

## Harriet Jacobs in Massachusetts

By Zane Jones, Barisere Tuka, Avery Britt, and Siena Lerner-Gill

### Introduction

Our timeline of Harriet Jacobs' time in Massachusetts (and Cambridge specifically) begins before she took up residence at 17 Story Street, where the boarding house she operated still stands, and it concludes after her death, at her burial in Mount Auburn Cemetery. Challenges of historical preservation of Jacobs' life are magnified by racism and sexism, leading to the relative lack of images and surviving sources documenting Jacobs' life after she wrote *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which was published about a decade before she moved to Cambridge. The images available on this timeline, all of which were captured in 2024, depict physical landscape and primary documents, reminding us of the importance of record-keeping and preservation. Still, Harriet Jacobs' life is accessible to anyone who desires to learn and honor it. Hundreds of years have not diminished the impact of studying, naming, and caring for the places Jacobs lived and the places that her name appeared in print.

### Timeline

1844 - Moves to Boston.<sup>1</sup>

May 7, 1844 – Charles Lenox Remond delivers a speech called “For the Dissolution of Slavery” that argued that northern states like Massachusetts should secede from the Union because of Southern slave ownership. Abolitionists like Remond argued that in doing this act, they would cut off the economic power of the south and force abolitionism.<sup>2</sup>

1849 — Harriet Jacobs moves to Rochester to live with her brother. There, she runs in abolitionist circles with Frederick Douglass, William C. Nell, and Amy Post.<sup>3</sup>

1849 - Black residents in Boston, led by William C. Nell, protested segregated schools and filed a suit. These protests led to a lot of Black residents moving into Cambridge. Massachusetts ultimately voted to uphold separate but equal treatment for black people.<sup>4</sup>

1850 — Harriet Jacobs Returns to NYC from London.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Koritha Mitchell, ed., “Harriet Jacobs: A Brief Chronology,” in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Broadview Press, 2023), 55.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Lenox Remond. "Speech of C.L. Remond." In *Black Abolitionist Papers*, 5, 1858, <http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/archival-materials/speech-c-l-remond/docview/2522666005/se-2> (accessed December 15, 2024).

<sup>3</sup> Koritha Mitchell, ed., “Harriet Jacobs: A Brief Chronology,” in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Broadview Press, 2023), 55.

<sup>4</sup> Janet Fagan Yellin, *The Harriet Jacobs Family Papers* (University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Koritha Mitchell, ed., “Harriet Jacobs: A Brief Chronology,” in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Broadview Press, 2023), 56.

1855 — Public Schools desegregated in Massachusetts. However, there would be many years to come of efforts to physically desegregate the public school system in the state.<sup>6</sup>

1870s — Cambridge, MA sees an influx of Italian and Irish immigrants.<sup>7</sup>

1870 — Harriet Jacobs moves to Cambridge, MA and opens a boarding house.<sup>8</sup>

April 14, 1870 — The 15th amendment was ratified in Boston, legislatively eliminating voting discrimination based on race. This event prompted a jubilation day in Boston where people took to the streets and the Boston Common to celebrate.<sup>9</sup>

1870 — Richard Theodore Greener becomes the first Black man to graduate from Harvard.<sup>10</sup>

November 9-10, 1872 — The great fire of Boston is the city's largest fire and one of the most destructive fires in American history. It destroyed 60 acres of Boston's commercial district, leaving 20,000 Bostonians jobless.<sup>11</sup>

1873 — Economic Panic of 1873.<sup>12</sup>

1873 - Jacobs established a larger boarding house at 127 Mount Auburn in Cambridge. Her brother, John S. Jacobs also moved back to the United States from London and joined his family in Cambridge - but he unfortunately passed away soon after.<sup>13</sup>

1873 – Imogen Willis Eddy is listed in the 1873 Cambridge directory as living at Jacobs' 127 Mount Auburn boarding house. Eddy was the baby that Jacobs took care of, referred to as Mary Bruce in *Incidents*.<sup>14</sup>

