

Resource:

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

Document Text

I. On sexual exploitation

When I was fifteen, Dr. Flint, who was fifty-five, began to whisper obscenities in my ear. No law protects a slave woman from insult, violence, or even death. An attractive white woman is admired, but an attractive Black woman is humiliated and brutalized.

Sometimes Flint cursed and threatened me; sometimes he tried to seduce me with gentleness. He told me I was his property and must surrender to his will. I tried to ignore him, but I was forced to live in his house. He met me at every turn. . . .

II. On the response to Nat Turner's rebellion

Everyone in Edenton heard about a rebellion against slavery, led by Nat Turner. Several whites in Virginia had been killed. Most whites in Edenton were terrified that the slave rebellion might spread to North Carolina. Turner hadn't been captured yet, so whites wanted to find out which Blacks supported him, and which had weapons. . . .

Suddenly orders were given and all the men rushed in every direction, wherever they could find a Black. It was a grand opportunity for poor whites, who had no slaves of their own to whip, to bully other people's slaves. Poor whites regularly showed their loyalty to wealthy slave owners. They never stopped to think about what they had in common with slaves. The same power that slave owners used to trample Blacks kept these whites poor, ignorant, and immoral.

All day white men terrified and tormented Blacks. At night some of them raped Black women. If a Black husband or father reported the crime, he was tied to the public whipping post and whipped for "lying." People with even the slightest brownness to their skin were afraid to be seen talking together.

III. On the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850

Soon after, the Fugitive Slave Law went into effect. This law made it a federal crime to help a runaway slave. Even people living in the Free States had to obey this law. No one who had escaped from slavery was safe.

Black families who had lived in New York City for twenty years now fled the city. Poor laundry women who had made a simple home for themselves through years of hard work had to give up all their furniture, quickly say goodbye to their friends, and start over in Canada. Many husbands and wives learned that their spouse was a runaway who must leave. Because the children of slave mothers are considered slaves, fathers suddenly discovered that their beloved children could be taken from them and carried into slavery.

Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Boston: Published for the author, 1862).