HARRIET JACOBS HOUSE

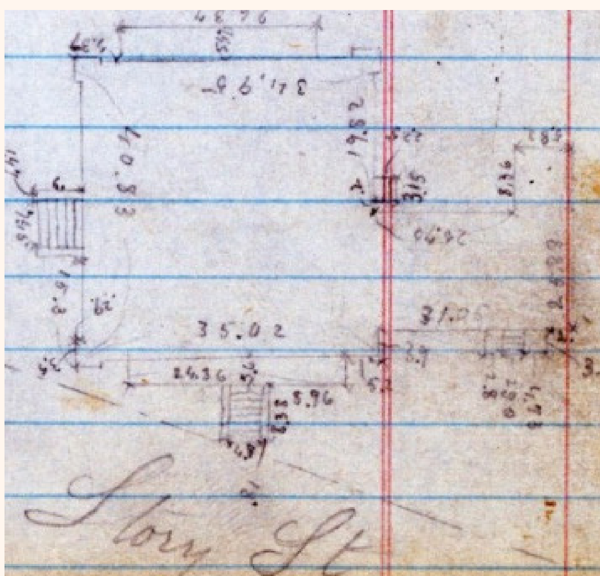
17 STORY ST.

FOUNDED 1873

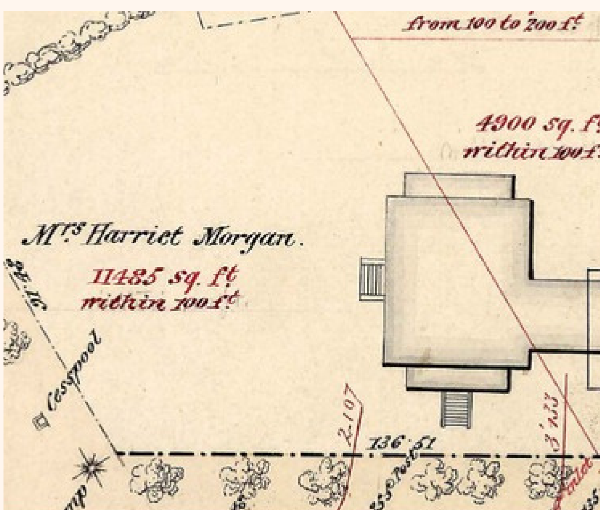
IMAGINED CONVERSATIONS

HOME TOUR

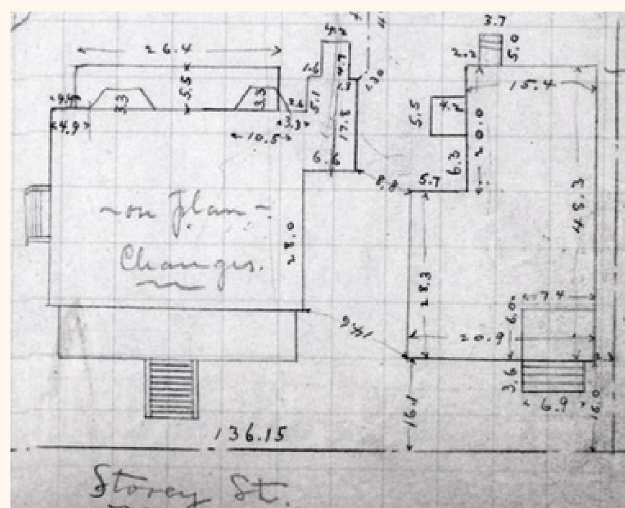
127 Mt. Auburn Street, ca. 1965. CHC photo by Bonnie Orr.



Nineteenth century plans of the home.



Cambridge City Engineer, Story Street Sewer Plan, 1871. The plan was updated by overlaying the relocated ell at 15 Story Street after 1882.



127 Mt. Auburn and 15 Story Streets, Surveyed footprints, 1895. Not to scale; measurements in tenths on a foot. Cambridge City Engineer, House Book 33/56.

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A FINAL NOTE

"Uncover your connection to history - click here to take the quiz* and find out which remarkable figure from Harriet Jacobs' house you match with!"

The cover of Harriet Jacobs' autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl (1861).*

*10 responses max per month

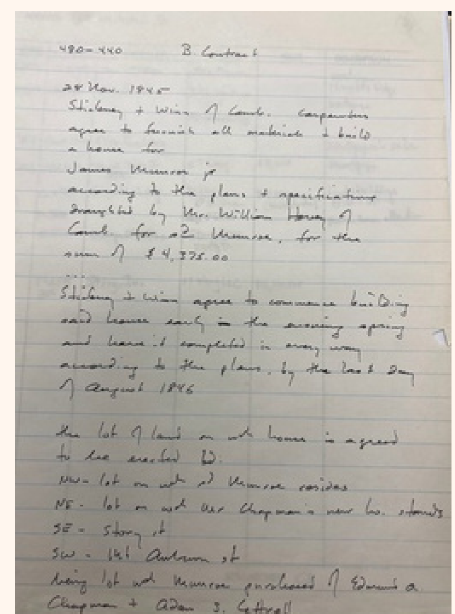
Courtesy of Christopher Mackin.

ABOUT

In this feature, we invite readers to step inside Harriet Jacobs' iconic boarding house, offering a glimpse into the vibrant world that once filled its rooms. Inspired by the polished narrative style of *Architectural Digest*, we explore the fascinating array of individuals who graced Harriet's doorstep—boarders, dinner guests, and fellow abolitionists alike—who wove a rich tapestry of dialogue and action. From close companions to powerful political figures, these figures played pivotal roles in both the house and the wider Cambridge community. Through this exploration, we aim to illuminate the significant, often untold stories that unfolded within these walls.

Follow along with us as we take you through the house.

Join us as we guide you through each room of Harriet Jacobs' boarding house, complete with evocative photos of similar historic boarding houses and captivating biographies of the individuals who might have occupied these spaces. With a keen eye on their backgrounds and passions, we delve into the lives of the boarders and guests, imagining the dynamic conversations and exchanges that once echoed within these walls. This journey offers a window into the stories and voices that brought the house to life.



480-440 B. Contract

24 Nov. 1845
[illegible] + Winn of Camb. carpenters
agree to furnish all materials & build
a house for
James Munroe jr
according to the plans & specifications
drawn by Mr. William [illegible] of
Camb. for sd Munroe, for the
sum of $4,375.00
...
[illegible] & Winn agree to commence building
said house early in the coming spring
and have it completed in every way
according to the plans, by the last day
of August 1846

the lot of land on wh house is agreed
to be erected [illegible]
NW - lot on wh sd Munroe resides
NE - lot on wh Mr Chapman's new ho. stands
SE - Story st
SW - [illegible] Auburn st
being lot wh Munroe purchased of Edward A.
Chapman + Adam S. Cottrell

DINING ROOM

The dining room would have been a space to host and feed official guests of the boarding house. Harvard affiliates, abolitionists, and travelers to Cambridge stayed in Harriet's boarding house and ate here.

Image courtesy of Linda Cabasin.

Image courtesy of Dr. Tiya Miles.

We have included images of Harriet Beecher Stowe's home here, which features a dining room that may exhibit similar styles to what Harriet Jacobs' dining room could have looked like.

DINING ROOM GUESTS

Chauncey Wright

by Kanny Ho Fong

Chauncey Wright (September 10, 1830 – September 12, 1875) was an American philosopher and mathematician known for his defense of Darwinism and his influence on early American pragmatists like Charles Sanders Peirce and William James. Born in Northampton, Massachusetts, he studied at Harvard, where his interest in science and philosophy grew, particularly after reading figures like John Stuart Mill and Francis Bacon. Wright became a prominent critic of Herbert Spencer and a defender of natural selection, contributing to publications such as *The Nation* and *North American Review*. He also lectured on psychology and mathematical physics at Harvard and helped found The Metaphysical Club in 1872. An agnostic and utilitarian, Wright influenced later pragmatists with his ideas on science as "working hypotheses" and his rejection of metaphysics. He died of a stroke at 45.

