

2012

Slavery, Imprinted: The Life and Narrative of William Grimes

Susanna Ashton

Clemson University, sashton@clemson.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/english_pubs



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cohen, L. L., & Stein, J. A. (2012). *Early African American print culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications by an authorized administrator of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.

MATERIAL TEXTS

Series Editors

Roger Chartier Leah Price
Joseph Farrell Peter Stallybrass
Anthony Grafton Michael F. Suarez, S.J.

A complete list of books in the series
is available from the publisher.

Early African American Print Culture

Edited by
Lara Langer Cohen
and
Jordan Alexander Stein

PENN

PUBLISHED IN COOPERATION WITH
THE LIBRARY COMPANY OF PHILADELPHIA
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA PRESS
PHILADELPHIA

seem more permanent, they learned to improvise and innovate.⁵² Instead of retreating from politics into an aesthetic world of artistic letters as William Dowling has maintained, some Federalist writers merely changed strategies.⁵³ They maintained their appreciation of Augustan satire and used it to fashion more vernacular satiric forms to address the people generally. As the promise of a “speaking aristocracy and a silent democracy” waned, some Federalist-leaning printers became innovators in shaping public sentiment.⁵⁴ Through the ideology and practice of racial difference, they disseminated the norms of democratic comportment and speech. While the Federalists may have been somewhat sympathetic to the real black people whom they used as models for their caricatures, the populace seems to have learned their lesson well and more fervently maintained racial boundaries, refusing to mix the form of American citizenship with the out-of-place matter of African descended bodies.

Like the earlier Federalist satiric papers, Bobalition served to instruct the public. The graphic carnivalesque component of these prints directed the white public to see black people as inherently different, unable to speak, and subject to public ridicule. Likewise, they suggested to Americans of African descent that, regardless of their actual behavior, white Americans would likely see them as unruly and out of order. Coupled with the graphic, the literary component attempted to train the public (black people included) in the standards of orderly and appropriate performance through constructing a fictive and caricatured “blackness” and associating that blackness with disorder and impropriety, rendering the two virtually synonymous. These anti-black prints forcefully and repeatedly asserted racial difference as a means of simultaneously constructing and maintaining the boundaries of a new popular democracy while instructing potential citizens and subjects in the appropriate manner of performing their positions, in opposition to the caricatures of “blackness,” as *white*.

CHAPTER 7

Slavery, Imprinted: The Life and Narrative of William Grimes

SUSANNA ASHTON

In 1824, in a fury over the injustices of slavery, racism in the North, and exploitation of the workingman, William Grimes wrote the story of his life. *The Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave* (1825) ends with a visceral and violent image of literary sacrifice: Grimes offers to skin himself in order to authorize the national story of the United States:

If it were not for the stripes on my back which were made while I was a slave, I would in my will leave my skin as a legacy to the gover[n]ment, desiring that it might be taken off and made into parchment, and then bind the constitution of glorious, happy, and free America. Let the skin of an American slave bind the charter of American liberty!!

Grimes's memoir, the first detailed autobiography written by a fugitive slave in the United States, rendered visible the contradictions of a national ideology that could marry freedom and slavery: his status as “bound” also “bound” the legal freedoms enshrined in the United States' founding documents. And that he made this claim by invoking the imaginative language of print was no coincidence. Not only had Grimes worked as a hired slave to a prominent printer in Savannah, and was thus conversant in both the practice and language of print culture, but he was challenging the sacred status of print in Western culture. I see this passage as not only an opportunity for him to

