

Painful history of Rappahannock's Montpelier

— as told by William Grimes

Montpelier as seen last week on F.T. Valley Road, south of Sperryville.

PHOTOS BY JOHN MCCASLIN

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William Grimes, the fugitive runaway slave who became famous for authoring the first-ever narrative of an enslaved African-American, wrote that he endured continuous physical and mental abuse while kept at Col. William Thornton's "Montpelier" plantation along today's F.T. Valley Road in Rappahannock County.

In "The Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave. Written by Himself" — published in New York in 1825, with a second edition in 1855 — Grimes said he was only 10 years old when Thornton traveled the short distance from Montpelier to King George County "to buy negroes, and he came to my master's house, who was his brother-in-law, and seeing me, thought me a smart boy.

"He asked my master what he would take for me; he replied, he thought I was worth £60. Col. Thornton immediately offered £65, and the bargain was made," Grimes recalled forty years later. "It grieved me to see my mother's tears at our separation. I was a heart-broken child, although too young to realize the afflictions of a tender mother, who was also a slave, the hopes of freedom for her already lost; but I was compelled to go and leave her."

Grimes was born in King George in 1784, the "light-skinned" son of Benjamin Grymes, a well-to-do Virginia plantation owner whose closest neighbor was a doctor named Steward.

"My father ... was one of the most wealthy planters in Virginia. He had four sons; two by his wife, one, myself, by a slave of Doct. Steward, and another by his own servant maid," said Grimes.

"I was ... a bastard and slave, and owned by Doct. Steward. My father was a wild sort of man, and very much feared by all his neighbors ...

"Doct. Steward kept me until I was ten years old," he continued. "I used to ride behind his carriage, to open gates, and hold his horse. He was very fond of me, and always treated me kindly. This made my old mistress, his wife, hate me; and when she caught me in the house, she would beat me until I could hardly stand. Young as I was then, I can yet remember her cruelty with emotions of indignation that almost drive me to curses. She is dead, thank God, and if I ever meet her again, I hope I shall know her."

Little did the youngster realize that whatever tolerable life existed then would soon become abysmally worse, starting with the day "Col. William Thornton came down from the mountains" and seized him from his mother's arms.

The first of his relentless beatings occurred the morning Thornton and his wife suspected their coffee, which Grimes only helped prepare, was laced with medicine stored in a nearby cabinet.

"My master then rose up in anger, and took me behind the ice-house, and whipped me severely,

'Col. William Thornton came down from the mountains ... to buy negroes ... and thought me a smart boy'

in the following manner: First, he caused me to be what they call horsed up, being raised upon the shoulders of another slave, and the slave to confine my hands around his breast; in this situation they gave me about forty or fifty lashes; they whipped me until I hardly had any feeling in me ...

"[B]ut for a young boy, who had tried and exerted himself to the utmost, to give good satisfaction to his master, mistress and all the family," penned Grimes, "it was too much for me to bear. It indeed sometimes happened that every morning I was taken and whipped severely ... when I was entirely innocent.

"There without friends, torn from the arms of my mother, who has since died in slavery, not being allowed to see me, her only son, during her illness," he reflected, "together with my suffering, is sufficient to convince my readers that any boy of my age would endeavor to find, and also to improve an opportunity to clear themselves from the house of bondage."

Abusing the youngster had reached a degree that "Doctor Hawes," Thornton's son-in-law and a member of the U.S. Congress — [a medical doctor and planter buried near Sperryville, Aylett Hawes, according to the census, kept 70 slaves on plantations he owned in today's Rappahannock County] — advised the colonel "not to whip me any more, as he said he thought I could not bear it much longer."

Pain and punishment

Montpelier in the late 1700s had anywhere from ten to fifteen "servants" assigned to the plantation house, with a larger number of slaves toiling in the fields. At his own request one day, Grimes was allowed to join those "hoeing corn," which while distancing him from the torturous

➔ whims of Col. and Mrs. Thornton “I suffered everything but death itself.”

Grimes worked beneath a black overseer named Voluntine, “who punished me repeatedly, to make me perform more labour [sp] than the rest of the [darker skin] boys.”

