

## “Incidents” in the Life of a North Carolina Slave Girl Can Be Read Between the Lines of Postal History

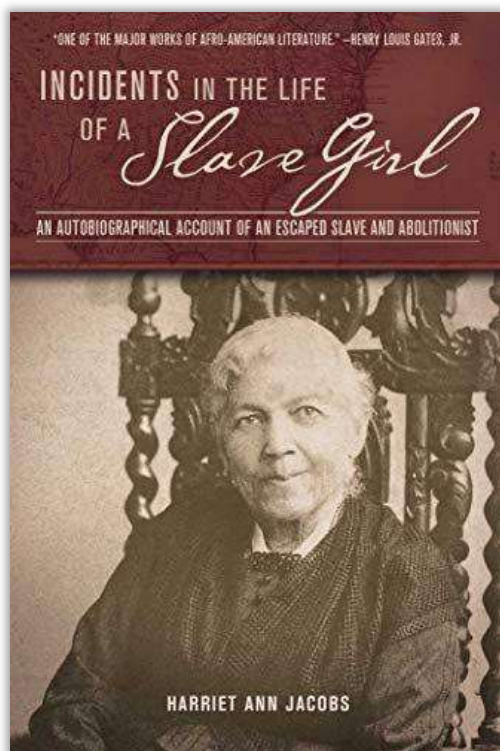


By Kevin Lowther

**Editor’s Note:** This article originally appeared in *Kelleher’s Stamp Collector’s Quarterly*, First Quarter 2023. We thank author Kevin Lowther and *Kelleher’s Stamp Collector’s Quarterly* Editor Randy Neil for permission to reprint this article. Modifications have been made to the original layout and content of the article to conform to the requirements of the *North Carolina Postal Historian*.

While back I asked Tony Crumbley, a dealer specializing in North Carolina postal history, whether he had any folded letters from the small town of Edenton, circa 1820s to the 1850s. He sent me a large bundle, from which I selected four.

Why Edenton? A few years before, I had stumbled across a book entitled *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*<sup>1</sup> (Figure 1).



▲ **Figure 1.** *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself.* (Harriet Ann Jacobs.)

As I usually do, I looked first at the back of the book for the acknowledgements and index. On the last page, to my utter surprise, was a short letter written in 1860 by George W. Lowther. My father was George F. Lowther, but that is merely a coincidence.

The George Lowther in the book was vouching for the authenticity of the incredible story published in Boston shortly before the start of the Civil War. Lowther (no relation that I know of) had been raised in Edenton and knew the book’s author. He had been born into slavery himself on a large plantation near Edenton owned by a Lowther family.<sup>2</sup>

“I knew of her treatment from her master,” George wrote, “of the imprisonment of her children; of their sale and redemption; of her seven years’ concealment’ and of her subsequent escape to the North.”<sup>3</sup>

The enslaved girl was Harriet Jacobs, shown in Figure 1, a year or two before her death in 1897. She had been born enslaved in Edenton in 1813. To elude her lecherous master, Dr. James Norcom (Figure 2), she would hide for seven years in a crawl space in the attic of her grandmother’s house.



▲ **Figure 2.** Dr. James Norcom.

