"Made with My Own Fingers When My Heart was Full":

Motherhood and Material Culture in the Lives of Three 19th Century Women

Meaghan K. Kelly

Advisor

Dr. Charlene Boyer Lewis

Professor, Department of History

A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts at Kalamazoo College

2023
Strict gender roles and expectations for women rooted within separate spheres ideology became foundational to American society during the nineteenth century. Separate spheres ideology dictated that women should remain in the private sphere, inside the home, focused on their roles as a mother and a wife. Women remained confined to the home because society decided they were more naturally moral and needed to be protected from the outside, public sphere that would corrupt their morality. Conversely, men dominated the public sphere, as they worked outside of the home and controlled systems seen as masculine, like the Church and political structures. Within the household, families expected women to create a moral home as a refuge from the outside world. This expectation put women in charge of managing the household, creating a strictly gendered division of labor. Cooking, cleaning, and child rearing all became distinctly feminine roles and the home itself became feminized.

As the nineteenth-century family centered around children, women in the home started to be defined as mothers more than ever before. Motherhood became synonymous with femininity as women’s roles within the home focused on caring for children. Separate spheres ideology made women responsible for their children’s wellbeing, both physically and spiritually. Good wives and mothers kept Christian households that displayed morality. Women’s status as mothers had the potential to give them power. In the north, women used motherhood and moral superiority to push moral reform movements that they believed in. In the south, society constructed motherhood incredibly differently along strict racial divides. Plantation mistresses became mother figures to their households, infantilizing enslaved people. Motherhood in the lives of enslaved women looked incredibly different, as slave owners constantly threatened to, and did, separate
and harm families. For many nineteenth-century women, motherhood played a central part in their lives. Their identity as a mother affected many of the choices they made and the agency they had inside and outside of the household.

Harriet Jacobs, an enslaved woman, achieved freedom for herself and her children. Born in the small town of Edenton, North Carolina, in the early 19th century, she was primarily raised by her free grandmother after her parents, both enslaved, died while she was young. At the age of fifteen, James Norcom, the man who owned her, began to pursue her and sexually harass her, which would continue until the end of his life in 1850. In an attempt to push him away and take control of her own future, Harriet began a sexual relationship with one of the most prominent white men in town. They had two children together. Norcom's desire for total domination over her extended to her children, as he attempted to control Harriet through harming them. This pushed Harriet to take extreme action; she ran away, leaving her children in the care of her free grandmother while hiding just a few feet away from them in her grandmother's attic. She stayed in the attic for seven years, barely able to move, becoming significantly weaker before eventually becoming too weak to walk. After seven years, in 1842, she determined that James Norcom had cut back on his search and she left for the North. Once out of his reach, she reunited with her children and gained freedom for the three of them. She also worked with abolitionist groups, eventually writing her life story in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, one of the only female-written slave narratives, written under the pseudonym Linda Brent and published in 1861.

Motherhood followed a much more traditional path in the life of Angelica Singleton. Born into the Southern aristocracy as the daughter of a planter in 1816, she
became the latest generation in a web of the nation's wealthiest plantation owners. Her elite status shaped nearly every aspect of her life, including the education she received and the kinds of people she socialized with. On a trip to Washington D.C. in 1838, former First Lady Dolley Madison introduced her to Abraham Van Buren, the son of the president. The pair married just a few months later and Angelica quickly became the youngest acting First Lady, at just twenty-one years old, to the widowed Martin Van Buren. Public perception of her was harsh, as the press accused her of luxurious spending and reveling in the attention of foreign governments across Europe. As a southern belle in the North, Angelica simultaneously charmed and was suspicious to the men she hosted in the White House. Grief overshadowed her brief time in the White House, as her first child, Rebecca, died shortly after birth. Moving to the Van Buren estate in upstate New York in 1841, her life and her letters began to revolve around her children and a series of difficult pregnancies. During this period, motherhood encompassed both the highest and lowest parts of her life. In total, she had three children who lived to adulthood.

Throughout her life, she and her family traveled between her childhood home in South Carolina and her new home in New York, toeing the line between North and South.

Upstate New York also housed Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the daughter of highly conservative judge Daniel Cady and his wife Margaret. Elizabeth deeply felt the ways in which her opportunities were shaped by her gender, due to the conservative views around femininity from society and her father. This pushed her to take even more steps in her education, as she received tutoring and eventually continued at an all-girls school. Her curiosity and passion for education quickly drew her into activist groups through her cousin. From here, she began to meet many people in the reform and abolitionist
movements. This included Henry Stanton, whom she married in 1840. Elizabeth traveled across Europe with Henry, quickly becoming introduced to early women's rights activists. As they settled in Boston after their return, Elizabeth embraced her role as a wife and mother, focusing instead on her home and the objects she used to display her family's respectability. Judge Cady attempted to separate the couple from social reform by buying them a house in the village of Seneca Falls, which he believed would distance her from the women's rights movement. However, Elizabeth quickly found a community of activists in her new home town, and just a year later helped to plan the 1848 Women's Rights Convention and co-authored the Declaration of Sentiments. Now truly making a name for herself within women's rights, she was introduced to Susan B. Anthony just a few years later. She and Anthony started what became a life-long career in activism together, but Elizabeth stayed primarily in Seneca Falls to raise her seven children. Her house in Seneca Falls served not just as the private sphere where she worked as a wife and mother, but as she created spaces where she met with Anthony and others and wrote, she brought the public sphere into her home as well. Her life existed between public and private, as she balanced her role within her family and the career in women's rights she built for herself. She reflected on her career and her life in her autobiography, *Eighty Years and More: Reminiscences 1815-1897*, published just a few years before her death in 1902.

Studying material culture and physical space helps connect with the women of the past. Looking at the things women handled and the places they inhabited helps to ground them within their own lives and helps historians understand the world they live in. Additionally, material culture allows the past to be understood beyond written
documents. For many women, especially women of color, who were often not literate or whose lives were not as well preserved in written documents, the study of material culture can be groundbreaking. Material culture provides the opportunity to examine areas of domestic life that were not included as significantly in written documents. By analyzing the objects women used and cherished as well as the spaces they interacted with, much more can be understood not only about the importance of race, class, and the regions they lived in, but also the agency nineteenth-century women had within these societal structures.

Examining and comparing the lives of women through material culture and physical space can reveal differences between women, particularly women of different races, different social statuses, and different locations. Material culture and physical space influenced the challenges Harriet Jacobs, Angelica Singleton Van Buren, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton faced and how they overcame the obstacles within their lives, particularly in their early adulthood. Comparing the lives of these three women reveals stark contrasts along the lines of race, class, and location. Tracing common biographical threads such as their roles within the household and their roles as mothers, shows how these women viewed and used similar material culture items, like clothing and household objects, and physical spaces in their homes in very different ways.

A challenge that often arises in women's history, and that I confronted while writing, is figuring out how to refer to a woman. I have chosen to refer to these women by their first name, the names that they most often used themselves. This allowed me to remain consistent throughout my paper and within each section, as Angelica and Elizabeth change their names at marriage and the last name Harriet used throughout her
childhood is unclear. Using first names also helps to avoid some of the confusion between repeated family names, especially when using last names as first names. Finally, I chose the names that they presented to the public. Historian Jean Fagan Yellin refers to Harriet as Hatty throughout *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* and some sources related to Angelica point to Sarah, her other first name, or Angelique, a school nickname. However, neither of these women consistently used these names in public throughout their adult lives. For all of these reasons, I have chosen to refer to them simply as Harriet, Angelica, and Elizabeth, echoing what their family and friends called them throughout their lives.

The challenges Harriet Jacobs faced were rooted in her identity as an enslaved woman; Norcom’s determination to hold power over her and his repeated sexual harassment posed a constant threat throughout her young adulthood. She used both of her pregnancies to deflect Norcom’s approaches, but as Norcom began to exert control over her children, her determination to protect herself and her children pushed her to take extreme action against him. Harriet Jacobs’s use of material culture and physical space provides deep insight into the calculated planning of her actions against Norcom and of caring for her children. Growing up as an enslaved girl, she treasured objects that connected her with her family and used these objects in attempts to craft respectability. Her hiding space in the attic utilized the protection of her free grandmother while allowing her to keep her children close and cared for.

In the early years of her marriage, Angelica Singleton Van Buren felt pressure from the public perception of her role as acting First Lady. Personally, her life was focused on her children, as she experienced many challenging pregnancies and buried two of her children. Her identity as a mother drew her focus away from areas of her life
where she was heavily criticized, as she focused instead on her role within her own family. Physical space played a constant role in her life as the daughter of a Southern planter and the daughter-in-law of a Northern politician. In the South, her elite status controlled her life as she displayed her family’s gentility, whereas in the North, she hosted important political guests both in the White House and in Lindenwald. She used material culture, often clothing, to shape both public and personal perceptions of herself. She used her outfits to consciously construct her public image, particularly during her time in the White House. Clothing also connected her to her family in the private sphere, as she put care and thought into the clothes her family wore and left behind.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton repeatedly challenged the gendered limits placed on her life by the structure of society, and, in more intimate ways, through her father’s traditional views of femininity. Her identity as a wife and mother not only shaped her career, but was referenced throughout her writing as a firm cause for her activism. Physical space and material culture played a key role in her life and her career. The material culture objects she treasured often connected to her career or her role within her household. Physical spaces were of key importance to her throughout her childhood and early career, especially her house in Seneca Falls where she created a separate and semi-public space away from her children for her work.

Harriet Jacobs
Harriet Jacobs grew up in Edenton, North Carolina, a small town on the coast of Albemarle Sound, where the Chowan and Roanoke rivers meet, a location that made it the first permanent European settlement in the state of North Carolina. Once a lucrative trading port, the town’s growth came to a sudden halt as an extreme hurricane in the late eighteenth century cut it off from the Atlantic. Even as its importance in trade began to decline at the end of the Revolution, it remained an important political center in North Carolina. The town claims several residents deeply connected to the Revolution and early American politics. Slavery in Edenton had existed since the founding of the town. Most of the enslaved population arrived by boat on a dock on East Water Street (see figure A). The dock sat at the bottom of the town green, most likely next to a market house. Many of the people forcibly brought to Edenton came from other colonies and the Caribbean, rather than directly from Africa. A 1790 census shows that the enslaved, Black population was nearly double that of the white population. The census reveals huge economic disparities between the different social classes of Edenton. Half of the enslaved population was owned by only five elite planters.¹ Many of these enslaved people lived outside of the town in the surrounding plantations, but were counted because the slave-owning families resided in town. Because Edenton was a small town, the social and racial hierarchy shaped nearly every aspect of life for everyone in town. While the few slave-owning, white elites were at the top and the enslaved majority was at the bottom, the middle of the hierarchy was not as clear. Race, wealth, and reputation all controlled status in Edenton. Because of the intimacy that came with small-town life, people were conscious of their image and the way their neighbors perceived them, in a way that was

very different from crowded cities or distant plantations. Harriet would become incredibly conscious of this intimacy and the way it affected daily life during her time in Edenton.

Harriet’s father Elijah Knox was an enslaved man who greatly valued the little freedom he had and who instilled a desire for freedom in his children. He was a highly skilled carpenter owned by Dr. Andrew Knox. Historian Jean Fagan Yellin states that his parents appear to be Athena, an enslaved woman on Knox’s plantation, and Henry Jacobs, a white farmer who lived only a mile away from the plantation with his wife and children.\(^2\) The Knox family trusted Elijah, who trained him as a carpenter. Because of his skilled trade, the Knox family allowed him to work off the plantation on nearby construction sites, including in Edenton where he met and married Delilah Horniblow. Harriet was their oldest child, born in 1813 and her brother John was born two years later.\(^3\) The Knox family’s trust in Elijah meant that he was able to live in Edenton with his wife and children, even after the family moved further away from the town. He paid the family $200 a year in order to live away from the plantation and control his own labor.\(^4\) His job as a carpenter was a point of pride for his family, as Harriet chose to include it in the opening lines of her autobiography. Within their home in Edenton, Elijah attempted to shield his children from the horrors of slavery as much as possible. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet recalled a moment her brother, walking


\(^3\) Harriet’s exact birth year is debated among historians. Many primary sources and events the she discussed in *Incidents* point many historians, including Jean Fagan Yellin, to 1813. However, other historians believe she was born in 1815, as this is the date on her gravestone and the dates throughout *Incidents* are inconsistent. I have chosen to assume she was born in 1813, following the dates laid out by Jean Fagan Yellin.

through the town, heard both their father and their mistress call him, and had to make an immediate decision about who to be obedient to at a very young age. He ultimately answered to the woman that owned them first, to which their father responded, "You are my child ... and when I call you, you should come immediately, if you have to pass through fire and water." Harriet and John recalled the lesson of obedience and the importance of family throughout their lives.

Harriet's relationship with her mother's family became essential to her in Edenton. Harriet's grandmother, Molly Horniblow, was the daughter of an enslaved woman and a plantation owner in South Carolina. Her father freed her and her siblings, sending them to St. Augustine. On the journey, slave traders kidnapped her and her siblings and sold them back into slavery, landing her in Edenton. There, the Horniblow family purchased her, and she began to work Horniblow's Tavern located on King's Street (see figure A). She quickly became one of their most important slaves as she helped to run the tavern, did the sewing for the family, worked as a wet nurse, and raised their children. During this time, she had five children of her own, although the paternity of her children is unclear. Molly used the skills she learned working at the tavern, like cooking and baking, to earn her own money and take care of her children. Molly was freed by her mistress upon her death, but her children, including Harriet's mother Delilah, remained enslaved. Her mistress's children divided Molly's four older children between them, selling the youngest, twelve-year-old Joseph, to make the inheritance equal.

Though Joseph stayed in Edenton, his separation from the family was a huge blow, especially to young Harriet who considered him a brother due to how close they were in

---

age. Her freedom meant that Molly could purchase a house, where she ran her own business selling food and had a new goal of buying her family’s freedom to ensure they could stay together (see figure A). Delilah and therefore Harriet and her brother, went to Margaret Horniblow.

Harriet was only six when Delilah died, and it served as a pivotal moment in her life, as she realized for the first time that she was a slave. Her mistress Margaret had promised Delilah that she would take care of her children, but unlike what Harriet and her family had anticipated, this did not mean setting them free. Harriet, nevertheless, seemingly remembered her time being enslaved by Margaret fondly. Margaret taught her to read and write, something that differentiated her from many other enslaved people and was outlawed in North Carolina just a few years later. She also learned to sew, an important skill that Harriet later used to support herself in various ways throughout her life. Early on in *Incidents*, she highlighted her devotion to Margaret and repeatedly stated an almost familial connection, calling her mistress her mother’s “foster sister.” The way Harriet wrote about Margaret and the Horniblow family differed from the way she wrote about slavery throughout the rest of *Incidents* as she emphasized the closeness and connections between families, with less of a focus Margaret’s ownership over her and her brother.

Around the age of twelve, Harriet’s life had several sudden changes quickly following one another. Margaret Horniblow died in 1825, willing twelve-year-old Harriet to her young niece, Mary Matilda Norcom. Because Mary Matilda was a child, her

---

father, Dr. James Norcom owned Harriet in her place. Historian Jean Fagan Yellin argues that, because the section leaving Harriet to Mary Matilda was added later and was not consistent with the rest of the will, this section may have been manipulated by Norcom. Within Margaret Horniblow’s will, all of Harriet’s family that she owned went to one family member and would have been kept together. A section added right before her death that was not signed intentionally separated Harriet and put her under Norcom’s control. Despite being Margaret Horniblow’s doctor and the executor of her will, no one at the time questioned this section and the way it benefited Norcom. Harriet’s brother John had been sent to work for Norcom several months earlier and this continued with Margaret Horniblow’s death. Edenton regarded James Norcom highly because of his work as a doctor. His office was also located on King’s Street, directly next door to Horniblow’s Tavern (see figure A). In 1826, about a year after Harriet and John moved into James Norcom’s house, their grandmother informed them that their father had died. The Norcoms reaction to her father’s death struck Harriet and highlighted their cruelty, as she wrote, “I thought I should be allowed to go to my father’s house the next morning; but I was ordered to go for flowers … 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.”

Harriet’s reference to her father’s body being only a mile away highlighted the proximity of everything in Edenton. For the first time, she acknowledged the importance of Edenton as a small, interconnected town and how that contrasted with the isolation of the Norcom house.