Another overseer, a white man named Coleman Thead, “was very severe, flogged me several times, for almost nothing. The overseers have an unlimited controul [sp] over the slaves of the plantation, and exercise their authority in the most tyrannical [sp] manner.”

A third overseer was to be hired by Thornton, a man named Burrows, who “was more severe than either of the former ... he set us to making fence, and would compel us to run with the rails on our backs, whipping us all the time most unmercifully.”

His anguish soon reached a point where Grimes confided in a fellow slave called “Planter George” that he had resolved to run away.

“Old George immediately repaired to the house of the overseer and informed him of my intention to run away in the morning,” Grimes recalled. “So they brought me out and horsed me upon the back of Planter George, and whipped me until I could hardly stand.”

Burrows wasn’t finished. He promised the boy additional whippings “three times a day, and [making] me carry three rails to one, all day.”

The very next morning Grimes “ran for the mountain,” where he “secreted myself in an old log ... about three days, when I became so pinched with hunger that I thought I might as well be whipped to death as to starve; so I included to give myself up, if I could get to my master before the overseer should get me. In that I succeeded.”

At the urging of Dr. Hawes, Thornton ordered the overseer not to whip the boy without his knowledge. The overseer not only ignored the colonel’s request, even worse for Grimes he “dare not tell my master, for if I did the overseer would whip me for that. If it were not for our hopes, our hearts would break; we poor slaves always cherish hopes of better times. We are human beings, sensible of injuries, and capable of gratitude towards our masters.”

So the “overseer whipped me a great many times before I escaped his hands.”

It so happened that Grimes was in the right place at the right time late one night when Thornton, described as a “very large man,” became “entangled” when dismounting his horse. As Grimes told it, he likely saved his master’s life.

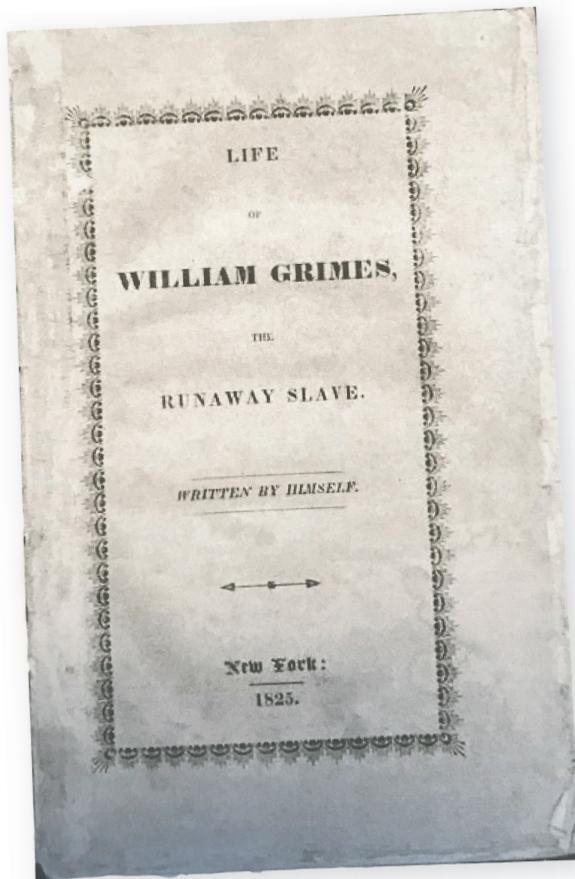
“Afterwards,” he wrote in his autobiography, “when he [Thornton] was angry with me, I could sometimes appease him somewhat, by hinting this to him.”

Thornton’s wife, on the other hand, picked up where her husband might have left off, including when Grimes referred to an enslaved biracial woman as “Miss” instead of “Betty.” The mistress “was extremely angry with me,” dispatching her husband early the next morning to fetch Grimes from the slave quarters.

“So they took me, and tied me on a bench, and as soon as they began to whip, I would slip out from the rope, until the master told the overseer to horse me upon another’s back,” he said. “My master gave me many severe floggings.”

