

Was indentured servitude different than slavery?

Before reading, source the following documents. Then, examine and analyze the document by responding to the analysis questions provided.

Historical Context:

Indentured servants first arrived in America in the decade following the settlement of Jamestown by the Virginia Company in 1607.

The idea of indentured servitude was born of a need for cheap labor. The earliest settlers soon realized that they had lots of land to care for, but no one to care for it. With passage to the Colonies expensive for all but the wealthy, the Virginia Company developed the system of indentured servitude to attract workers. Indentured servants became vital to the colonial economy.

The timing of the Virginia colony was ideal. The Thirty Year's War had left Europe's economy depressed, and many skilled and unskilled laborers were without work. A new life in the New World offered a glimmer of hope; this explains how one-half to two-thirds of the immigrants who came to the American colonies arrived as indentured servants.

Servants typically worked four to seven years in exchange for passage, room, board, lodging and freedom dues. While the life of an indentured servant was harsh and restrictive, it wasn't slavery. There were laws that protected some of their rights. But their life was not an easy one, and the punishments meted out to people who wronged were harsher than those for non-servants. An indentured servant's contract could be extended as punishment for breaking a law, such as running away, or in the case of female servants, becoming pregnant.

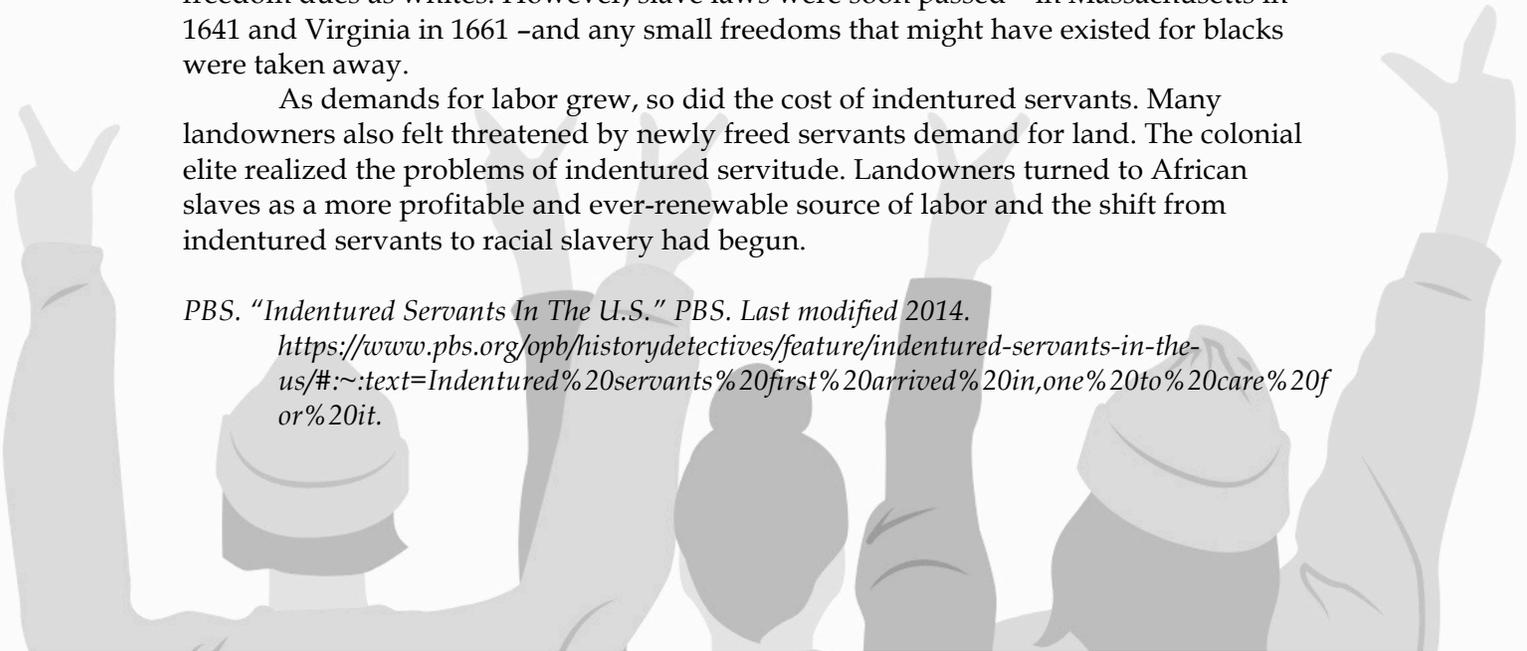
For those that survived the work and received their freedom package, many historians argue that they were better off than those new immigrants who came freely to the country. Their contract may have included at least 25 acres of land, a year's worth of corn, arms, a cow and new clothes. Some servants did rise to become part of the colonial elite, but for the majority of indentured servants that survived the treacherous journey by sea and the harsh conditions of life in the New World, satisfaction was a modest life as a freeman in a burgeoning colonial economy.