1874 — Harriet Jacobs appears in the Directory for the City of Cambridge.<sup>15</sup>

March 1, 1875 — The Civil Rights Act of 1875 is enacted and legislatively guarantees that people cannot be discriminated against on the basis of their skin color. This act allowed for Black people to be able to have equal access to “public places and facilities like restaurants and public transportation.” However, this act was effectively nullified in 1883 with a Supreme Court ruling

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<sup>6</sup> “Boston’s Crusade Against Slavery,” Harvard Libraries, accessed December 11, 2024, [https://library.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/static/onlineexhibits/emancipation/header\\_intro.html#:~:text=From%20the%20Revolution%20through%20Reconstruction,granted%20black%20men%20unrestricted%20suffrage](https://library.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/static/onlineexhibits/emancipation/header_intro.html#:~:text=From%20the%20Revolution%20through%20Reconstruction,granted%20black%20men%20unrestricted%20suffrage).

<sup>7</sup> “Global Boston,” Boston College Libraries, accessed December 11, 2024, <https://globalboston.bc.edu/index.php/home/ethnic-groups/italians/>.

<sup>8</sup> Koritha Mitchell, ed., “Harriet Jacobs: A Brief Chronology,” in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Broadview Press, 2023), 59.

<sup>9</sup> “The Day of Jubilee: Celebrating the 15th Amendment in Boston,” The National Park Service, accessed December 11, 2024, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/celebrating-the-15th-amendment-in-boston.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> *Britannica Academic*, s.v. “Richard Theodore Greener,” accessed December 15, 2024, <https://academic-eb-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/levels/collegiate/article/Richard-Theodore-Greener/605798>.

<sup>11</sup> *Britannica Academic*, s.v. “Boston Fire of 1872,” accessed December 15, 2024, <https://academic-eb-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/levels/collegiate/article/Boston-fire-of-1872/470859>.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew W. Robertson 2010. “PANIC OF 1873.” *Encyclopedia of U.S. Political History*. Washington DC: CQ Press. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781608712380.n285>.

<sup>13</sup> Janet Fagan Yellin, *The Harriet Jacobs Family Papers* (University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Paula Tarnapol Whitacre, “Crossing Paths in Cambridge: Harriet Jacobs, Imogen Willis Eddy, and the Harvard College Observatory,” History Cambridge, accessed December 11, 2024, <https://historycambridge.org/articles/crossing-paths-in-cambridge-harriet-jacobs-imogen-willis-eddy-and-the-harvard-college-observatory/>.

<sup>15</sup> Greenough, Jones & Co., “Cambridge Directory for 1874,” accessed via Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/cambridgedirecto1874unse/page/n3/mode/2up>.

that declared it unconstitutional. This ruling along with four others of a similar nature ushered in the Jim Crow era in America. The Civil Rights Act was only reinforced in 1964.<sup>16</sup>

March 4, 1877 — Rutherford B. Hayes takes office as president, putting into action the Compromise of 1877 that saw troops in the south withdrawn and effectively ended Reconstruction.<sup>17</sup>

1877 — Harvard's Memorial Hall built.<sup>18</sup>

1879 — Harriet and Louisa Jacobs move to Washington DC and establish a boarding house at 1409 K Street N.W. for elite whites until she established a new boarding house for elite black patrons in 1885.<sup>19</sup>

1887-1891 — Efforts begin to build the Harvard Bridge that will connect Cambridge and Boston<sup>20</sup>

1888 — Harriet Jacobs becomes ill and remains sick until her death.<sup>21</sup>

March 7, 1897 — Harriet Jacobs dies in DC.<sup>22</sup>

March 10, 1897 - Harriet Jacobs is buried at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> "The Civil Rights Act of 1875," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed Dec 11, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Civil-Rights-Act-United-States-1875>.