Conversations with Chauncey Wright, given his intellectual background, would likely have been deeply thought-provoking and stimulating, touching on topics ranging from philosophy and science to ethics and human consciousness. As an agnostic and defender of Darwinism, Wright would have engaged in thoughtful discussions on the nature of knowledge, skepticism, and the limits of human understanding. He might have challenged listeners to question assumptions, urging a scientific and empirical approach to understanding the world while recognizing the complexity of existence and the limitations of certainty.

Given his interest in psychology and evolution, conversations might delve into the nature of self-consciousness, the evolution of human thought, and the relationship between mind and body. Wright's views on evolution, particularly his defense of Darwinism, could spark debates on natural selection, the role of chance and necessity in the development of life, and the philosophical implications of these ideas for human existence and morality. He could have challenged others to think about how philosophical ideas influence everyday life, emphasizing practical applications of knowledge and the importance of adapting ideas to real-world circumstances. His occasional bouts of depression and alcoholism might have added a layer of personal depth to his conversations, perhaps revealing a more reflective side as he thought about his own human suffering, the search for meaning, and the tension between scientific objectivity and emotional experience.

DINING ROOM GUESTS

Raphael Pumpelly

by Kanny Ho Fong

Raphael Pumpelly (September 8, 1837 – August 10, 1923) was an American geologist and explorer known for his extensive geological surveys and contributions to the field of economic geology. Born in Owego, New York, he studied geology and metallurgy in Europe before embarking on a career that took him to Japan, China, Mongolia, and Siberia. He served as a professor at Harvard from 1866 to 1875 and later contributed to the U.S. Geological Survey, where he organized the division of economic geology. Pumpelly is best known for his work on the geology of the Gobi Desert, the creation of lake basins in the Canadian Shield, and his involvement in archaeological digs in Turkmenistan. Raphael Pumpelly and his wife, Eliza, boarded at Harriet Jacobs' house in Cambridge around 1870-71.

Conversations with Raphael Pumpelly would have blended intellectual rigor, curiosity, and a deep interest in the natural world. As a geologist and explorer, Pumpelly would have brought a scientific and observational approach to his discussions, especially with Harvard academics. Conversations with fellow scientists would likely have centered on his extensive fieldwork in Asia, the Gobi Desert, and the Canadian Shield. He would have shared his theories on geological processes, such as the formation of lakes in the Canadian Shield due to glacial erosion, and his work on the disintegration of rock over time, likely sparking debates with other scholars about the forces shaping the Earth's surface.

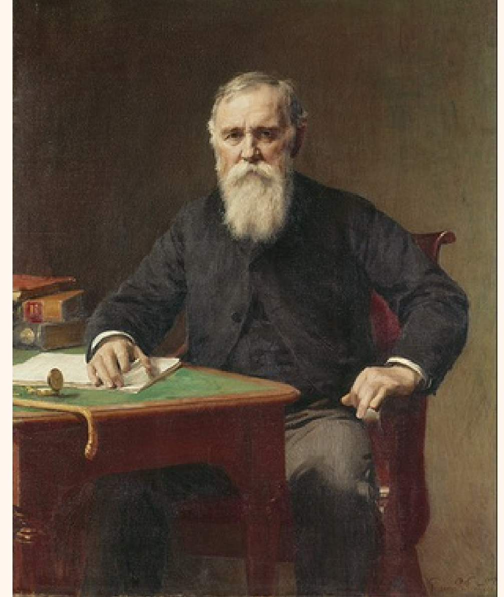
At the same time, interactions with individuals who boarded at Jacobs' house, and even with Jacobs herself, would have introduced a different dimension to his conversations. Jacobs would have brought a perspective grounded in the lived experiences of marginalized people and the effects of societal structures on the lives of the oppressed. Jacobs might have challenged Pumpelly's perspective on the role of science in society, prompting him to consider how the exploitation of natural resources might intersect with issues of justice, land ownership, and racial equality. In turn, Pumpelly might have shared insights from his scientific explorations that highlighted the connectedness of human societies and the natural world, perhaps helping to bridge the gap between scientific work and social responsibility.

DINING ROOM GUESTS

Christopher Colombus Langdell

by Kanny Ho Fong

Christopher Columbus Langdell (May 22, 1826 – July 6, 1906) was an American jurist and legal educator, best known for revolutionizing legal education as Dean of Harvard Law School from 1870 to 1895. Langdell introduced the casebook method, a teaching approach that requires students to analyze legal cases and apply reasoning to understand the law. Langdell also reformed the Harvard Law curriculum, extending it to three years and replacing the lecture system with one that prioritized student engagement. He rejected traditional apprenticeship in favor of a university-based education and emphasized the importance of a comprehensive law library. He passed away in 1906, and Harvard Law's library, Langdell Hall, was named in his honor.



Conversations with C.C. Langdell would likely have been deeply intellectual, focused on the intersection of education, law, and societal progress. As a highly respected academic, Langdell would have brought a rigorous, methodical approach to discussions, often emphasizing the importance of scientific reasoning and empirical evidence in legal education. His conversations with fellow Harvard academic boarders would have likely revolved around his revolutionary ideas on the case method, which required students to engage actively with legal texts and real cases rather than simply passively absorbing lectures. He might have argued that law, like science, should be studied systematically, with students compelled to use critical thinking to derive legal principles from case law, rather than relying solely on established doctrines and historical precedents.

In conversations with people who boarded in Jacobs' house, the dynamic would have shifted somewhat. Harriet Jacobs, known for her activism and firsthand experiences with enslavement, would have brought a perspective that highlighted social justice and the lived realities of marginalized people, which might have prompted Langdell to engage more deeply with questions of equity and the law's role in shaping social structures. Langdell's commitment to the "scientific nature" of law might have been challenged by the personal experiences of those around him, who could have emphasized the real-world implications of legal systems, especially for disenfranchised groups, one example being the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act.

DINING ROOM GUESTS

Huntington Denton

by Kanny Ho Fong

As a student at the Scientific School of Harvard in 1873, Huntington Denton's conversations as a boarder in Jacobs' house would likely have been influenced by both his academic background and the diverse perspectives of those in the house, particularly Jacobs herself.
Given that Denton was studying at the Scientific School, his conversations may have often revolved around scientific advancements, intellectual ideas, and the challenges of academic life. He might have discussed subjects like the burgeoning field of engineering, technological innovation, or emerging ideas in the sciences with other students and intellectuals of the time. The house, however, was also home to people with deep personal experiences of the struggles against slavery, racial oppression, and social injustice. Jacobs, for example, might have brought a very different lens to any conversation.

Francis C. Lowthorp and C.H. Lathrop

by Kanny Ho Fong

As law students boarding in Jacobs' house in the early 1870s, Lowthorp's and Lathrop's conversations with Harriet Jacobs would likely have been shaped by the contrast between their legal studies and her lived experiences and activist work. The two would have engaged in discussions about legal theory, the complexities of law, and the evolving landscape of civil rights in the post-Reconstruction United States.
Jacobs, with her profound personal experiences, would have brought a deeply human perspective to these conversations. She might have shared her views on the inadequacies of the legal system in protecting the rights of African Americans, emphasizing how laws often reinforced the status quo of racial inequality and oppression. Given the historical context of the time, their discussions could have touched on the recent passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, and the promises of equality and civil rights they represented — promises that, in practice, were often not upheld.