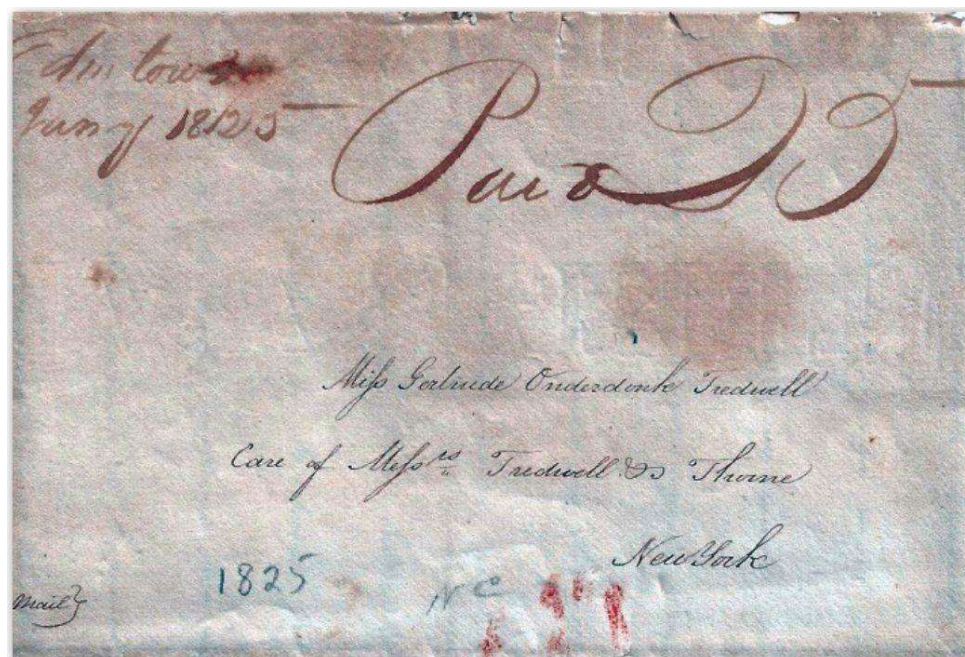
Her grandmother was free and respected by both races. Harriet escaped by water to the North in 1842. In the late 1850s, at the urging of the Abolitionist, Amy Post, she began writing what is now considered a classic among slave narratives.

My plan was to illustrate Jacobs's story with stampless letters postmarked in Edenton (Figure 3), a port tucked away in the northeastern corner of the state on Albemarle Sound.

The four covers I bought from Crumbley had period postmarks. Each related tangibly to individuals Harriet would have known, or known of, while enslaved, including the infamous Dr. Norcom. The earliest of the four letters (Figure 4) was written on January 17, 1825, by Mary M. Collins (1806-1837) to Gertrude Tredwell in New York, a cousin to the Tredwells in Edenton.



▲ **Figure 3.** Edenton, North Carolina.



▲ **Figure 4.** Mary M. Collins mailed this folded letter from Edenton, NC (Chowan Co.) to her cousin in New York in January 1825. It was docketed "Paid 25."



*“You probably heard of your cousins visit to Raleigh during the sitting of the Legislature. [They] have just returned delighted with our Capitol. They found it very gay, altho the citizens were somewhat disappointed at not seeing Lafayette at the expected time.”*

(The Marquis de Lafayette, a young French nobleman who served General George Washington as an aide in the American Revolution, was touring the United States.)

Mary apologized for the brevity of her letter, as she was preparing for a wedding, and asked Gertrude to greet her brothers Josiah and Williamson, as well as sister Henrietta, who were visiting with the Tredwells.

The Collins family would leave its mark on Hattie. The first was laid on New Year’s Day of 1818 when her uncle Joseph was sold to the Collinses.

It was a rude awakening for six-year-old Hattie, who had not realized, while living in the cocoon of her grandmother’s house, that she too was owned by others.

Joseph was sent to the Collins plantation at Somerset, outside Edenton. A few years later, in 1828, he and his young master, Josiah (Figure 5), tussled when the latter ordered Joseph to obey his commands more quickly.



▲ **Figure 5.** Josiah Collins III (1808-1863) owned Harriet Jacobs’s uncle Joseph.

After Joseph threw Josiah to the ground, and was about to be publicly whipped, Joseph “ran.” He reached New York, only to be recaptured and brought back to Edenton in chains.

Hattie later remembered watching Joseph (“ghastly pale, yet full of determination”) as he was marched from the landing up Broad Street to the jail.<sup>4</sup> He would remain there for several months, then was sold to a New Orleans buyer. He would escape again, but eventually vanished from Hattie’s life. She had considered him a brother.

On November 5, 1839, William E. Snowden posted a long letter in Edenton (Figure 6) to his mother in New York.



▲ **Figure 6.** William E. Snowden, while visiting Edenton, N. C., for the first time in 1839 wrote to his mother in New York.

Snowden would marry the daughter of Joseph B. Skinner, an Edenton attorney who owned several plantations. It was Skinner who recaptured Harriet Jacobs’s runaway uncle in New York.

He had arrived a few days earlier on his first visit to the South. Within speaking distance of where he was staying, with the family of Joseph B. Skinner, Harriet Jacobs was in her fifth year wedged into her crawl space.