<sup>17</sup> "Rutherford B. Hayes: The 19th President of the United States." The White House. Accessed December 15, 2024. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/rutherford-b-hayes/>.

<sup>18</sup> "History of Memorial Hall." Office for the Arts at Harvard University. Accessed December 15, 2024. <https://websites.harvard.edu/memhall/home-2/buildings/history/#:~:text=A%20ceremony%20was%20held%20on,in%20the%20spring%20of%201876>.

<sup>19</sup> Janet Fagan Yellin, *The Harriet Jacobs Family Papers* (University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> *New Bridge to Cambridge across the Charles River Basin from West Chester Park. Hearing before the Committee on Harbors and Lands, March 28, 1887.* 1887. Boston: Gunn Curtis Co.

<sup>21</sup> Janet Fagan Yellin, *The Harriet Jacobs Family Papers* (University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Koritha Mitchell, ed., "Harriet Jacobs: A Brief Chronology," in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Broadview Press, 2023), 60.

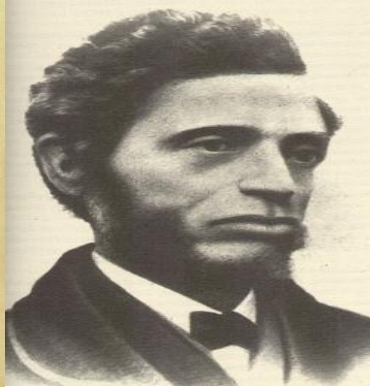
<sup>23</sup> Koritha Mitchell, ed., "Harriet Jacobs: A Brief Chronology," in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Broadview Press, 2023), 60.

## Images

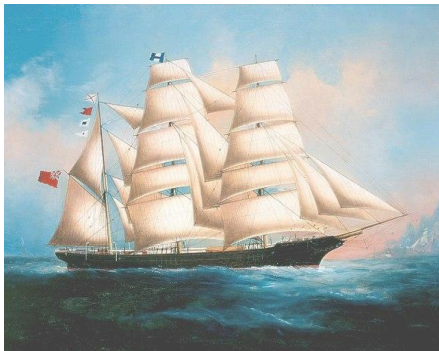
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<sup>24</sup> Gibert Studios. *Photograph of Harriet Jacobs*. 1894. photograph. Journal of the Civil War Era.

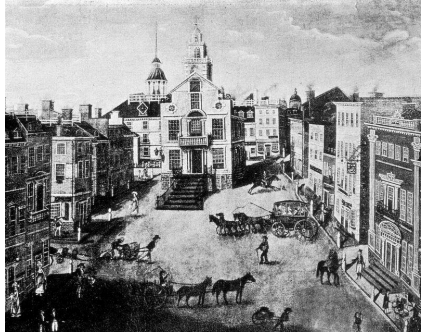
<sup>25</sup> William Cooper Nell, portrait photo. photograph. Liberator Photo Gallery.

<https://www.theliberatorfiles.com/liberator-photo-gallery/>

<sup>26</sup> Roberts, H. Armstrong. *Great Fire of Boston 1872*. November 10, 1872. Painting. Archive Photos.

<https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/the-great-boston-fire-of-9th-10th-november-1872-boston-news-photo/563940491>

<sup>27</sup>John C. Munro off Hong Kong. 1865. painting.



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<sup>28</sup> *Old State Street, Boston, Massachusetts, United States*. Harvard Fine Arts Library, Digital Images and Slides Collection, 1800.

<sup>29</sup> Greenough, Jones & Co., "Cambridge Directory," p. 36.

<sup>30</sup> Greenough, Jones & Co., "Cambridge Directory," p. 28.

<sup>31</sup> Greenough, Jones & Co., "Cambridge Directory," p. 37.