DINING ROOM GUESTS

Adams Sherman Hill

by Kanny Ho Fong

Adams Sherman Hill (January 30, 1833– December 25, 1910) was an influential American journalist, rhetorician, and educator, best known for his work as Boylston Professor of Rhetoric at Harvard University from 1876 to 1904. His most notable contributions include textbooks such as *The Principles of Rhetoric*, which shaped the first-year composition curriculum in U.S. classrooms and emphasized grammar, style, and clear writing. A critic of the rise of uneducated newspaper journalism, Hill advocated for a refined use of the English language and sought to cultivate an intellectual American identity through proper rhetorical training. His pedagogical approach influenced the development of rhetoric and composition programs across the country, leaving a lasting legacy in American education. Hill's conversations with other Harvard academics and boarders at Jacobs' house would likely have reflected his intellectual rigor and a deep commitment to the idea of cultivating a refined, intellectual elite through education.

In conversation with Jacobs, Hill would likely have found a respectful and intellectually stimulating exchange. He may have admired her courage and resilience, recognizing her as an important voice in the abolitionist and women's rights movements. However, their discussions would also have highlighted the contrasting approaches to social change: Hill's academic, even detached approach to intellectual discourse in rhetoric, versus Jacobs' deeply personal, lived experiences and less 'academic' prose since she was not given the same opportunities to access higher education and/or even the kind of schooling he may have had since youth. Hill may have been more focused on the structural means of informing change, while Jacobs might have emphasized the urgency of action and the need for radical reform.

PARLOR

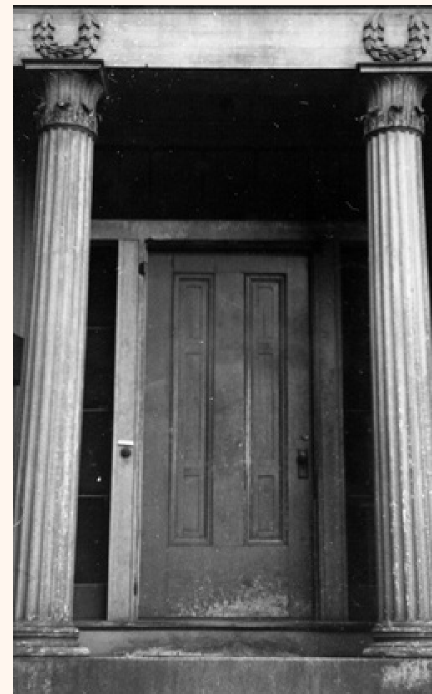
The parlor, in most homes of this style, was the heart of the house. Harriet would have had complete control over who spent time there, and she might have led the conversations which occurred. Though a piano, like the one pictured below, was probably too expensive for her boarding house, we imagine that songs, poems, or even stories might have been performed, friends gathering around to listen and encourage each other.

Drawing of the house, courtesy of Old Kinderhook Auction Company.

Image courtesy of Linda Cabasin.

We imagine the parlor as a space where Harriet Jacobs might have hosted friends and fellow abolitionists, coming together to discuss personal accomplishments and important moments. Pictured to the left is the parlor at Harriet Beecher Stowe's house.

After Harriet Jacobs escaped in 1835, she found safety under the roof of Nathaniel Parker Willis in Idlewild, located in Cornwall-on-Hudson, New York. Jacobs worked for Willis as a domestic servant, beginning in the late 1840s. She was also a nursemaid to his daughter Imogen Willis (Eddy). Jacobs' prior experiences as an enslaved housemaid and nursemaid helped equip her for the duties required in the Willis household, but it also paralleled and likely reminded her of the exploitative labor she had endured in slavery. Despite these parallels, her work with the Willis family gave her access to resources and connections that would ultimately support her efforts to secure freedom for herself and her children.



James Munroe Jr. house, 127 Mt. Auburn Street. Portico with fluted columns, Temple of the Winds capitals, and wreaths. D. Wetherell photo, ca. 1935.

WILLIS FAMILY

by Kalani Clark

In 1845, Jacobs traveled with the Willis family to England and helped care for their daughter Imogen. This trip offered Jacobs a chance to evade her former enslaver James Norcom, (his pseudonym was “Dr. Flint” in *Incidents in The Life of a Slave Girl*) who made several determined efforts to re-enslave Jacobs, including releasing an ad in the *American Beacon* newspaper offering a $100 reward for Jacobs’ capture in 1835. Jacobs’ trip to England provided her the opportunity to evade Norcom’s reach. Norcom had limited power in England, where slavery had been abolished over a decade earlier in 1834. The trip may have also offered Jacobs a reprieve from the racial hostility and legal oppression deeply impacting America in the late 1840s, leading up to the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850. Jacobs’ connection to the Willis family provided her with an incalculable network of support, guidance and safety on her journey towards freedom. Jacobs would eventually secure her freedom through enlisting the help of Nathaniel Parker Willis’ second wife, Cornelia Grinnell Willis, who purchased Jacobs’ freedom in 1852 for $300. Furthermore, during her time with their family, Jacobs began writing her seminal autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which highlighted the critical role the Willis family played in safeguarding her journey and supporting her voice.

Imogen Willis Eddy

by Kanny Ho Fong

IMOGEN WILLIS EDDY AMONG THE HARVARD COMPUTERS (IN THE CENTER, READING A BOOK). FROM HARVARD ARCHIVES, PHOTO W289692_1.

Imogen Willis Eddy (June 20, 1842 - September 4, 1904) was an American astronomer and mathematician who worked as a ‘computer’ at the Harvard College Observatory (HCO) from 1889 until her death. She was born in Oswego, New York, as the eldest daughter of poet and author Nathaniel Parker Willis and his first wife, Mary Stace Willis. Harriet Jacobs was her nanny and even mentioned Imogen under a pseudonym in *Incidents*, her book. As an adult, Eddy spent some time as a boarder, both with and without her husband, at Jacobs’ Boston and Cambridge boarding houses. Eddy was characterized as a "slight, delicate blonde with nearsighted gray eyes" and was noted for being "an interesting conversationalist and a keen observer." She married a doctor from New York but was widowed at a young age. She had one daughter, Cornelia Willis Eddy, affectionately called Nellie. In an 1896 interview, she emphasized the importance of a comprehensive understanding of mathematics for those working in her field, saying, “to be really effective, a computer must understand algebra, geometry, trigonometry, the principles of astronomy and the instruments.”

At the same time, a letter to her brother reveals a more personal side to her academic pursuits, noting that while she "never liked arithmetic," she found the "higher mathematics" used to solve the movements of stars to be a completely different, more compelling matter. She would have shared this enthusiasm with her peers, recounting how she avidly read about astronomy and was daily uncovering new practical knowledge in the field.

When she engaged in conversations with Harriet Jacobs, those exchanges would have been strikingly different but equally profound. Jacobs, with her experience as a formerly enslaved woman, might have offered Eddy a window into the social realities and personal struggles that were often far removed from the “ivory tower” of academia. The two women could have bonded over their shared experiences in navigating systems of power—Eddy in the academic world, and Jacobs in the realm of racialized and gendered oppression. Additionally, given that Jacobs had served as Eddy’s nanny and had played a significant role in her early life, their relationship might have also carried a sense of maternal instinct and familiarity, with Eddy perhaps seeing Jacobs not only as a fellow intellectual but also as a beloved figure of nurturing and guidance.