“Your wandering son is again quietly settled among kind + hospitable people,” he began his three-page letter. But then he noted self-consciously that “I am the only grown male white about the house. . . .” Nevertheless, “I feel quite at home. . . . There is no stiffness + and no appearance of pride of family, but that is because they do not think it necessary to show it. Aristocratic notions are ingrained in them.”

Snowden had come to tutor the Skinner children. “The most advanced scholar I will have is a 12 yr old . . . who is to learn Latin.” Joseph Skinner, Edenton’s leading lawyer and owner of several plantations, insisted on his children learning foreign languages. It was Skinner, as the Collinses’ attorney, who had captured Harriet’s fugitive uncle Joseph in New York and brought him back to Edenton in irons.<sup>5</sup>

Skinner had married Maria Lowther in 1810.<sup>6</sup> Their son Tristram (Figure 7), born in 1820, would be called from college in 1840 to manage the family’s plantations. Commissioned a captain in the 1st North Carolina Infantry, Tristram would be killed in 1862 at Mechanicsville, Virginia.



▲ **Figure 7.** Tristram Lowther Skinner (1820-1862) (middle) as he appeared as a lieutenant in the North Carolina Infantry. (Courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina.)

William E. Snowden, having embraced Southern hospitality and now a pastor, would marry Harriet Skinner in August 1842. Her relationship to the Edenton Skinners, if any, is unknown.

Another Lowther in Joseph B. Skinner’s household was his enslaved valet, the same George (1822-1898) whose validation of Harriet Jacobs’s story had caught my eye a few years earlier. George (Figure 8) had been born to another of Skinner’s slaves, Polly Lowther, who was a baker.



▲ **Figure 8.** George W. Lowther (1822-1898) was Joseph B. Skinner’s slave and valet whom he freed in 1843. Lowther moved to Boston where he became active in Abolitionist circles. In 1860 he wrote a letter validating Harriet Jacobs’s book.

George’s father is not known. What is known, however, is that Skinner manumitted Polly (1780-1864) in 1824 when George was two. He took a direct role in educating the manifestly intelligent boy, whom he described in his 1850 will as “my favorite and faithful Body Servant.” In the early 1840s, Skinner made George a free man.<sup>7</sup>

As he grew into adulthood, during Harriet’s seven years of invisibility, George would have passed often within the range of the peephole she had made in the eaves of her “apartment.”

Harriet would finally escape Edenton and the clutches of Dr. Norcom in the same year as George’s manumission. Now free himself to leave Edenton, George left for Boston, where Harriet’s brother John had encouraged him to settle.

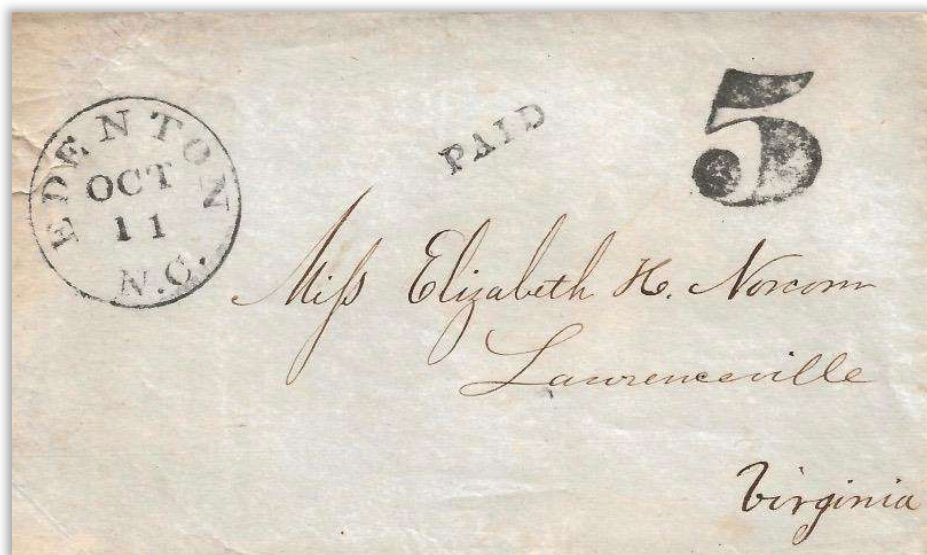
George established himself in Boston as a hairdresser and became active in the Abolitionist movement. Harriet and her daughter Louisa attended George’s wedding in 1852 to the daughter of a mixed-race man who had been born in 1800 in Virginia. In 1878, he would be elected to the Massachusetts legislature.