---

Life in the Norcoms’ house was very different from what Harriet had known. She was still able to be with family; her brother and one of her aunts, Aunt Betty, also worked for the Norcoms. As one of the wealthiest men in Edenton, James Norcom owned a large house, his medical office, and a plantation outside of Edenton (See figure A). Aunt Betty and Harriet worked in the house caring for his wife Maria and young Mary Matilda, respectively, while her brother John worked primarily at James Norcom’s office. In *Incidents*, she recounted the horrors of the Norcom house. She wrote of multiple instances where enslaved people suspected Norcom of having children with women he owned. Norcom violently punished those who accused him and questioned the paternity of enslaved children he owned. He sold one enslaved woman and her baby in order to separate her from her family, including her husband, who accused James Norcom of getting his wife pregnant. When another young, enslaved girl had a child assumed to be his, the girl and her mother prayed that she and her baby would die, while being mocked by the Norcoms. Both the girl and her baby died later that day.\(^9\) The cruelty Harriet witnessed from James and Maria Norcom differed greatly from what she experienced in Margaret Hormiblow’s household. About Mary Norcom, she wrote, “She was a member of the church; but partaking of the Lord’s supper did not seem to put her in a Christian frame of mind.”\(^10\) Shining a religious light on the actions of the Norcoms highlighted Harriet’s religiousness and that of her audience. Ultimately, the cruelty that Harriet experienced in just her first few years living in the Norcoms’ house was a huge contrast


to everything she had experienced in slavery up until that point and marked a change in her relationship with the family who owned her.

Harriet’s life with the Norcoms became even worse as she turned fifteen, an age that she declared, “a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl,” as James Norcom’s sexual harassment began. He became focused on catching her alone, asserting his power over her, and, as she wrote, “corrupt[ing]” her mind. He attempted to control Harriet’s body by controlling the physical space around her and her perception of that space. He first attempted to isolate her physically, controlling situations around her to guarantee they were alone. Once alone, she stated that he repeatedly reminded her of his total control over and possession of her body, insisting that she must submit to him in every way. This abuse also isolated her from her family and the other slaves in the household. Norcom controlled her work around the household to keep her away from other enslaved people, making her easier to target. His abuse also mentally isolated her from the other enslaved people in the household and her family, as he threatened to harm her further if she discussed his actions. In Incidents, Harriet reflected on her physical and emotional reactions to James Norcom, how she felt heavier with grief. “The other slaves in my master’s house noticed the change,” she wrote, “Many of them pitied me; but none dared to ask the cause. They had no need to inquire. They knew too well the guilty practice under that roof; and they were aware that to speak of them was an offense that never went unpunished.” Harriet also faced the jealousy-fueled wrath of Maria Norcom. She quickly understood what was happening between Harriet and her husband and could no

\[11\] Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, 30.
\[12\] Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, 30.
\[13\] Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, 31.
longer stand to be in the same room as Harriet. At one point, she summoned Harriet to her room and forced her to recount everything that he had said to her, swearing on a Bible. Harriet quickly realized that Maria Norcom’s tears were not sympathy for her, but because she felt disgraced and hurt as his wife. After learning how much her husband was hurting Harriet, Maria Norcom, like many other white plantation mistresses, not only refused to help, but became even more furious at Harriet’s presence within the house. Ultimately, at only fifteen-years-old, Harriet’s life and the space she existed in was now totally controlled by James Norcom and his predatory desire for power.

Because Edenton was such a small town, Harriet used physical space to her advantage and to protect herself from James Norcom in different ways. He was very conscious of his reputation in the town, something that dictated his actions, especially outside of his house. This had benefited Harriet’s family before, when he had attempted to misinterpret the will that freed Molly, but had been publicly shamed because of his attempts to keep her enslaved. Harriet quickly understood that he only confronted her alone, and soon attempted to stay around other enslaved people in the house as much as possible. She also shared a bed with her Aunt Betty in a separate part of the house, which protected her at night. Historian Bernard Herman argues that areas of the house dominated by enslaved people were practically invisible to whites, leaving enslaved people’s movements largely unmonitored. The details of these spaces from slave owners are limited and vague at best. Harriet, like every other member of the Norcom’s household, knew that he would never enter areas of the house where enslaved people lived, as his intentions would be too obvious to other enslaved people, and “as a married man, and a professional man, he deemed it necessary to save appearances in some
degree.”¹⁴ Norcom realized the power of gossip, specifically when it came from within his own household. In this sense, being in a small town like Edenton benefited Harriet, since James Norcom could not be protected by the anonymity of a larger city or the isolation of a plantation, a fact that she reflected on and acknowledged in *Incidents.*¹⁵ As one of the only doctors in town and an elite, white man, he had a strong reputation that he was eager to protect. But, as historian Lisa Tolbert writes, through purchasing her house and selling food to many white families “Harriet’s grandmother, Molly Horniblow, cultivated a powerful [reputation] of her own ... The interactions of James Norcom, Molly Horniblow, and Horniblow’s influential white clientele, illuminate the complex racial dynamic that distinguished southern towns.”¹⁶ From the start, Norcom threatened to kill Harriet if she told Molly about his harassment clearly fearing the power the Black women held in Edenton. Nevertheless, Molly could sense something was wrong, and began to push to buy Harriet’s freedom even more. James Norcom was desperate to retain his control over Harriet, and thus began his constant refusal to give her up, a fight that would continue until his death.

James Norcom’s desire to control Harriet affected all aspects of her life, especially her relationships with others. Shortly after he began harassing her, Harriet wrote about falling in love with a man who lived nearby. He was a free Black man and, like her father, a carpenter. He offered to buy her freedom in order to marry her. Harriet, fearing Norcom’s reaction to another request to purchase her, recruited a wealthy white

¹⁵ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave,* 32.
woman in town who was a friend of the family to talk to both of the Norcoms and encourage them to sell her to get rid of her. Norcom would not be persuaded to sell her, and the request infuriated him. She loved someone else and would not submit to his control, which upset him even further. After hitting her and threatening once again to kill her, he stated that he would never again speak with her about marrying another man. He attempted to isolate her further, not speaking to her for weeks but continuing to watch her closely and keep her separated from other enslaved people. In *Incidents*, Harriet reflected on his nefarious goals, "He thought to mortify me; to make me feel that I had disgraced myself by receiving the honorable addresses of a respectable colored man, in preference to the base proposals of a white man."  

In one last conversation with the free Black man, Harriet urged him to go to a free state, knowing that he would have better opportunities there and believing watching her continue to suffer in Norcom's house would be too heartbreaking for him to bear. As she watched him go, she recalled feeling like her girlhood was ending. She began to understand the kind of future that awaited her in the Norcoms' household and deeply desired to change it.

The future James Norcom envisioned for Harriet became closer than ever before as he began to make plans for her. He realized that the safety of a small-town environment protected Harriet from his advances. He also believed Harriet's hesitance connected to his wife's presence in the house. He decided to segregate her from her community in Edenton by moving her to his plantation. He informed her that he wanted to build her a new house, removed from the other enslaved people, where they could be together. Harriet was horrified to find out that not only could he not be swayed from this,

he had already started construction on the house. She quickly understood the significance of this house and how it would separate her from the safety she found in the presence of others, and swore she would never enter it. In Incidents, she explained that this plan of his pushed her over the edge into action. "What could I do? I thought and thought, till I became desperate, and made a plunge into the abyss."\(^{18}\) Harriet, recalling his jealousy of the carpenter that loved her, decided to push him away through his jealousy and gain the protection of a man even more powerful than Norcom. She defended this difficult decision throughout Incidents. She recalled how she felt ashamed of the choices that she made, while acknowledging that she believed there were no other choices she could make. Jean Fagan Yellin writes that it was "clear that at fifteen, she did not have the option of choosing virginity, nor did she have the option of choosing marriage with a young man she loved."\(^{19}\) Because of James Norcom’s threat to more thoroughly control her body through the physical space she existed in with the little house on the plantation, Harriet began to take drastic actions.

Harriet turned to another powerful white man who was interested in her, Samuel Tredwell Sawyer. Sawyer came from a powerful family with ties to North Carolina Governors and was very well educated, pursued law after graduating from the College of William and Mary. When Sawyer met Harriet, he had just passed the bar exam and started his own practice in Edenton. He took an interest in Harriet, frequently seeing her visit her grandmother’s house, just a few doors down from his own home (See figure A). Sawyer’s house, on the same street as Molly Horniblow’s, was also only down one block.

\(^{18}\) Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, 59.
\(^{19}\) Yellin, Harriet Jacobs: A Life, 27.
from Norcom's house, with only a couple minutes' walk separating the three houses. He, like the rest of Edenton, had heard rumors about the Norcom family's treatment and was interested in helping her. Harriet had watched the other enslaved women involved with white men throughout Edenton and hoped that, if Samuel Sawyer were to have children with her, he would fight to free her and their children. She also believed that getting pregnant with another white man's child would anger Norcom enough to sell her. The location of his house directly between Molly's and James Norcom's clearly played a large role in their relationship. His protection over Harriet was tied not only to his status, but to his proximity to Norcom's house. Located only a handful of doors down from Molly's house, Harriet would have passed his house every time she left Norcom's house, certainly every time she went to her grandmother's house. She hoped that becoming Sawyer's mistress would provide her with another watchful eye on King Street to keep James Norcom at bay. In Incidents, Harriet wrote next to nothing about her interactions with Sawyer. She gave no indication of where they met, how often they spent time together, or even the extent of their relationship. Regardless, she quickly became pregnant, adamant that Samuel Sawyer was the father.

Harriet attempted to hide her pregnancy, revealing it only as James Norcom attempted to take her from Edenton. He soon finished the construction of the house on his plantation that he had threatened her with and began to make plans to move her. When he told her that she would be taken, by force if necessary, to the plantation and stay there, she quickly fired back that she was already pregnant with another man's child. This infuriated him, as she expected, and he remained silent just as he had been when he discovered her love for the carpenter. Harriet sought refuge at her grandmother's house,
but before she could explain, Maria Norcom followed her, certain that the child was her husband’s. She declared that Harriet could not live in the Norcom’s house anymore, putting the blame on Harriet. Molly, having heard the rumors but never the complete story, assumed that Maria Norcom’s assumption was correct. Harriet wrote that Molly “tore from my fingers my mother’s wedding ring and her silver thimble,” before throwing her out of the house as well.²⁰ For the first time, she connected her memories to specific items, and the significance of Molly’s taking them was not lost on Harriet. She tied these items to her mother’s memory and believed that losing them was a sign of not living up to the morals that her family held so deeply. This line also reveals that she wore these items often, if not every day. From what she wrote about her mother, she remembered very little of her before her death. Being connected to her through these items was meaningful for Harriet, especially as she became a mother herself. Additionally, seeing Maria Norcom and Molly Horniblow react to her pregnancy in the same way, by not allowing her to live in their respective houses, highlights both women’s beliefs that Harriet’s immorality affected the space she was in. By throwing her out and pushing her further away, both women attempted to use distance to protect their households and their reputations, each for very different reasons. Overall, Harriet felt a mix of complex emotions as she accepted her pregnancy. The reactions from those around her, mixed with her own feelings of guilt, while still trying to remain hopeful that this plan would create a better future for herself were difficult and took a toll on her. Regardless, as she walked out of Molly’s house that day, she recalled feeling a shift in the way people treated her and that she had started to shape her own future.

Harriet wanted to continue to have Samuel Sawyer by her side. They maintained their relationship during her pregnancy, as he and Harriet worked with her grandmother to plan for the child. Once Harriet talked to Molly and explained everything between her and James Norcom, she was again allowed to live in her house. She noted that while Molly did not forgive her, she did pity her and continued to care for her. Her grandmother also spoke with Samuel Sawyer, who assured her of his promise to care for Harriet and buy her and her child as soon as he was able. While Harriet’s pregnancy disappointed Molly, Sawyer’s assurance helped her accept it. Historian Jean Fagan Yellin also hypothesizes that a letter between Sawyer and Norcom from 1828 may include a reference to Harriet, as Samuel Sawyer acknowledged that he had not treated James Norcom with “that decorum which your age, your character and your standing in society merited.” However, she acknowledges this letter might also be about politics as he went on to discuss an upcoming election. If the letter referenced Harriet, it provides a unique insight into the way the social hierarchy of Edenton controlled how these two men spoke to one another. As Sawyer expressed regret for his actions against Norcom at the beginning of his relationship with Harriet, he acknowledged Norcom’s control over Harriet and her legal status as his property. Through both his promise to buy Harriet and his interactions with Norcom, Sawyer balanced the power and influence that came with his status against Norcom’s.

Harriet continued to live at her grandmother’s house throughout her pregnancy. Although she was not allowed to live in his house, Norcom visited her at her grandmother’s house frequently. On one such visit, he questioned her as to whether the

father of her child was white. When she confirmed that she had slept with a white man, James Norcom "sprang upon me like a wolf, grabbed my arm as if he would have broken it. 'Do you love him?' said he in a hissing tone." Harriet responded simply, "I am thankful that I do not despise him."\(^{22}\) He became even more jealous as he learned that Harriet had chosen to sleep with a man that he considered a social equal. By asking whether she loved him, it is clear that James Norcom was desperate to control not only Harriet’s body, but her mind and heart. It also implies that he was desperate for her love, or at least the closest thing he could get while owning her, her submission. With her continued defiance, he emphasized the control he had over her body and the spaces she existed in. He swore that he would never sell her, to Sawyer or anyone else, and that he would keep her close to him. Although her pregnancy had angered him in the way she anticipated, she had hoped this would make him more willing to sell her and it devastated her to find that it had the opposite effect almost immediately. Additionally, as one of the only medical doctors in town and as her owner, he made it clear that no other doctor could treat her during her pregnancy, another reminder of his constant possession over her. Harriet’s response also revealed the emotions she was feeling throughout this plan. She recognized that motherhood, specifically motherhood that tied her to a man like Samuel Sawyer, gave her power. She, unlike many other enslaved girls before her, had chosen the father of her children and had done so wisely with hope for the future.

By living at her grandmother’s house, she had a certain level of protection from Norcom. His presence within Molly Horniblow’s home emphasizes the important role physical space played in protecting Harriet from Norcom’s abuse. In his own home, he

had complete control over the space and everyone inside of it. But in Molly’s home, he was constricted by social standards. James Norcom, of course, cared about his own reputation and the way he upheld it in public. Molly’s reputation also protected her household. Molly’s status as a well-respected free woman in Edenton allowed her to restrict who entered her house. With Harriet living there, this meant Molly oversaw James Norcom’s access to her. Molly ultimately held more power in this space, something that he was very aware of. He grabbed her arm “as if he would have broken it” and repeatedly stopped himself from hitting her; it is easy to imagine that these interactions would have happened very differently had he been in a space he owned.

Harriet wrote of a few interactions where he got too angry, and Molly threw him out. Having his actions policed by a Black woman directly opposed the near unlimited power he had in his own house. Regardless of whether he was allowed inside, he passed the house every day as he walked to his office. Harriet recalled continuing to feel his presence, especially as he had her brother John deliver her notes filled with the threats he whispered to her when she lived in his house. James Norcom’s constant presence at her grandmother’s house throughout Harriet’s pregnancy emphasized his continued control over her body, despite her living outside of the physical spaces he controlled.

Harriet felt Norcom’s presence in Molly Horniblow’s home the most during the birth of her son, Joseph. Harriet recalled that she was too sick to leave her bed in her grandmother’s house. Because he did not allow her to see any other doctor, she put off medical treatment until she was so sick that her family felt they had no other choice. When James Norcom was called, she says that she “was very weak and nervous; and as
soon as he entered the room, I began to scream."23 Not long after, her baby was born prematurely. He informed her family, as Harriet overheard, that he believed both her and the baby would die soon after birth. She wrote that, for the first time since the abuse and harassment started, she no longer wanted to die, but that she only wanted to live if her son lived. Harriet could not get out of bed for several weeks, but ultimately they both survived. She named her son Joseph, after her uncle that she considered a brother and who was fiercely determined to gain his freedom. Sawyer, who visited shortly after the birth and helped support the two of them, offered to have the baby take his last name, but Harriet refused as she believed it would only anger James Norcom even more. Because she felt that she could not give him a last name, she delayed his baptism. Following his birth, Harriet and Joseph were still not allowed to enter the Norcom’s house and continued to stay with Molly. At the house on King Street, Harriet learned even more domestic skills as she helped Molly cook and bake. At this point, Molly had worked hard to establish her business and it had become the primary bakery in Edenton. Working with Molly allowed Harriet to focus on caring for her baby, far more than she would have been able to working in Norcom’s house. Molly’s status that she established through her bakery also increased with the number of white customers she had, as they regarded her, and her family, highly. During this time, Harriet continued her relationship with Sawyer, as she wrote about him visiting her and the baby frequently. Norcom also visited her, under Molly’s watchful eye, to remind her again and again that she and her son belonged to him. Living at Molly’s house offered Harriet certain protections and opportunities that she would not have had living at Norcom’s house.