In 1619 the first black Africans came to Virginia. With no slave laws in place, they were initially treated as indentured servants, and given the same opportunities for freedom dues as whites. However, slave laws were soon passed – in Massachusetts in 1641 and Virginia in 1661 –and any small freedoms that might have existed for blacks were taken away.

As demands for labor grew, so did the cost of indentured servants. Many landowners also felt threatened by newly freed servants demand for land. The colonial elite realized the problems of indentured servitude. Landowners turned to African slaves as a more profitable and ever-renewable source of labor and the shift from indentured servants to racial slavery had begun.

PBS. "Indentured Servants In The U.S." PBS. Last modified 2014.

<https://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/feature/indentured-servants-in-the-us/#:~:text=Indentured%20servants%20first%20arrived%20in,one%20to%20care%20for%20it.>



Source A: Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents of a Slave Girl*

When I was six years old, my mother died; and then, for the first time, I learned, by the talk around me, that I was a slave. My mother's mistress was the daughter of my grandmother's mistress. She was the foster sister of my mother; they were both nourished at my grandmother's breast. In fact, my mother had been weaned at three months old, that the babe of the mistress might obtain sufficient food. They played together as children; and, when they became women, my mother was a most faithful servant to her whiter foster sister. On her death-bed her mistress promised that her children should never suffer for any thing; and during her lifetime she kept her word. They all spoke kindly of my dead mother, who had been a slave merely in name, but in nature was noble and womanly. I grieved for her, and my young mind was troubled with the thought who would now take care of me and my little brother. I was told that my home was now to be with her mistress; and I found it a happy one...

When I was nearly twelve years old, my kind mistress sickened and died. As I saw the cheek grow paler, and the eye more glassy, how earnestly I prayed in my heart that she might live! I loved her; for she had been almost like a mother to me. My prayers were not answered. She died, and they buried her in the little churchyard, where, day after day, my tears fell upon her grave...

After a brief period of suspense, the will of my mistress was read, and we learned that she had bequeathed me to her sister's daughter, a child of five years old. So vanished our hopes...

Dr. Flint, a physician in the neighborhood, had married the sister of my mistress, and I was now the property of their little daughter... When we entered our new home we encountered cold looks, cold words, and cold treatment. We were glad when the night came. On my narrow bed I moaned and wept, I felt so desolate and alone... My heart rebelled against God, who had taken from me mother, father, mistress, and friend... I spent the day gathering flowers and weaving them into festoons, while the dead body of my father was lying within a mile of me. What cared my owners for that? he was merely a piece of property. Moreover, they thought he had spoiled his children, by teaching them to feel that they were human beings...

Little attention was paid to the slaves' meals in Dr. Flint's house. If they could catch a bit of food while it was going, well and good. I gave myself no trouble on that score, for on my various errands I passed my grandmother's house, where there was always something to spare for me...

My grandmother's mistress had always promised her that, at her death, she should be free; and it was said that in her will she made good the promise. But when the estate was settled, Dr. Flint told the faithful old servant that, under existing circumstances, it was necessary she should be sold... At that time, my grandmother was

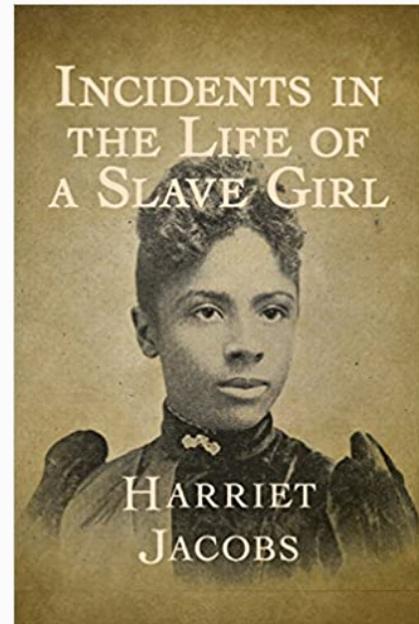


Figure 1: Jacobs, Harriet A., Lydia Maria Child, Jean Fagan Yellin, and John S. Jacobs. *Incidents in the life of a slave girl: written by herself*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000.

