which curiously severs the more direct lineage of grandmother/granddaughter and creates a more tangential aunt/niece tie. The distance here raises questions about how Jacobs viewed Molly’s legacy; dying prior to the publication of *Incidents*, even less of a burden existed to protect her grandmother’s identity. Their relationship was not unblemished. Banished from Molly’s house after divulging her liaison and ensuing impregnations by Sawyer, Jacobs is forever haunted by the expulsion and it, alongside other chastisements from abolitionists, made her reticent to share the personal details of her life story for many years. The sacrifice and devotion that each gave to the other is suffused in Jacobs’s prose and letters, but the friction possibly contributed to the shift from grandmother to aunt. Literarily, Jacobs keeps Molly at arm’s length, detaching her from some of the more stunning reminiscences in the text. (By contrast, emphasizing the importance of her brother, Joseph, in her life, Jacobs names her son in his honor, and likewise twins them in the text: both rechristened as

(who served as the narrative’s editor) and Jacobs’s white friend Amy Post...were clearly shaped by dual Northern attitudes to black women...Child recognized the problem of audience reception, no doubt from her own experience as an abolitionist author...Child reorganized certain aspects of the narrative as part of a strategy against audience alienation...” (135). See Bibliography for full citations.

Benjamin.) Maintaining a measure of control in this (un)naming process when enslavement was focused on withholding autonomy from Blacks, Jacobs can choose to show her cards and reveal her enslaver and all those complicit to her reading, abolitionist public. Acts of identity removal can function multidimensionally as radical, practical, and psychological. The live wire she possesses is a constant threat to expose her enslavers—although this power in relation to that of the Norcoms and a country resting on the bedrock of White supremacy is limited.

Of the very few named sites in Edenton with an explicit title in *Incidents* is Snaky Swamp, which immediately jumps off the page with its capitalized, alliterative moniker, unique in the chapters about Jacobs's early life. Indeed, North Carolina is never directly mentioned as the state of her bondage, but the cities and states *adjacent* are announced, and so too is the ecology of the area, which would have been identifiable to most East Coasters. Connecting Snaky Swamp to the wider topography of the swampland, she compares it to “the Dismal Swamp” (133), twining the two spots and further pointing to Edenton's real location in a circular manner. (Yellin identifies a specific site, “Cabarrus Pocosin” [47], as the analog to Jacobs's Snaky Swamp.) Describing an imperiling episode in the Snaky Swamp before she is spirited to Molly's annex, Jacobs gives a mile marker and notes the botanical spray she and her uncle must navigate to find a proper hiding spot. Such specificities may have been clues—or merely the details of a visual writer—but they nonetheless tie Edenton irrevocably to her written narrative as much as her literal, physical journey:

...they would hide me in Snaky Swamp, till my uncle Phillip had prepared a place of concealment for me...About four o'clock, we were again seated

in the boat, and rowed three miles to the swamp...I dreaded to enter this hiding-place. But I was in no situation to choose...Peter landed first, and with a large knife cut a path through bamboos and briers of all descriptions. He came back, took me in his arms, and carried me to a seat made among the bamboos...I had been accustomed to the sight of snakes all my life, but these were larger than any I had ever seen. To this day I shudder when I remember that morning...But even those large, venomous snakes were less dreadful to my imagination than the white men in that community called civilized. (96-97)

In the midst of the retelling, Jacobs is able to pull back enough from the painful memory to condemn not merely Whites in the system of slavery, but pointedly those in “that community,” Edenton. The town again goes unnamed, but the context clues peppered throughout the chapters before and after circle closely around what was then an often-used regional shipping hub. If Snaky Swamp was an in-group name for a particular place that would have been known only to the enslaved populace in Edenton, the implications of textual subterfuge are even more compelling. Barring (re)discovered sources, vernacular allusions are unconfirmed.

Not only is a wider swath of Edenton portrayed—and in the process, branching out to the maritime underground railroad’s impact on the region, largely due to the particularities of the estuary of the Albemarle Sound—but also Jacobs’s own psychological mindset, which she so frequently binds to the natural and architectural landscape of the town and its environs. Speaking with the sailor who is responsible for her safe transport northward after fleeing the garret, Jacobs’s emotional association between the swamp and terror is shown to have transplanted onto the location itself:

As we passed Snaky Swamp, [the captain] pointed to it, and said, “There is a slave territory that defies all the laws.” I thought of the terrible days I

had spent there, and though it was not called Dismal Swamp, it made me feel very dismal as I looked at it. (133)

The double usage of “dismal” in the passage is a straightforward pun, characteristic of her writing style, and this link between being psychologically dismal and the physical presence of the Dismal Swamp is not limited just to the outdoors. Jacobs also describes her hiding place as “dismal” three times in the text, referring to it as a “dismal hole” (97) or “...a little cell, dismal” (104). Having survived the heavily somatic sicknesses and snake bites during her time in Snaky Swamp, it is hard to miss how Jacobs interweaves the various bodily traumas she endured with the walls and trees that surround her. Distress, imprisonment, escape, the physicality of the garret, the swamp, and dense forests—in the background and foreground both, Edenton plays a foundational role. In situating events and sites together and in conjunction with her frame of mind, the interconnectedness of place and self can be seen repeating itself text-wide.