23 Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, 68.
In 1831, two years after Joseph’s birth, Harriet wrote about Nat Turner’s Rebellion and its effects on Edenton. It occurred just north of Edenton in Virginia and was the bloodiest slave rebellion in American history. As the news reached the town, Harriet and much of Edenton’s Black community began to hear rumors that their houses were going to be searched. Ahead of Molly’s house being searched, she “arranged everything in my grandmother’s house as neatly as possible. I put white quilts on all the beds, and decorated some of the rooms with flowers.” She wrote that she did this knowing it would upset the white men searching their house to see a respectable Black household. Harriet used specific objects, like the white quilts and flowers, to demonstrate her family’s respectability in a way she knew would help protect them. When the house was searched, the white men also focused on specific objects in the house. Despite many houses owned by free Black people being burned down, Molly’s household made it out relatively unharmed, losing only a few items of clothing. Harriet believed that their proximity to Sawyer and other white friends of the family ultimately protected them. Their proximity and Molly’s status played a large part in keeping the family safe, as Black people throughout Edenton were beaten and had their property destroyed due to a false assumption of guilt. Although there were no known slave rebellion conspiracies around Edenton, many poor whites believed that the lives built by Black people, particularly free Black people, in Edenton threatened the social hierarchy. Although Nat Turner’s Rebellion did not touch Edenton, the fear that it sparked in white people deeply affected Harriet’s life and highlighted just how dangerous it was to be Black, not just in the Norcom’s house, but in all of Edenton regardless of enslaved status. Harriet kept her

---

family away from most of the violence by using objects throughout their home to construct respectability and fulfill the ideas whites in Edenton held for Black households.

Harriet continued her relationship with Samuel Sawyer as James Norcom’s abuse from a distance persisted and, a couple of years after the birth of Joseph, at only nineteen years old, she became pregnant with her daughter Louisa Matilda in 1833. She described Norcom’s reaction and violence much more. As soon as she told him she was pregnant, he stormed out of Molly’s house, returning moments later to cut off all of Harriet’s hair. She wrote that he believed she took too much pride in her looks, but shaving her head also served as a reminder of his ownership of her body. His violence lasted throughout her pregnancy. At her daughter’s birth, Harriet wrote that she mourned for the life she knew her daughter would have as an enslaved woman. She wrote nothing of Samuel Sawyer’s reaction, only stating that their daughter looked exactly like his late mother, and chose instead to highlight Norcom’s reaction for her audience. Norcom came to Molly’s house within days of the birth and demanded that Harriet bring her daughter to him. He screamed at them, vowing to make Harriet and her children suffer. She soon passed out; she wrote that he set the baby on the bed and began to shake Harriet violently. Just as he only came when she was alone, Harriet understood the importance of keeping her grandmother and other protectors close. James Norcom’s reaction to the birth of Louisa Matilda emphasized the safety of Molly’s home that protected Harriet and her children.

James Norcom’s occasional absence from Edenton also gave Harriet more freedom, which she used to baptize her children. Religion played a significant role for

25 Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, 87.
both Harriet and Molly. *Incidents* heavily relies on Christian morals that Harriet included throughout to connect with her white abolitionist audience. When work pulled him out of Edenton after Louisa Matilda’s birth, Molly jumped at the opportunity to have both children baptized. They went to Saint Paul’s Episcopal Church, which, despite many renovations, still stands on West Church Street (See figure B). The church is small, with only a few dozen pews and balconies on the second floor. The stark white paint and gold detailing demonstrates how the church catered to Edenton’s elites, like Norcom. Harriet associated the church with the lives of her own parents, as they emphasized religion throughout her childhood and baptized her at the same church. Baptizing her children reminded her of her mother and in *Incidents* she reflected on how their early lives had been so different because of the men who owned them. Delilah’s master had died early and her mistress cared for her, unlike the Norcoms and their violence towards Harriet. The church also reminded Harriet of her father, as the woman who had owned him, Mrs. Andrew Knox, and her daughter Louisa Matilda attended the church as well. The daughter offered to serve as a godmother to Harriet’s children, and, in turn, Harriet named the baby Louisa Matilda after her. Harriet knew that she did not want her children to have the last name Norcom and felt Norcom would become more violent if she gave the children Sawyer’s name. Rather than give them the last name of the people who owned her father, she looked to her paternal grandfather, a free white man, despite her father being unable to take that name while he was alive. At the end of the day, Mrs. Knox gave Louisa a gold chain necklace. The symbolism of the chain bothered Harriet, who wrote, “I wanted no chain to be fastened on my daughter, not even if its links were
of gold."26 She did not write about what happened to the necklace, made her feelings clear. With the births of her children, Harriet’s main goal in life went from pushing James Norcom away to gaining freedom and getting all three of them out of his control.

In 1834, with both of her children baptized, Harriet turned her focus away from her relationship with Sawyer and towards their children’s freedom. Her family collected several hundred dollars and commissioned a slave trader to go to Norcom asking to purchase her and take her to Texas. Enough money was raised to pay the slave trader and for him to offer the Norcoms up to twelve hundred dollars. As Harriet expected, Norcom continued to refuse on the grounds that Harriet belonged to his daughter and that the law did not allow him to sell her. He also told the slave trader that he believed he was sent by Sawyer and to tell him they would never be allowed to buy Harriet or their children. He started watching Harriet even more closely and visiting her and children every day. She recalled that no matter how young they were, both of her children physically feared Norcom, reacting differently as soon as he entered the room. At one point when Joseph rushed towards her for comfort from Norcom, he threw her son across the room and knocked him unconscious, stopped only when other people, usually her family, entered the room. Harriet recalled being closely watched and he entered the house whenever her grandmother left. When he did scream at Harriet with Molly present, she did not hesitate to throw him out and insisted he focus on his own wife and children rather than her family. Shortly after, he visited again to offer her an arrangement for her and her children’s freedom. If she agreed to cease contact with Sawyer and move to a cottage where she would work for him, he would free them. This echoed his earlier threat of a

cottage that had pushed her to initially start a relationship with Sawyer. With the threat of being totally controlled by him far away from Edenton once again hanging over her head, she quickly turned him down. With her refusal, he decided she would be sent to the family's plantation outside of Edenton. A week later, despite Molly's offers to buy them, Harriet and Louisa left for the plantation; Joseph was too sick to move and stayed with Molly. As she left Edenton, Harriet decided to start planning how she was going to free herself and her children.

Life on the Norcom's plantation was very different from what Harriet experienced living at Molly's house. In order to shift the Norcom family's attention away from her, Harriet focused on her work and tried to simply blend in with the other enslaved mothers. Unlike at Molly's house where she could focus on raising her children and protected them from the Norcoms, on the plantation she "saw him [the son of James Norcom] beat the other little ones. The spirit of their mothers was so crushed by the lash, that they stood by."27 While she was working, Louisa wandered around alone. Harriet recalled one day when Louisa sat outside of the window she was working at and cried for hours before falling asleep in the dirt under the stairs of the main house. After days of crying, Louisa became sick, and Harriet did not hesitate to send her back to her grandmother. The plantation was worlds away, both physically and literally, from what Harriet had experienced in Edenton. She lost her proximity to the people who protected her and the objects she used to craft respectability. When she could, she would walk the six miles back to Edenton in the middle of the night to comfort her children, always traveling with other enslaved people for safety. She also used her time in town to plan her escape,

meeting with her friends and family. One Sunday she managed to spend the whole day in Edenton, putting everything in order for her escape and savoring the last day she could spend with her family. Her grandmother, unaware of the plan but certain something was happening, begged her not to go. When she returned to the plantation, she learned through a series of overheard conversations and rumors that her children were to arrive to be “broken in” and put to work. Harriet decided that it was time to put her plan into action.

At midnight on a day in June of 1835, Harriet slipped out of a window into the rain and began the walk back to Edenton. First, she stopped at her grandmother’s house. Let in by a close friend, she said goodbye to her children and arranged for the friend to empty her trunk early in the morning to throw off Norcom. She then went to her first hiding spot in Edenton; she never revealed where she initially stayed, but her writing hints at a place close to Edenton if not in the town itself. In the morning, the Norcoms arrived at Molly’s door and demanded to know if she had seen Harriet. They found all her things gone and her children still at home and determined that she must have run away. They told Molly that if she were to return, her children would be allowed to live with her on the plantation. Molly used her standing within the community to insist that the children stay with her while Harriet was missing, rather than being sent to Norcom’s house. At this point, Harriet was desperate to send her grandmother a message, but held off as she knew the house was being closely monitored and everyone who spoke to her was suspect. Shortly after searching Molly’s house, Norcom and the police began searching every ship heading out of Edenton that was bound for the North.
Within a day of Harriet’s escape, James Norcom put out a newspaper advertisement with a $100 reward for her capture (See figure C). It included a very detailed description of her and made Norcom’s obsession with her body clear. He wrote that she was twenty-one, had light skin, and was five foot four. He described her hair as thick, dark, and naturally curly, but easily combed straight. The detail with which he wrote about her hair puts his reaction to her second pregnancy in a much different light. Cutting her hair off signaled his control over her body and controlled one of her most prominent features. By cutting her hair, he attempted to control the way other men saw her, particularly other men like Sawyer. He also focused on the objects that he believed she would have with her, like the clothes that had disappeared from her trunk at her grandmother’s house. He wrote that Harriet was “a good seamstress, she has been accustomed to dress well, has a variety of very fine clothes, made in the prevailing fashion, and will probably appear, if abroad, tricked out in gay and fashionable finery.”

Harriet greatly valued her skill as a seamstress, which she had gained when she worked for Margaret Horniblow as a child. She used this skill and the knowledge it gave her to craft respectability, similarly to when her grandmother’s home was searched and in the way she treasured her mother’s thimble. Because Harriet hid all of her clothes, Norcom assumed she would use her clothing similarly. His advertisement stated that he believed she was heading North, as there was nothing that would cause her to run away. His comments about her fine dress and leaving the plantation without being provoked painted a very different image of Harriet’s life since she had become his slave just ten years

---

earlier. Despite James Norcom’s desperate attempts to catch her before she started her journey north, his initial search for her revealed nothing.

With her disappearance, Harriet hoped that James Norcom would assume that she had left Edenton and be willing to sell her, her brother, and her children. At one point, thinking the men tracking her had gotten too close, she fled her initial hiding spot. After being bitten by an animal, she reached out to her family, telling them that she needed help. With her home still under intense surveillance, Molly turned to a friend to find Harriet’s first official hiding spot. They took a huge risk asking a white neighbor who, despite being a lifelong friend of Molly’s, owned slaves. Molly believed she would be sympathetic to Harriet because of James Norcom’s extreme abuse and that her house would be far less likely to be searched. Both worked, as the neighbor and her enslaved cook worked to hide Harriet, moving her around the house to avoid the suspicion of others. Harriet noted that in this hiding place, she could watch James Norcom walk to and from work every day, which made her feel even more in control.\(^29\) Initially, he threw every family member of hers he owned in jail, including her brother John, Aunt Betty, six-year-old Joseph, and two-year-old Louisa, in hopes that they would reveal her location (See figure D). John sent both letters and messages to Harriet, assuring her that they were fine, and she should not come out. The Norcoms brought Aunt Betty back to the house after a couple of weeks and, after two months, sold John, Joseph, and Louisa to Sawyer. Several weeks into hiding, she heard Norcom’s voice as she hid in the neighbor’s house. The enslaved woman who kept her concealed soon informed Harriet that not only did he have no idea she was hiding in the house, but he had come to borrow

money to travel to New York to search for her, leaving immediately. Norcom’s absence gave Harriet and her family the opportunity to arrange her permanent hiding spot in Edenton. Her family quickly finished preparing the attic of Molly’s house for her. On the walk to Molly’s house, she concealed herself, dressing in men’s clothing. The proximity of those she knew struck her, at one point she literally bumped into Samuel Sawyer, who did not recognize her.\textsuperscript{30} As Harriet entered the attic, she knew that she would be there for a long time but had no idea just how long it would be until she walked out in the open again.

The attic of Molly’s house kept Harriet safe and away from Norcom for the next seven years because of its location and the protection from Molly’s status. One of Harriet’s uncles built her a spot above her grandmother’s storeroom, perpendicular to West King Street (See figure E). A small trap door connected the attic to the top of the shelves below, where Molly placed food for her to grab throughout the day. At nine feet long, seven feet wide, and only three feet tall at the highest point, Harriet could not fully stand in the attic. No sunlight got through the walls and mice constantly ran through the space. To Harriet, however, the dismal attic offered safety and proximity to her children. While invisible in the attic, she felt significantly safer because of the safety offered by Molly’s status as well as the distance from Norcom. Harriet highly valued being close to her children, seeing them even though she could not speak to them. She used a screwdriver to drill a tiny hole in the wall facing the street in order to see her children pass by, keeping a watchful eye on them. The hole and newfound light provided another purpose, she could now read during the day. Harriet treasured her grandmother’s Bible,

\textsuperscript{30} Jacobs, \textit{Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl}, 126.
that she read often, and the few newspapers that her family brought to her.\footnote{Yellin, \textit{Harriet Jacobs: A Life}, 50.} Having the Bible in the attic emphasized the importance of religion throughout Harriet’s life. Her time studying the Bible reflected in the way the religious themes throughout \textit{Incidents}. The few objects she had in the attic and occasional conversations with family as they came to the trap door became her connection to the outside world. With so little light and the inability to move around, Harriet soon felt extreme effects, what Yellin labels sensory deprivation.\footnote{Yellin, \textit{Harriet Jacobs: A Life}, 50.} Things got worse in the winter, as she started to freeze, losing movement in her arms and legs, then her speech. As she slowly got better, but remained weak, she wrote that “Dark thoughts passed through my mind … I tried to be thankful for my little cell, dismal as it was, and even to love it, as part of the price I paid for the redemption of my children.”\footnote{Jacobs, \textit{Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl}, 137.} Harriet’s health suffered because of the conditions of the attic, but she remained there because of the safety it offered and the hope of her family’s freedom.

With winter came Christmas and Molly brought Harriet materials to make Christmas presents for Joseph and Louisa. Making Christmas presents for her children helped to pull her attention away from the conditions of the attic. She sewed both clothing and toys for them, which helped her pass time in the attic by the little light from her small hole to the outside. After Christmas, as she watched her children from the attic, she heard Joseph tell one of his friends that the new clothes meant that Santa Claus was real, because his mother was too far away to fill his stocking. Harriet wrote, “How I longed to tell him that his mother made those garments, and that many a tear fell on them
while she worked!" Harriet used the clothes she sewed her children in the attic to represent her love for her children while it was too dangerous for her to speak to them. Having these new clothes, sewed with care, also signified Joseph and Louisa’s freedom from the Norcoms. They no longer had clothes assigned to them from the Norcoms’, but rather had only clothes sewed by their mother and grandmother. The nice clothes also connected to Harriet’s role as a seamstress and how she crafted respectability for her family through her work. Sewing clothes for her children, which she continued to do throughout her time in the attic, helped Harriet connect to her children despite her distance.

With Christmas, Molly brought people into her house to ward off suspicion. The first Christmas Harriet spent in the attic, she invited the constable who led several of the hunts for Harriet and a formerly enslaved man who had a reputation for reporting runaway slaves to improve his own status. By inviting these two people, Molly showed that she had nothing to hide. Christmas dinner included going into nearly every room of the house, leaving all the doors open, and taking them upstairs to prove that Harriet was not there. James and Maria Norcom also visited when Molly fell sick shortly after Christmas. Harriet wrote that she did not know that they had been in the home and was terrified to hear about it from her family later.55 Molly’s willingness to bring people into her home removed any suspicion of Harriet’s location.