display slavery's literal and figurative inscription on his skin, as William Andrews has aptly noted, but also as a cry that could seize upon an image that had a personal resonance.² This image arose from his own fraught experiences with the print world, by which he was occasionally exploited but from which he also occasionally benefited. His challenge, "Let the skin . . . bind the charter of American liberty," played out, too, in his very copyright registration of his own bound life story, the first U.S. copyright claimed for a full-length black-authored book. By boldly asserting his rights of intellectual property he was, in effect, cauterizing the injuries slavery had imprinted upon him. His experiences with how print culture could both entrench and unseat a system that enslaved him lent Grimes language both figurative and literal to shape not only his expressions but also his actions. His intellectual property claim was essentially synecdochic—his copyright claim could thus stand in as a broader claim to his own self, a man who had been "bound" in slavery. That is to say, while both literal and figurative texts betrayed him (as he suggested the Constitution did, for example) they also could be harnessed for his own benefit (as the letters he wrote negotiating his own "value" demonstrated). The upshot was that Grimes understood himself as a full-fledged participant in textual world—a participant shaped by text but also a participant who could assert the material and immaterial power of text to his own benefit as well.

William Grimes's narrative is a notable text not merely because of its rich and troubling contents but also because of its status as the first published, book-length runaway slave narrative in the United States that was almost certainly, in its first edition, written by the runaway himself.³ Moreover, the fact that he went to the expense and effort to have his copyright asserted under the jurisdiction of the 1790 Copyright Act, the first federal copyright act in the United States, also illustrates how his work marked a transitional moment of national conceptions about citizenry, civic rights, the public sphere, and property itself.⁴ The 1790 law required, in no uncertain terms, U.S. citizenship on the part of the claimant.⁵ By claiming his own copyright—and all evidence suggests that he was the first African American to claim copyright for a book-length work under the 1790 act—Grimes marked 1825 as a moment in which conflicting notions of citizenship and civic rights might be exploited to his advantage.⁶ It is, of course, possible that a publisher filed the copyright on his behalf, but since the phrasing of the title-claim reads that Grimes "hath deposited in this Office the title of a Book" it seems probable that Grimes himself made an appearance and the clerk knowingly recognized him as a man with citizenship rights sufficient to file the claim (see Figure 7.1).⁷

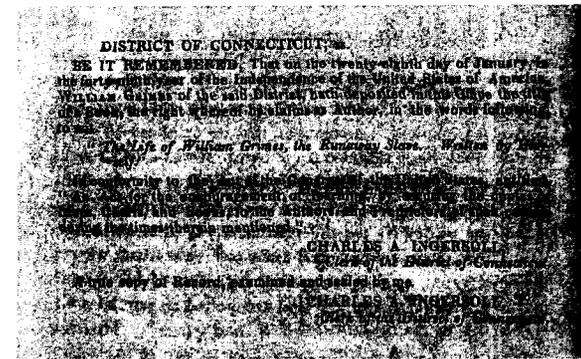


Figure 7.1. Copyright notes from the 1825 edition of *The Life of William Grimes*. Courtesy of Z. Smith Reynolds Library Special Collections and Archives, Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Since the Connecticut State Constitution specifically denied free black males the right to vote in 1818 and yet receiving copyright was predicated upon one's citizenship, Grimes's success demonstrates the variable levels and definitions of citizenship as effectively practiced in the antebellum era. Indeed, one might also argue that his claim had even more import because it was one of his very first rights exercised as a freeman. For it was only after he had, under duress, purchased his freedom and relinquished his identity as a fugitive slave, that he could he invoke any kind of citizenship rights at all.

The fact that it took at least thirteen more years after Grimes for another black person to claim a U.S. copyright on anything other than a protest pamphlet suggests, too, that we might view Grimes and his copyright as a singular aberration.⁸ Other black writers (David Walker, for instance) wrote books and political pamphlets under their own names that were not copyrighted until well after Grimes's 1825 narrative had been published. And yet Grimes's 1825 copyright claim raises questions that reveal much about the historical period as well as about his individual situation. What made it possible to register that claim, for example, and what made it of interest to Grimes in the first place? How did the unfettered nature of his literary production, a book neither introduced nor framed with the imprimatur of white patrons, inform his decision? And how had his previous experience with the print trade informed his decision to compose and register his work? In the work that follows, I argue that just as his offer to skin himself was constructed to reveal the contradictions

of American polity in the figurative terms most likely to reverberate with violent irony, so too his successful assertion of copyright was a calculated act that not only powerfully asserted his own claims but also made visible the hypocrisy of a nation through the legal language of textual property rights.