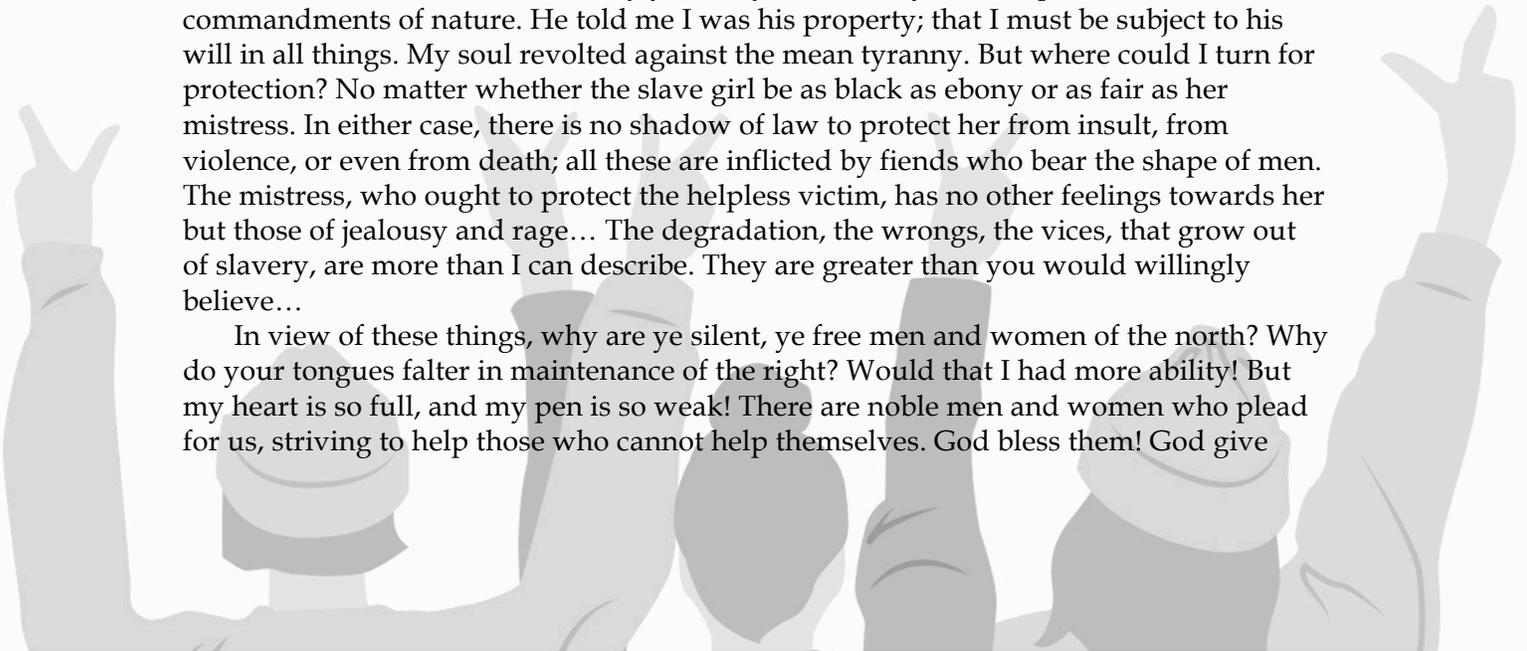
just fifty years old. Laborious years had passed since then; and now my brother and I were slaves to the man who had defrauded her of her money, and tried to defraud her of her freedom...

Dr. Flint was an epicure. The cook never sent a dinner to his table without fear and trembling; for if there happened to be a dish not to his liking, he would either order her to be whipped, or compel her to eat every mouthful of it in his presence. The poor, hungry creature might not have objected to eating it; but she did not object to having her master cram it down her throat till she choked... This poor woman endured many cruelties from her master and mistress; sometimes she was locked up, away from her nursing baby, for a whole day and night... to the slave mother... day comes laden with peculiar sorrows. She sits on her cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning; and often does she wish that she and they might die before the day dawns. She may be an ignorant creature, degraded by the system that has brutalized her from childhood; but she has a mother's instincts, and is capable of feeling a mother's agonies.

On one of these sale days, I saw a mother lead seven children to the auction-block. She knew that some of them would be taken from her; but they took all. The children were sold to a slave-trader, and their mother was brought by a man in her own town. Before night her children were all far away. She begged the trader to tell her where he intended to take them; this he refused to do. How could he, when he knew he would sell them, one by one, wherever he could command the highest price? I met that mother in the street, and her wild, haggard face lives to-day in my mind. She wrung her hands in anguish, and exclaimed, "Gone! All gone! Why don't God kill me?" I had no words wherewith to comfort her. Instances of this kind are of daily, yea, of hourly occurrence.