What’s more, there is a close association between predation in the swamp and predation under bondage, with acts of concealment—in the events of her life *and* in the way she pens the narrative—continuing to underpin so many of the confrontations and thoughts in Jacobs’s portrayal of her time in Edenton. The innuendo-laden swarm of snakes and their bites of consumption give way to a remarkable passage in which Jacobs must double back through a more populated area to get to Molly’s house and the garret above to be secreted away for years. Because of the short distance between the home and Sawyer’s—the same street, King—it is unsurprising that Jacobs would encounter him regularly, but under the circumstances of her covert travel and costumed with darkened

skin and male clothing, the intensity of proximity and disguise are brought to an apex, wherein the act of anonymizing becomes almost literarily literal:

Peter declared I should go home that night, if the devil himself was on patrol. They told me a place of concealment had been provided for me at my grandmother's. I could not imagine how it was possible to hide me in her house, every nook and corner of which was known to the Flint family. They told me to wait and see. We were rowed ashore, and went boldly through the streets, to my grandmother's. I wore my sailor's clothes, and had blackened my face with charcoal. I passed several people whom I knew. The father of my children came so near that I brushed against his arm; but he had no idea who it was. (97)

Taking this scene at face value, Jacobs reveals herself without being unmasked. Hidden in plain sight in this nearly surreal scenario, she bypasses the “father of [her] children” undetected. She has transcended into anonymity, the ultimate volte-face and a prelude to the continual push and pull in her life and writings of hiding and concealment; intentional, timed revelation; and the extremes of far and close proximity. Whether or not Jacobs is leaning into suspenseful hyperbole when Sawyer “came so near that [she] brushed against his arm,” the effect remains, and is another link in the chain of Jacobs’s perpetual playing with distance even as she recounts dangerous moments in her life.

In addition, she hints at a feeling of empowerment when writing about “boldly” traversing the familiar streets upon which she, as an enslaved woman, typically faced the daily harassment and degradation that was a normalized outgrowth of the machinery of chattel slavery. Though her face is “blackened...with charcoal” (and thus still highly visible in a community where hyper-surveillance of Black bodies often led to violence), there is clearly freedom in donning a male persona. The “sailor’s clothes” seemingly suffice as a façade, as Jacobs passes “several people whom [she] knew.” Being so near to

the wharf in a town inextricably linked to the fate of the water and those that cross it, the outfit of a sailor would likely have been a suitable affectation. Considering “every nook and corner” of Molly’s house is “known to the Flint family,” there is a sense that any kind of hidden parts—of the body, of the house, of the garret—can be subverted and turned into refuges, despite the trauma that they indicate and perpetuate.

The gestures at obscuring Edenton’s key players in her life—providing material with which to interpret her frame of mind, indulgence in symbolism, and priorities—also, in the process, obscures the parts of Jacobs that are so intimate that they cannot be anonymized, and thus they are completely excised. This is a conscious decision on Jacobs’s part, underscored in her correspondence with her editor, Lydia Maria Child, from which Yellin’s biography extrapolates:

Harriet Jacobs had become “Linda Brent,” but not to hide behind a pseudonym or to disappear under a fictions name. As “Linda” she had empowered herself to write about a life that as “Harriet,” she could neither speak nor write. But now that her book was actually published, she was eager to identify herself as its author. What she had written, she had promised her reader, was true. But looking at her work, she knew that she had made a great many choices about what incidents she would not—could not—bring herself to tell the whole truth about, and so had decided not to write about at all. She had composed her story with a reader in mind, a free woman who had no experience with a sexual history like her own...She would strip her narrative, clearing it of all the extras...Instead, she would carefully restrict herself not to what she had heard, but to what she herself had seen...She would, in fact, omit everything that might detract from the story of her freedom struggle. (144-145)

In tandem with this assessment sits the knowledge that Jacobs left an apparent trail of breadcrumbs that led to clear identifiers of her enslaver, biological father to her children, and a host of others complicit in the system of bondage, all while never naming

names directly. While true that she refused to expand on extremely personal, sexual details, there is nevertheless extensive information upon which to locate intimate aspects of her formative years. Truly, there is a hide-and-seek character to the prose that nods to what Yellin refers to as Jacobs's "delight in language" (123), which makes her wordplay and rhetorical choices laden with meaning, especially in a time when coded messages, subterfuge, and subliminal resistance were an everyday part of life as a bound woman in a slave society.

CHAPTER THREE—THE DEVIL IN THE DETAILS

Tying together the anonymity of Edentonians in *Incidents* with Jacobs's calculated use of the vague and the detailed throughout the text, the emergence of an invisible map underlying her description of Edenton and its surroundings can be gleaned from the hyper-specificity of her memories, written as they were years after they transpired and after undergoing extreme duress and trauma throughout. Rather than esoteric and seemingly innocuous specificities, these minute mentions actually suggest both a potential subversive seam in the memoir *and* illustrate the emotional link between her psychology and the physical spaces of the town. In sum, Jacobs harnesses her past for communication in the present.