The Life of Grimes

Grimes's expectations for an audience and some attendant profits may have been highly ambitious in 1824, before slave narratives were a widespread print phenomenon, but they weren't unreasonable. No known book-length slave narrative, unambiguously authored by a slave, had ever been published in the United States. His experiences with the educated, socially influential, and politically active populations of New Haven and Litchfield, Connecticut, surely shaped his hopes that a story, his story, which testified to a new perspective on American freedom and citizenship, might find an audience.

For his story did demand notice: born in 1784 in Virginia, he led a peripatetic life, continually torn away from what was familiar. He was owned by at least nine masters (and was lent to, employed by, and hired out to many more than that), he was moved from place to place, and he was assigned a variety of both menial and artisan tasks, from plowing to assisting with medical procedures and from working as a coachman for a printer to, possibly, working in a print shop. At various times he was a house slave, a farmhand, a field slave, and what we might understand as an urban hustler—enslaved but nonetheless operating with some considerable autonomy in the city of Savannah, Georgia. Grimes details extensive physical and psychological suffering under cruel masters; at one point he even tries to use an ax to break his own leg to avoid working for a particularly vicious man. He is repeatedly betrayed by enslavers who keep him hostage to their hollow promises of freeing him.

His accounts of suffering do not end when, in 1815, aided by black sailors, he escaped by boat from Savannah. Fully half of his narrative thereafter consists of his experiences as a fugitive in the North—experiences that were anything but easy. He made it to New York City and from there to New Haven, Connecticut, and elsewhere, but even in the northern states (slavery wasn't fully abolished in Connecticut until 1848) he was still not free from the power of the slave system and the social problems attendant upon poverty.

Even as a fugitive, Grimes became a familiar figure around the Litchfield law school in Litchfield, Connecticut, and also at Yale University in New Haven, where he cut hair, ran errands for students, founded a "victualing shop," traded furniture, and became deeply embroiled in the often raucous world of university and city life. His barbering work, in particular, allowed him access and networking with lawyers, statesmen, academics, students, and even the governor of Connecticut. By 1823, Grimes realized that his Savannah master knew of his Connecticut whereabouts and that inquiries were being made. Grimes also knew that, if he were taken up or accosted by agents working for his master while on the streets of New Haven, he might not have the opportunity to negotiate for his freedom. Calculating that he could fare better in the smaller and more regulated community of Litchfield, Connecticut, where he had already founded some good relationships, he fled potential capture in New Haven and settled his family in Litchfield.

His strategy paid off. Although he was shortly thereafter tracked to Litchfield and forced to purchase his freedom through intermediaries, losing all his money and incurring considerable debts, the fact that he was even able to conduct such a complex transaction—which involved mortgaging his property and using various levels of sympathetic legal representation—was thanks to the remarkable political and social culture of that town. His connections with the professional community in Litchfield—home not only to the famous Beecher family from 1810 to 1826 but also home of the first law school in the United States and indubitably one of the most prominent gatherings of legal and intellectual minds in the nation—were ultimately what saved him. In Litchfield, he found prominent men who were willing to negotiate his price and arrange for the humiliating but necessary transaction.

Still shaken from nearly being returned to slavery, Grimes immediately went to work on his memoir to recoup his losses and managed to publish it early in 1825, only a few months after becoming a free man. Incredibly, considering all his disadvantages of caste and class, William Grimes's story continued for another twenty-six years. He had more children and continued to deepen his relationships and ties to the community, especially with the students of Yale. A "William Grimes" was listed as living in New Haven in the 1830 census, and again in the 1840 census, this time with several children and a woman, presumably his wife. The 1846 New Haven city directory lists no profession for him, but notes "William Grimes" is "col'd" (colored) and lives at 21 Rose Street. His early years may have been nomadic (even after his 1825