News from her family also included that Samuel Sawyer had been elected to Congress and would soon leave for Washington D.C., and Harriet used her knowledge of

---

the neighborhood to speak to him, alone. Despite numerous promises to free them, he had
not officially freed the children, although he allowed them to live with Molly as though
they were free. He also owned John, continuing to have him work rather than freeing
him. Because Harriet watched him from the attic, she anticipated him walking down
West King Street and planned to speak to him alone where she knew no other neighbors
would see her, lowering herself out of the attic and waited by the window. She found her
legs so weak from the attic that she could not hold herself up, gripping the window and
attributing her only strength to her love for her children. As he came out of the house,
having spoken to Molly, she called out and stopped him, begging him to free their
children before he left. With their brief conversation, Samuel Sawyer became the only
person outside of her family to see her during the seven long years she spent in the attic.
He once again promised Harriet he would free their children, but did not follow through
on this promise before he left for Washington D.C. Her grandmother came to get her, but
Harriet could no longer stand and had to wait for her uncle to carry her back to the attic.
As she returned, her attitude about the attic shifted; getting down, she had been motivated
by her love for her children, but she knew the conversation would be her last chance to
advocate for her children while she stayed in the attic. No longer focused on the safety it
offered, she called it her “dungeon” where she “was left with my own thoughts- starless
as the midnight darkness around.” 36 Harriet’s isolation allowed her to carefully plan her
conversation with Sawyer, but the isolation soon became overwhelming.

In 1842, seven years after she entered, Harriet finally believed it to be safe enough
and decided to take the risk of leaving her attic. Norcom continued to refuse to sell her

36 Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, 141.
and she determined that leaving Edenton was her only choice. Louisa, still owned by Sawyer, had been taken north with Sawyer and his new wife, in hopes that she would be able to attend school and be further away from James Norcom, but also to work in his household. Harriet decided to follow her daughter north and send for Joseph soon after. Molly worried about the risk of Harriet leaving and remained unsure about the boat that offered to take her. However, after an encounter with a neighbor where they believed Harriet had been spotted, Molly pushed her to leave. Before leaving, Harriet spoke to Joseph, also still owned by Sawyer, for the first time since he was six, having been in hiding over half his life. Joseph told her that he had figured out where she hid years ago and had attempted to keep people away from her hiding place in order to keep her safe, continuing to echo that she had gone North.\textsuperscript{37} With that, she finally left for the North and for freedom, boarding a boat. The dock where she left was less than half a mile away from the dock where her enslaved family members had arrived in Edenton and been auctioned off fifty years earlier. As Harriet and her family determined that she would be safer further north, they planned her escape they used their understanding of the spaces around them to ensure that she remained as safe as possible.

The early life of Harriet Jacobs in Edenton, North Carolina, displays how important the impacts of material culture and physical space were on women in the mid-nineteenth century, even enslaved women. As child, Harriet constantly analyzed the physical space around her as she tried to understand what it meant to be enslaved. Her analysis changed entirely with the death of her parents as she passed into the hands of James Norcom. She then navigated between the violence of Norcom's house and the

\textsuperscript{37} Jacobs, \textit{Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl}, 173.
comfort of Molly's home. As Norcom began to sexually harass her, her use of physical space became even more important, as she limited the time they spent alone and sought solace at her grandmother's house, hoping to avoid harm and Norcom's control over her body. Physical space impacted her decision to have two children with a more prominent white man in town who lived even closer to her grandmother. As his mistress, she also sought protection in the spaces Samuel Sawyer had more control over. Her memories of material culture objects in *Incidents* highlight their importance. She carried her mother's wedding ring and thimble as a tangible connection to her mother's love. The objects in Molly's house also comforted her, especially as she used her skills as a seamstress to make the home look orderly and respectable. Harriet used her knowledge of the meanings and limits of physical space in Edenton when running away from Norcom's plantation, as she carefully chose her hiding spots before she reached the attic. Her years in the attic highlighted just how much of an effect one space had on her, both mentally and physically. The material culture objects she had and made while in the attic connected her to the outside world and to her children as she watched them grow up without her. Harriet and her family analyzed and manipulated the space in Edenton consistently for seven years, looking for the safest opportunity for her to leave. When it presented itself, they used their knowledge to take her from her attic to the North, away from slavery and her abuser. Ultimately, Harriet Jacobs used physical space and material culture to keep herself safe and maintain connections with those she loved while enslaved in Edenton.

*Angelica Singleton Van Buren*
Angelica Singleton grew up just over three hundred miles southwest of Edenton, in Wedgefield, South Carolina. Angelica grew up on one of her family's plantations in the Sumter District of South Carolina. The Singletons lived halfway between the city of Sumter and the state's capital, Columbia. The family primarily lived at Melrose Plantation in Manchester, about six miles south of Wedgefield.38 Currently, all that remains of Melrose is the Singleton family graveyard, where much of Angelica's paternal family is buried.39 The plantation distanced the family from cities but remained close enough to make travel to larger cities convenient. While the plantation in Manchester served as the Singletons' home, they owned several other plantations across the state, including Richland, Sumter, and Orangeburg counties. Jacob Stroyer, an enslaved man on one of the Singleton plantations in Richland County, stated that Angelica's brother owned 465 slaves at just that one plantation around 1850.40 Looking at number of plantations and enslaved people the Singleton family, it is clear that the Singletons operated on a much larger scale than the Norcom family. However, the violence of slavery that Harriet recalled throughout *Incidents*, particularly that her male relatives experienced, was also present throughout Jacob Stroyer's memories of the Singleton family as well. The Singleton family's ownership of several plantations and hundreds of enslaved people across South Carolina made them one of the largest and most powerful families in the state.

Angelica’s father Richard Singleton came from an important family and connected the Singlesons to several other influential families across South Carolina. Matthew Singleton immigrated from England to Virginia around 1745. Within the next ten years, he moved again to Sumter and established himself as a planter. His son, John Singleton, inherited and expanded the plantations, growing indigo, peanuts, and cotton. He married Rebecca Richardson, the daughter of a high-ranking military officer in the Revolutionary War and fellow South Carolina planter, Richard Richardson. In 1776, their son Richard Singleton was born. Like his father, Richard inherited and grew the family’s plantations. He managed at least seven plantations once he inherited his father’s estate. Following his father, Richard got involved with horse racing and breeding. He, and many other planters, used horse breeding both as recreation and to display their wealth. In 1802, he married Charlotte Videau Ashby and the pair had one child who survived to adulthood, Mary Rebecca Singleton.\textsuperscript{41} After Charlotte’s death in 1809, Richard met and married Rebecca Travis Coles.

Rebecca Travis Coles Singleton also came from an elite background. Rebecca’s family lived in Virginia, where three of her brothers owned plantations in Albemarle County.\textsuperscript{42} One of her sisters, Sarah, married Andrew Stevenson, a planter and politician who became the U.S. minister to Great Britain. Richard Singleton spent nearly every summer at health resorts throughout Virginia and met Rebecca at White Sulphur.\textsuperscript{43} After they married around 1814, the pair continued to visit health resorts including White


\textsuperscript{42} Singleton Family Papers Finding Aid, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

\textsuperscript{43} Singleton Family Papers Finding Aid, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
Sulphur, building one of the first houses there in 1825.\textsuperscript{44} This summer house had a mortgage of about $22,000 (well over half a million dollars today) and was considered very simple compared to the second summer home they built there just ten years later.\textsuperscript{45} Rebecca and Richard Singleton had five children together: John Coles, Marion Videau, Sarah Angelica, and twins Richard Richardson and Matthew Richard. Angelica was closest to her sister. Born only one year and three days apart in 1815 and 1816 respectively, Marion and Angelica grew up, went to school together, and remained close throughout their lives. Richard and Rebecca ensured that both girls received a high-quality education and learned all the necessary skills of running a plantation household.

The expectations that planters put on their wives and daughters, like Angelica, were extremely different from the expectations for enslaved women, like Harriet. Following separate spheres ideology, plantation mistresses ran everything related to the domestic sphere. Unlike women of any other social class, wives of elite planters did little physical labor, rather they managed the labor of all the slaves who worked inside the house. Because of their role as household manager, these women often positioned themselves as mothers of the plantation. Mistresses provided clothes and assisted with the distribution of food to all enslaved families on the plantation. They saw themselves as models for morality to those around them. Historian Marli Weiner writes that while these women took their role as a manager seriously and worked incredibly hard to fulfill the expectations that their husbands and society placed on them, they often overlooked the

\textsuperscript{45} Singleton Family Papers Finding Aid, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
labor of Black women whose enslavement laid the foundations for their lifestyles. The daughters of planters started preparing for their role as a planter’s wife years before they married. They spent their childhoods primarily focused on domestic skills and the level of education that girls received often depended on their family. Because of their focus on domestic life, these daughters displayed their family’s gentility through their leisure. As they got closer to marriage, they began to take on roles within the household, generally being taught by their mothers. This included overseeing different housekeeping tasks, sewing, or caring for any younger siblings. By displaying gentility through various social events and perfecting domestic skills, planter families hoped to find suitable husbands for their daughters. Ultimately, the teenage years of girls like Angelica and her sister Marion focused on their preparation for running a household of their own and fulfilling the expectations of their family.

Richard and Rebecca Singleton valued educating their daughters, sending Angelica and Marion to school during their teenage years. First, they attended Columbia Female Academy. Angelica studied there between 1826 and 1830, at age ten through fourteen. The state authorized the founding of the school in the late eighteenth century. Classes began in 1820, making the Singleton daughters early students. This school in the state capital was close to their home, located only about forty miles from Melrose. Its location would have been important due to their age and proximity to the rest of the family. It was also one of the best schools for women in South Carolina at that time. The

curriculum focused on reading, writing, and languages. The school positioned itself as a way to educate women into being better wives and mothers. Columbia Female Academy laid the foundation for Marion and Angelica’s education, but their education did not stop there.

After graduating from the Columbia Female Academy, Marion and Angelica attended Madam Grelaud’s Seminary for Young Ladies. Angelica studied there in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania between 1831 and 1836, roughly ages fifteen to twenty. Deborah Grelaud, originally from French Haiti, provided students with a European-focused education. The girls studied French, history, music, grammar, needlepoint, and other subjects that displayed their elite status. The boarding school catered specifically to elites, as yearly tuition in 1839 cost $500 a year, (with a modern equivalent of over $16,000). The high tuition restricted the kind of education offered at Madam Grelaud’s to daughters of incredibly wealthy families. Other women with presidential ties attended this school, including relatives of Washington and Monroe. Additionally, because the students lived in Philadelphia, its location played a key role in drawing planter families from the South. Historian Daniel Kilbride notes that similar schools existed throughout the south, but planter families chose schools in Philadelphia like Grelaud’s because of the opportunities the city offered. Many planters considered Philadelphia north enough to be urban and cosmopolitan, allowing them to build connections with elite Northern families.

52 Anthony, “First Ladies Never Married to Presidents: Angelica Van Buren.”
Being in the city allowed for visits with Northern family members, other powerful families in the North, and visiting Europeans much more frequently than plantation life. They also believed that it was close enough to the South to maintain Southern ideals and refinement.\textsuperscript{53} While attending Madam Grelaud's Female Seminary, Angelica and Marion surrounded themselves with other daughters of planters and built the foundation for an elite lifestyle.

During her first year at Madam Grelaud's, Angelica kept an autograph journal (See figure F). Autograph journals, like this one, rose in popularity throughout the nineteenth century and expressed sentimentality. Filled with messages from friends and classmates, they reflected the importance of close friendships throughout the Victorian era. She filled her journal with passages written by herself, classmates, or her teachers. Bound in olive green leather made of calf skin, the covers are decorated with gold gilding in an intricate pattern around the edge. The spine is considerably more worn than the rest of the book due to use. The interior covers are decorated with marbled paper, following the fashion of the time. The intricacy of the journal highlights the Singleton family's status. On the first leaf, written in cursive, is "Angelica Singleton" and the year, "1831". Within the text, her schoolmates refer to her as Angeline, la Belle, and Queen of May.\textsuperscript{54} The use of the French version of her name, specifically at her French school, highlights her attraction to French customs, a love that lasted throughout her life. La Belle also connects to Angelica's love of all things French. The connection is clearly drawn to a

\textsuperscript{53} Kilbride, \textit{An American Aristocracy}, 59.
\textsuperscript{54} Angelica Singleton Van Buren, Album, 1831, Angelica Singleton Van Buren Collection, Digital Archives, University of South Carolina University Libraries, 
Southern Belle, which both friends and the American public called her throughout her time in the public eye. La Belle also references her beauty and grace, both features that the public eye focused on later in her life. Being nicknamed the Queen of May within her first year of attending Madam Grelaud’s, highlights her popularity among her classmates. Additionally, the fact that this nickname is used throughout her journal is significant, as she seemingly attempted to reinforce her social status within the school through a nickname. These notes and messages reveal a fifteen-year-old who quickly charmed those around her, both classmates and teachers alike, as Angelica fit right in with her first introduction to the nation’s elite.

Rebecca Singleton involved herself with her daughters’ education at Madam Grelaud’s. Letters to Marion and Angelica show the care she took for their education as she instructed them on what to do and who they should talk to. Her letters remained critical of what the girls did, repeatedly reminding both girls of their gentility and the expectations that it placed on them. One of these letters told them that she has written, again, because they have left her first letter unanswered for far too long and scolded Angelica’s handwriting in a letter sent to her aunt. Expectations based on status and how their education would help them meet these expectations filled the letters she wrote to her daughters. One letter questioned them about a variety of very detailed different aspects of school, including their standing in each class, certain awards, and what instruments they decided to learn. Despite being in South Carolina, it is clear that Richard and Rebecca remained involved with their education. Additionally, the plans that Rebecca made for Angelica and Marion outside of their education highlighted the importance of their location in Philadelphia. They had many family members that passed through the city
who dropped off new clothes or took messages between the girls and their parents. The girls also served as connections for the family in the city. Rebecca wrote that she “requires” the girls to visit a family friend, “and offer her some of our Carolina Oranges, which I hope you have received safe and sound.” 55 Both her word choice and the emphasis indicate the importance of having Marion and Angelica in Philadelphia to strengthen their relationships to Philadelphia’s elite. Ultimately, Rebecca’s letters to her daughter while they attended Madam Grelaud’s emphasize the expectations of them as the daughters of an elite planter family while they attended school in Philadelphia.

After finishing her education at Madam Grelaud’s in 1836, Angelica’s search for a husband began. Like other daughters of elite families, this meant visiting Eastern cities and attending a variety of events throughout the social season. Angelica and Marion visited Washington D.C. in December of 1837. 56 They stayed with Rebecca Singleton’s sister Sarah and her husband politician Andrew Stevenson. While in Washington, Angelica formed a connection with another one of her mother’s relatives, cousin Dolley Madison. Madison remained closely tied to the White House, even after her time as First Lady ended. She maintained a close relationship with President Martin Van Buren, often accompanying him to various events. Van Buren’s wife, died years before he entered office and, with four unmarried sons, he had no First Lady two years into his presidency. Dolley Madison, and the rest of her family, saw this as the perfect opportunity to bring Angelica into Washington society.

---

55 Rebecca Travis Coles Singleton to Marion and Angelica Singleton, February 28, 1829, Box 3, Singleton Family Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
56 Angelica Singleton to Marion Singleton, Edgehill, November 3, 1837, Box 4, Singleton Family Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
Less than a week before Angelica met the Van Buren family, she wrote a letter that reflected on her time in Washington to her sister Marion, who had returned to the south. This very long letter recorded who she spoke with, the kinds of events she attended, and detailed how those around her doted on her. She noted that, at just twenty-one years old, she was “the only young one among them, consequently, a wee bit of a pet with all of them.”  

Angelica’s Southern Belle personality that had earned her popularity at Madam Grelaud’s continued to charm those around her as she entered elite society under the wing of Dolley Madison. She went on to list the events she planned to attend throughout the next week, including, on Thursday, a trip to the drawing room of the White House. Although her comment is left at that, a meeting in the drawing room implied a much more intimate setting compared to the balls and dinner parties that occupied the rest of her week. She noted that with every social event attended, “I begin to feel myself initiated, dessous des cartes of Washington Society … I find myself taking in the great game and its players.”  

Angelica noted the “dessous des cartes of Washington Society,” which directly translates to under the map and is used to refer to the insider information or hidden agendas, highlights just how much she learned about elite society in the North since she had arrived in D.C. just three months earlier. She also noted that the primary agenda for most people her age, although definitely not her own, she assured her sister, is finding a spouse. She wrote that she is certain she has not met her husband yet and that she “would much like him to make his entrée.”  