DURING the first years of my service in Dr. Flint's family... My master began to whisper foul words in my ear. Young as I was, I could not remain ignorant of their import [meaning]. I tried to treat them with indifference or contempt. The master's age, my extreme youth, and the fear that his conduct would be reported to my grandmother, made him bear this treatment for many months... He tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles my grandmother had instilled. He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master. I was compelled to live under the same roof with him – where I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature. He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolted against the mean tyranny. But where could I turn for protection? No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men. The mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings towards her but those of jealousy and rage... The degradation, the wrongs, the vices, that grow out of slavery, are more than I can describe. They are greater than you would willingly believe...

In view of these things, why are ye silent, ye free men and women of the north? Why do your tongues falter in maintenance of the right? Would that I had more ability! But my heart is so full, and my pen is so weak! There are noble men and women who plead for us, striving to help those who cannot help themselves. God bless them! God give



them strength and courage to go on! God bless those, every where, who are laboring to advance the cause of humanity!..

the state of things grew worse and worse daily. In desperation I told him that I must and would apply to my grandmother for protection. He threatened me with death, and worse than death, if I made any complaint to her. Strange to say, I did not despair. I was naturally of a buoyant disposition, and always I had a hope of somehow getting out of his clutches. Like many a poor, simple slave before me, I trusted that some threads of joy would yet be woven into my dark destiny.

The secrets of slavery are concealed like those of the Inquisition. My master was, to my knowledge, the father of eleven slaves. But did the mothers dare to tell who was the father of their children? Did the other slaves dare to allude to it, except in whispers among themselves? No, indeed! They knew too well the terrible consequences.

My grandmother could not avoid seeing things which excited her suspicions. She was uneasy about me, and tried various ways to buy me; but the never-changing answer was always repeated: "Linda does not belong to me. She is my daughter's property, and I have no legal right to sell her." The conscientious man! He was too scrupulous to sell me; but he had no scruples whatever about committing a much greater wrong against the helpless young girl placed under his guardianship, as his daughter's property.

Reader, I draw no imaginary pictures of southern homes. I am telling you the plain truth. Yet when victims make their escape from the wild beast of Slavery, northerners consent to act the part of bloodhounds, and hunt the poor fugitive back into his den, "full of dead men's bones, and all uncleanness." Nay, more, they are not only willing, but proud, to give their daughters in marriage to slaveholders. The poor girls have romantic notions of a sunny clime, and of the flowering vines that all the year round shade a happy home. To what disappointments are they destined! The young wife soon learns that the husband in whose hands she has placed her happiness pays no regard to his marriage vows. Children of every shade of complexion play with her own fair babies, and too well she knows that they are born unto him of his own household. Jealousy and hatred enter the flowery home, and it is ravaged of its loveliness.

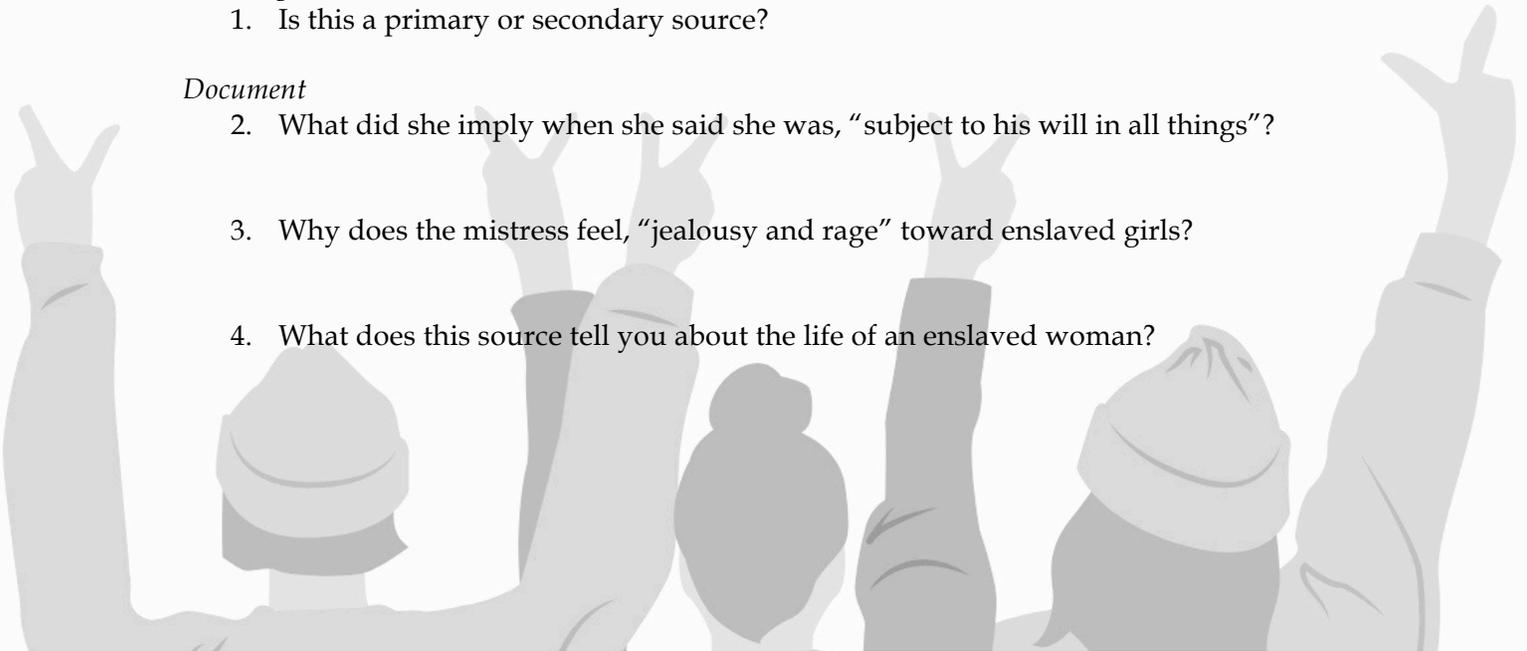
Jacobs, Harriet A., Lydia Maria Child, Jean Fagan Yellin, and John S. Jacobs. Incidents in the life of a slave girl: written by herself. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000.

