

Leonard Grimes

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by

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from

*Essence of A People II:
African Americans Who Made Their Lives Anew
in Loudoun County, Virginia, and Beyond*

Leonard Andrew Grimes was a twelve-year-old “very bright mulatto boy” when his parents, Andrew and Polly Grimes, registered their status as free Negroes in 1826 at the Loudoun County Court House in Leesburg. The boy had been born free in Leesburg, but for all blacks in the South, freedom was relative and often tenuous. As a youth, Grimes worked for a butcher and an apothecary in Washington, D.C., but maintained his ties to Loudoun. And, in 1834, when Grimes would have been about twenty years of age, he registered his free status at the courthouse in Leesburg.

For a time he worked for a slaveholder, traveling with him to the Deep South. There, he witnessed slavery at its harshest and vowed to combat the institution. Returning to Washington in the middle or late 1830s, he established himself as a hackney carriage driver, providing transportation for politicians, professional, and other in the nation’s capital and well beyond the capital’s environs. He married, fathered two children, purchased property at the corner of H and 22nd Streets, and earned the respect of the blacks and whites who knew him.

But Grimes was also leading a secret life. At great risk to himself and his family, he became a part of the Underground Railroad, a network of assistance given to slaves escaping to the North. He served as a conductor, a role for which his job as a hackney driver gave him the perfect cover.

It is unknown how many rescue missions Grimes participated in, but in 1839 his luck ran out. Engaged by a free black man to rescue his wife and six children—all being held in slavery in Loudoun by Joseph Meade—Grimes carried off the rescue without a hitch. But he was spotted by Harriet Hardy, the daughter of William Hardy, who kept a coach stop on the Georgetown and Leesburg Turnpike at Dranesville.

Ann Farr, a friend of Hardy’s, later claimed that Hardy said she saw Grimes and his carriage approaching around dusk one day in late October. Assuming Grimes would stop as usual to give his passengers rest and refreshment, Hardy ordered the candles lit in the front room. But, to her surprise, Grimes continued past, and Farr claimed Hardy “distinctly saw the head of a person, with a hat on, through the small side light in the curtain of the barouche.” At the time, Hardy is said to have presumed that the passenger preferred another stop further down the road, but later she suspected that Grimes was transporting fugitive slaves. It was rumored that the family of refugees made it to Freedom in Canada.

Eventually Meade heard that Grimes was rumored to have assisted the runaways. On January 20, 1840, Meade swore out a warrant against him, and by March 2nd, Grimes was arrested, without bail, and taken to Leesburg for trial. As the court convened on March 10th, the courthouse was packed, and people watched with “breathless attention.” Grimes’s able defense team—headed by General Walter Jones of Washington D.C., with assistance from John Janney and B. W. Harrison of Loudoun County—decried the evidence as purely circumstantial and, highlighting Grimes’s sterling reputation, argued eloquently on his behalf. Nonetheless, Grimes was convicted and sentenced to two years in the state prison in Richmond plus a \$100 fine. This was the lightest penalty possible and credited to “the former good character of the Prisoner.”

The day after the trial, Grimes signed an indenture for this real and personal property so that his wife and children would have money to live on. His attorneys and friends twice petitioned the governor for a pardon, but to no avail. After he was freed, Grimes moved his family to New Bedford, Massachusetts. The whaling community—which included many African Americans and Quakers—was a center of antislavery activity and Grimes became a part of this network providing assistance to fugitive slaves.

Grimes’s experiences deepened his spiritual commitment. During a trip to Boston, another hotbed of abolitionism, he met with members of a fledgling congregation in need of a minister. After a trial period, Grimes was ordained a Baptist minister and installed as pastor of the new Twelfth Baptist Church. It grew rapidly, and since many of its members had escaped from slavery, it became known as the “Fugitive’s Church.” As a preacher, Grimes was “a man of power, but not an easy speaker. He manifested great amiability of character and always had a pleasant word for those with whom he came into contact.”

Construction of a new house of worship for Twelfth Baptist, on Southac Street, had not even been completed, however, when a new federal law rocked the North and profoundly affected the congregants. In September of 1850, as part of a compromise over the spread of slavery to the territories, Congress passed a stricter Fugitive Slave Act. Formerly, escaped slaves could easily find refuge in Free states; after 1850, life became far riskier for fugitives and those who helped them.

Grimes played a central role in a famous fugitive slave case involving his parishioner Anthony Burns, an escaped slave from Virginia. Burns was arrested in 1854, and Grimes led an unsuccessful attempt to free him from the Boston jail. The ensuing trial attracted tremendous crowds and drew attention to the Fugitive Slave Act and the abolitionist cause, while costing the federal government \$14,000. Burns lost his case, but a Grimes-led fund-raising effort in the black community garnered the funds to purchase Burns’s freedom. This effort at mass resistance was quite effective—no other fugitive slaves were prosecuted in Boston.

When Civil War broke out and Lincoln called for troops, many men from Twelfth Baptist wanted to answer the call, but black men were, at that time, barred from enlisting. Grimes was part of the successful agitation for a change in policy and recruited for the newly

organized 54th Massachusetts regiment. Grimes was even invited to serve as the regiment's chaplain, but he declined, citing his duties with Twelfth Baptist.

After the Civil War and the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery, he worked to better the lives of freed men and women. He must have felt gratified when the United States ratified in 1868 the Fourteenth Amendment, which extended full citizenship and its rights of "life, liberty, and property" to all those born or naturalized within its borders, followed in 1870 by the Fifteenth Amendment, which guaranteed the right to vote to all citizens regardless of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude." Still he labored on, working to assist the freed men living in his community and nationally. But the time of his death in 1874 at about age 60, he had served Twelfth Baptist faithfully and conscientiously for twenty-seven years, and his race—indeed, his country and his God— even longer.