Written just days before her trip to the White House, Angelica’s life seemed to follow the path that had been

---

58 Angelica Singleton to Marion Singleton, Washington D.C., March 4, 1838.
thoughtfully planned by her family, her status, and her education. On Thursday, March 8, Angelica and Dolley Madison went to the White House drawing room, meeting the President and his four unmarried sons: Abraham, John, Martin Jr., and Smith Van Buren.

Martin Van Buren lost his wife many years before he became President and maintained an incredibly close relationship with his sons. His wife, Hannah Hoes, had been his childhood sweetheart, both growing up near Kinderhook, a predominately Dutch village in upstate New York. They married in February of 1807 and had their oldest son Abraham, named for Martin’s father, in November of that same year. John, Martin Jr., and Smith soon followed. Hannah died of tuberculosis in 1819, at just thirty-five years old. Family members assisted in caring for and raising their children, primarily one of his wife’s relatives Christina Cantine. Abraham, twelve at the time of his mother’s death, remained closer with his father while the younger boys stayed with other relatives more frequently. Just three years later, he enrolled in West Point Military Academy. His military career took him across the United States as he climbed through the ranks. With his father’s inauguration in March of 1837, he resigned and became Martin’s personal secretary. Martin and all four of his now adult sons moved into the White House, where they attempted to put off hosting social events for as long as possible. With his introduction to Angelica, the Van Buren White House would soon get its hostess.

Abraham and Angelica married in November of 1838, just eight months after they met. They married at the Singleton plantation Angelica grew up on, Melrose. Their whirlwind introduction, engagement, and marriage highlights the seemingly perfect

---

match that Dolley Madison arranged. News quickly spread about their marriage; a Boston newspaper reported on their wedding in early 1839. Unlike most of the positive reactions to their marriage, this article pointed out the obvious attempt to connect the North and South, questioning "Do not the politicians discover something portentous in this?" Portentous, defined both as something done pompously to impress and as a sign that something bad is about to happen, stands out as a thoughtful word choice. Additionally, people made note of where they spent their time early on in their relationship. Angelica coming to Washington to meet Abraham made her a cosmopolitan young woman, as her family set her up to be throughout her education. But the wedding's location on her family's plantation also caught people's attention, as the pair began traveling back and forth in order to maintain strong ties to both sides.

After their wedding in November, Angelica quickly stepped into her role as hostess and First Lady. Soon after assuming the role, she sat for her official First Lady portrait (see figure G). The original still hangs in the Red Room of the White House. Henry Inman, a painter who rose in popularity throughout the 1830s, completed the portrait in 1842. It depicts Angelica standing in front of a column next to a bust of the President, giving her a very traditional and classic feel. Her dress is the primary focus of the painting. The white dress is covered from top to bottom in an intricate, organic design in a similar white tone. The symbolism of Angelica's morality and status displayed through a white dress provides an insight into how she used clothing and followed fashion in order to craft her public image. Her sleeves are decorated with pink flowers.

---

61 "Bargain and Intrigue," The Liberator, January 4, 1839.
and lace. These designs echo nature but at an elevated status, following Victorian ideals around nature and femininity. The lace detailing, gold shawl, feathers, and pearls show her extreme wealth. The feathers and the pearls on her head echo the appearance of a halo or crown, making her look even more angelic. Her dark curls contrast with her skin, making her look even paler. Another dress Angelica wore, now on display as part of the Smithsonian’s First Ladies exhibit, also displays her status (see figure H).63 This dress is made of dark velvet and emphasizes her body far more than the dress within her First Lady Portrait. The dark velvet gave her a much mature look. As the youngest acting First Lady, both at the time and since, it is easy to imagine that she would have felt her age working against her in the White House and used her clothes in different ways to express her maturity and her ability to handle the job. The shear lace shawl continues to highlight her wealth with its craftsmanship and detailing. The shawl also pulls attention away from the sexual cut of the dress. Ultimately Angelica’s official First Lady portrait and her First Lady dress within the Smithsonian exhibit display how she carefully crafted her public image to express her status and solidify her place in the White House.

For her first event, she hosted the 1839 New Year’s Day open house. She took many cues from her cousin Dolley Madison, following her lead. She met the press, and the American public, in the oval reception room, what would later become known as the Blue Room.64 The public, like the Van Burens, the Washington elites, and her classmates at Madam Grelaud’s, found her immediately charming. Angelica, although the youngest acting First Lady, spent the first twenty-two years of her life preparing for her position

---

64 Anthony, “First Ladies Never Married to Presidents: Angelica Van Buren.”
and learning the skills she needed to host the nation’s elites and it perfectly positioned her for success in the White House. Her second major public appearance took her to Europe, as she became the first woman to travel to Europe while acting as First Lady. This trip served as Angelica and Abraham’s honeymoon, but it was also a working trip as they stayed with Angelica’s aunt Sarah and uncle Andrew Stevenson, the U.S. minister to Britain. In Britain, he arranged for the couple to be introduced to Queen Victoria. In France, King Louis Philippe received them in court. These interactions with European royalty had a significant impact on her and she looked for ways to make the White House even more European.\textsuperscript{65} When in the royal courts of Europe, nobility treated her and received her as the Queen of the United States, a title she did not deny. Although her family members attempted to warn her against it, she embraced the glamor of European royalty.\textsuperscript{66} Angelica’s first year as acting First Lady built itself on the foundation laid by her education as she stepped into the role smoothly.

As Angelica and Abraham returned to the United States, she attempted to incorporate what she had learned in Europe into her role as White House hostess. As she planned for her second New Year’s Day open house, she made several changes from her first year. Taking cues from European royals, on New Year’s Day in 1840, she sat on a raised platform and greeted visitors from a distance, surrounded by ladies-in-waiting, something that, less than a century after the Revolutionary War with anti-monarchical sentiment still strong, did not land well American elites. In a harsh difference from her first year, Angelica received significant criticism as she entered her second year in the


\textsuperscript{66} Anthony, “First Ladies Never Married to Presidents: Angelica Van Buren.”
White House. After this, the Whig party, which already despised Martin Van Buren’s love of conspicuous consumption, used her as a symbol for extravagance and overspending in the White House. Overall, the start of Angelica’s second year as First Lady faced significantly more criticism from the public due to the changes she implemented in the White House.

While people clearly saw the influence their trip to Europe had on Angelica’s hosting style, many of these critiques ignored Angelica’s pregnancy, despite being six months pregnant. Her pregnancy and the symptoms she wrote about can be used to understand how she chose to use physical space during her time in the White House. A letter she wrote to her mother just a month earlier hints at a difficult pregnancy. She told her mother that she was too sick to travel to South Carolina, writing that even “a sitting posture, is agony to me- by causing me the most violent pain.” Several letters from later pregnancies echo the difficulties she experienced during pregnancy, often being put on bedrest for weeks at a time. With these symptoms affecting her life so heavily at five months pregnant, her choice to remain seated at the New Years event appeared practical as well as traditional. Angelica seemingly avoided most of the criticism directly, as several weeks later she withdrew from the public eye and went into confinement to prepare for the birth of her first child. Ultimately, the way Angelica used physical space and distance throughout her pregnancy, both by remaining seated and by entering confinement, intertwined deeply with public perception of her actions.

67 Anthony, First Ladies, 119.
68 Angelica Singleton Van Buren to Rebecca Travis Coles Singleton, Washington D.C., December 14, 1839, Box 4, Singleton Family Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
69 Anthony, “First Ladies Never Married to Presidents: Angelica Van Buren.”
The birth and death of Angelica’s first child, Rebecca Van Buren, consumed her life for the first half of 1840. Material culture played a huge role in the way Angelica remembered her daughter’s life. Focusing on her pregnancy and entering a period of confinement allowed her to avoid most of the criticism she received following New Year’s Day. She gave birth to her daughter in late March at the White House. Much of the information on her death is conflicting, with estimates from historians ranging between hours to months after the baby’s birth. Sources from Angelica point to Rebecca dying within a few days of her birth. Her gravestone in Washington D.C. simply reads “Rebecca, infant daughter of Abram and Angelica Van Buren, March 28, 1840.”

Choosing to bury her in Washington, very close to the White House, rather than New York where Abraham and Angelica chose to be buried, shows their desire to keep her close. Angelica also treasured the material culture objects related to her baby, primarily clothing worn by her daughter. Within her own life, material culture symbolized her love for her daughter. A letter to her mother — who she named her daughter after — written in May, talks about these items that remind her of her daughter. She tells her mother that a friend asked to use some of the clothes and things she had set aside for her baby, but she refused, writing, “I could not summon the resolution to part from the only moments left me of our dear little one.” She says that she made many of the items by hand and that they were so full of her love for her daughter, she cannot imagine another child wearing them, adding that she hoped she would need them again soon for other children. This letter rules out any possibility that Rebecca lived beyond two months old. The letter also

provides an insight into Angelica’s relationship with Abraham. She tells her mother that “The Major” is caring for her as she is recovering by bringing her different waters, taking them with her every day, and planning a trip to White Sulpher as soon as she could travel again. These looks into intimate moments reflect a close relationship between Angelica and her husband. Although Angelica received heavy criticism from the public, she focused far more on her personal life, both by remaining in physical spaces surrounded by her family and treasuring the material culture objects that reminded her of her baby.

During this time, however, criticisms of the Van Buren White House, many of which included Angelica, began to pick up as the President started his campaign for reelection. This culminated in a speech presented to the House of Representatives in April 1840 often called “The Gold Spoon Oration.” Charles Ogle, a member of the Whig party and representative of Pennsylvania, delivered the speech. It argued that spending in the White House was out of control and needed to be reduced. He believed that the President was an aristocrat, too far out of touch with the people to be able to lead. Although he did not name Angelica directly, many of his comments about spending implicitly included her. One such comment noted that plans to change the White House gardens had been made “by individuals whose taste … have been greatly improved by a visit to the magnificent gardens at the palace of Versailles, and to some of the rich and sumptuous parks and gardens belonging to the Crown of England.”

As he gave this speech less than a year after they returned from Europe and within a couple of months of the New Year’s event, the audience would have understood the accusations against Angelica and

Abraham. Charles Ogle's speech also set up William Henry Harrison as a foil to the Van Buren presidency, arguing that he was a much simpler man and more representative of the American people. Although the Gold Spoon Oration received mixed reactions, many shared the sentiment and believed the White House had become too extravagant.\textsuperscript{73} The perceived spending in the White House brought a lot of criticism to the Van Buren presidency.

Martin Van Buren strongly believed in the importance of using conspicuous consumption to prove his status. Van Buren's first employers as he started his legal career drilled in him the importance of looking the part, telling him he was not allowed to wear homemade suits to work. This stuck with him, as he strove to display his status through his clothing and his house for the rest of his life. As president, he, with Angelica's help, updated several of the rooms in the White House, pulling furniture from earlier presidents out of storage to make the White House elegant and historical. While the criticism of these updates targeted Angelica as the hostess, Martin pushed for and designed many of these spaces, with Angelica working with her father-in-law to make the White House fashionable. Martin's love for conspicuous consumption culminated in his estate, Lindenwald. Lindenwald is located in Kinderhook, in Columbia County, New York. Many residents of Kinderhook, like the Van Buren family, descended from Dutch immigrants and primarily spoke Dutch, with the whole village proud of its Dutch roots. He purchased the house and land from the Van Ness family in 1839.\textsuperscript{74} Buying the estate,

\textsuperscript{73} Ogle, "The Gold Spoon Speech of 1840," \textit{Journal of the White House Historical Association}.
to Martin, meant buying the history that came with it. Only thirty miles south of Albany, the Van Ness family frequently used the house to host important political guests, including hiding Aaron Burr after his duel with Alexander Hamilton. Modeling himself on Thomas Jefferson, who visited, Martin Van Buren embraced being a landowner and a farmer, as he grew many crops, focused on apples, a staple of Upstate New York. Making Lindenwald into a show place meant several major renovations throughout the house. As he lost his bid for re-election and returned to Lindenwald in 1841, the house became a model of how he and Angelica worked together to create the perfect spot to entertain important political guests in their home.

Martin, with Angelica's help, remodeled the house to create the ideal hosting space. Much of their renovation rebuilt or redesigned the first floor. Directly inside the front door, they designed two parlors, one primarily for men and one primarily for women. The women's living room, nicknamed the Green Room, gave Angelica a separate space to host women, particularly before and after dinner. The room had several light couches, a small table, and delicate chairs. As the Martin Van Buren Historical Site reconstructed this room, they added children's toys to incorporate the time young children spent in this room with their mothers (see figure 1). They furnished the men's parlor very differently, featuring hunting pictures and past presidential portraits, including Martin's own directly above the fireplace and Jefferson and Jackson framing the doorway. The room reflected Victorian masculinity as it became a space distinctly for men, separate from women and children (see figure J). Their biggest change to the first floor took out the front staircase and converted the space into a dining hall to host huge parties (see figure K). The dining hall included a custom dining room table set that could
expand out to seat up to thirty people. Many important guests dined at this table, including the founders of the Free Soil Party as they concluded to run a presidential campaign with Martin. Off the dining hall, they also had a guest room. This connected to the Dutch tradition of reserving the best bedroom for guests, which typically put the room near the entrance, as at Lindenwald. Although his love of luxury ultimately cost him the presidency, Martin Van Buren and his new daughter-in-law continued to value conspicuous consumption, investing in the ability to look like and fit in with early American elites.

As the Van Burens moved into Lindenwald after the presidency in 1841, Angelica discovered she was pregnant again. A letter written just before the 1840 election to her mother revealed that she worried about her health and the “swelling of my stomach.” A second letter just three weeks later confirmed that her doctor had “concluded that I was in the family way,” and instructed her to essentially start her confinement immediately because of her poor health. She also noted that she felt the need to write to her mother about her pregnancy as soon as possible, as she “would be so likely to hear from others,” about her symptoms. Angelica understood the web connecting elites that benefited her rise to the White House also meant that she had limited privacy. During her pregnancy and bedrest, Angelica distracted herself with the objects around her, primarily by purchasing clothing for herself and her family. In the same letter that details her high risk of a miscarriage, she tells her mother about cloth she bought. She wrote that she bought

75 Angelica Singleton Van Buren to Rebecca Travis Coles Singleton, Philadelphia, November 1, 1840, Box 4, Singleton Family Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
76 Angelica Singleton Van Buren to Rebecca Travis Coles Singleton, Washington D.C. November 24, 1840, Box 4, Singleton Family Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
77 Angelica Singleton Van Buren to Rebecca Travis Coles Singleton, Washington D.C. November 24, 1840.
silk and other fabric from England with the intention of making dresses following the European fashion for herself, Marion, and one of her nieces. The way she organized purchasing and sewing these objects provided an insight into how she helped to manage households, both in Kinderhook and in Manchester. Just for the fabric she mentions, she had them shipped from England, before being divided between New York and South Carolina, while arranging for them to be sewn into dresses before they reached their destination. Her coordination of the shipping, payment, measurements, and style with ease displayed how she grew into her role as a household manager. Angelica’s use of material culture items and her management for her family highlight the important role she played in managing Lindenwald, despite her confinement during her pregnancy.

After the birth of her son Singleton Van Buren in June of 1841, Angelica could move around the house and therefore more fully stepped into her role as hostess of Lindenwald. She used Lindenwald’s location to benefit her family, both in the private sphere and in the public sphere. Publicly, the house became a political hub in upstate New York. During the move from Washington in early 1841, she wrote to her mother asking for advice on running a household that would constantly be hosting guests, making it clear that she anticipated the role she would play in her father-in-law's career after the White House. Martin ran two more presidential campaigns out of Lindenwald and constantly hosted politicians. More privately during this time, she also took on the role of surrogate mother to her orphaned niece, Mary McDuffie, nicknamed Mary Mac, her father’s granddaughter from his first marriage. Angelica brought Mary Mac, about twelve years old, up to Lindenwald to support her education and prepare to introduce her
to elite society. Angelica, when she wrote to her mother to send for Mary Mac in 1842, noted that her niece’s “talents deserve that she should have first rate teachers,” and that her education would be better suited in New York. Once she arrived in Lindenwald, Angelica wrote again to her mother just months later about how Mary Mac enjoyed living with them and improved in every way. Her letters also described how the house supported her life with her new baby, as she wrote that her son was a “little monkey … full of tricks & all sorts of fun. He walks everywhere with the slightest support & can take a few steps alone.” Throughout Angelica’s letters, the importance of being at Lindenwald is clear. Lindenwald’s location made it close enough to Albany to pull people in for political meetings, with Old Post Road, which ran from New York City to Albany, running through the property directly in front of the house. Angelica also noted that they hosted people on their way to Saratoga as well, attracting elites on their way further north. Lindenwald’s location in upstate New York also provided educational opportunities for Mary Mac, opportunities that she anticipated would benefit Singleton as he grew older as well. Angelica also enjoyed being further out of the city while raising her son, as she believed it not only allowed for plenty of room to play but was also healthier for him. Angelica reported throughout her letters that Mary Mac, when not focused on school, benefitted from participating in elite recreation and learned from Angelica as well. Angelica’s first years of primarily living at Lindenwald highlighted the importance of its location and the way Angelica used physical spaces within the home.