Sourcing

1. Is this a primary or secondary source?

Document

2. What did she imply when she said she was, "subject to his will in all things"?
3. Why does the mistress feel, "jealousy and rage" toward enslaved girls?
4. What does this source tell you about the life of an enslaved woman?



5. What does this source tell you about the life of a slave owner's wife?

Analysis

6. Why might Harriet Jacob's account be different from a male slaves account?



Source B: NPR

In 1859, [Harriet E.] Wilson published a book that she gave a provocative title: *Our Nig*. That name is a derivative of a racist nickname given to the book's protagonist, a little girl of mixed race who grows up as an indentured servant to a white family. The girl is tortured by the family matriarch, beaten and forced to sleep in a frigid crawl space. Even the kindest members of the family call her "nig."

"Some of the things she wrote in her book were shocking," says JerriAnne Boggis, founder and director of The Harriet Wilson Project. "But it's not any more shocking than anything that you didn't know about slavery. It was shocking that it happened in the North because that's not our story. Our story is the abolitionist [anti-slavery] movement."

Wilson's book called out racism among abolitionists in the North. It's also emblematic of how important pieces of African American history can be forgotten — and then rediscovered...

Wilson's book never sold well in the 1800s, and it disappeared for more than 100 years. Then in the 1980s, her story intersected with a historian who was destined to become one of America's most famous storytellers: Henry Louis Gates Jr...

Gates dove into historical archives looking for a Harriet E. Wilson, and discovered one born to a white mother and black father in Milford, N.H., in 1825. Among the facts Gates discovered about Wilson that corroborated details from the novel were that she had a child in a poorhouse at the time she wrote the story. Sadly, Gates learned, her son passed away shortly after she published her book.

Wilson would likely have been familiar with slave narratives — books such as *Twelve Years A Slave* by Solomon Northup — which were popular at the time among Northern abolitionists. Ironically, Milford, N.H., was also a hotbed of abolitionist activity. At the time that Wilson was surviving what Gates describes as "what we could only call a period of harsh indenture," just up the road lived some of the most prominent abolitionist families of the mid-1800s.

"[Wilson's] teaching us in a spiritual way," says Alice Walker, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author, "about the paucity of substance in people who claim to see your suffering, but then they do absolutely nothing. And that is so American in so many ways."

Rodolico, Jack. "Early Novel Written By Free Black Woman Called Out Racism Among Abolitionists." NPR. Last modified February 15, 2020.

<https://www.npr.org/2020/02/15/805991106/early-novel-written-by-free-black-woman-called-out-racism-among-abolitionists>.