Having sent Jacobs to his son's plantation to isolate her from her support system—and crucially, her children—Norcom unknowingly activates in Jacob's rendering what could be interpreted as a sub-topography of Edenton's outskirts. On one of the rare sojourns that Jacobs is able to negotiate in order to visit her children, she and her companion are "...met by a company of four patrols...we had time to hide behind a large tree. They passed, hallooing and shouting in a manner that indicated a recent carousel" (77). These rougher, wood-drenched pathways, as described by Jacobs, are literally unsafe as well as psychologically debilitating. "Again and again I had traversed those dreary twelve miles, to and from the town..." (78) is a refrain that seems also

intended to communicate her state of mind as much as the reality of the darkness of the path itself. As Jacobs's personified self, Linda overlays the map of her interiority onto the map she treads physically with her feet, using the environment and roadways to articulate her feelings and seeing in her surroundings that which resides inside.

Blanketing these layers of emotion is the unnamed plantation from which she is forced to come and go: Auburn, on the outer edges of Edenton, and part of the architecture that Norcom uses in his attempts to control her movements. She indirectly identifies it by referring to the location as being exactly "six miles" from the town, and later reiterates that the total to and from town is "twelve miles," as if repeating directions. Then, marking it by an environmental element, she notes that patrols stopped them halfway on their passage (so, roughly six miles on the road) and they seek shelter behind a "large tree." While perhaps elusive to most readers, these specific details may have been landmarks or touchpoints for in-group audiences. The mileage and tree marker(s) Jacobs outlines can aid readers in identifying which plantation she is referring to, alongside the context clues she doles out in the text. Indicators like these, and others explored previously, can be interpreted using what Joan N. Radner and Susan S. Lanser refer to as "implicit coding" (9),¹¹ a theoretical framework which, when applied to *Incidents*, buttresses the interpretation presented here of linguistic subterfuge and subversive map-making with words:

[A] context for implicit coding exists when there is a situation of oppression, dominance, or risk for a particular individual or identifiable group; when there is some kind of opposition to this situation that cannot

¹¹ Joan N. Radner and Susan Lanser. "Strategies of Coding in Women's Cultures." *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture*. (University of Illinois Press, 1993).

safely be made explicit; and when there is a community of potential “listeners” from which one would want to protect oneself. Sometimes, some context of danger or taboo is recognized first and coding is inferred on this basis... (9)

Lanser and Radner follow up with crucial caveats in terms of conjecture and the dangers of over-analyzing. Caution is fundamental when dealing with the delicacies of covert resistance in the past among those groups who were intentionally muted by a ruling class:

In the absence of explicit evidence of coding, one has to demonstrate that a coded reading is plausible. At the same time, the suggestion of implicit coding use ultimately remains an act of interference—one that has potential consequences for individuals and communities and therefore should not be undertaken without care. Who is to say whether coding has taken place in a given context? Who is to say what the decoded meaning is? What are the relations of power in which such judgments are made? If coding is a strategy adopted (consciously or not) for concealment, what will be the consequences of uncovering an act of coding? These are not merely academic questions; they involve the safety, reputations, and well-being of individual women and entire communities...interpretation is a powerful and literally consequential activity...specific acts of coding...might not necessarily be considered such by other interpreters. But in giving names to some available forms of resistance and subversion, we hope to make it easier to identify hidden feminist messages and to hear voices that might otherwise have gone unnoticed...while all meanings may be provisional, even provisional meanings have “real effects.” (9-10)

The fine details within *Incidents* thus take on new resonance when viewed through the lens Radner and Lanser propose. Though the audience for Jacobs’s writing was intended mostly for White Northerners and the abolitionist crowds overseas, even in Great Britain, not everything was for their eyes. The subtle nudges toward people and locales in Edenton—consciously or not—were potentially aimed at residents in her birth town, and possibly for the sake of incriminating the living relatives and tormentors still

residing there. The constant back-and-forth between disclaiming and teasing out the actual site of her past is negotiated in her diction and verbiage, which is sometimes so straightforward and microscopic as to be stilted.

The psychological bond between Jacobs and her text, with its methodical attention to the precise, allows such small memories and descriptions to also be read as mapping out a terrain that traces or alludes to the various paths and haunts where those in bondage could covertly traverse. Building on this, Camp transposes the rival geography onto the antebellum South, observing:

...the challenge for enslaved people was not one of repossession of land in the face of dispossession but of mobility in the face of constraint...Where planters' mapping of their farms was defined by fixed places for plantation residents, the rival geography was characterized by motion: the movement of bodies, objects, and information within and around plantation space...Much of the rival geography, such as woods and swamps, was space to which planters and patrols had access, and other parts, including quarters and outbuildings were places over which they also had a large measure of control...[this] provide[d] space for...resistance to planters' domination of slaves' every move. (7)

We see this in action during Jacobs's harrowing episode on the road to and from Auburn Plantation, when she uses colloquial language and expresses time and events using relational comparisons that would have been more meaningful to readers who had escaped bondage, or the select few still enslaved who had access to her writing and could read it (or hear about it from others). Employing what scholar Mark M. Smith would later refer to as "aural time" (175),¹² Jacobs's reliance on sound as visual and as an indicator of time of day is a type of vernacular language which can be interpreted subtextually:

¹² Mark M. Smith. *Mastered by the Clock: Time, Slavery, and Freedom in the American South*. (University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