PARLOR

Nathaniel Parker Willis V

by Kalani Clark

Nathaniel Parker Willis was a 19th century author, editor, and poet. He was born on January 20, 1806, in Portland, Maine to devoutly religious parents, Nathaniel Willis IV and Hannah Parker Willis, both of whom had deep puritan ties. His father, who shared his name, was the founder of *The Boston Recorder*, which was the first religious newspaper in the United States. One of Willis' most prominent ancestors, Rev. John Bailey, was a nonconforming Independent minister in Lancashire, England. Rev. John Bailey was silenced and imprisoned in 1675. However, he later escaped and fled to Massachusetts in 1684, later becoming the first minister of Watertown. Rev. Bailey also became an associate minister at the First Church in Boston. When Reverend John Bailey died in 1697, Harvard's President, Increase Mather, preached his funeral's sermon.

The granddaughter of Rev. John Bailey, born Abigail Belknap, married a man named Charles Willis and gave birth to Nathaniel III (Nathaniel Willis Sr.) in 1755. Nathaniel Willis III authored a Whig newspaper in Boston named the *Independent Chronicle,* which ran during the Revolutionary War. Nathaniel Willis III's son, Nathaniel Willis IV, was, as mentioned above, the founder of the first religious newspaper in America, the *Boston Recorder*.

Willis IV was Nathaniel Parker Willis' Father, thus tying him to three generations of authors, writers, and poets with longstanding ties in the New England area. Nathaniel Parker Willis' long line of ancestors, many of whom were authors and outspoken revolutionaries during times of political unrest, war, and religious change, underscores the deep connection that he and the larger Willis family had to literature, notions of freedom, and the construction of New England cultural and religious values. The Willis family's ties to literature, religion, and advocacy for freedom could have provided Harriet Jacobs with a supportive and intellectually stimulating environment. Descended from generations of writers and revolutionaries, Nathaniel Parker Willis and his family's values aligned with Jacobs' abolitionist mission, granting her access to critical networks and resources to further her fight for liberation.

PARLOR

Cornelia Grinnell Willis

by Kalani Clark

Cornelia Grinnell (Willis) was born in New York in 1825 to parents Elizabeth Tallman Russell and Cornelius Grinnell, Jr. After her parents passed, she went into the care of her father's brother, Joseph Grinnell. Her uncle, Joseph, was a famous abolitionist and businessman, based in both New York and Massachusetts. He built his estate on County Street in New Bedford, Massachusetts.

Cornelia attended school in New Bedford and traveled to Europe with her adoptive father, Joseph Grinnell, for his business pursuits. In 1843, their family moved to Washington D.C., where Joseph Grinell served in the House of Representatives. During her time in the D.C, she met her husband Nathanial Parker Willis, who was a widower with a young daughter named Imogen. Cornelia and Nathaniel Parker Willis married in 1846, which introduced Imogen Willis to a new stepmother. Cornelia Grinnell Willis would give birth to five children, but unfortunately lost her youngest daughter at birth. For Harriet Jacobs, this marriage provided further employment opportunities with the Willis family, as she could continue working for their family in capacities like nursemaiding. Cornelia Grinnell Willis would later provide Jacobs with refuge in her family's New Bedford mansion in 1852, following the arrival of Jacob's enslaver James Norcom in Massachusetts. In 1852, Cornelia Grinnell Willis successfully purchased Harriet Jacobs' freedom for $300, freeing her from the constant fear of being re-enslaved. Harriet Jacobs' wrote her autobiography *Incidents in The Life of A Slave Girl* while living in the Willis house alongside Cornelia. While caring for the Willis family and Imogen, specifically, it's likely that Harriet Jacobs and Cornelia engaged in conversations about their shared experiences as women navigating a society dominated by patriarchy and slavery. As a philanthropist who grew up in an abolitionist home, Grinnell may have discussed the realities of slavery, emancipation, and social reform with Jacobs. These exchanges would have provided Jacobs not only with emotional support but also with a deeper understanding of her own agency in the abolitionist movement. After Nathaniel Willis' death, Cornelia traveled through Europe with her children, overseeing their education. Her youngest, Bailey Willis, graduated from Harvard College in 1870. During this period, Cornelia resided in Harriet Jacobs' Cambridge boarding house. Later, she moved to Washington, D.C., where she and two of her daughters supported Jacobs until her passing in 1897. Cornelia died in Washington D.C. in 1904 and was buried in Oak Grove Cemetery in New Bedford, Massachusetts.

PARLOR

Mary Walker

by Kalani Clark

Mary Walker was born enslaved on Duncan Cameron’s plantation in North Carolina in 1818. While enslaved, she worked as a seamstress as well as a handmaid to Cameron’s daughters. After being threatened with sale further south, she made the calculated decision to escape. During one of the family's trips to Philadelphia in 1848, Walker seized the opportunity to flee, leaving behind her mother and three children as she sought freedom from bondage.

In Philadelphia, Mary Walker worked as a seamstress for James Lesley. However, the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 endangered previously enslaved Black people residing in free states. To ensure her safety, Walker fled to Boston, where she found refuge with Lesley’s abolitionist cousin Peter Lesley Jr. and his wife, Susan Lesley. While free, Walker suffered from isolation and continued to mourn being separated from her mother and children. In 1859, Peter Lesley Jr. wrote a letter to Walker’s enslaver, Mildred Cameron. The letter stated: “I have seen how sick at heart she is about her mother. . .Her heart is slowly breaking. She thinks of nothing but her children. . . Her mother-heart yearns unspeakably after them.”[3]

Mildred Cameron never replied to Lesley's heartfelt letter. Many Northern abolitionists besides the Lesleys helped Walker to re-unite with her children, including Fredercik Douglass and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Walker’s son, Frank, escaped enslavement in 1852; however, she didn't reunite with her other children, Agnes and Bryant Walker, until after the Civil War ended.

Image of Mary Walker’s House on 54 Brattle Street.

PARLOR

Mary Walker, continued

Walker's life and journey aligns with Harriet Jacobs's experiences, especially the painful decision to leave their families behind in the pursuit of freedom. Both women also navigated their roles as caregivers while fighting for their autonomy in the Northern states, using their experiences to inspire and inform the abolitionist cause.

In Cambridge, Mary Walker became known for her talent as a seamstress and a caretaker. She faithfully worked for Sarah Robbins Howe's sisters for many years. Howe's sons, James Murray Howe and Estes Howe, purchased Walker a home in June of 1870 on 54 Brattle Street (now 56 Brattle) in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

While there is no direct evidence linking the two women, Walker's Brattle St home is currently measured at 0.5 miles away from Jacobs Cambridge boarding house on 127 Mt Auburn St. It is entirely possible that Walker and Jacobs had a relationship and conversed about their experiences and shared knowledge as they both lived in Cambridge and faced similar challenges related to both their pasts, as well as their efforts to establish a new life in a community still dominated by racism. Mary Walker died in 1872 at the age of 54. She was buried in Mount Auburn among the community of people she had lived with, including Sarah Howe and Howe's son Estes.

When John Jacobs, Harriet Jacobs' brother and a good friend of the Walker family, died, Agnes Burgwyn, Walker's daughter, and her husband, James Burgwyn, buried him in their family lot. In 1875, John Jacobs's niece, Louisa Jacobs (Harriet's daughter), bought a plot near the Walkers' and had John Jacobs' body buried there. Unfortunately, Walker's home on 54 Brattle St was not preserved as a historical landmark and is now the Cambridge Center for Adult Education.