Sourcing

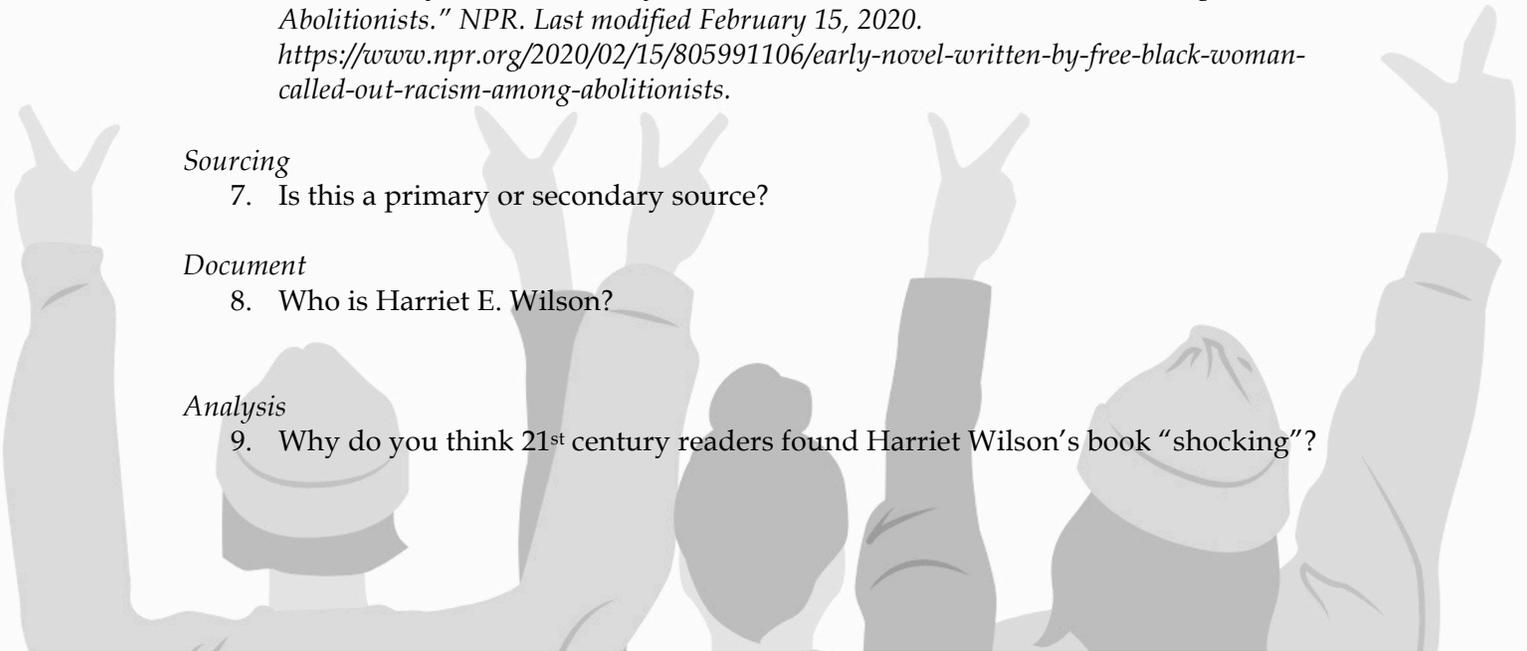
7. Is this a primary or secondary source?

Document

8. Who is Harriet E. Wilson?

Analysis

9. Why do you think 21st century readers found Harriet Wilson's book "shocking"?



Source C: Harriet E. Wilson, *Our Nig*

Frado, a mixed-race girl abandoned by her white mother after the death of her black father, takes a job as a servant to a lower middle-class white family in the North, only to encounter a world of abuse and abandonment. The book was published in 1859 and was the first novel published by a Black woman in America.

So all the trunks were assembled and crammed with the best selections from the wardrobe of herself and mother, where the last-mentioned articles could be appropriated.

"Nig was never so helpful before," Mary remarked, and wondered what had induced such a change in place of former sullenness.

Nig was looking further than the present, and congratulating herself upon some days of peace...

No sooner were they on their way, than Nig slyly crept round to Aunt Abby's room, and tiptoeing and twisting herself into all shapes, she exclaimed,—"She's gone, Aunt Abby, she's gone, fairly gone;" and jumped up and down, till Aunt Abby feared she would attract the notice of her mistress by such demonstrations...

"No! no! Frado, that's wrong! you would be wishing her dead; that won't do... But you forget what our good minister told us last week, about doing good to those that hate us; you must go finish your work, or your mistress will be after you, and remind you severely of Miss Mary, and some others beside."