“Luckily we heard their horse’s hoofs before they came in sight...They passed, hallooming and shouting...when we arrived on the plantation we heard the sound of the hand-mill...We were safely in the house before the horn summoned them to their labor” (77). The audible indicators are directional; the “sound of the hand-mill” implies that the mill is likely on the edges of the plantation rather than in its center, as they have just arrived. This identifier would also have the potential of helping to further identify the plantation, especially when in congruence with the rest of the details Jacobs provides. The call of the “horn” is a recurring motif in countless slave narratives and recollections, as it was the clock of the enslaver’s making, just as pocket watches or mantle timepieces would have been used to track the hours by overseers, enslavers, and their families. The minutiae almost morphs into hyper-realism, sitting in contrast with the pointed excision of any naming of the area, let alone the state, which is never mentioned in the text (although, an endorsement from “A Woman of North Carolina” on the first edition’s front cover is yet another wink that once more tells and hides concurrently). The push and pull of the materiality and ephemeral nature of time expressed here is another tension that Jacobs inadvertently—or not—exposes when she writes about the spaces around her.

The specifics of time bleed into the specifics of place in *Incidents*, albeit with different meanings and signifiers. Tangible, material objects and parts of buildings—for example, the precise notation Jacobs makes in *Incidents* of the implied sharpness of the garret’s “pent...tin roof” (100)—interrogate and interrupt her definitions of home. Discrete spots and hidden passages form a type of anti-household, defined by confinement and terror, a sensation which isn’t unfamiliar to Jacobs, residing as she did

so closely in Norcom's home for years. Gibson, too, picks up on the way architectural measurements, meticulous material details, and observations of the home-space are frequently, negatively interconnected with the words Jacobs uses:

Her physical confinement is metaphorically rendered in her enclosure in the small spaces characterizing her mode of existence during literal enslavement. Chief among these is her encapsulation for seven years within the garret of her grandmother's house. Prior to this "grand enslavement" is her "escape" into restricted territories, spaces of confinement but not homes. The places she squeezes herself into—spaces beneath floors, attics, closets—are far less than abodes, hardly houses, and absolutely not homes. In contrast to her grandmother's home, they are called in turn: "cell" ... "small room" ... "shallow bed" ... "retreat" ... "place of confinement" ... "den" ... "prison" ... "dark hole" ... "dungeon" ... "dismal hole" ... "grave" ... and "nook." (170)

In being confined in her grandmother's home, once described as a haven, the diction that in some scenarios could be interpreted as cozy or intimate ("retreat ... den... nook") is contrasted with the clearly desolate ("prison ... dungeon ... grave"). *Incidents* constantly plays with juxtaposition, and this un-home is a type of inversion that we see scattered throughout the text. Indeed, juxtapositional language comes across in the "lonely cottage" in which Norcom plans to psychosexually entomb her, contrasting the forlorn use of "lonely" with the tonal warmth of "cottage." The choice of language and its overall meaning *are* her message: slavery poisons everything (including words), and especially the family and the homestead. In hiding, she cannot live comfortably, because such a lifestyle is unavailable to her as an enslaved woman; academic Mary Titus reminds us that Jacobs "...expresses the diseased social system that surrounds them and

that denies them healthy and harmonious domestic practices” (204).¹³ Like Norcom’s predatory and manipulative conception of what a house is in relation to trapping Jacobs as concubine, the details of the way the garret is referred to are meant to direct the reader’s attention to the ingrained age of slavery and the inherent corruption it brings. Had she spoken in generalities and closely concealed the specifics of the site, different interpretations could be drawn. Jacobs, however, *does* speak in the language of the minute (and often). It is in this syntax that analysis must rest.

The placement of the garret above street level—“Some boards were laid across the joists at the top, and between those boards and the roof was a very small garret...It was a pent roof, covered with nothing but shingles, according to the southern custom for such building” (97)—gives Jacobs an almost aerial perspective, ironically on top of and above the situation while simultaneously imprisoned and tethered. The leitmotif of the “loophole,” as she refers to it, out of which she views the world during her confinement, operates similarly to her relationship with the town and its architecture of containment, oscillating as it does between a place of utility and danger. Gibson expounds, as well, on an interpretation of the garret as similarly exposed and unexposed: “[A] loophole is...a small opening in a *fortress* wall through which arms may be fired, a place allowing defensive action, and also, because it conceals observer from observed, unobserved offensive action. In other words, the term ‘loophole of retreat’ has about it denotations and connotations that are opposite in meaning. ‘Retreat’ means withdrawal, yet, in

¹³ Mary Titus. “‘This Poisonous System’: Social Ills, Bodily Ills, and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.” *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: New Critical Essays*. (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

connection with ‘loophole’ it suggests offensive intent. ‘Loophole’ may suggest at once evasive and direct action” (170). Given that a loophole is a backdoor solution to an ordinary process or practice, Jacobs continues to animate the text with linguistic trickery; her garret is, literally, a backdoor escape route. “Loop” and “hole” together call to mind something dynamic yet staid. A loop circles and moves, but only into itself by repetition; a hole implies movement yet is meant to engulf. The turbulence of these shifting meanings in Jacobs’s “loophole” remind us that the art of her language can at times be inseparable from her psyche.

How is the loophole a means of rhetorical trickery in the text? The loophole is a provision which provides a backdoor to ordinary processes and practices. How might this double entendre work here?