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Hubbard W. C. 9 Second  
Hughes Patrick, 10 Broadway  
Jacobs Harriet Mrs. 127 Mt. Auburn  
Johnson Matilda C. 142 Thorndike  
Johnson Martha A. Mrs. 4 Seventh

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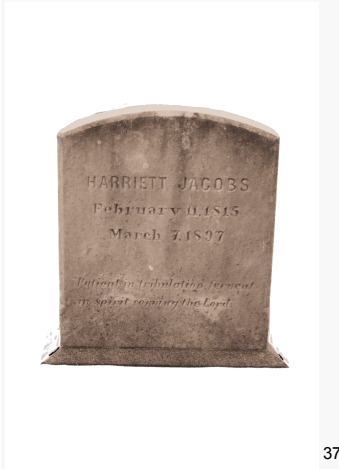
<sup>32</sup> Zane Jones, photograph, 2024.

<sup>33</sup> Greenough, Jones & Co., "Cambridge Directory," p. 215.

<sup>34</sup> Greenough, Jones & Co., "Cambridge Directory," p. 43.

<sup>35</sup> Greenough, Jones & Co., "Cambridge Directory," p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> *Memorial Hall*. Plans, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, United States. 1874.



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<sup>37</sup> Zane Jones, photograph, 2024.

<sup>38</sup> Historic American Engineering Record, Harvard Bridge, Spanning Charles River at Massachusetts Avenue, Boston, Suffolk County, MA. 1968. photograph. Historic American Engineering Record. <https://www.loc.gov/item/ma1293/>



## EXPANDED SECTIONS

### William C. Nell's Impact on Protests against the Segregation of Boston Schools: Barisere Tuka

By the 1860s, the black population in Cambridge had doubled in comparison to the previous decades.<sup>39</sup> This is due, in part, to the protests, led by black abolitionist William Cooper Nell, against Boston's segregated schools. Nell led a nearly fifteen year long series of protests, boycotts, and petitions throughout the '40s and '50s, dedicating his efforts towards shutting down the Abiel Smith School - the only segregated school for black students in Boston. During the mid-1840s, he founded the School Abolishing Party to help achieve his goal, particularly because he saw Smith School "as both a symbol and perpetrator of racial caste".<sup>40</sup>

The efforts of Nell and the Black Bostonian community accumulated in the Massachusetts Supreme Court case, *Boston v. Roberts* - which was first filed in the 1840s by resident Benjamin Roberts in defense of his daughter, Sarah Roberts. He used a legal campaign to argue that she should be able to enroll in all-white school that was closer to their home and the Supreme Court ultimately ruled in favor of Boston by 1850.<sup>41</sup> Despite this, Nell was able to use a city-wide boycott to apply the pressure needed to pressure the state legislature to desegregate Boston schools in 1855.<sup>42</sup> The Black Bostonian community held the "Triumph of Equal School Rights" in Nell's honor on December 17, 1855.<sup>43</sup>

### Celebrations after the ratification of the 15th amendment: Avery Britt

After the Fifteenth Amendment to the US Constitution was ratified in Massachusetts, allowing Black people the right to vote with the words "the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude," mass celebration ensued for the Black population in the area.<sup>44</sup> For centuries before this amendment, Black people were subject to state-specific decisions on their rights to inclusion and suffrage. However, only eight states would allow Black people the unencumbered right to vote and many restricted their freedom in myriad other ways

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<sup>39</sup> "The Black Population of Cambridge by Census Year, 1790-2020". The Cambridge Room. Accessed December 15, 2024.  
<https://thecambridgeroom.wordpress.com/2022/05/25/the-black-population-of-cambridge-by-census-year-1790-2020/>

<sup>40</sup> Stephen Kantrowitz, *More Than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829-1889* (New York: Penguin, 2012) 126

<sup>41</sup> "The Sarah Roberts Case". National Park Service. Accessed December 16, 2024.  
<https://www.nps.gov/articles/the-sarah-roberts-case.htm>

<sup>42</sup> "William Cooper Nell: Smith Court Leader". National Park Service. Accessed December 16, 2024.  
<https://www.nps.gov/articles/william-cooper-nell-smith-court-leader.htm#ftref13>