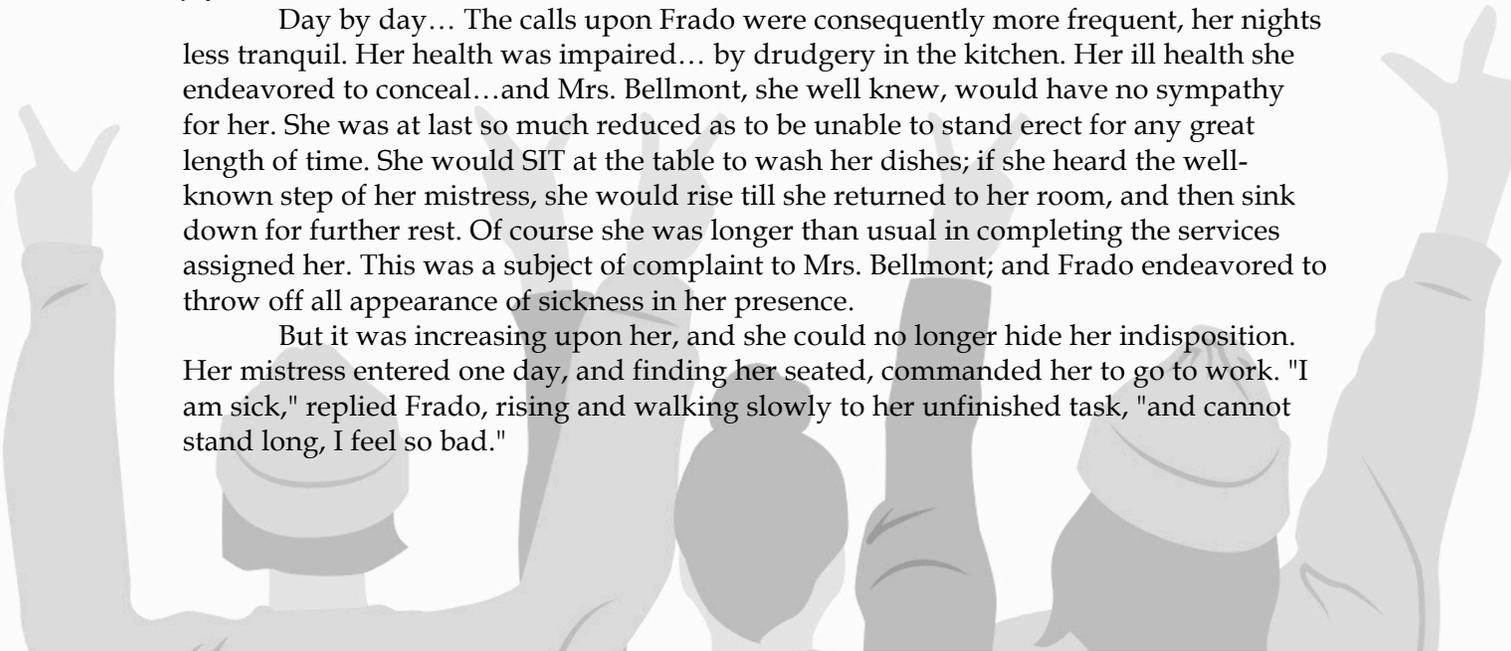
Nig went as she was told, and her clear voice was heard as she went, singing in joyous notes the relief she felt at the removal of one of her tormentors.

Day by day... The calls upon Frado were consequently more frequent, her nights less tranquil. Her health was impaired... by drudgery in the kitchen. Her ill health she endeavored to conceal... and Mrs. Belmont, she well knew, would have no sympathy for her. She was at last so much reduced as to be unable to stand erect for any great length of time. She would SIT at the table to wash her dishes; if she heard the well-known step of her mistress, she would rise till she returned to her room, and then sink down for further rest. Of course she was longer than usual in completing the services assigned her. This was a subject of complaint to Mrs. Belmont; and Frado endeavored to throw off all appearance of sickness in her presence.

But it was increasing upon her, and she could no longer hide her indisposition. Her mistress entered one day, and finding her seated, commanded her to go to work. "I am sick," replied Frado, rising and walking slowly to her unfinished task, "and cannot stand long, I feel so bad."



Figure 2: Hargreaves, Susanna, photographer. "A Memorial to a New Hampshire Mother and Author." June 3, 2020. Last modified September 2, 2020. <https://www.nhmagazine.com/the-memorial-to-a-new-hampshire-mother-and-author/>.



Angry that she should venture a reply to her command, she suddenly inflicted a blow which lay the tottering girl prostrate on the floor. Excited by so much indulgence of a dangerous passion, she seemed left to unrestrained malice; and snatching a towel, stuffed the mouth of the sufferer, and beat her cruelly.

Frado hoped she would end her misery by whipping her to death. She bore it with the hope of a martyr, that her misery would soon close...

Nig was in truth suffering much; her feelings were very intense on any subject, when once aroused. She read her Bible carefully, and as often as an opportunity presented, which was when entirely secluded in her own apartment...

Mrs. Bellmont found her one day quietly reading her Bible. Amazed... she felt it was time to interfere. Here she was, reading and shedding tears over the Bible. She ordered her to put up the book, and go to work, and not be snivelling about the house, or stop to read again...

Mrs. Bellmont, as we before said, did not trouble herself about the future destiny of her servant. If she did what she desired for HER benefit, it was all the responsibility she acknowledged. But she seemed to have great aversion to the notice Nig would attract should she become pious. [She told her husband] "I found her reading the Bible to-day, just as though she expected to turn pious nigger, and preach to white folks. So now you see what good comes of sending her to school...you know these niggers are just like black snakes; you CAN'T kill them. If she wasn't tough she would have been killed long ago. There was never one of my girls could do half the work."