The emphasis on realism and fine attention to detail lends credibility to Jacobs’s claims, which were astonishing and near-unbelievable to her audience both then and still in some circles today. Her authorship has long been in contention and was frequently questioned upon publication, with Jean Fagan Yellin definitively confirming more than a century later Jacobs’s identity and writing of the manuscript. It can be argued that the precision of Jacobs’s descriptions and the coding frameworks known to be occurring—consciously or not—in subversive offense to slaveholding society are as much for her abolitionist readership as they were for those in bondage or in subjection to the racist, patriarchal hegemony in power. More so, these specificities of measurement and dimension show Jacobs in the act of blueprinting the house she will crave her entire life. Under the perversions of slavery, this house can never truly be a home, and the tethered

amalgamation of parts that she pieces together in confinement constitute a psychic and literary “house” built of spare parts—tin and wood and shingles—that can be scraped together. She constructs the loophole with a tool, carving a window for this unconventional abode. The garret, in its constant role as refuge and prison, is an incomplete home, and never safe, but Jacobs’s output of text—*Incidents*—and the abstract architecture and geography around her that she maps leaves her mark behind ephemerally, as a physical, permanent home would never be preserved.

CHAPTER FOUR—UNEASY AMBIGUITIES

HARRIET JACOBS

c. 1813 – 1897

Fugitive slave, writer,
& abolitionist. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*
(1861) depicts her early
life. Lived in Edenton.¹⁴

In 1998, a historical marker for Harriet Jacobs was positioned outside of the Historic Edenton Visitor Center in the umbra of St. Paul’s Church, directly across the street. There, more than a century earlier, Jacobs baptized her two children in an isolated, secret ceremony; there, James Norcom and members of his family are buried, with elaborate headstones denoting their status—both in the praise inscribed on the façades and the proximity of the sites to downtown Edenton and the church proper. In conjunction with the topographical orientation of their graves, which is unmissable in its centralized location and for the distinctive steeple above, the rich verdure for which Edenton prides itself is carefully maintained on the property, recalling nearby Atlantic South plantations surrounding Edenton and throughout the region, with its knotted, exposed tree roots, orderly brick paths, and lantern lighting. Being within the boundaries of the church guarantees exposure and upkeep for the gravesite of Jacobs’s enslaver; there is no lack of audience. The flow of vehicles to and from the wharf on Broad Street,

¹⁴ Transcribed by the author from life.

mere feet from the Norcoms—and more noticeably with bare trees in the winter—allow little privacy. Surrounded as the spot is by heavy pedestrian traffic and tourist-welcoming businesses, Norcom is, in a literal sense, still very much at the physical forefront of an epistemological town narrative that forms over time, a palimpsest, subconsciously and consciously, with and without intent. Jacobs’s historical marker installed at the turn of the century is yet one more layer added to the strata of Edenton—though ideally, not the last to call forth her memory.

The Edenton of the 2020s is heavily dependent on the past as a selling point to tourists. Having lost its status as a bustling trade hub with route closures and the pivot to steam power, the economy now rests on the perceptions and inclinations of newcomers and visitors. With clear historical markers guiding people to colonial and revolutionary-era landmarks and statues, fashionable gardens and architecture preserved nearly in aspic in their original condition, cerulean water vistas, and nostalgic-leaning shops, Edenton pitches itself as a quintessential Southern town; the marketing and advertising of Edenton’s governance today proclaims across dozens of examples of official literature and websites that they are “Named The South’s Prettiest Small Town.” (To wit, Bonnie Ramsey devotes pages of lush photographs and a few short paragraphs to Edenton in *The Most Beautiful Villages and Towns in The South*, focusing solely on colonial and revolutionary history; the narrative of the town ends there.) Not pictured are the streets with strip malls, abandoned buildings, and disrepair. Like much of America, towns are made up of a mix of incomes, and Edenton follows suit in its manicured downtown and back streets and people in need of care. The quiet would likely have been unfamiliar to

the hectic commerce of Jacobs's time, but the distortion that inequities in money create on the landscape is possibly just as evident now as it was in the 1800s.

Less than a half mile away from St. Paul's Church and Jacobs's historical marker, her grandmother, Molly Horniblow, has a resting place located in a lot on West Albemarle Street. Known as the Providence Burial Ground, her body lays alongside other notable Black Edentonians. A pamphlet distributed by the Penelope Barker Welcome Center on Broad Street describes it thusly:

The Providence Burial Ground was the final resting place for many of Edenton's free, enslaved, and emancipated African American citizens during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Church records indicate that among those interred are Molly Horniblow, an emancipated businesswoman who was the grandmother of author and abolitionist Harriet Jacobs, Thomas Barnswell, a substantial property owner, and Private Jonathan Overton, a veteran of the Revolutionary War. Modern mapping suggests the existence of between sixty and eighty gravesites.¹⁵

When I visited in February 2022, a bare mattress slumped against a tree near broken headstones; debris littered the perimeter. Most of the remaining markers are almost impossible to read, and the majority of burials are denoted with a simple white cross. Private residences and a funeral home surround the immediate vicinity of the plot of land. Without the scholarship of a small coalition of regional historians in and around Edenton, and students of Jacobs particularly, the site with its decentralized location and moldering architecture—what little of it exists—may have been lost to restoration. Tellingly, despite a fire in 1949 that destroyed significant structures of St. Paul's,