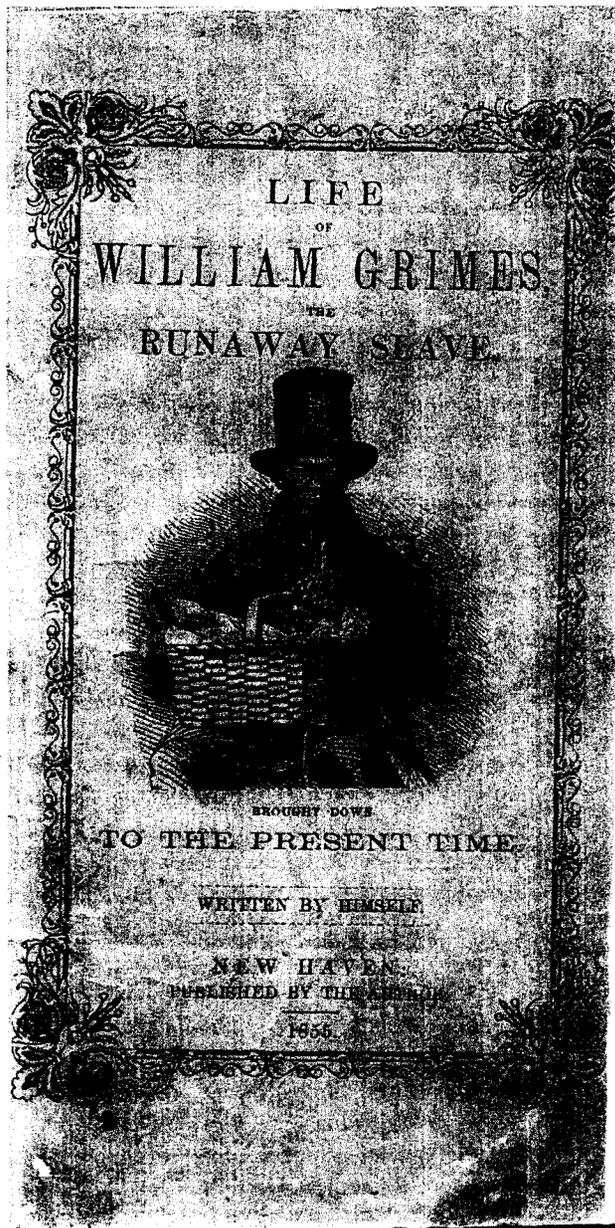


Figure 7.3. The 1855 edition of *Life of William Grimes*. Cover page image courtesy of the research library at the Connecticut Historical Society Museum, Hartford

Old Grimes—We have received a copy of the “Life of William Grimes,” a work which thousands of New Haveners have read, and which was printed by S. H. Harris, at T. J. Stafford’s establishment. It may not be uninteresting to our readers to know that the concluding portion of this narrative was written by Mr. Harris one day in the composing room. Old Grimes was sitting by, “basket in hand,” furnishing the writer with the heads.

While the basket doubtless refers to the basket he was known for carrying throughout New Haven and with which he is pictured on the cover of his 1855 edition (see Figure 7.3), the word “heads” here presumably refers to what we might call headlines or perhaps organizing ideas. Thus in this notice we are directed to imagine Grimes sitting in a print shop narrating or at least shaping, his conclusion, engaged in the very bosom of the print world. We learn that “thousands” of New Haveners would have read his book and that Samuel H. Harris, who was soon to become the president of the New Haven Typographical Union, had worked closely with Grimes, a fellow veteran or denizen of print shops, to produce his final edition. Truly, this notice placed Grimes’s life achievements firmly where they belonged, in the world of print production—indeed, in the composing room itself.