PARLOR

Henry Adams

by Conner Huey

Henry Adams was born on February 16, 1838, to Charles Francis Adams and Abigail Brooks. A descendant of the prominent Adams political family, Henry pursued a successful career in the humanities, becoming a journalist and later historian. In his career as a journalist, he exposed political corruption. As a historian at Harvard University, he is considered to have possibly been the first to conduct a class in a seminar format. As part of his career as a historian, he wrote a well-renowned book of early American history entitled *The History of the United States of America 1801 - 1817*, a nine-volume work that has been praised for its historical and literary contributions.

As the son of Charles Francis Adams Sr, who was a leader in the anti-slavery movement as the vice presidential nominee for the Free Soil Party in the 1848 election, Henry's views on slavery were likely strongly influenced by his father's. Thus, he would likely have found sympathy with Harriet in her work as an abolitionist. Conversations around the house may have included a shared disdain for the practice of slavery.

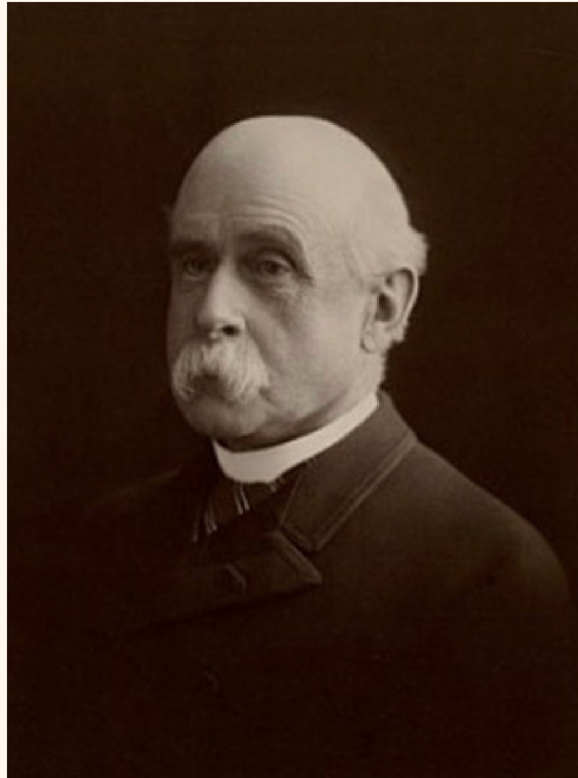
Following his studies at Harvard and as a resident of Harriet's boarding home, Henry briefly spent time working as the personal secretary to his father during his service as the US Ambassador to the United Kingdom, but he did not follow in his father's footsteps as a politicians. Pursuing a humanities career as a journalist and historian, Henry passed away on March 27, 1918, leaving behind a legacy as a historian with renowned publications, including his memorial that ultimately won him a Pulitzer Prize (posthumously), as well as a man who shaped the life of Harriet Jacobs' Cambridge boarding home.

PARLOR

Charles Francis Adams Jr.

by Conner Huey

Charles Francis Adams Jr. was born on May 27, 1835 to Charles Francis Adams and Abigail Brooks. A descendant of the prominent Adams political family, Charles served in the Union Army during the Civil War, ascending to the rank of brevet brigadier general, before pursuing a career as a railroad executive, concluding his career as the President of the Union Pacific Railroad. During his career, he also worked as a historian, being elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1871. He also became the Vice President of the American Historical Association in 1901.



Like his younger brother, Charles was also a student at Harvard University and lived as a boarder in Harriet Jacobs' Cambridge home during his time at Harvard. He graduated in 1856. As the son of abolitionist Charles Francis Adams Sr., presumably Charles' views on slavery would have been similar to his father's, making him sympathetic to the struggles of African Americans during the Antebellum period.

However, unlike Henry, Charles' views on slavery have been studied in greater detail, with scholars explaining that Charles argued "that slavery had accorded some benefits to black bondsmen." Consequently, it is possible that given Charles' status as a Boston Brahmin with limited connections to the practice of slavery, Charles's conversations with fellow boarders and Harriet in her home may have been less sympathetic to the cause of abolition.

Charlotte Forten Grimké

by Conner Huey

Charlotte Forten Grimké was born on August 17, 1837 to Robert Forten and Mary Virginia Wood. On her father's side, Charlotte descended from a line of prominent abolitionists, with her father being a member of the Pennsylvania Vigilance Committee, and her grandfather, James Forten, being a wealthy sailmaker who utilized his status as a wealthy, free African American to champion the causes of abolition and civil rights for African Americans. On her mother's side, Charlotte descended from enslaved peoples, with her mother Mary Virginia Wood being born into slavery in the South before being emancipated in 1832.

Born into a prominent abolitionist family, Charlotte continued the work of abolition in her own career, helping to found the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, as well as serving as a teacher to freedmen in South Carolina during and following the Civil War.

In her personal life, Charlotte married pastor and fellow abolitionist Francis Grimké in 1878. They lost a child just five months following their daughter's birth. Charlotte aided her husband's work in ministry, building networks to support African American community members in Washington D.C.

At some point, Charlotte and Harriet became acquainted and ultimately friends, with Harriet inviting Charlotte to holiday dinners at her boarding house. It is likely that this friendship was rooted in their shared experiences as women who had faced racial oppression, although the manners in which they have experienced this racial oppression were different. Indeed, Charlotte, as the free-born daughter of a prominent abolitionist family, had life experiences that were drastically different from Harriet's, who was a formerly enslaved woman. However, Charlotte may have been able to empathize at a more personal level given her mother's experience as a formerly enslaved woman. As an educated woman of color and a teacher, Charlotte may have encouraged Harriet to discuss her life experiences and translate them into written format so that others can learn from her experiences beyond their lifetimes.

PARLOR

Julia Ann Wilbur

by Kalani Clark

Julia Ann Wilbur was born in 1815 to Mary Lapham Wilbur and Steven Wilbur. She grew up in a Quaker family of farmers in upstate New York. Wilbur later became one of the first women to work in the U.S. Patent Office. She also worked in Rochester, New York where she participated in antislavery and women's rights conferences and meetings. She became a member of the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society in the early 1850s, and in 1862 Wilbur became a paid freedmen's agent, traveling to Alexandria, Virginia to continue her work as an abolitionist.

In 1865, Wilbur moved to Washington, D.C., where she would meet Harriet Jacobs. Between 1863 and 1865, Jacobs was working in Alexandria, Virginia, where she and Julia Wilbur worked as relief agents, operating a clothing room near Washington and Wolfe Streets. They lived in a duplex that served a variety of functions, operating as a classroom, a small hospital, and even living quarters for freedpeople and relief workers of the North. Jacobs and Wilbur occasionally lived upstairs, at different times, while working to assist the newly emancipated community. During the Civil War, this work became too dangerous for Jacobs, thus prompting her to leave Washington D.C. and settle back into the house of Nathaniel Parker Willis, with her daughter Louisa.

Harriet Jacobs and Julia Wilbur likely formed a close partnership rooted in their shared commitment to supporting freedpeople during the Civil War. Their conversations may have revolved around strategies to distribute resources, managing the clothing room, and addressing the needs of the free Black community in the area. Given Jacobs' personal history as an enslaved person in North Carolina and Wilbur's abolitionist background, they likely exchanged insights on the challenges and opportunities of aiding freedpeople in the South while supporting each other. Their paths having crossed in 1865, which was a politically and socially uncertain time for Black people in America, Jacobs and Wilbur likely discussed the urgent needs of freedpeople and strategies to empower the Black community during a period of great transition, the beginning of the Civil War.