One of the worst beatings came when Mrs. Thornton told Grimes to ground some corn for hominy, his efforts not meeting her complete satisfaction, “for she said the hominy was not beat quite enough, though [it] was very good.”

On another occasion, Thornton ordered Burrows to “take me down to the stable, tie my legs, put a rail between them, then stretch me up and whip me.” This time, however, as the



The cover of William Grimes’ 1825 book, which laid bare the torture that took place at Montpelier Plantation in today’s Rappahannock County.

“I suffered everything but death itself.”

whipping was about to commence, Thornton watched as the boy, who actually believed he was about to die, “looked up to heaven and prayed fervently to God to hear my prayer, and grant me relief in this hour of adversity ...

“I was surprised to hear my master express himself in terms that I could not reasonably expect,” Grimes recalled. “He said to me, ‘go, behave yourself well and you shall not be whipped.’ In the mean time [sp], Burrows, the overseer, who had stood by wanting and waiting for the privilege of whipping me, stood in suspense and astonishment.”

Grimes was enslaved at Montpelier through his early teenage years. With his many painful memories he did recall with fascination the times a “great hurricane and earthquake” both struck Montpelier, “and I saw the sky part, and it looked as red as crimson,” he described. “The earth shook, and everything that was on it; and I heard them talk of many thousands who were drowned.”



Freedom via Savannah

The Thorntons eventually sold Grimes to a traveling Georgia man for the sum of five-hundred dollars. It was while accompanying his new master to his home in Savannah that Grimes realized his misery wouldn’t end anytime soon.

It was so painful, so fast, that Grimes offered a black man in Petersburg “two silver dollars to take an ax and break my leg, in order that I could not go on to Savannah; but he refused, saying he could tell me a better way. I asked him how? He said runaway [sp].

“I told him I would not run away unless I was sure of gaining my freedom by doing it,” Grimes wrote. “We then travelled on the next day about thirty miles, and put up for the night. I then attempted to break my leg myself. Accordingly I took up an axe, and laying my leg on a log, I struck at it several times ... endeavouring to break it. At the same time I put up my fervent prayers to God to be my guide, saying ‘if it be thy will that I break my leg in order that I may not go on to Georgia, grant that my blows take effect.’”

Grimes’ attempts “to destroy myself” ultimately failed, and upon arrival in Georgia he was subjected to further abuse that would last for years. Until the long-awaited day in 1814 when he escaped his bonds, stowing away on a ship bound for New York, aided in the process by sympathetic “yankee sailors.” He eventually traveled further north into New England, settling finally in New Haven, Conn., where he married Clarissa Caesar in 1817.

And then in an instant, having found a small measure of success as a barber, Grimes lost his property and whatever else he owned. His Georgia master, it turned out, had discovered his whereabouts, and through the court system he forced Grimes to either buy his freedom or return to slavery.

Grimes chose to remain free, and to help pay for his freedom he found a publisher in New York to print his life’s story, which had an immediate impact on readers. As scholar Yuval Taylor observed, the book “inadvertently helped inaugurate a genre” because of its raw and engaging first-hand account of slavery.

“To be put in irons and dragged back to a state of slavery, and either leave my wife and children in the street, or take them into servitude, was a situation in which my soul now shudders at the thought of having been placed,” Grimes wrote. “It would have exhibited an awful spectacle of the conduct and inconsistency of men, to have done it; yet I was undoubtedly the lawful property of my master according to the laws of the country ...

“But no law, no consequences,” he continued, “can authorize them to take my life or liberty from me, while innocent of any crime.”

No longer a fugitive runaway, Grimes and his wife would have 18 children together, twelve surviving. He died in August 1865.

Editor’s note: Montpelier was built in the mid-18th century by Francis Thornton as a residence for his son, Col. William Thornton, 1742-1818. The family settled here in 1740, obtaining a grant for thousands of acres, including in the F.T. (Francis Thornton) Valley. Appreciation is extended to Rappahannock resident James C. Miller III for pointing out William Grimes’ link to Montpelier and providing a copy of his narrative for review.

As it was during the 18th century, Montpelier today is surrounded by fields, some still producing corn.