

*The “Underground Railroad” that helped many enslaved escape to freedom in the North involved substantial risk, not just to the enslaved if they were captured, but also to those who abetted them. One such person was Leonard Grimes, a free black hackney (carriage) driver based in Washington who was charged with helping a family escape from Loudoun County and subsequently sentenced to two years in the state penitentiary. But this did not deter him: after moving North, he continued to help the enslaved find the path to freedom. The trials of Leonard Grimes (1840) and Nelson Talbot Gant (1846, see below) were the basis for the National Park Service’s designation of the Loudoun Courthouse in 2003 as part of its Underground Railroad Network To Freedom Program.*

## **THE LEONARD GRIMES TRIAL (1840)\***

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\*[This account is a nearly verbatim excerpt from an article, “Leonard Grimes, 1814?-1874” by Deborah A. Lee, in *The Essence of a People II, African Americans Who Made Their World Anew in Loudoun County, Virginia, and Beyond*, Edited by Kendra Hamilton, published in Leesburg, Virginia, by the Black History Committee of the Friends of Thomas Balch Library, 2002, pp. 21-25.]

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 Courthouse in Leesburg. The boy had been born free in Leesburg. As a youth, Grimes worked for a butcher and apothecary in Washington, D.C. but maintained his ties to Loudoun. And in 1834, when he 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, professionals, and others in the national capital and well beyond the capital’s environs. He married, fathered two children, purchased property at the corner of H and 22<sup>nd</sup> 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 [now Route 7] 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 2<sup>nd</sup>, Grimes was arrested without bail and taken to Leesburg for trial. As the court convened on March 10<sup>th</sup>, 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 his 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—was a center of antislavery activity, and Grimes became a part of this network of providing assistance to fugitive slaves . . . .

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