<sup>43</sup> "William Cooper Nell: Smith Court Leader". National Park Service. Accessed December 16, 2024.  
<https://www.nps.gov/articles/william-cooper-nell-smith-court-leader.htm#ftref13>

<sup>44</sup> "U.S. Const. amend. 15, sec. 1" qtd. in "The Day of Jubilee: Celebrating the 15th Amendment in Boston," The National Park Service, accessed December 11, 2024,  
<https://www.nps.gov/articles/celebrating-the-15th-amendment-in-boston.htm>.



far beyond the scope of just voting rights. Even Massachusetts had quelled the rights of its Black citizens, as when Charles Lenox Remond tried giving an address in Faneuil Hall in 1842, he was met with vitriol from white Massachusetts citizens.<sup>45</sup>

However, on the day of the amendment's ratification, April 14, 1870, thousands of Black people crowded into public areas in Boston, making themselves seen and making their voices heard. According to Benjamin Roberts in *The New Era* newspaper's coverage of the event, the day had "most beautiful" weather and began with a promenade from Boston Common to Faneuil Hall that over three thousand Black people participated in.<sup>46</sup> Once the group reached the Hall, Charles Lenox Remond had a moment that he had been denied decades earlier—the chance to speak at Faneuil Hall. *The Boston Globe* wrote about his address, saying "he could not possibly call to his lips language which would do justice to his heart or his feelings... this was the proudest day in all his experience, and he doubted not that all present felt that it was the crowning joy of our life."<sup>47</sup>

However, the amendment still left some members of the population out of its directive. Although the audience at Faneuil Hall was filled with mostly women, these women were still not allowed to vote. Because of this slight, some women like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton dismissed the amendment outright, however, their suffragist counterpart, Lucy Stone embraced the amendment.<sup>48</sup> *The Boston Post* reports her "congratulating the colored citizens upon the success of their vital measure, and expressing hope for a speedy extension of the suffrage to wom[e]n."<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, this day was one of jubilation and celebration for Black people, as their efforts for equality had progressed.

### Expansion on the opening of Jacobs' second boarding house: Zane Jones

In 1872, one of the most destructive fires in American history swept across Boston, leaving 20,000 Bostonians without jobs and much of Boston destroyed.<sup>50</sup> Just a year later, the collapse of Jay Cooke and Company, an investment banking firm in Philadelphia, set off panic for investors. This resulted in severe economic depression: during the years following, business

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<sup>45</sup> "The Day of Jubilee: Celebrating the 15th Amendment in Boston".

<sup>46</sup> Benjamin Roberts, "Celebration of the 15th Amendment in Boston," *The New Era* (Washington, D.C.) April 28, 1870, qtd. in "The Day of Jubilee: Celebrating the 15th Amendment in Boston," The National Park Service, accessed December 11, 2024, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/celebrating-the-15th-amendment-in-boston.htm>.

<sup>47</sup> "The Fifteenth Amendment," *The Boston Post*, April 15, 1870, qtd. in "The Day of Jubilee: Celebrating the 15th Amendment in Boston," The National Park Service, accessed December 11, 2024, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/celebrating-the-15th-amendment-in-boston.htm>.

<sup>48</sup> "The Day of Jubilee: Celebrating the 15th Amendment in Boston," The National Park Service, accessed December 11, 2024, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/celebrating-the-15th-amendment-in-boston.htm>.

<sup>49</sup> "The Fifteenth Amendment," *The Boston Post*, April 15, 1870, qtd. in "The Day of Jubilee: Celebrating the 15th Amendment in Boston," The National Park Service, accessed December 11, 2024, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/celebrating-the-15th-amendment-in-boston.htm>.

