



Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave. Written by Himself

William Grimes

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William Grimes (1784-1865) was the son of Benjamin Grymes, the rich owner of a plantation in King James County, Virginia, and an enslaved servant of Grymes's neighbor, a Dr. Steward. William Grimes served at least ten different masters in Virginia, Maryland, and Georgia, working in such varied positions as house servant, valet, field worker, stable boy, and coachman. He was a light-skinned slave, a fact that enabled him to pass as white on various occasions. Oftentimes he was severely mistreated by both his masters and his fellow slaves, and Grimes also endured physical abuse in the house and in the field, and at times became combative or despondent. He escaped slavery in 1814 by stowing away on a ship bound for New York and became an entrepreneur in New England. He eventually settled in New Haven, Connecticut, and married Clarissa Caesar in 1817. They had eighteen children together, twelve of whom survived. After eventually finding a small measure of success, Grimes lost all of his property when his master discovered his location and forced him to buy his freedom or risk being returned to slavery. Grimes wrote the *Life of William Grimes* and published it in 1825, hoping to regain some of his lost funds. He published a second edition of his autobiography in 1855, updating it with humorous anecdotes and tempering some of his earlier bitterness. Grimes died in August 1865. The *Life of William Grimes* was the first book-length autobiography written by a fugitive American slave, and its publication. Furthermore, *The Life of William Grimes* is an important early text in the slave narrative genre, and it provides a raw and engaging first-hand account of the institution of slavery, unmediated by Abolitionist political aims.

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