Bound and Printed

The distinct lack of conciliatory rhetoric marks Grimes’s text as different from many of the slave narratives that later became understood as representative of the nineteenth-century experience. Indeed, his recognition in the *Liberator* and elsewhere as a “quaint old darkey” makes less sense as an accurate character description than as an indication of the extent to which the condescending culture of the radical press—to say nothing of the mainstream one—could not acknowledge his rebellious legacy. Beholden to no organization for sponsoring his life story, Grimes had no incentive to mitigate any critiques of slavery or express his loyalty to the United States. When, by the 1830s and 1840s, the abolitionist movement realized the hortatory power of first-person narratives to raise money, they became published and distributed aggressively, albeit with introductory letters or authenticating documents from prominent white abolitionists, ministers, statesmen, and, occasionally, even printers, vouching for the truthfulness of the encased narrative.¹⁶

This was not, however, the case with Grimes's 1825 edition or even his later edition in 1855. The sole framing device Grimes employs is not a character reference but is simply an initial statement of title deposit and the claiming of authorship, witnessed by the clerk of the District of Connecticut in 1825 (see Figure 7.1).¹¹ Nonetheless, when Grimes publicly establishes his right to claim the book as his own, he effectively invokes a paratextual space (in this case in the form of a copyright or depository announcement) that here may be understood as symbolic resistance to dominant conceptions of authority, authenticity, and external valuation.

Grimes's gamble that the official witnessing enacted by the imprimatur of the copyright clerk would serve him in any logistical way beyond that of adhering to legal publication formalities proved incorrect.¹² Decades later, when he wanted to reissue a copy of his narrative but had lost any complete copies of his own, the District of Connecticut clerk's office evidently did not or could not provide him with his book. Grimes was thus forced to advertise in the papers for his own memoir, so that he might be able to update it and attempt a second edition.¹³ While he was eventually able to obtain a surviving copy of the 1825 edition in this manner and was thus able to update it for a second edition in 1855, the incident provided yet another bitter example of how even his own book proved elusive to him—a fact consistent with many other incidents he recounts about his dealings with paper.¹⁴ It is difficult to say precisely how this initial self-publication was arranged, but his hands-on involvement is certainly a possibility. He discusses paying the printer in New Haven, but he also had knowledge of the print world beyond cursory reading and writing, and it seems likely he was able to employ a printer with at least an informed sense of the trade at hand, if not a more direct involvement in the production or printing of the text. And even if he wasn't involved in the production of his own material text, his self-publication and assertion of authorship in the District of Connecticut clerk's office suggests a considerable familiarity with how the world of print needed to be publicly negotiated.

This knowledge may have come in part from his early experiences in Savannah, Georgia. As a teenager, young Grimes was hired out for a few months by his master to work for Philip D. Woolhopter.¹⁵ Whether or not Grimes was literate at that point or involved in some aspect of typesetting at this stage, we can still legitimately speculate that a strong young man capable of pulling down a press iron might well have lent a hand from time to time in the pressroom. When we consider that Woolhopter, like many early printers, ran a variety of jobs and doubtless had periods of heavy orders, it seems

certain that Grimes had many opportunities to become familiar with the language and mechanics of printing regardless of how involved he may or may not have been with the pressroom.¹⁶

There is only slight evidence about the literary matter Grimes could have come in contact with while working for Woolhopter. We do know that Woolhopter was the official printer for the seat of Georgia's government and the *Columbian Museum and Savannah Advertiser* newspaper (which regularly ran advertisements for slave auctions and for runaways) and also printed sermons and other sorts of religious pamphlets in Savannah.¹⁷ Moreover during the time Grimes was with Woolhopter, the *Columbian Museum* specifically advertised a stationery store also set up by Woolhopter that marketed pens, paper, and a variety of reference books and novels, so certainly Grimes was surrounded by the commerce and discourse of the print trade. In the years preceding Grimes's presence in the print shop, numerous titles of interest were published by Woolhopter, including the *Doctrine of Perpetual Bondage Reconciled with Infinite Justice of God*, written by John Beck and published in 1800, and the complete collection of Georgia state laws and supplementary federal documents, including the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, that were printed in one volume in 1802. While Grimes wasn't with the print shop during those precise years, he could not have been oblivious to the irony of slave labor being used to produce titles, texts, newspapers, and legal documents promoting slaves' own bondage. Thus the manner in which he framed his life story as one shaped by the literal and figurative presence of texts adds a dimension of self-conscious argument about his own presence as an objectified subject in uneasy relationship to a subjectified object.