<sup>50</sup> *Britannica Academic*, s.v. "Boston Fire of 1872," accessed December 15, 2024, <https://academic-eb-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/levels/collegiate/article/Boston-fire-of-1872/470859>.

bankruptcies doubled, unemployment soared, and economic instability gripped the nation.<sup>51</sup> Yet, it is known that in 1873, Harriet Jacobs decided to open a larger boarding house at 127 Mount Auburn Street in Cambridge. As depicted in the extended segment about the Cambridge Directory, Jacobs already faced systematic issues due to her race and gender that would have likely deeply impacted her positionality as a businesswoman. To be a Black female entrepreneur meant that she had to fight for limited resources and formal recognition.

Jacobs' story, as written in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, was already remarkable, but her decision to push against the odds and expand her business during a time of widespread economic uncertainty speaks to her resilience and determination to succeed. Even her former enslaver acknowledged, while placing an ad for her apprehension, that she was an intelligent and talented woman, who spoke "easily and fluently," with "agreeable carriage and address."<sup>52</sup> While these qualities were noted with malicious intent from her enslaver, so that she could be recaptured and forced back into the very life she worked so hard to escape, it was likely these talents that allowed her to thrive in her life as a free woman, and would have been instrumental in her success as she managed her boarding house. She not only weathered through the challenges that everybody else was facing during an economically unstable period, but she *excelled* in creating a business that was able to sustain her and her family. Her financial success during this time of severe economic instability is a testament to her resilience and assertion of her own agency, and shows her ability to navigate a system that was designed to marginalize her.

### 1874 Cambridge Directory: Siena Lerner-Gill

Harriet Jacobs' residence in Cambridge is documented in multiple editions of the city's directory. Her name appears throughout the early 1870s, listed alphabetically and sometimes also in a section dedicated to boarding houses. Little information is shared about Jacobs specifically in these directories, other than her address and profession. However, the directories can be used as windows into the narrow local context that Jacobs lived in. The directory from 1874, for example, features a variety of advertisements for local businesses and new products. The first advertisement in the directory is for the Arlington Cooking Stove, a cooking range that employed new technology to circulate heat throughout two ovens and boasted that its "self regulating flues."<sup>53</sup> The advertisement includes paragraphs of text, suggesting that housekeepers examine the product before purchasing it and advising that it is well suited for hotels. These two sentences signify that the advertisement was targeted toward wealthy, likely white individuals who could afford housekeepers and owned hotels. As the owner of a boarding house, Jacobs may have

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<sup>51</sup> Andrew W. Robertson 2010. "PANIC OF 1873." *Encyclopedia of U.S. Political History*. Washington DC: CQ Press. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781608712380.n285>.

<sup>52</sup> James Norcom, Advertisement, *American Beacon*, Norfolk, Virginia, July 4, 1835, <https://glc.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Ad%20for%20the%20capture%20of%20HJ.pdf>.

<sup>53</sup> Greenough, Jones & Co., "Cambridge Directory for 1874," accessed via Internet Archive: 2, <https://archive.org/details/cambridgedirecto1874unse/page/n3/mode/2up>.

desired an appliance like the Arlington Cooking Stove, but the references to class in the advertisement make it clear that she likely could not afford one.

The directory also includes an introductory letter written by the compilers who created it. The message is revelatory of the micro-politics and social tensions circulating during the time that Jacobs lived in Cambridge. The compilers aggressively criticize businessmen who refuse to purchase the directory or contribute to its production, implying that those who chose not or could not afford to financially support the directory reaped unfair benefits from those who did. The letter's continued reference to men reveals the sexism of the time, and invites a question we cannot presently answer about how Jacobs was able to secure her name in the book. She did not purchase an advertisement in the pages, but her name's presence in the section of the book dedicated to boarding houses could have brought her attention and served her personally and financially. The punitive tone, overt sexism, and implied racism of the prefacing message from the compilers complicates her presence in the directory and invites many more questions about how Jacobs navigated the social landscape of the time.

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John C. Munro off Hong Kong. 1865. painting.

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