¹⁵ From the Historic Edenton State Historic Site's 2020 physical pamphlet titled *African American Heritage Guide: Edenton, North Carolina*.

including the steeple, it and other consumed parts were “...rebuilt exactly as [they] had been before the fire” (15).¹⁶

This tension is revealed in myriad other ways, across all aspects of life in Edenton, which are complications and reckonings that all communities encounter in some measure, though the fractures manifest in different ways. The fissures in a town that benefited and built itself on the forced labor of other humans, whose descendants continue to mingle with the relations of their enslavers, is reflective in the choices of what gets restored; who is memorialized (and where); the people in charge of making those decisions; and the access some have and others don't to history-making and its preservation. An organizational infrastructure held over from centuries of preferential racial bias toward Whites—and White-passing individuals—still reverberates within modern-day municipalities, state and local governments, religious groups, and other factions in Edenton that play a role in shaping how the town is portrayed in published literature, museum exhibits, and town-wide walking tour placards. Actions based in White supremacist thinking created the spaces for the segregated burials in the town, which prevail into the early 2020s, although acts of reclamation can create new spaces for contributions to the many narratives that compose Edenton.

Indeed, a close reading of the text of Jacobs's marker also uncovers remnants of the type of terminology that is more in touch with the vernacular of her era than the 1998 date of the signpost's erection: it does not acknowledge her freedom. She remains a “fugitive slave” in perpetuity—a stagnant yet transient state of flight which, while

¹⁶ Edenton Woman's Club. *A Walking Tour of Historic Edenton*. (Edenton Woman's Club, 2016).

certainly reflective of Jacobs's constant need to move due to financial constraints or threat to her life, conceals the crucial fact that Jacobs lived to see freedom and died outside the confines of chattel bondage and ownership. This feat was attained—to Jacobs's lifelong distress—by purchase of one of her employers, Cornelia Willis. While devoted to Jacobs, Willis nevertheless had the upper hand in what was structurally a transactional relationship resting on uneven power dynamics. Still, the choice of words on the placard minimizes her freedom's acquisition. Likewise, the brief, incomplete sentence which concludes the epitaph—"Lived in Edenton"—downplays both the extent to which Edenton formed the backbone of the plot of *Incidents* and the cumulative role of the town in enforcing (or sometimes resisting) her enslavement, upon which her infamy is based and thus the call for a marker in the first place.

Street names still recall old masters and mistresses of slaveholding Edenton who used forced labor to build the town, as well as enslavers or those complicit in Jacobs's escape: the Blount, Bond, Elliott, Hewes, and Iredell streets echo on in today's map; residents and outsiders alike continue to utter the names of those so intertwined with slavery when giving directions or seeking an address. In *Incidents*, Jacobs writes of an unnamed "'friend in need'" (86) who is described throughout chapters eighteen and twenty as a benefactress who hid Jacobs in the lead-up to her confinement in the garret. Ambiguously, this friend does not receive even a pseudonym, despite the role she played in aiding Jacob's absconsion. This ally (and slaveowner) is Mary Bonner Blount Tredwell, Sawyer's cousin. Her family's influence on Edenton can be seen in today's Blount Street, and the Borritz-Tredwell-Muth House is preserved on West Eden Street,

occupied at one time by Sawyer's relatives. Many families and houses in town intersected through marriage and architecture, and the constant shuffle of lending and leasing enslaved people around Edenton and among those same families led to psychological and physical bonds that persist today on the streets and in Jacobs's text.

Antagonists described in *Incidents* also feature on the landscape of current-day Edenton. As the enslaved had monetary value, distant relations often appear, trope-like, in slave narratives upon deaths of slaveholders with property to transfer. Due to the dollar worth of physical bodies, cousins of Sawyer's—including James Iredell Tredwell (Mr. Hobbs) and the familiar branch of his heredity, the Blounts, who encapsulate the internal schisms regarding slave-owning within families: Mary Blount Tredwell (Mrs. Hobbs), and Joseph Blount (Mr. Thorne)—were among many who would take advantage of opportunities to chase down an inheritance, legitimate or otherwise. Norcom's relatives would do the same, which kept Jacobs in continual states of homelessness and sometimes literal statelessness, described in detail in the latter sections of *Incidents*. The kind of object permanence that eluded Jacobs's life sits in contrast with the safeguarding of the tony estates whose legacies of profiting from bondage are what allowed for the financing and building of such structures.

The James Iredell House is one of the oldest standing residences in Edenton, dating to the 1770s, and was the ancestral home of the relatives of James Iredell Tredwell (the "Mr. Hobbs" in *Incidents*). That preserved homes of slaveowners mingle in the town isn't remarkable on its own; the American landscape is scarred with them. But, when access to creating a lasting, physical landmark that represents a particular story or figure

is unequal based on race, class, or gender, such houses become signifiers of erasure, whether or not the intentionality is based in the prejudice of individuals maintaining the site. Instead of exploring the plurality of narratives—including the enslaved people who constructed and ran the property—the Iredell House (and other locations in Edenton) play up the links to its colonial past, where the achievements of the age of revolution are heightened and prominently featured in its displays and exhibits. Harnessing the Iredell House’s status on the National Register of Historic Places, it behooves curators to lean as far back into the past as possible. Curators highlight the patriotic origin story for tourists, often opting to skip over the Civil War, through published literature available on site and across Edenton: brochures, guidebooks, walking tour pamphlets, web articles, and other distributed ephemera for events, promotion, and historic anniversaries. Likewise, Thomas Butchko’s *Edenton: An Architectural Portrait* focuses mainly on the Iredell House’s history during its early years and its revival after World War II, gliding past the Civil War and Reconstruction. Many portrayals of architecture and history in the town follow this pattern: colonial stories followed by twentieth century restoration. The North Carolina Historic Sites website describes Edenton thusly, as of September 2022:

Edenton has been called “the South’s prettiest town.” Established in the late 17th century and incorporated in 1722, it is located on Edenton Bay at the head of the Albemarle Sound, ninety miles southwest of Norfolk, Virginia. A town of 5,000 people, Edenton retains an extensive historic district with a wonderful assemblage of 18th, 19th, and early-20th-century buildings.

During the 18th and early 19th centuries, Edenton was a political, cultural, and commercial center in the colonies and in the fledgling nation. One of its *[sic]* citizens signed the Declaration of Independence, and another signed the United States Constitution. James Iredell, a local judge, was

appointed by George Washington to the very first United States Supreme Court.

Today, the record of accomplishment from earlier days can be seen in the public and private buildings along the streets of this remarkable community, and in the pride its residents take in their past and present. To take a tour of the North Carolina Historic Sites and view a free 13-minute video on the history of Edenton, visit the Historic Edenton Visitor's Center at 108 N. Broad Street, Edenton, 27932. Historic Edenton also offers tours of the life of Harriet Jacobs, who's been referred to as the “female Frederick Douglass.”¹⁷

Visit North Carolina (under the umbrella of the Economic Development

Partnership of North Carolina) writes:

The home of James Iredell is located in Edenton, a town rich in architecture and history since pre-Revolutionary times. George Washington appointed Iredell to the first U.S. Supreme Court. His earliest career included service as a British tax collector and as a state attorney general. The house is available for touring.

Edenton, however, is not monolithic; the historical memory of resistance and slavery isn't always an afterthought, but a substantive part of the town's history. North Carolina Historic Sites offers printed pamphlets—also accessible digitally—about Jacobs (*Harriet Ann Jacobs, 1813-1897: Self-Guided Tour of Her Edenton Years, 1813-1842*), and the same organization publishes online:

Featuring 18th and 19th century history, North Carolina's second oldest town Edenton was one of the fledgling nation's chief political, cultural, and commercial centers. The state's first colonial capital, it was established in the late 17th century and incorporated in 1722. Once its second largest port, Edenton provided slaves with a means of escape via the Maritime Underground Railroad before Emancipation. Today it features an extensive historic district with architectural styles spanning

¹⁷ See Bibliography for all digital sources.

250 years, such as the 1767 Chowan County Courthouse National Historic Landmark.

The African American Heritage Guide, distributed by the Historic Edenton State Historic Site electronically and in print, goes to great lengths to point out alternate sites for visitors to engage with and facts to learn, many of which are not standard fare for most official publications and blurbs about the town. When the Edenton Woman's Club, the publisher of Butchko's volume, released the second printing of *A Walking Tour of Historic Edenton* in 2016, the summary of the Iredell House follows the temporal pathway of colony-to-modernity, skipping over the murky in-between when the town prospered on a foundation of chattel slavery and stood with the Confederacy. Yet, the EWC does include Jacobs: "Edenton was the home of Harriet Jacobs, author, abolitionist, and fugitive slave, whose memoir '*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*' was published in 1861. This book brought attention to the plight of slaves" (111). There is no celebratory or honorary architectural association for Jacobs, although there are dedicated entries for the Josephine M. Leary Building, decorated like a wedding cake and one of the most colorful and noticeable fronts downtown, and St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church, now known as Kadesh AME Zion Church, a historically Black congregation in the process of reclaiming and reconstructing the building for worship as of 2022. By viewing the town through Jacobs and the Black accomplishments and culture occurring over the span of Edenton's lifetime, the politics of erasure are continually revealed. While she and other personages like her are not archetypal and should not be configured as microcosms, Jacobs is nevertheless a remarkable touchpoint

for the ways in which Edenton does and doesn't grapple with the public fight between an imaginary and actual understanding of the past.

On the boundaries of visibility and invisibility is the Edenton Museum Trail, a series of placards placed around the downtown and waterfront area which demarcate various spots and histories related to Edenton. It is billed as a walking history tour, with each plaque numbered for the visitor to follow, although each signpost notes that "...participants can begin or end where desired."¹⁸ That tourists will likely view them out of chronology as they walk the streets presents exciting opportunities to play with timeline and to ask questions about the synthetic ordering of historical events, allowing for complicated narratives to emerge in lieu of linear interpretations of time. Indeed, with the markers streetside and easily approachable, the likelihood of visitor interaction is high, allowing for frequent on-the-ground engagement with the past and its ripples into the present. That said, the majority of the placards relate the colonial and revolutionary history of the town, emphasizing what Edenton presents as their foundational role in the birth of the nation. Placard 2 expounds that "...[sea trading] brought fame and prosperity to Edenton and famous forefathers who saw promise here, chose to stay and, over time, became among our Nation's Leaders."¹⁹ James Iredell is among those listed.