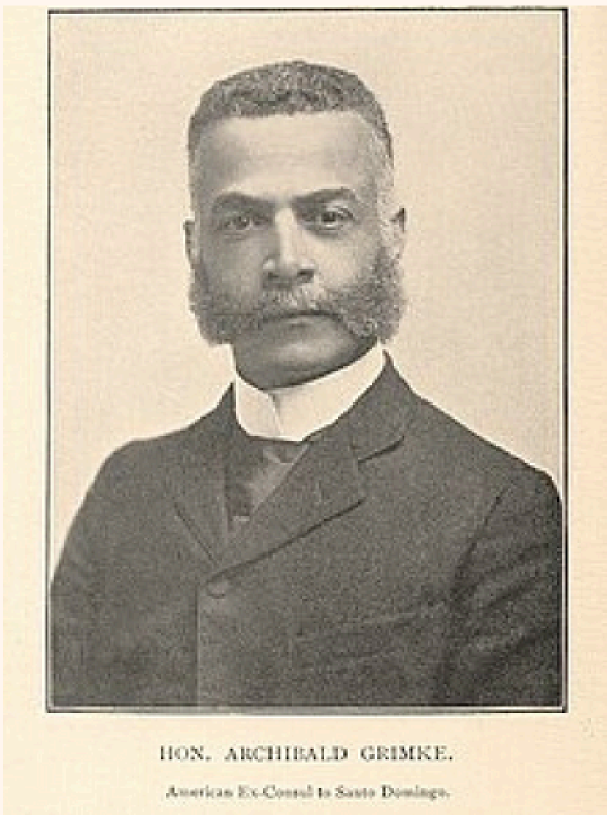
PARLOR

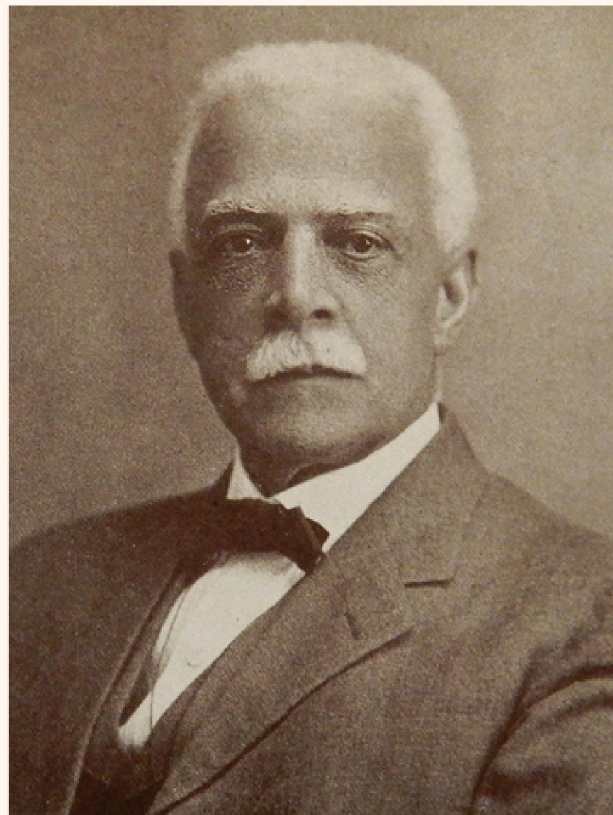
Archibald “Archie” Henry Grimké

by Kanny Ho Fong

Archibald "Archie" Grimke was a prominent attorney, civil rights activist, and co-founder of the NAACP, who graduated from Harvard Law School in 1874. Born with a complex family legacy, with ties to both the slaveholding South and abolitionist reformers, Grimké navigated the challenges of his heritage as the Black son of a white enslaver and a mother who had endured enslavement.

He went on to serve as consul to the Dominican Republic under President Cleveland and became president of the NAACP's Washington, D.C., branch, working to confront racial inequality despite the era's pervasive practices of segregation and disenfranchisement. Grimké's conversations with other Harvard academics and fellow boarders at Jacobs' house would have been deeply shaped by the complexities of his background and the social dynamics of his time. Given his unique position as both a member of a prominent abolitionist family and a Black man raised in the South, he likely engaged in discussions that highlighted the tensions between the intellectual ideals of the time and the harsh realities of racial inequality.





PARLOR

Archibald “Archie” Henry Grimké, continued

In conversations with other residents of the house, a space that may have included both abolitionists and freedpeople, Grimké would have encountered a range of perspectives on freedom and justice. Jacobs herself, who had endured enslavement and witnessed the harshest aspects of racial oppression, might have shared her personal stories and perhaps felt solidarity with Grimké and his background. He might have found himself engaged in exchanges over the pace of social change, with some arguing for more radical action as they expressed the painful reality of life under the persistent grip of racial violence and disenfranchisement and others perhaps prescribing a more tempered kind of change. Grimké’s position as an educated Black man from a family with both slaveholding and abolitionist legacies likely made him a figure of fascination and, at times, tension in these discussions, as he navigated the complexities of identity, heritage, and the struggle for racial justice in post-Civil War America. Grimké, in turn, might have shared complex feelings about his family’s history and his own position as a Black man educated at Harvard. He would have been acutely aware of the contradictions in his background—being descended from both an elite Southern slaveholding family and famous abolitionists, like his aunts Sarah and Angelina Grimké.

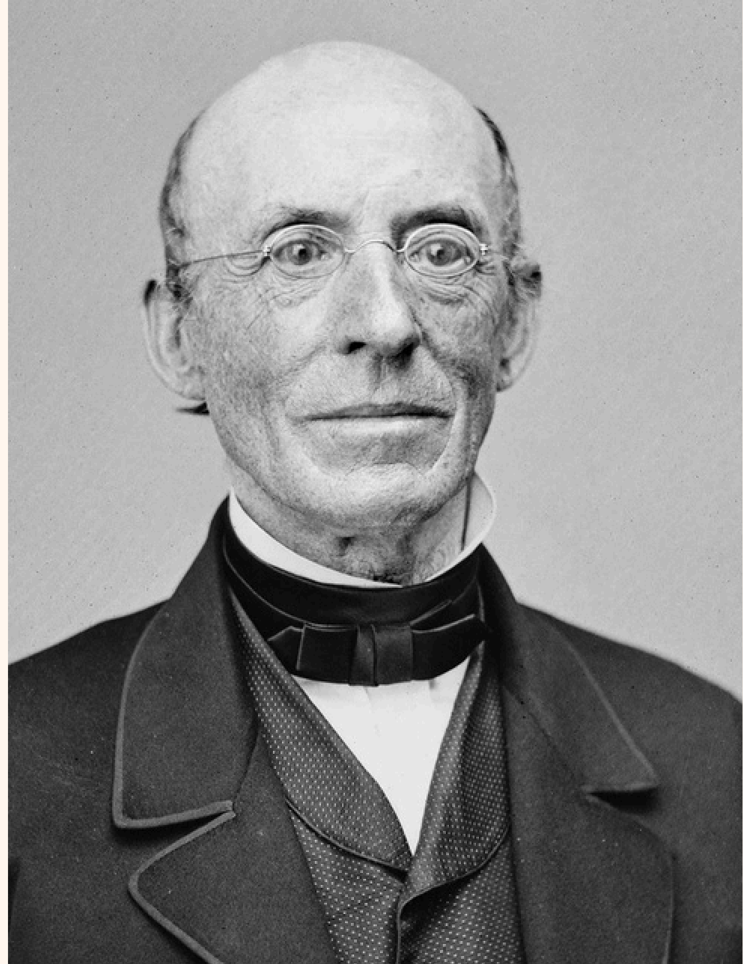
Jacobs might have helped him better understand the lived experiences of Black people who had been denied any form of education or opportunity. She could have challenged him to think beyond intellectual arguments and consider the practical, everyday struggles of Black people in the South, especially women, after emancipation. Their conversations would have likely been a mix of shared understanding, where Grimké’s intellect met Jacobs’ lived experiences, accompanied by moments of tension, as Grimké confronted his own privilege as an educated man in a time of ongoing racial violence. Both would have been concerned with the racial uplift and liberation of Black people, but with different focuses: Grimké as an advocate for legal and intellectual reform, and Jacobs as a witness to the everyday oppression of Black people, especially women, in the South. Ultimately, their dialogues might have been an enriching exchange, where intellectual theory met the harsh realities of life under racial oppression.