79 Angelica Singleton Van Buren to Rebecca Travis Coles Singleton, Lindenwald, July 1, 1842, Box 4, Singleton Family Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
80 Angelica Singleton Van Buren to Rebecca Travis Coles Singleton, Lindenwald, July 1, 1842.
and the location of the house in upstate New York to benefit her family in a variety of ways.

Angelica’s use of physical space within Lindenwald became even more important as she became pregnant again in 1843. Like her previous pregnancies, she experienced many symptoms and constantly worried about having a miscarriage. Her letters, while still detailing her pregnancy symptoms and reports from her doctor, focused on what went on throughout the household. She primarily focused on Martin and Abraham, or “ex-P” and “the Major” in her letters, as she looks at where they are going and who they meet with. She also tells her mother about she managed domestic work while on bedrest as she continued to run the household. Many of her letters talk about the domestic workers at Lindenwald. Sometimes she discusses the tasks being done at Lindenwald, but more often, she simply vented her frustrations to her mother, frustrated with being unable to experience the “same attention & tenderness as in Carolina,” from the people who worked at Lindenwald.81 Her dissatisfaction with the primarily white domestic laborers of the north is clear throughout her comparison to the enslaved labor she was accustomed to in the south, a comparison that is present throughout her correspondence with her mother. Additionally, the same letter from 1843 informed her mother that she “triumphed over all temptation ... & am soon reaping the reward in being a mother once more.”82 Letters from Angelica’s previous pregnancy refer to this same “temptation,” a desire to end her pregnancies in order to both end her confinement and reduce what she believed to be the unavoidable suffering and death of her children. Her hatred for bedrest and her inability

81 Angelica Singleton Van Buren to Rebecca Travis Coles Singleton, Lindenwald, June 20, 1843, Box 4, Singleton Family Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
82 Angelica Singleton Van Buren to Rebecca Travis Coles Singleton, Lindenwald, June 20, 1843.
to move during pregnancy overwhelmed her letters. Writing about the isolation of confinement, she said, "I almost think it would be better to let the little being go at once than make extreme sacrifice ... but to perish in the birth or in its infancy after continuous suffering."\(^83\) Angelica struggled with her inability to move around Lindenwald. Upstairs and totally separate from public areas of the house, being confined to her bedroom clearly wore on Angelica. Overcoming this stage of her pregnancy, what she calls "triumphing over all temptation," connected to her ability to move around the house more freely. She talks about getting to eat in the dining room with the rest of the family, rather than alone in her room. Angelica’s writings emphasized how much she valued her ability to move around and control physical spaces at Lindenwald. Unfortunately, shortly after this letter, Angelica lost her second child. Remembered simply as unnamed baby boy, Angelica and Abraham chose to have him buried in New York City, where they themselves would eventually be buried, rather than in Washington D.C. with Rebecca.\(^84\) Burying their children closest to where they were living at the time points to frequent visits and the importance of the proximity of the grave. Ultimately, throughout Angelica’s third pregnancy and as she buried a second child, her writings about her bedrest and the placement of her child’s grave revealed the importance of using physical space in her life.

Angelica’s early life up until the age of 27 in 1843 provides many examples that display the impact physical space and material culture had on her life. Coming from an extremely wealthy planter family in the South, Angelica’s education focused on hosting guests and managing households from an early age. During her years in the White House

\(^83\) Angelica Singleton Van Buren to Rebecca Travis Coles Singleton, Washington D.C. November 24, 1840.
as acting First Lady, she used both physical space and material culture to consciously craft her image. This initially benefited her, as she initially charmed Washington elites as a young Southern Belle. Her First Lady portrait captures this public image, as her clothing reflected her status and morality to those around her. She controlled the spaces of the White House through the way she hosted various events. The negative reactions that followed her second New Years event reflected how closely the public watched her use of objects and spaces in the White House. Angelica’s perceived mishandling of physical space and use of material culture too as similar to that of European monarchs quickly turned the public against her and the Van Buren administration, as seen in Charles Ogle’s Gold Spoon Oration. The second half of Angelica’s time as First Lady and her transition to Lindenwald afterwards looked very different, as her letters show a transition of focus on to her personal life rather than her public image. She began to use material culture differently, as many of the objects she wrote about were focused on motherhood, most notably, the way she treasured her daughter’s clothes after her death. Her letters reflected on the role she played in Lindenwald within the public sphere as she assisted her father-in-law in hosting political guests, but focused on how the location would also benefit her children and her niece. Long bedrests for her second and third pregnancies emphasized the importance of physical space. As she could not leave her room for weeks at a time, her letters reveal frustration at the inability to use physical space around her during her pregnancies, particularly in 1843. Ultimately, Angelica Singleton Van Buren used material culture and physical space, both in the public sphere and the private sphere, in a way that reflected her role as a hostess and a mother.
Elizabeth Cady Stanton grew up in Johnstown, New York. Located about fifty miles northwest of Albany, the small town connected deeply to her traditional upbringing. The area lacked elites on the same level as the Singleton family and revolved instead around the middle class as the town moved into the nineteenth century. Although Harriet, Angelica, and Elizabeth all grew up in and around small towns, the effect it had on their lives differed greatly because of their social status and the location of these small towns. Additionally, because Johnstown was not tied to a plantation like Edenton and Manchester, the labor that Elizabeth grew up surrounded by differed compared to what Harriet and Angelica observed and experienced throughout their childhoods. Johnstown focused on manufacturing as it housed glove factories and much of the population worked in the glove industry in some way.85 Throughout Elizabeth’s childhood in Johnstown, the town became more industrialized.

On a much smaller scale than the Singletons, Elizabeth’s family benefitted from their status and connections in Johnstown. The town and surrounding communities respected Elizabeth’s father and, with his work as a judge, the family was more well respected than industrial working families. The Cady family was also wealthier than many other residents of Johnstown. They had three domestic workers, all Black men. At least one of these men was enslaved until New York outlawed slavery in 1827. As she

remembered her childhood later in life, Elizabeth frequently recalled these three domestic
workers and the role they played in the Cady household. The location and social
hierarchy of Johnstown impacted Elizabeth’s childhood in unique ways, which she
reflected on later in life.

Although Elizabeth often overlooked the role her mother played, Margaret
Livingston played a large role in establishing the Cadys in Johnstown. Margaret
Livingston’s parents were Elizabeth Simpson and James Livingston. James Livingston
fought in the Revolutionary War and was descended from one of the most powerful
families in New York. The Livingston family had been in New York for several
generations and connected the Cadys to various powerful politicians, military officers,
and landowners. Margaret married Daniel Cady in 1801 at just sixteen years old. Her
family connections helped to jumpstart her husband’s career and they quickly settled
comfortably in Johnstown. Elizabeth wrote little about her mother, saying much more
about her father. She did note that she remembered Margaret being “courageous, self-
reliant, and at her ease under all circumstances and in all places.”86 Margaret both
conformed to and pushed against Victorian standards for women, in her own way
different from that of her daughter. Elizabeth remembered her mother primarily as an
enforcer of the gender roles that she despised growing up. However conservative she was
during Elizabeth’s childhood, Margaret later supported the push for women’s suffrage as
she signed a petition in 1867 and was remembered by her granddaughter as a staunch
abolitionist.87 While Elizabeth wrote nothing about her mother’s feelings towards her

86 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *Eighty Years and More: Reminiscences 181-1897* Originally published in 1898,
fight for women’s suffrage, Margaret Livingston played a large role in shaping Elizabeth’s understanding of Victorian gender expectations.

Elizabeth’s father Daniel Cady heavily influenced her growing up as she studied his career in politics and hoped to follow in his footsteps. He grew up in Columbia County, New York, and studied law in Albany before moving to Johnstown. His law career got its start through Margaret’s brother-in-law. He worked as a lawyer before getting involved in politics at both state and national levels. At the state level he worked as a District Attorney and as a representative. In 1815, the same year Margaret bore Elizabeth, he ran a successful campaign and served one term in Congress. Throughout most of her childhood, his career focused on practicing law in Johnstown. During this time, guests frequented the Cady’s house, something that Elizabeth took note of and looked up to. As she watched him debate with political friends and challengers as a child, he inspired her own career in politics. In 1847, he became a judge on the New York Supreme Court, a position that lasted until his retirement. Elizabeth, within the fond memories of her father, described her father as having “a dignified repose and reserve of manner,” writing that she and her siblings felt “fear rather than affection” towards him.88 His conservatism extended outside of the courtroom and affected the opportunities offered to his children early on as he strictly separate spheres ideology and Victorian gender roles. Because of this, he offered his sons incredibly different opportunities compared to his daughters. His conservative nature shaped much of Elizabeth’s early years as she simultaneously learned from him and feared him.

88 Stanton, Eighty Years and More, 3.
With ten siblings, the lives, and deaths, of Elizabeth’s brothers and sisters affected her childhood and the role she played within her household throughout her life. She recalled her younger sister’s birth as one of her earliest memories. At just four years old, she noticed that many of the comments revolved around her sister’s gender and the disappointment of not having another son. Five of her siblings died in early infancy, which deeply affected Margaret. Elizabeth writes that, between her father’s career and mother’s heartbreak from burying half of her children, her parents slowly passed more and more domestic duties to their eldest daughter, Tryphena, who, just like their father, firmly believed in Victorian gender ideology. She guided her younger sisters in selecting “clothing, books, schools, acquaintances … reading and amusements.”

Elizabeth had just one brother who survived beyond infancy, Eleazer. He died at twenty years old, just before his graduation from Union College as he had followed in his father’s footsteps towards a career in law. As Elizabeth sat with her father, he told her that he wished she was a son, a comment that stuck with her throughout her life. Years later she wrote about that night, when she swore to live up to everything her father had wanted from her brother, determined to be “learned and courageous,” which, to eleven-year-old Elizabeth, meant studying Greek and riding horseback. Elizabeth’s relationships with her siblings and the way her parents interacted with her siblings greatly impacted her childhood as she observed the different roles her brothers and sisters played within their household.

Elizabeth’s determination to follow in her brother’s footsteps and make her father proud guided her childhood, especially as she began her education. She first attended

---

89 Stanton, *Eighty Years and More*, 27.
Johnstown Academy as a child. She remembered her years there fondly, primarily because both boys and girls learned together in this space. She competed against the boys academically, as she wrote that she rose to the top of her class and won several awards for different departments. As she got older, she continued to push her education to a higher and higher level, until she got to the highest-level math and language classes, typically only taken by boys. She took pride in herself as the only girl in these classrooms. The spaces she learned throughout her childhood, particularly male-dominated spaces heavily impacted Elizabeth and pushed her to push the limits placed on her because of her gender. Because she had gotten so used to competing with boys in school, the discovery that Union College, where nearly all the Johnstown boys went, did not allow girls devastated Elizabeth. Historian Lori Ginzberg, looking at how Elizabeth reflected on this in her autobiography, *Eighty Years and More*, writes, “she believed that her thwarted ambition made her more determined to fight the suppression of women; at the time, she was simply furious at being left behind.”\(^91\) Although she could not go to Union College with the boys she had studied with, she continued her resolution to push forward in her education, determined to make her father proud.

On top of Johnstown Academy, Elizabeth sought out additional tutoring to learn Greek. As part of her mission to fill her brother’s shoes after his death, she enlisted a neighbor, Rev. Simon Hosack to help her learn. The pastor not only tutored her in Greek and Latin, but also became a confidant and friend. Unlike her father, Simon Hosack, she wrote, “entered fully into the feeling of suffering and sorrow which took possession of me when I discovered that a girl weighed less in the scale of being than a boy, and he

\(^91\) Ginzberg, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton*, 22.
praised my determination to prove the contrary."\footnote{92} She remembered him often talking with her father and informing him just how exceptional she was. With his teaching, she quickly rose to the top of her classes at the Academy in Green and Latin. As she showed her father how quickly she learned and the prizes she won, he continued to remark repeatedly that she should have been born a boy. Her tutor comforted her and encouraged her plans for her future. Upon his death, around the time she finished at Johnstown Academy, Rev. Simon Hosack promised to leave her his textbooks that they studied from together, which she cherished throughout her life. These books held huge symbolism to Elizabeth, as they reminded her of the first person who pushed her academically and believed in her future. \textit{Eighty Years and More} written over half a century after his death, mentioned that whenever she looked at them, she continued to feel "[thankful] that in childhood I was blessed with such a friend and teacher."\footnote{93} Additionally, these books became the first of many material culture objects that she associated with her education and treasured the rest of her life. The value she placed on these objects reflected the valued she placed on her education and the effect it had on her career. Ultimately, being able to pursue academics outside of school and being pushed to do more by her tutor supported Elizabeth as she struggled to live up to her father's expectations for her brother and highlighted the emphasis she placed on education.

After finishing at Johnstown Academy, while most of Elizabeth's male classmates went to Union College, Elizabeth continued her education at Troy Female Seminary, or Mrs. Willard's Seminary. In 1830, she took the train to Albany and attended boarding

\footnote{92} Stanton, \textit{Eighty Years and More}, 21-2.
\footnote{93} Stanton, \textit{Eighty Years and More}, 24.
school for the first time. She later recalled the trip in detail, as she felt increasingly hopeless about her education the further away she got from Johnstown and the Academy that gave her so many opportunities. The physical separation from boys, both inside and outside of the classroom, seemed to be her primary focus. She took less interest in her studies, as she noted that she had already studied everything Troy Female Seminary offered except for French, music, and dance. While she attempted to challenge herself with those three subjects, she focused far more on interacting with the boys she did see and impressing her classmates. The girls at Mrs. Willard’s school could only see boys if they were brothers or cousins, but Elizabeth noted that the number of "cousins" she had in Troy and Albany grew quickly. As school no longer allowed her to see boys every day, she soon transitioned from a tomboy to a boy-obsessed teenager, as her memoir noted that she paid more attention to calls and notes than ever before and ever since. Ginzberg writes that, "Both she and the more conventionally feminine girls were happy to cast her as a heroic male figure."94 Without the boys in the classroom to compete with, Elizabeth eagerly impressed the girls around her. She openly admitted how much she enjoyed the girls' flattery, once even letting herself be falsely accused of cheating by her teachers because a classmate complimented her poem. Troy Female Seminary, as she expected, did not have huge impact on her academically, but the social life she experienced, and loved, shaped her teenage years.

After just a few years, Elizabeth finished her education at Troy Female Seminary and went back to Johnstown in 1833. Because of her status, society offered her very few options outside of marriage. None of these options, which primarily kept women within  

94 Ginzberg, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 24.
the private sphere, interested her as she desperately wanted to push her education further, eager to participate in political debates. Back at her childhood home, she did little domestic labor, as Margaret and Tryphena organized everything. She and her younger sisters only needed to care for their bedrooms and their own clothes. *Eighty Years and More* mentioned little about the domestic labor she grew up surrounded by, paying little attention to who did the domestic labor within their household. She spent most of her time in her father’s library, debating with and learning from the law students and other boys, just like her childhood. Ginzberg notes that while other women’s rights activists worked, either inside or outside of the home, and began to develop their careers, Elizabeth “seems to have waited for her future to land in her lap. Which, of course, it did.”\(^5\) Her shift from an interest in debating women’s rights to a life-long career in activism began, like many other connections in her life, through her mother’s family.

