

TEACHER'S GUIDE

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MISSION 2: "Flight to Freedom"

Harriet Jacobs on the Fugitive Slave Law (1861)

Harriet Jacobs escaped from her master in North Carolina in 1845, and later wrote a narrative of her experiences. After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, Jacobs and other fugitive slaves in the North faced new threats to their safety and freedom. In this passage, she describes the impact of the 1850 law on the African American community of New York City.

...an event occurred of disastrous import to the colored people. The slave Hamlin [James Hamlet], the first fugitive that came under the new law, was given up by the bloodhounds of the north to the bloodhounds of the south. It was the beginning of a reign of terror to the colored population....Many families, who had lived in the city for twenty years, fled from it now. Many a poor washerwoman, who, by hard labor, had made herself a comfortable home, was obliged to sacrifice her furniture, bid a hurried farewell to friends, and seek her fortune among strangers in Canada. Many a wife discovered a secret she had never known before—that her husband was a fugitive, and must leave her to insure his own safety. Worse still, many a husband discovered that his wife had fled from slavery years ago, and as 'the child follows the condition of his mother,' the children of his love were liable to be seized and carried to slavery. Everywhere, in those humble homes, there was consternation and anguish. But what cared the legislators of the 'dominant race' for the blood they were crushing out of trampled hearts?

...I was subject to it; and so were hundreds of intelligent and industrious people all around us. I seldom ventured into the streets; and when it was necessary to do an errand for [my employer], or any of the family, I went as much as possible through the back streets and by-ways. What a disgrace to a city calling itself free, that inhabitants, guiltless of offence, and seeking to perform their duties conscientiously, should be condemned to live in such incessant fear, and have nowhere to turn for protection! This state of things, of course, gave rise to many impromptu vigilance committees. Every colored person, and every friend of their persecuted race, kept their eyes wide open.

Source: Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861)