PARLOR

by Conner Huey

William Lloyd Garrison

William Lloyd Garrison was an abolitionist leader born on December 10, 1805. From a young age, Garrison became involved in the abolitionist movement, shifting from supporting gradualist views in the movement to becoming an ardent abolitionist. To this end, initially, he was a member of the American Colonization Society, which promoted the resettlement of free African Americans to what is now Liberia in West Africa, but he recanted his views, and in 1832, founded what would become the American Anti-Slavery Society, which advocated for immediate abolition of slavery. As part of his abolitionist activities, Garrison also founded the well-known *The Liberator* newspaper, an anti-slavery newspaper that published works and was widely read by leading abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass. Further demonstrating his openness to changing his views, while he was initially a Christian pacifist who opposed American involvement in war, at the outbreak of the Civil War, Garrison supported Lincoln's efforts to preserve the Union.



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PARLOR

William Lloyd Garrison, continued

As part of his abolition work, Garrison became acquainted with numerous figures within the abolitionist community, including Harriet Jacobs. They first met in June 1862, at a yearly meeting of the Progressive Friends of Longwood, PA, where Garrison was leading efforts to encourage Lincoln to push for immediate emancipation of all slaves. Following this meeting, Garrison enlisted Jacobs as a correspondent for *The Liberator,* where her first story was reporting on slavery in the nation's Capitol.

Beyond being her employer, Garrison was also a boarder in Jacobs' 10 Trowbridge boarding home. Given their shared commitment to abolitionism and a professional working relationship, it is likely that in conversations around the dinner table in the boarding home, both Garrison and Jacobs would have had deep respect for each other as abolitionist leaders. The dinner table could have been a venue where the two leaders could have discussed salient issues pertaining to abolitionism and future articles for *The Liberator*.

PRIVATE QUARTERS

We imagine Harriet's private quarters as a space only for family. She would have found peace and respite in her space, welcoming the people she loved and spending time to care for herself.

Images of the banister and windows within the boarding house today. Courtesy of Christopher Mackin and Saffron Sener.

We have chosen to include images of details in the space today. We imagine Harriet and her family climbing these stairs and looking out these windows, savoring her control over the house and experiences within. The above photo is courtesy of Christopher Mackin, the left images of Saffron Sener.

FAMILY SPACE

John Swanson Jacobs

by Agatha Nyarko

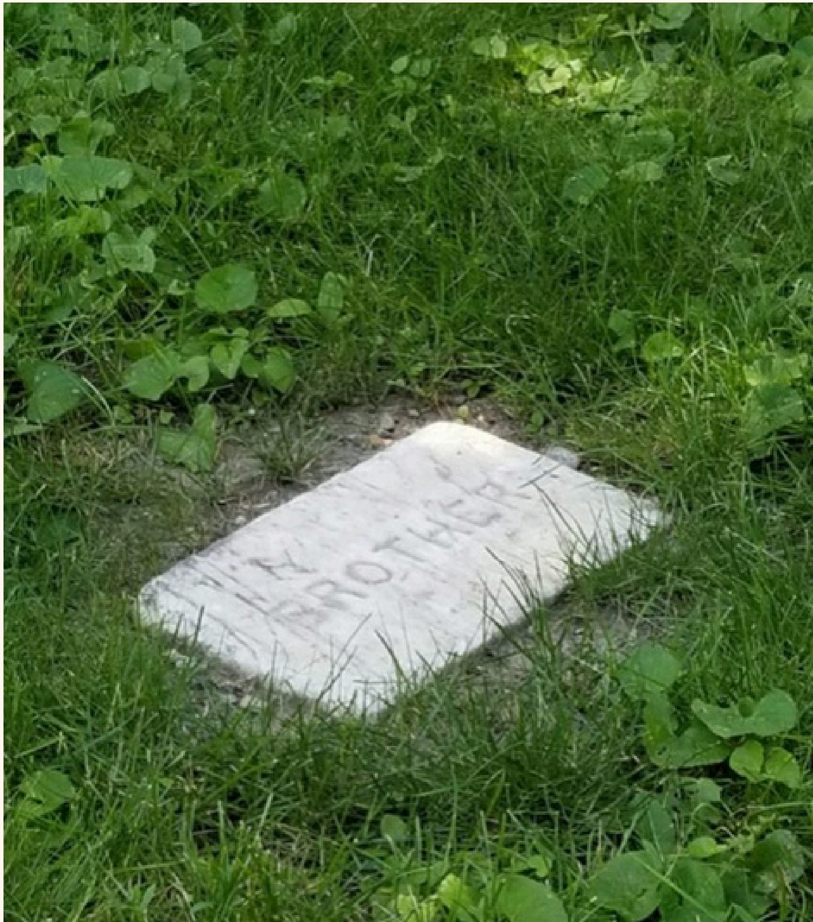
John S. Jacobs was Harriet's younger brother, separated in age by a few years. Born in Edenton, North Carolina in 1815, his childhood was marked by the early passing of his mother and the two decades of slavery he endured. Though he was repeatedly sold and exchanged during his early life, he would not escape until he went on a trip to New York with his last owner, Samuel Sawyer (who was also the father of Harriet's children). On this trip in 1838, John simply left Sawyer behind, leaving a note for his former master to find in which he decisively claimed his freedom with the valediction, "no longer yours, John S. Jacobs."

After his escape from slavery, John's abolitionist work truly took shape. Between 1838 and 1850, he traveled the United States, working with figures including William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass to lecture across the country advocating for the abolitionist cause. When the Fugitive Slave Act passed in 1850, declaring that no part of the United States was safe for an escaped slave, John left for Australia. Though Harriet claims in her book *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* that John was exempt from the Act because he was brought to New York by his master rather than escaping and fleeing, we can imagine that the Act would have pushed John to action. It is in Australia, after all, that he finally wrote and published his memoir, *The United States Governed by Six Hundred Thousand Despots*.

FAMILY SPACE

John Swanson Jacobs, continued

By the end of John's life, he had traveled across the United States, as well as to Australia and England. Throughout those years, he wrote letters back and forth with his sister, Harriet, discussing their lives and their shared cause. In 1878, he returned with his wife and children to live in Cambridge, one street away from Harriet's boarding house. He died just a few months later, and was buried near his sister in Cambridge's Mount Auburn Cemetery. His grave reads: "brother."



John Jacobs' grave in Mt. Auburn Cemetery

FAMILY SPACE

Louisa Matilda Jacobs

by Agatha Nyarko

Harriet's daughter, Louisa Matilda, was born into slavery. Her father was Samuel Tredwell Sawyer, a White lawyer and later Congressman – and her owner. He bought her freedom when she was six years old and sent her to live with relatives in New York, where she would eventually reunite with her mother and study to be a teacher.

As an activist, Louisa spent much of her time working for both the abolitionist cause and the suffragist one. She spent time with both the Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society and the American Equal Rights Association, where she met women like Frances Harper, Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Though we cannot know exactly how she understood her work with those organizations, we do know that both Louisa and her mother were often frustrated and disappointed by the racism of the abolitionist and suffragist rhetoric they heard. Nevertheless, Louisa worked tirelessly for the suffragist movement, lecturing and distributing pamphlets.