Elizabeth’s maternal first cousin, Gerrit Smith, maintained close ties with the Cady family and often hosted her, fostering a passion for activism and connecting her with several influential activists from across the country. Gerrit Smith and his wife, Ann Fitzhugh Smith, lived in Peterboro, about one hundred miles west of Johnstown. Gerrit worked and maintained a strong relationship with Daniel Cady throughout his career and the Cady family regularly traveled to visit them. He and his wife owned huge amounts of land and were incredibly wealthy. They put substantial amounts of their wealth behind their activism. Inspired by William Lloyd Garrison in the early 1830s, they got heavily involved in the abolitionist movement. Using their wealth, they made Peterboro a massive stop on the Underground Railroad as they assisted in getting formerly enslaved

people into Canada. Their house also became a center for hosting abolitionists, activists, and politicians, conservative and liberal alike. Elizabeth also noted that it hosted many elites as well, with the Schuyler and the Livingston families being frequent visitors. As Elizabeth concluded her education, she stayed at Peterboro more frequently. She became very close with Gerrit’s daughter, also called Elizabeth, and the pair would go on to exchange letters throughout their lives. The Smiths’ house at Peterboro allowed her to meet and interact with activists she would be heavily impacted by and work with throughout the rest of her career. One such person she met, Henry Brewster Stanton, would have an even larger impact on her life.

Henry Brewster Stanton became a friend of the Smiths because of his work as an abolitionist speaker. His parents, Joseph Stanton and Susan Brewster, bore him in 1805, making him ten years older than Elizabeth. Joseph Stanton worked in manufacturing and trading and the family owned one enslaved person. Henry credited his fond memories of the enslaved woman in their house for building an abolitionist foundation at a young age. His career started in politics, but as his interest in abolitionism grew, he continued to follow the opportunities presented to him. He formed strong friendships with other activists as he traveled the country, including William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass. He spoke all over Upstate New York, often staying at Peterboro. Elizabeth recalled the first time she heard him speak and loved the passion of his speeches, thinking him far more emotionally provoking than other contemporaries. The pair met in 1839 and, within a month of their introduction, became engaged.

---

96 Ginzberg, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 31.
Elizabeth's family had mixed reactions to her engagement to Henry and attempted to guide her in a more traditional direction as they separated her from him. Gerrit, upon hearing of their engagement, warned Elizabeth that her father would not allow her to marry an abolitionist. Although it went unspoken to her, he believed her engagement would hurt his relationship with Daniel Cady, as it had been his house and connections that had supported her relationship with Henry.97 Other activists questioned the partnership as well, many thinking that a young girl who showed an interest and a gift for debating women's rights could do much better than someone who, at best, did not support women's suffrage. Soon after their engagement, Elizabeth returned to Johnstown, alone. Her father used the separation from her fiancé to persuade her against the match. Rather than voice his concerns about Henry's politics, Daniel focused instead on the quality of life and status that Elizabeth had been raised with and Henry's inability to provide that. He argued that the anti-slavery movement, whether or not it was successful, would not fund him forever. He made it clear that Henry could not fund or provide the lifestyle she had grown up with, which deeply connected to the material culture items she had become accustomed to. "Although she resented her father's intervention," Ginzberg writes, "she was susceptible to arguments about her material well-being."98 Daniel made it clear that Henry would not be able to provide Elizabeth with the same household and the status that was tied to the household. She also, like many other middle-class daughters, had grown accustomed to relatively little domestic work. As a woman focused on academics and learning, the freedom that came with this limited domestic work allowed her to fully pursue her interests. Her father's argument, deeply rooted in Victorian ideas about gender

97 Ginzberg, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 32.
98 Ginzberg, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 33.
and status that tied the objects and space that surrounded her, convinced Elizabeth to break off the engagement. However, when Henry informed her that he would be sailing to London for the World’s Anti-Slavery Convention in just a few months, she decided that the political life he offered mattered more than the household and status he could not, and quickly married him on May 1st, 1840, less than a year after they met.

Soon after the wedding, they left for London. Henry had been selected with several hundred other delegates to discuss and lecture on abolition across the world. The journey to London highlighted the age gap between the couple. Elizabeth, aside from her time in Albany, lived a sheltered life in the small towns of Upstate New York; Ginzberg refers to her as a “provincial young woman.”99 The anticipation and excitement would have been overwhelming. Their journey began in New York City, where two of Elizabeth’s sisters accompanied them and sent them off. As they waited on the dock, she played tag with her brother-in-law. While Elizabeth remembered this fondly, Henry and one of his friends and fellow delegates believed it to be a show of her immaturity. Henry used the long voyage to London to teach her about abolition and what to expect at the convention. Their arrival in England thrilled her, but the next day, as all the female delegates from the United States arrived, Elizabeth began to meet the women who would change her life. Henry and their traveling companions had explained why the United States sent two factions of abolitionists, but as Elizabeth met these women, she realized just how important this divide was. Henry Stanton represented the side of the division that did not support women’s rights and argued against women’s membership in their organization. The Garrisonian delegates, connected to William Lloyd Garrison included

99 Ginzberg, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 36.
many women and passionately supported women’s rights inside and outside of their organization. After meeting the female Garrisonian delegates and William Lloyd Garrison himself, Elizabeth soon decided that she agreed with them, passionately, believing that “there was no question so important as the emancipation of women from the dogmas of the past.”¹⁰⁰ This debate would come to a head at the World’s Anti-Slavery Convention, as the organizers of the event excluded women, requiring them to sit in a separate area, away from the men.

Arguably the most important effect to come out of the Anti-Slavery Convention, contrary to the original intent, related to the exclusion of women and Elizabeth’s reaction, rather than abolition. The organizers of the event held a vote as they debated whether to include women. Attendees gave conflicting accounts on how Henry voted, but Elizabeth believed that he voted in favor of including women. As the female delegates and wives of male delegates, like Elizabeth, stayed in their segregated space, they formed strong connections. Being unable to participate in the convention that they were delegates to frustrated these women, and Elizabeth witnessed, and empathized with, this frustration firsthand. Here, she met many women who pushed her to a career in activism, including Lucretia Mott, Angelina and Sarah Grimke, and Lydia Maria Child. Elizabeth became enamored with Mott and the pair quickly became friends as Mott brought the new activist into her wider circle. Here, with her new friend in London, was where she recalled proposing the idea of a women’s rights convention once they returned to the United States, though Mott remembered the idea coming later. Regardless, being excluded from the World’s Anti-Slavery Convention pushed Elizabeth from an activist’s wife to an

¹⁰⁰ Stanton, Eighty Years and More, 79.
activist in her own right. After the convention, Henry and Elizabeth traveled around England and France for eight months as he lectured, putting her plans for activism and conventions on hold. After leaving most of the other delegates, including all of those in the Garrisonian faction, Elizabeth used their time in Europe to learn more about activism from those they met and to sightsee, seeing the French King just months before he would receive the Van Burens.

Returning to the United States eight months after their wedding, the couple did not have a place to live, nor did Henry have a job up to her father’s standards. They moved back in with her parents in Johnstown as Henry began to study law under Daniel. Elizabeth slipped back into the life she led before her marriage, as anti-slavery and women’s rights work once again felt far away. She continued to have very few expectations placed on her, so little that as her younger sisters “married and commenced housekeeping,” she found herself only kept busy with her now-limited activism.\(^{101}\) She recalled spending her time at home “reading law, history, and political economy, with occasional interruptions to take part in some temperance or anti-slavery excitement.”\(^{102}\)

Unlike in London where activism surrounded and excited her, life in Johnstown slowed Elizabeth’s connection with other women’s rights activists. Her career in women’s rights slowed further as she gave birth to her first child, Daniel Cady Stanton, in March of 1842. She found motherhood rewarding and challenging all at once. *Eighty Years and More* detailed how she felt like she entered motherhood totally unprepared, not knowing how to do anything, while simultaneously recounting how the nurse who helped care for baby

\(^{101}\) Stanton, *Eighty Years and More*, 111.

\(^{102}\) Stanton, *Eighty Years and More*, 111.
Neil did everything wrong. She did take advice, however, from Angelina Grimke, whom she visited that year. Her memoir also recalled that she never hesitated to give advice to mothers as well, as she often used children to start conversations with parents she met. Motherhood became a public role for Elizabeth much more than it was for Harriet Jacobs or Angelica Singleton Van Buren, as she wrote about her experiences and the knowledge she gained from motherhood throughout her connections with other mothers.

The same year they welcomed their first child, Henry finished his studies and began to work as a lawyer in Boston. The move to Boston meant that activists and friends surrounded Elizabeth once again. Because Henry’s abolitionist group opposed that of the Garrisonians, and therefore most of the female abolitionists, many activists viewed her with suspicion and did not welcome her with the same ease she felt in London. Ginzberg argues that, unlike Elizabeth’s time in London, “her time in Boston underscored how marginal she remained to the antislavery movement,” that she was only an “abolitionist by marriage and proximity.”

The little abolitionist work she did when they lived in Johnstown highlighted how her participation in antislavery movements primarily relied on where she lived. Even while living in Boston, she frequently visited her family and traveled to Albany, putting any abolitionist work on hold. Additionally, she got involved in activism primarily through social events, something that the other women took note of.

Elizabeth, always eager to learn more and debate those around her, found herself far more interested, or only interested, in the intellectual debates around abolition, rather than actively participating in the reform movement. This increased with the pregnancy

---

103 Ginzberg, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 46.
104 Ginzberg, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 46.
and birth of her second child, Henry Stanton Jr. in Albany in 1844, where her parents lived temporarily for her father’s job. Elizabeth’s life in Boston increased her engagement with abolitionist ideas while highlighting how her involvement in the movement relied on proximity rather than passion for the cause at hand. Elizabeth’s participation with abolitionist events became even less frequent as the Stantons moved into their first house in Boston.

For the first time in her life, Elizabeth became fully responsible for her own house, as well as her two babies and two domestic workers, as she proudly wrote in *Eighty Years and More*. She considered her house an incredibly symbolic space that represented many different things to her. She loved the complete control that came with running a household, or as she called it in *Eighty Years and More*, “reign[ing] supreme within four walls.”¹⁰⁵ She, like the Van Burens, took immense pride in the way her house looked and how it presented her family’s status. She believed that a neat and orderly house reflected her Victorian middle-class ideology. In particular, she used her dining room table to highlight her role as a housewife. The dining room and large table allowed her to host the abolitionists who had hosted her and Henry for several years. The way she decorated the table also held deep significance to her. She made sure that her tablecloths and centerpieces followed the trends and the seasons, keeping her in fashion. How she arranged everything with care and put thought into every object mattered the most to her.¹⁰⁶ She also used clothing to reflect her organization, taking great care “to give an artistic touch to everything the dress of my children and servants included,” arguing that

¹⁰⁶ Stanton, *Eighty Years and More*, 137.
an orderly home was “even more attractive than a domestic scene hung on the wall.”107 Clothing played an important role when drawing comparisons between her family and her neighbors as well. She noted that she felt it was very important for the laundry to be hung outside and brought back inside earlier than any of her neighbors, one way she compared her household to those around her. Like Angelica, Elizabeth complained about her domestic workers not keeping the space as orderly as she would like it, writing about how she always reminded them to do things in a quicker and more organized way. Elizabeth’s house in Boston and the way she arranged the objects inside of it held great significance to her as she created and cared for a home for her family for the first time.

The next couple of years brought a lot of changes to the Stanton family. Her cousin Gerrit Smith and his wife Ann Fitzhugh visited them in Boston and during the visit the Stantons hosted several abolitionists connected to Henry. Just before the visit, in 1845, Elizabeth gave birth to the pair’s third son, named Gerrit Smith Stanton, after her cousin. By this point, they had been in Boston for three years and Henry continuously struggled with establishing himself as a lawyer. Boston housed the Garrisonian side of the abolitionist movement and therefore he had not been fully welcomed. Citing his poor health, the Stantons decided to move back to Upstate New York.108 As she and her children arrived at her parents' house, her father suggested Seneca Falls. The family owned a house there that he offered to purchase for them. With the passage of the married women’s property act, a rare point in politics where Elizabeth and her father

107 Stanton, Eighty Years and More, 137.
108 Ginzberg argues that the Stantons moved not because of Henry’s health, which had started to improve in Boston, but rather because his career was struggling particularly as he worked against the Garrisonian abolitionists. Ginzberg, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 48.
agreed, though for vastly different reasons, Daniel would be able to put the house fully in her name. He hoped that the house in Seneca Falls, about 150 miles further west of Johnstown, would pull her away from the activism of Boston. Additionally, the house and the land it sat on needed significant updating, something he hoped, in tandem with her three children, would keep her too busy to be political. He bought the house, challenging her to prove what women were capable of by renovating it.\textsuperscript{109} Elizabeth, leaving her children with her parents, took off to Seneca Falls to create the home her family lived in for over fifteen years in the town that she would tie to women’s rights.

In \textit{Eighty Years and More}, Elizabeth portrayed Seneca Falls as a sleepy and disconnected town that lacked the intellectual stimulation that Boston had offered her. She went to Seneca Falls to work on the renovations and set up the household alone at first, with her children and Henry following. Even with her family in town, she found her new home extremely isolating. She wrote that caring for her children and the house now took more time than ever, and the initial charm that existed with her first house in Boston quickly wore off in her new home. The location of the house, she believed, played a large part in this. At the time the Stanton family moved in, the house laid on the outskirts of the town (although it is now in a neighborhood). On a raised area above the river, the house still sits in a huge yard, perfect for a large family. The long walk to town, Elizabeth remembered, had few sidewalks and covered her in mud. And despite her complaints about her domestic workers while living in Boston, she found the ones in Seneca Falls far worse, taking on more of the work around the house herself, rather than just directing servants. They helped care for the baby, but Elizabeth took a lot of the care of the older

\textsuperscript{109} Stanton, \textit{Eighty Years and More}, 144.
boys upon herself, as she took great interest in their education and in establishing her family in the town. This focus on housekeeping, very different from what she experienced in Boston, isolated her from the social life and activism she enjoyed in Boston: "I had so many cares that the company I needed for intellectual stimulus was a trial rather than a pleasure." Historian Lori Ginzberg argues that the isolating narrative Elizabeth presented about the town is not entirely accurate. The quiet river outside of the Stantons’ house, still visible from the front porch, powered heavy machinery in the industrial areas of town and ultimately connected them to the Erie Canal. The remains of the machinery in the river are located only a few blocks down from her house, easy to see along the road. Additionally, the railroad offered them only a two-hour journey to both Rochester and Albany, keeping their connections with activists throughout Upstate New York strong. Additionally, on earlier visits to Seneca Falls when she visited her sister, she made several connections with women in the town, many of whom were activists who supported women’s rights. These connections within Seneca Falls pushed Elizabeth to continue to be involved with activism on top of her work within the home.

Elizabeth developed many new friendships and connected with old friends in Seneca Falls and throughout Upstate New York that would continue to develop her career in activism and her interest in women’s rights. These relationships formed and strengthened as Lucretia Mott visited the town in the summer of 1848. Mott introduced her to several other Quakers and Garrisonian abolitionists. Their meeting took place at the home of Richard and Jane Hunt in Waterloo, the town next to Seneca Falls. Hunt and

---

111 Ginzberg, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton*, 49.
Mott invited Elizabeth, introducing her to Mary Ann McClintock, her daughter Elizabeth McClintock, and Martha Coffin Wright, Mott’s sister. Just like in London, Henry’s stance against the Garrisonians initially isolated Elizabeth from these other women. On top of that, all of the other women were Quakers and related to each other. With Mott’s introduction, the other Garrisonian women welcomed Elizabeth and listened to her “long accumulated discontent,” that had built up in caring for her household and children. The group discussed women’s rights, as Lucretia and Elizabeth recalled their conversation discussing a potential women’s rights convention many years earlier. The group decided to take action and organized a meeting. They determined that it needed to be soon, as they wanted Mott and her husband James to attend before returning to Philadelphia. They set July 19 and 20 as the dates for the convention, less than two weeks away. Ultimately, the organization of the convention relied on Elizabeth’s proximity to and friendship with Quaker and Garrisonian activists. Although she remembered Seneca Falls as a quiet and disconnected town, she had found a group of women, who both lived in and frequently visited the town, with similar goals and ambitions within two years of her arrival. With these women, she organized the first women’s rights convention, making the town even more connected with politics.