To be clear: we cannot know if he read or participated specifically in printing and binding books promoting his own bondage. But we do know that he worked for a printer who made his living upon the labor of people who were forced collaborators in their own oppression. The comforting reconciliation that author John Beck offered in his doctrine justifying slavery might have provided very strange comfort indeed to the slaves who worked for that printer. The culpable language of "book" and "slave" in a book like Beck's *Doctrine*, which promoted the Good Book as irrefutable textual evidence justifying slavery, would be hard for any man in bondage to ignore. Similarly, the irony of slaves printing government documents that included the Declaration of Independence and collections of Georgia state laws regulating slavery would have been obvious to anyone forced to work on their production. When scholars seek to define what early black print culture might

have been, they would be wise to expand their definitions to consider the culture discourse of print in which even illiterate slaves would have participated.

Grimes's ability to secure copyright in 1825 is the result of inconsistent enforcement of federal regulations, to be sure. Legal cases in Connecticut and elsewhere abounded in the 1820s and 1830s that ruled variously about whether free black people could be "citizens."¹⁸ And perhaps we could view his copyright registration as a fortunate confluence of his light coloring with the happenstance of a good day with a sympathetic clerk. As Joanna Brooks argues elsewhere in this collection, books "depend on social movements to survive" (see Chapter 2).¹⁹ The fact that copies of his 1825 edition were lost even to Grimes underscores Brooks's point about a necessary support system. The historical circumstance that demands note here, though, is that while Grimes didn't produce his memoir during the decades of abolitionist publishing and thus it nearly disappeared from view, his ability to produce it at all, much less his confidence in copyrighting it, were nonetheless the product of a social world that was increasingly open to the democratization of practices hitherto restricted to elites. Grimes was familiar with the cultural and intellectual worlds of New Haven and Litchfield and was aware how individuals he had access to were well placed to subscribe to or distribute his work. The growth of print and book culture in the republican culture of Savannah, much less the printed dissemination of laws done by the very printer who had held him, must have allowed Grimes to imagine that he himself could someday harness print to his own ends.

At various points in the 1825 edition and even more so in his 1855 edition, Grimes identifies himself as a citizen in a reference that may seem obscure now but that would have been commonly recognized. Each time he referred to himself as "Old Grimes" or each time he cited the song "Old Grimes," he was claiming a legitimized presence in the nation's history, for the song was, as he informs us, to be sung to the popular tune of "John Gilpin Was a Citizen."²⁰ For a black man and ex-slave to assert citizenship was an audacious act even if done with some facetiousness via musical referencing. But for Grimes, who asserted citizenship rights by registering his copyright claim, it was in keeping with the multivalenced textual and literal poses he assumed; he might be an ex-slave and a trickster, for sure, but he was like John Gilpin, defiantly a citizen.

William Grimes's narrative is a synecdoche of the entire slave-narrative tradition that was to follow. As he saw it, his text made flesh and his flesh

made text. While we might see his memoir primarily as an early launching point for the narrative tradition of slave memoirs that came into full form by the mid-nineteenth century, that wouldn't give Grimes the full credit that he deserves. He set out the story of his life as an individual with all of his most human flaws and virtues on display and he did so via the medium of the book, an object Joseph Rezek describes as singularly placed to demonstrate "the disjunction between racial identity and cultural capital." (see Chapter 1). As if that weren't enough, Grimes registered the title of his story as "The Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave," but perhaps we should understand the titular emphasis as being placed not upon "slave" but instead upon his own name, claimed and copyrighted at great cost: "William Grimes." He might not be able to fully claim the American identity promised by the Constitution, but by constructing a narrative and asserting his a copyright, he effectively claimed a citizenship that would enable him to dissolve constitutional bindings.