Harriet and her Louisa's headstones in Mt. Auburn Cemetery.

Louisa also worked with her mother to run boarding houses in Washington D.C. and later in Cambridge. She stayed in Cambridge until Harriet's passing in 1897. She spent those years sharing meals with her mother, running the house, and communing with other abolitionists and intellectuals who frequented the house. After her mother's death, she worked for the National Home for the Relief of Destitute Colored Women and Children before leaving for Howard University in D.C., where she passed away in 1917. She is buried beside her mother in Cambridge.

FAMILY SPACE

Joseph Jacobs

by Agatha Nyarko

Out of her immediate family, there is the least known of Joseph Jacobs, Harriet's son. As a young child, Harriet watched her uncle, Joseph, attempt to escape their plantation in Edenton. Joseph failed, and after being paraded through the town and humiliated, he was sold to slavers in New Orleans - the family never saw him again. Harriet was moved by this experience with her uncle and chose to name her only son after him. Harriet had to escape on her own, but a few years later, she begged her grandmother to send Joseph to live with his uncle, John (her brother). After his freedom was bought by his father, Joseph stayed with his Uncle John in his travels to Australia to search for gold. Throughout those years, he exchanged letters back and forth with his mother.

In 1850, the letters stopped. Harriet could not reach her son, and though she tried desperately to contact churches in Australia and find her son, she never heard from him again.

James Munroe Jr. house, 127 Mt. Auburn St. (1845, William Hovey, architect). The Mansard roof and brackets were added ca. 1868. The entrance columns with acanthus capitals were removed in the 1960s. Photo ca. 1950.

HARRIET JACOB'S LEGACY

Harriet Jacobs' life, legacy, and work as a abolitionist, caregiver, author, and previously enslaved Black woman are significant because her journey demonstrates the longstanding history of Black women in the United States and their fight for equality. Her autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) provided an unprecedented account of the gendered experiences of slavery. This narrative highlighted the specific struggles of enslaved women, such as sexual violence, the fight for bodily autonomy, and the sacrifices of motherhood, while also emphasizing the resilience and agency of those who resisted gendered oppression.

The cover of one edition of Harriet Jacobs' autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl (1861).*

Jacobs' Cambridge boarding house is simply one example of the tenacity she displayed during a time when American society discredited the humanity of Black people and deemed them inferior. For a Black woman to run a business, write an autobiography, and live a free life in the 19th century was an extraordinary achievement that defied the societal norms and legal structures designed to suppress Jacobs. Her activism extended into the Reconstruction era, where she worked to improve the lives of newly freed African Americans, helping them access education and basic resources. She not only carved out a space for herself in a racially prejudiced country but also dedicated her life and work to uplifting her children, the broader Cambridge community, and, by extension, American society. This magazine-style overview of Jacobs' Cambridge boarding house deepens conversations about Jacobs' life and connects her to historically significant figures, thus cementing her legacy and the importance of her journey in the broader context of American history.

History often ignores the contributions of women, particularly Black women, and diminishes their accomplishments. The fight to preserve the legacy of Harriet Jacobs and the achievements of other Black women who contributed to the abolition of slavery and the advancement of racial equality remains essential. However, Black women's accomplishments are often overlooked, as history frequently diminishes their contributions and fails to acknowledge the pivotal roles they played in shaping the nation's progress toward justice and freedom. Harriet Jacobs' legacy endures as a testament to the courage, resilience, and leadership of Black women throughout history. Her life and work continue to inspire progress and conversation relating to racial and gender equality, providing a blueprint for resistance and advocacy in the face of systemic oppression.

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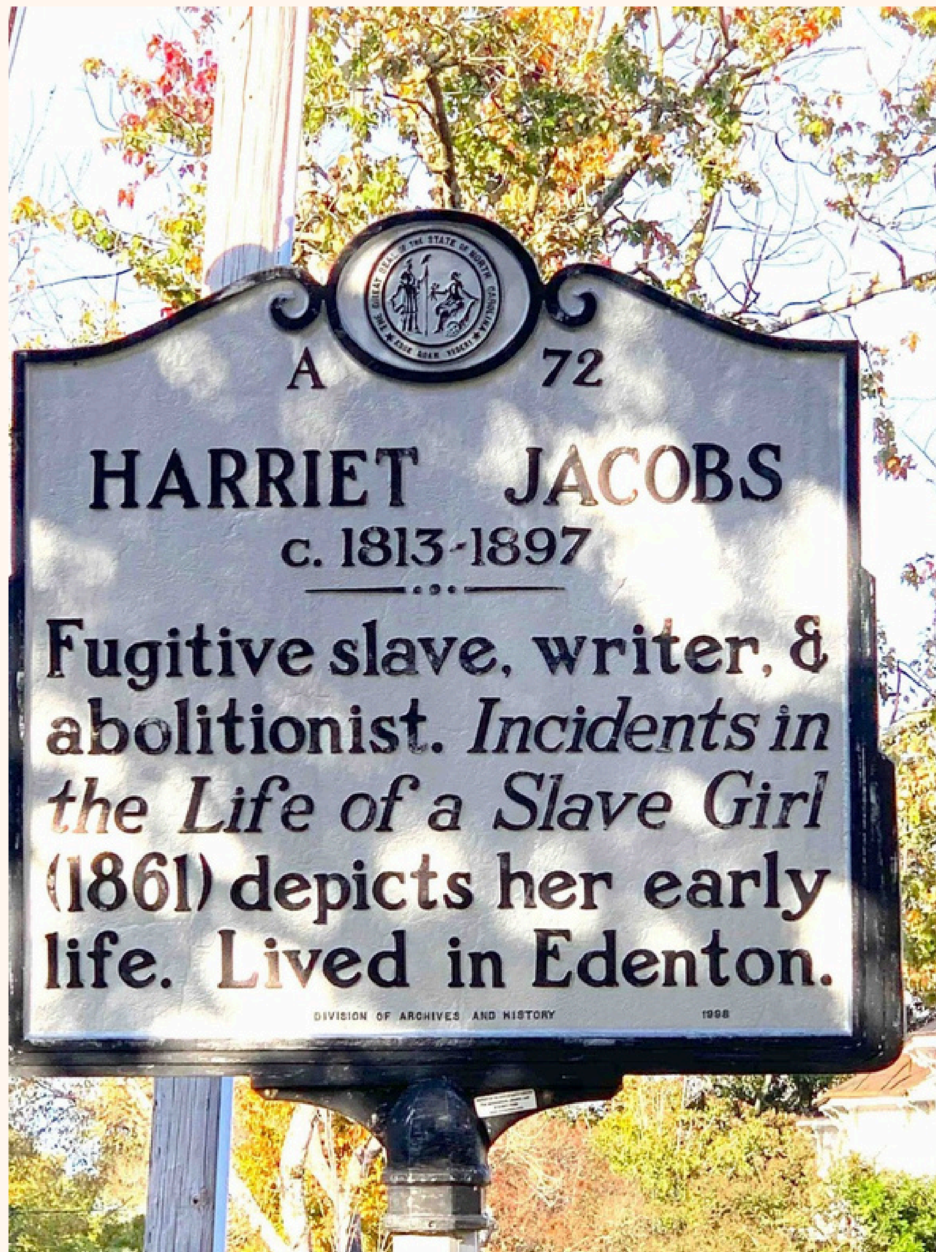

THANK YOU

HIST 12M:

ABOLITIONIST WOMEN AND THEIR WORLDS

Agatha Nyarko,
Kanny Ho Fong,
Kalani Clark,
Conner Huey