There is enough Edenton for everyone. The overlapping stories and experiences of Edentonians over the centuries can exist simultaneously and in conversation with one another—and they do, in unsettled, uneasy ambiguities that testify to the lack of

¹⁸ Transcribed by the author from life.

¹⁹ Transcribed by the author from life.

singularity that is Edenton. The Iredell House and its neighbors should feel free to stand upright if and when the marginalized voices are held in the same high regard, in the same vicinity. In 2022, they are not. Molly's house is gone not just because the ravages of hurricane and real estate erode street fronts over time—her economic, political, and cultural status as a Black woman ensured that the benefits of inheritance law, property ownership, and access to housing which overwhelmingly favored Whites would not apply to her. Enslaved and freed alike were denied the ability to accrue generational wealth, unlike their counterparts who resided in mansions nearby and were able to afford their extensive upkeep or raise funds for the high cost of maintenance and omnipresent renovation. Edenton's constructed topography today reflects this egregious imbalance, but it doesn't have to.

CONCLUSION—DEEP TIME

In the early winter of 2022, the Inner Banks Inn debuted renovations to the Harriet Jacob[s] and Samuel T. Sawyer suites, consisting of new wallpaper, fresh coats of paint, and updated furnishings. The pastoral, prewar aesthetic was altered to reflect modern design trends: maximalist wall stenciling; functional use of space; embracing of natural light; unexpected pops of color; and repeating patterns. Previously, the room contained only picturesque objets d’art and miniature paintings of White women in antebellum dress holding parasols in stately gardens. The removal of this imagery that strongly evoked the romantic ideal of a monoracial, pre-Civil War South is a reminder of the potential that *all* sites have to change, regardless of the visage they once embodied. However, the placard names on the doors remain, side by side, commercially enshrining together a pairing that in real life was at best coercive with imbalanced power, and for which Jacobs left behind almost no information. Here, her remembrance is tied to the White father of her children under the gaze of her enslaver in the cemetery across the street. These metaphors are themselves a part of memory-making and are admittedly made anachronously, but in a more literal sense, it is impossible to ignore the commodification of Jacobs, yet again, and the dearth of materials about her available to the contemporary public who lives in or visits Edenton is eclipsed by the attention to

colonial history, deep-rooted racial-economical divides that still reverberate in the present.

Alongside the remodeling at Inner Banks is the debut of Josephine N. Leary Day in February 2022, which recognized the achievements of Black Edentonian Leary, an entrepreneur whose name justifiably graces the front of the meringue-like frontispiece that greets the visitor on Broad Street. In tandem, a Confederate memorial statue in the center of downtown is being relocated to another spot in Edenton—the memories will coexist, with one Edenton resident interviewed in the *Chowan Herald* “...suggest[ing] another alternative to the site after relocating the monument was to erect a statue to Harriet Jacobs.”²⁰ With the incorporation of Leary’s accomplishments enshrined on a plaque as part of Edenton’s Museum Trail, the diverse branches of the town’s history are slowly being allowed to reveal themselves. This history was always there, but the admission of those narratives into the public arena is only recent; Jacobs, with her careful concealment or revelation, knew that only certain stories could be told in 1861. Slowly, the untold may become the narrative to overshadow the rest. But more likely, the countless stories of Edenton will sit next to each other—always in tension, always in juxtaposition. Perhaps, in a future to come, they will reflect the layers and stratigraphies of time, rather than its contradictions and frictions.

The biography of the Great Dismal Swamp is measured in geologic time and sits in contrast to the more recent scale of Edenton, whose written history can be condensed

²⁰ Excerpted from Tyler Newman’s article in the electronic version of the *Chowan Herald* on February 9, 2022, entitled “Edenton Town Council resolves to move statue.”

into several centuries. In opposition is the swamp, where ten thousand years of peat deposits, although still juvenile in the scope of the planet's lifespan, contain unrecorded histories: of the previously enslaved refugees finding freedom and escape; of the Indigenous communities that called it home before European masts appeared in what would eventually be known as the Albemarle Sound. This body of water edges up to the town's perimeter, and a view of these tides would have been a constant presence in Harriet Jacobs's life, and was the means of her escape northward, as it was for countless others, including her brother and children. Those that decamped for the swamp instead considered slavery so torturous as to find the often-lethal hazards of flora and fauna preferable to the chain. Jacobs made it to the North in body, but the trauma of severe, long-term imprisonment in Edenton would affect her mentally and psychologically.

In Jacobs's autobiography, written by herself, the place of her birth can and cannot be the "everytown" that abolitionist literature frequently invoked in its attempts to win the sympathies of the unconvinced. Just as Edenton is not an archetype of the South, neither can the unnamed Edenton of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* be a stand-in for other towns. The desire for Jacobs to simultaneously bare all and withdraw completely are the book's calling card, and the agony of choosing what to share is clear in her extant correspondence. These challenges—for Jacobs, for Edenton's leadership and populace—across time but within the same space are inherent to the narrativizing process, and the stories of the oppressed that survive the centuries do so in the face of extreme adversity, though the swamp running near and neath the town looms over them all.

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BIOGRAPHY

Lauren Magnussen received her Bachelor of Arts in English from The College of William and Mary in 2016. She currently resides in Virginia and splits her time between academia and book publishing.