"Did they ever try?" interposed her husband. "I think she can do more than all of them together...Just think how much profit she was to us last summer. We had no work hired out; she did the work of two girls—"

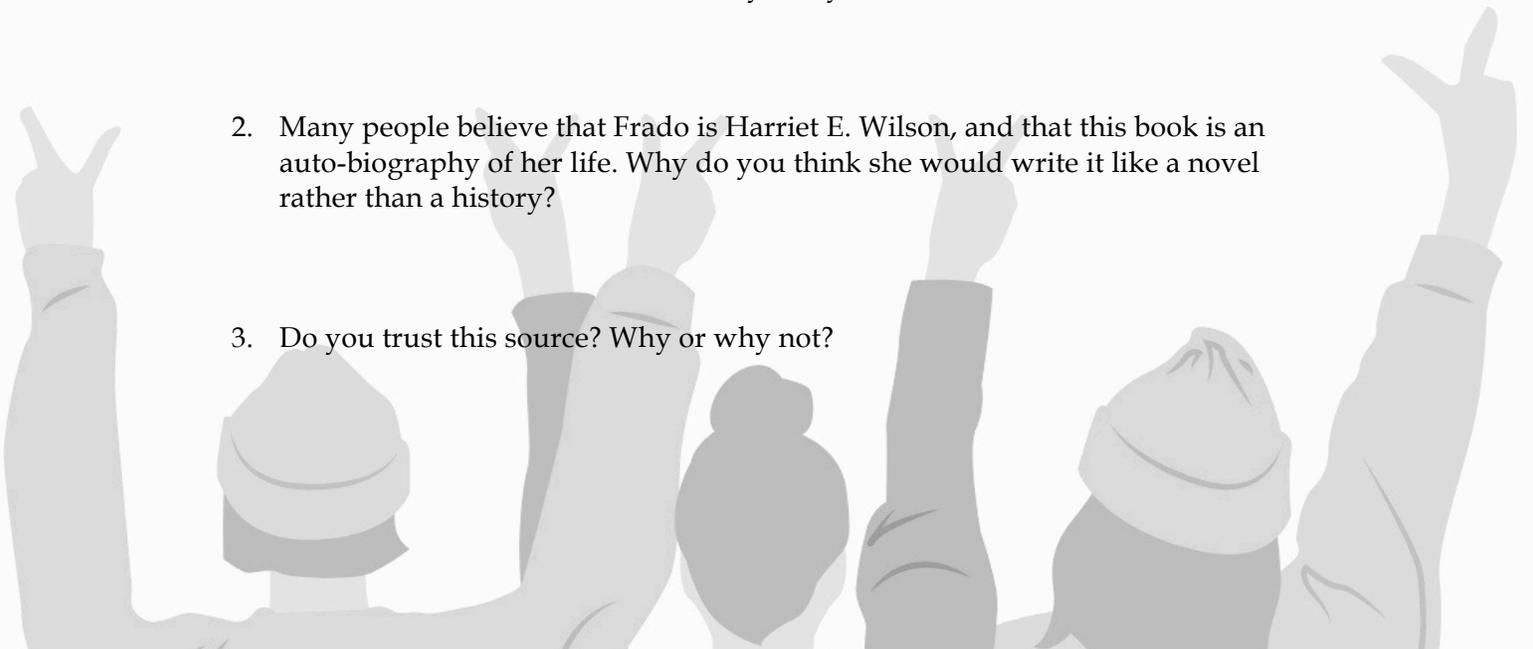
"And got the whippings for two with it!" remarked Mr. Bellmont.

"I'll beat the money out of her, if I can't get her worth any other way," retorted Mrs. B. sharply. While this scene was passing, Frado was trying to utter the prayer of the publican, "God be merciful to me a sinner."

Wilson, Harriet E., 1825-1900. Our Nig, or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black. New York: Penguin Books, 2009.

Sourcing

1. Who is the source? What bias do they likely have?
2. Many people believe that Frado is Harriet E. Wilson, and that this book is an auto-biography of her life. Why do you think she would write it like a novel rather than a history?
3. Do you trust this source? Why or why not?



Document

4. Why did the family call her “Nig”?
5. What is Mrs. Bellmont concerned most with? And why is she worried about Frado reading?

Analysis

6. Do you think it matters that these events occurred in a town that was largely anti-slavery (abolitionist)?
7. Why is this source important to understanding the effects of indentured servitude?

Was indentured servitude different from slavery? How so?

Should Harriet Wilson have been concerned about making her plight seem too terrible as compared to an enslaved woman like Harriet Jacobs?