The third cover (Figure 9) was addressed to Dr. Norcom's daughter Elizabeth (1826-1849) in Lawrenceville, a village west of Emporia in southern Virginia. The year is unknown, but the "Paid" and "5" markings indicate it was posted during the early or mid-1840s when Elizabeth was an adult.

**Figure 9.** ▶

Mailed in Edenton, N. C., in the 1840s addressed to Elizabeth Norcom, daughter of Dr. James Norcom.



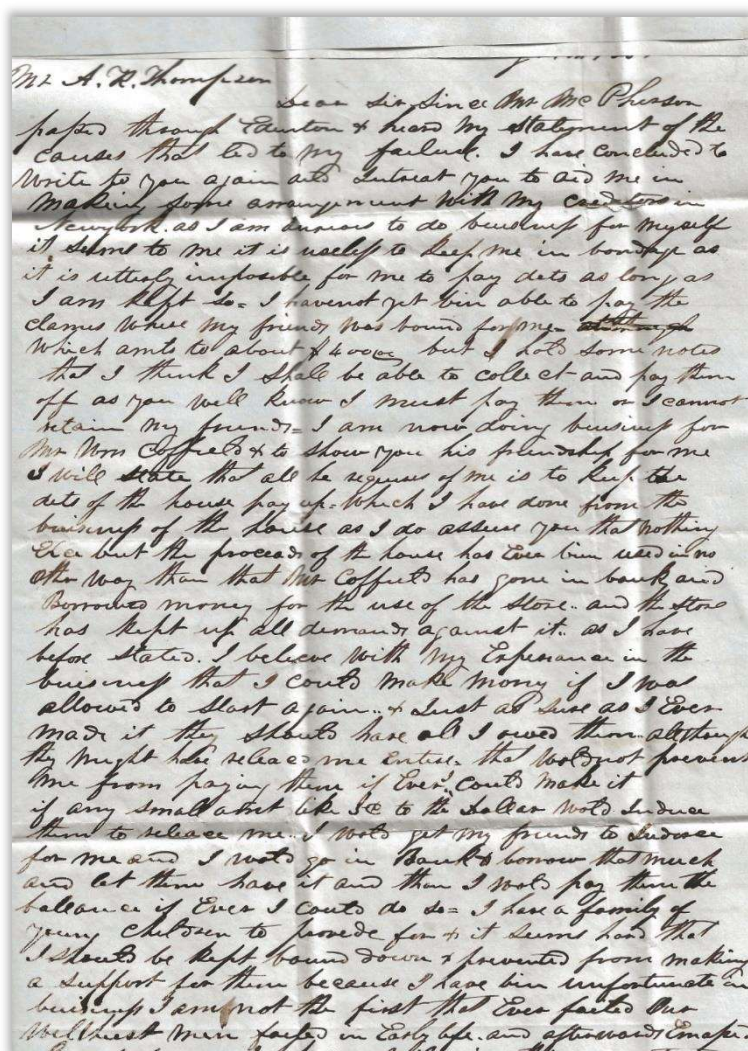
Harriet Jacobs, as a member of Dr. Norcom's household, would have cared for Elizabeth as an infant and young girl until, that is, Harriet vanished in 1835. How might a nine-year-old girl process the sudden, unexplained disappearance of a servant she had been taught belonged to the family?

Harriet, who had been taught to read and write by a former mistress, now used the mails to inform her nemesis, Dr. Norcom, that she had fled to Canada, although she was actually in New York. Elizabeth probably witnessed a display of her father's venomous rage when he learned of Harriet's flight. She would also have been aware of his futile trips to New York to recapture Harriet, who quickly moved on to the Abolitionist center in Rochester and later to Boston.

Enoch Jones, the writer of the last of the four Edenton covers (Figure 10) had nothing to do with Harriet. He did, however, interact with the Coffields, who had purchased Harriet's father in 1824. Writing to a businessman in New York on February 14, 1851, Jones spoke of "the causes that led to my failure," and lamented that he was being held in "bondage" by his creditors.