Ahead of the convention, the women continued to plan and invite people from across Upstate New York. They arranged to hold the convention at Wesleyan Chapel in downtown Seneca Falls. The chapel had hosted several other similar political events and, unlike nearly all other locations in the town, allowed women to organize and give speeches. Their proximity to other cities allowed them to quickly alert people, as they

wrote to friends and put information in local newspapers. This also included a letter to Frederick Douglass, a close friend of all the organizers. He lived in Rochester and soon accepted their invitation, publishing the information in his newspaper, *The North Star*, as well. During this time of preparation, they also wrote the Declaration of Sentiments to serve as an outline of their goals. Elizabeth primarily worked on it with Elizabeth McClintock, as they met to write together the following weekend. They choose to base their language on the Declaration of Independence, discovering, “an aptitude for rhetoric, history, and irony,” and creating a partnership that would last for several years.\(^{113}\) The Declaration of Sentiments touched on women’s ability to own property, as they wrote, “He has taken from her all right in property,” and argued that taxation of property owned by single women benefitted a government in which they were not represented.\(^{114}\) Elizabeth, who owned her own home with the passage of the Married Women’s Property act, heavily supported women owning property as a way to protect themselves, made clear through the Declaration and *Eighty Years and More*. Planning the Women’s Rights Convention of 1848 highlighted the importance of physical space related to women organizing in the public sphere, through their connections, the places they spoke at, and the ownership of the spaces around them. The organization of the event brought women out of their homes and of the private sphere as a whole as they became political actors.

On July 19, the Women’s Rights Convention began in Wesleyan Chapel. The first day brought speeches and conversations led by women, with fewer men in attendance and primarily listening. Here, the organizers presented the Declaration of Sentiments and

\(^{113}\) Ginzberg, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton*, 55.

spent the day making and adopting changes to the document. Many women hesitated at
the idea of fighting for women’s suffrage, including Lucretia Mott. Elizabeth and several
other organizers insisted that suffrage had to be their major goal. Women dominated the
chapel, as Elizabeth, Lucretia, and Elizabeth McClintock all gave speeches focused on
the discontents of womanhood and how they sought to change them.115 On the second
day, more men attended, many giving their support and signing the document as well.
The women estimated that about three hundred people attended throughout the two days.
Frederick Douglass spoke in support of women’s suffrage, which convinced many others
who were unsure about such a radical request. One hundred people (sixty-eight women
and thirty-two men) signed the declaration at the end of the convention.116 The women
included Harriet Cady Eaton, Elizabeth’s sister and Henry Stanton’s name does not
appear on the list of men. Although the convention received considerable backlash in the
following weeks, Elizabeth and the other organizers considered it a great success as it
inspired many other women’s rights conventions in the following years across the United
States, many of which they attended. The Women’s Rights Convention of 1848 also put
Elizabeth and Seneca Falls on the map and tied them to women’s rights.

The convention brought together many people who supported women’s rights,
which helped to further Elizabeth’s career as she worked with more women. She met
Amelia Bloomer, who also lived in Seneca Falls, around the time of the convention.
Bloomer, a writer who published the women’s newspaper *The Lily*, popularized the

115 Judith Wellman, *The Road to Seneca Falls: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the First Women’s Rights
Convention* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 196.
Bloomer Costume, a part of women’s dress reform. Elizabeth credited Elizabeth Smith Miller, daughter of Gerrit and Ann Fitzhugh Smith and Elizabeth’s friend at Peterboro, for designing the costume. Bloomer Costume dresses shortened the skirts and added pants or wide “bloomers” underneath. Women’s dress reformers believed that shortening the skirt made women’s clothes safer, particularly for working women. After witnessing her cousin care for her baby without the hassle of long skirts, Elizabeth soon began wearing the new outfit as well. Throughout her autobiography, she makes repeated references to feeling overwhelmed by the number of children she had and relied on visits with her family for support. Around the time she began wearing the Bloomer Costume, the Stantons had welcomed two more children in quick succession, Theodore in 1851 and Margaret in 1852. As the bloomer costume offered Elizabeth an opportunity to make caring for her children easier while signifying her support for women’s rights, she eagerly began wearing the new dress. Elizabeth wore the Bloomer Costume dresses for several years, with pictures of her wearing the outfit being published in The Lily (see figure L). To Elizabeth, this outfit represented the freedom that the women’s rights movement offered: “What incredible freedom I enjoyed for two years! Like a captive set free from his ball and chain.” Elizabeth’s reference to freedom displayed just how important she believed the Bloomer Costume to be. Bloomer Costumes became one of the most meaningful objects in the early years of the women’s rights movement, being worn by women who went on to lead national organizations. The Bloomer Costume did not last long, many women stopped wearing it within a couple of years due to the backlash they


118 Stanton, Eighty Years and More, 201.
received from many men who viewed such an extreme break from Victorian gender norms as dangerous. However, in the few years women wore the Bloomer Costume, the dress brought together many women and helped to symbolize their passion for women’s rights.

Meeting Amelia Bloomer in 1848 impacted Elizabeth’s life beyond the Bloomer Costume. Just a few years after the convention, Bloomer introduced Elizabeth to a friend that visited her, Susan B. Anthony. She wrote that Anthony, as well as several other friends like William Lloyd Garrison, came to Seneca Falls for an anti-slavery meeting around 1850. She recalled Susan “dressed in gray delaine, hat and all the same color, relieved with pale blue ribbons,” and that her outfit made her “the perfection of neatness and sobriety.”

Elizabeth used clothing to reflect her own respectability throughout her life and she quickly connected Anthony’s clothing to her respectability as well. As she used clothing to reflect Anthony’s character, she presented her friend as a respectable woman through her orderliness despite her work in the public sphere. The two soon became friends and partners. Susan frequently visited Seneca Falls so they could write and plan together. Elizabeth wrote that, in their work together, “I forged the thunder bolts and she fired them,” as Elizabeth stayed in Seneca Falls, “wholly absorbed in a narrow family selfishness,” while Anthony traveled to give speeches and start discussions about women’s rights. Because of her roles as a wife and a mother, she could not leave her children to work, so, with Anthony’s visits, Elizabeth’s house because their center for work.

119 Stanton, *Eighty Years and More*, 163.
120 Stanton, *Eighty Years and More*, 165.
As the Stanton home served as Elizabeth’s primary meeting spot with Anthony, it expanded beyond a place for the family and became a place for work as well. By turning her parlor into an office, she brought the public sphere into the private sphere. Elizabeth primarily worked out of her front parlor, where she kept her desk (see figure M). Women typically dominated parlors within the Victorian household, however they traditionally used the parlor to host friends and display their middle-class status. Elizabeth’s use of the parlor for work reflected the incredibly masculine study, which, as men controlled the room and brought their work inside the home, typically mirrored the public sphere within the private sphere. Both by the nature of the small house and because of Elizabeth’s gender, she did not have her own study, instead reconstructing how her family used and thought about the parlor. In the Stantons’ house, this room can be closed off from the rest of the house, something she did frequently to keep her children out while she wrote (see figure N). The doors connected the parlor and the dining room, two rooms that traditionally emphasized femininity in the household, but that Elizabeth used in her work very untraditionally. She prioritized creating an isolated space in her house for work, as even by her own account, her children constantly got into trouble. *Eighty Years and More* recalls several incidents to highlight the necessity of a separate office, occurring while she worked either in the house or in town. On one occasion, her second son, Henry, attempted to build a raft of cork, testing it in the river next to the house and setting the eighteen-month-old baby afloat, leaving him until Elizabeth noticed that the older brothers had not come back with him. She added that the next day, a neighbor passing by found the “same victimized infant” on top of the roof, in the chimney. ¹²¹ These stories

¹²¹ Stanton, *Eighty Years and More*, 164.
and many others are still remembered in Seneca Falls, with several people using them as examples of why the Stanton boys are not as fondly remembered as their mother. Sometimes, when Susan B. Anthony visited, she would entertain the children, who lovingly called her Aunt Susan, as Elizabeth shut the doors to her study and worked. Ultimately, as her career in activism took off, the way Elizabeth used her home shifted, from a place focused on her family to a space where she shut them out in order to enter the public sphere.

The first part of Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s life highlights the important role that material culture and physical space played in connection with her roles within her household, the women’s rights movement, and the intersection of the two. Growing up in Upstate New York, Elizabeth’s childhood focused primarily on her own interest in education, as her desire to have the same opportunities as boys inspired her passion for women’s rights. During her education, she came to treasure the objects, like her textbooks, that represented not only the time and effort she spent learning, but also her ability to persist in her education despite the limits of her gender roles. Family connections in nearby towns upstate through Gerrit Smith allowed her to enter into the world of activism, meeting several other activists and abolitionists throughout New York. As she married Henry Stanton, she began to interact with women who were also passionate about women’s rights. As she and her husband established their life in Boston, she embraced her role as a wife and mother, focusing on the objects around her house and building a respectable home. With the move to Seneca Falls, what had originally been an attempt to distance her from activism brought her even closer, as she formed close friendships and partnerships with women in the surrounding towns, resulting in the
Women's Rights Convention of 1848. The convention expanded her role as an activist and introduced her to several other women who furthered her career. During this time, wearing the Bloomer Costume represented the freedom offered by the women's rights movement. Her partnership with Susan B. Anthony pushed her to truly start a career in activism, as her home became a place of work rather than just a place for family. Ultimately, material culture and physical space played a constant role throughout Elizabeth's young adulthood and early career, often connecting to her career, motherhood, or the intersection of the two.

Material culture and physical space continued to play an important role in the lives of Harriet Jacobs, Angelica Singleton Van Buren, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. As Harriet Jacobs escaped to the North, she strategically sought out big cities, like Philadelphia, New York, and Boston, because of the anonymity they offered. During this time, she began to work as a nanny for author Nathaniel Parker Willis. Occasionally, she fled to Boston to avoid James Norcom as he continued to track her down, something his daughter Mary Matilda continued to do after his death. Several years later, Willis's second wife, Cornelia, purchased Harriet's freedom from Mary Matilda. In the North, she reconnected with John, Joseph, and Louisa, now able to build a life with her children. In 1849, she began her involvement with the anti-slavery movement, interacting with many of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's friends and signers of the Declaration of Sentiments, including Amy Post, William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and Lydia Maria Child. Child, supported by several other abolitionists, urged Harriet to write her life story, resulting in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Although published anonymously, many
abolitionist circles knew her as the author. During the Civil War, she went back to the South to continue her fight against slavery in a variety of different ways, including providing supplies to the North in the Civil War and teaching formerly enslaved people how to read. She eventually returned to the North, where she lived with Louisa until her death in 1897. Throughout most of the twentieth century, people believed *Incidents* was a fictional book written by Lydia Maria Child. Historian Jean Fagan Yellin’s work at the end of the nineteenth century proved Harriet’s authorship, culminating in a biography published in 2004.

After losing her third child in 1843, Angelica had two more children, Martin and Travis Coles Van Buren. She continued thoughtfully use objects and spaces to be conscious of her status. This reflected in how she raised them, taking the three boys and her niece Mary McDuffie to Europe in hopes of aiding their refinement. She and Abraham continued to travel frequently between the North and the South, toeing the line between the Singleton’s plantations in South Carolina and the Van Buren family’s involvement with the Free Soil Party in New York. As Abraham’s military career took them south for the Mexican American War, the Singleton family provided them with many enslaved people to run their temporary household. Upon her father’s death, they inherited one of the plantations and a couple hundred slaves. They ran the plantation primarily from their home in New York City, where they settled at the end of his military career in 1854. With the sale of the plantation before the Civil War and Abraham's retirement from the military, the two stayed in New York focused on their family until Abraham's death in 1874 and Angelica’s death in 1877.
When she met Susan B. Anthony in 1851, Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s career exploded. She spent the next several years primarily in Seneca Falls, continuing their partnership through writing. As her children grew older, she and Henry moved to New York City. Elizabeth traveled more with Anthony, giving speeches on abolition and women’s rights. Her daughter Harriot, born after she met Anthony, also worked with her mother and was passionate about women’s rights. Elizabeth continued to clash with other activists because of her willingness to set aside, or even go against, abolitionist goals in favor of white women’s, continuing to focus primarily on the rights of white, middle-class women. In 1869, she and Anthony founded a women’s rights organization, the National Women’s Suffrage Association, before combining with other organizations. Elizabeth became heavily involved in the leadership of these organizations, on top of the work she did. As she got older, she once again turned her focus to writing, cutting down on public appearances. She wrote several books about women’s rights and the history of the movement, the last of which was *Eighty Years and More*. She died in 1902, nearly two decades before the nineteenth amendment passed, called the Anthony Amendment after her friend and partner of many years.

The early lives and careers of Harriet Jacobs, Angelica Singleton Van Buren, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton reflect the importance of material culture and physical space. The differences in the way each woman used and understood physical space in her life emphasizes the differences between them. Angelica and Elizabeth’s gender and status, both deeply tied to their whiteness, dictated the expectations for them within their households and the way they reflected their respective statuses through objects within
their home. Their respective statuses also gave them the opportunity to move through different spaces to gain new opportunities, where, as an enslaved, Black woman, Harriet carefully calculated the spaces she entered in an attempt to keep herself and her children safe and gain freedom. These differences are also reflected in the way Harriet, Angelica, and Elizabeth used material culture objects throughout their lives. The way Harriet used her ability to sew and clothing in an attempt to craft her family’s respectability is very different from the ways Angelica used her family’s clothing to reflect their elite status and Elizabeth used the Bloomer Costume to express freedom from certain gender expectations. Additionally, the way these three women used books to symbolize and reflect their education played out very differently in each of their lives. Harriet’s focus on the Bible while confined in the attic displayed how she turned to religion, echoed throughout the writing of her autobiography. Angelica turning to books during her confinement held a very different meaning for her, especially as she read about powerful women in the United States and Europe which influenced her public image as a hostess. However, Elizabeth saw books and her education as a clear way to break out of the traditional gender roles that typically limited women to a focus on the home and religion. The way gender interacted with race and status heavily impacted how Harriet, Angelica, and Elizabeth thought about and used material culture objects and physical spaces. In conclusion, examining the differences in the ways Harriet Jacobs, Angelica Singleton Van Buren, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton used material culture and physical spaces, particularly as connected to their roles within the household, provides a more thorough understanding of the agency they had and the choices that they made within their own lives.
Map of Edenton, North Carolina courtesy of Historic Edenton Visitors Center. Features locations important to the life of Harriet Jacobs.
Figure B

Interior of Saint Paul's Church where Harriet Jacobs baptized Joseph and Louisa in 1833, choosing the last name Jacobs. Author's collection.
Figure C

$100 REWARD

WILL be given for the apprehension and delivery of my Servant Girl HARRIET. She is a light mulatto, 21 years of age, about 5 feet 6 inches high, of a thick and corpulent habit, having on her head a thick covering of black hair that curls naturally, but which can be easily combed straight. She speaks easily and fluently, and has an agreeable carriage and address. Being a good seamstress, she has been accustomed to dress well, has a variety of very fine clothes, made in the prevailing fashion, and will probably appear, if abroad, trimmed out in gay and fashionable finery. As this girl absconded from the plantation of my son without any known cause or provocation, it is probable she designs to transport herself to the North.

The above reward, with all reasonable charges, will be given for apprehending her, or securing her in any prison or jail within the U. States.

All persons are hereby forewarned against harboring or entertaining her, or being in any way instrumental in her escape, under the most rigorous penalties of the law.

JAMES NORCOM.

Edenton, N. C. June 80 1830

---

Figure D

Exterior of jail where James Norcom imprisoned John, Joseph, and Louisa when Harriet Jacobs went into hiding. The appearance has not changed significantly since the nineteenth century. Author’s collection.
Figure F

Exterior cover and front page of Angelica Singleton Van Buren’s autograph album from 1831. From University of South Carolina Libraries, Digital Collection.
Angelica Singleton Van Buren’s Dress from her time in the White House on display, Smithsonian Institution Archives, History of the Smithsonian Catalogue.
The women's parlor at Lindenwald, known as the Green Room, Martin Van Buren National Historic Site, author's collection.
Figure J

The men’s parlor at Lindenwald featuring a painting of a hunting scene, Martin Van Buren National Historic Site, author’s collection.
Lindenwald’s front entrance and dining hall, Martin Van Buren National Historic Site, author’s collection.
Elizabeth Cady Stanton modeling the Bloomer Costume for *The Lily*. Women's Rights National Historic Park, author's collection.
Figure M

Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s desk, Seneca Falls Historical Society Museum, author’s collection.
Figure N

Front room of Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s house in Seneca Falls. She and Susan B. Anthony closed these doors to make this space her office. Women’s Rights National Historic Park, author’s collection.
Bibliography


Anthony, Carl. “First Ladies Never Married to Presidents: Angelica Van Buren.”
National First Ladies Library, September 27, 2014.


McNulty, Katherine N. and Ruth Rhyne. “Singleton’s Graveyard.” National Register of Historic Places- Nomination and Inventory. 

“Miss Singleton Meets the Major.” The Evening News. April 11, 1918.