**Figure 10.** ▶

Enoch Jones, writing from Edenton to a New York businessman in 1851, mentioned that he was working for James Coffield, a plantation owner regarded as one of the most violent slaveholders in the Edenton region.



Jones operated a store in Edenton and in the 1850s would have a hotel across Albemarle Sound. The plantation based Coffields, in exchange for Jones managing their house in town, had borrowed money to keep the store open.

These were the same Coffields who had a legacy of violence which was extreme even among slaveholders. In the 1820s, the Coffield brothers, James and Josiah, owned 600 slaves. Both were notorious for their brutality. In her autobiography, Harriet described James, whom she called Mr. Litch, as “an ill-bred, uneducated man . . . . There was a jail and a whipping post on his grounds; and whatever cruelties were perpetrated there, they passed without comment. He was so effectually screened by his great wealth that he was called to no account for his crimes, not even murder.”<sup>8</sup>

The year before he bought Harriet’s father, James Coffield murdered two slaves who had been found with a ham and some bottles of wine which a flood had dislodged from the meat house and wine cellar and washed some distance from the plantation.

“Murder was so common on his plantation,” Jacobs wrote, “that he feared to be alone after nightfall. . . . His brother [Josiah] . . . was at least equal in cruelty. His bloodhounds were well trained . . . and a terror to the slaves. . . . When this slaveholder, his shrieks and groans were so frightful that they appalled his own friends. His last words were, ‘I am going to hell; bury my money with me.’”<sup>9</sup>

Josiah had died in 1837. Harriet was in hiding and would have heard of his demise from her grandmother who lived just below her garret. James died in 1843 shortly after Harriet had escaped to the North.

“Cruelty is contagious,” Harriet concluded in *Incidents*. The men had no monopoly on violence. A woman she referred to as Mrs. Wade was known for unceasing brutality. “The barn was her particular place of torture. There she lashed the slaves with the might of a man. An old slave of hers once said to me, ‘It is hell in missis’s house. ‘Pears I can never get out. Day and night I prays to die.’”<sup>10</sup>

George W. Lowther vouched for the authenticity of Harriet Jacobs’s book because prospective publishers and some in the Abolition movement feared it would be received by the public as just another novel in the vein of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which had been written a few years earlier by another Harriet, Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Jacobs considered approaching Stowe for advice before beginning to write *Incidents*. When Stowe wrote condescendingly to suggest that she might incorporate Jacobs’s experience into her sequel, *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Jacobs, perceiving a racial snub, rejected collaboration and decided to write her own story. They would not meet until 1871, when they reconciled.<sup>11</sup>

In March 1864, as the Civil War entered its final excruciating year, Jacobs wrote hopefully to L. Maria Child: “A Power mightier than man is guiding this revolution, and though justice moves slowly, it will come at last. The American people will outlive this mean prejudice against complexion.”<sup>12</sup>

But after visiting Edenton in 1867, for the first time since her escape, she abandoned the idea of resettling there. “I find it hard to have faith in rebels,” she wrote. Washington was no better. When she died there in 1897, lynching had become rampant, and the specter of Jim Crow stalked the South.

There was no escape, it seemed, from the violence and bigotry into which she had been born.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, By Herself*, Jean F. Yellin (editor), Cambridge, MA.: Harvard Un. Press, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> George W. Lowther was born enslaved in Edenton, North Carolina, in 1822. The white, slaveholding Lowthers owned hundreds of slaves. The surname remains very common in Chowan County, in the state’s northeast corner.

<sup>3</sup> Jacobs, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Fagan Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs, a Life*, New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004, p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> Jacobs, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

<sup>6</sup> Jacobs, *op. cit.*, p. 264 n7.

<sup>7</sup> Black and white Lowthers, with roots in Edenton, still pronounce their surname as the British do—“ow” rhyming with “cow.” The American pronunciation rhymes with “low.”

<sup>8</sup> See [www.blackpast.or/african-american-his-story/lowther-george-w-1822-1898](http://www.blackpast.or/african-american-his-story/lowther-george-w-1822-1898)

<sup>9</sup> Jacobs, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

<sup>10</sup> Jacobs, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

<sup>11</sup> Jacobs, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

<sup>12</sup> Jacobs, *op. cit.*, p. 221.