

## ARCHIBALD GRIMKE

(1849-1930)

Archibald Grimke is from Charleston and is descended from both enslaving and enslaved families. A white man from a prominent, slaveowning family has several children by one of his female slaves. Although they are well-treated during his lifetime, after his death their lives change drastically. For many, no historical record exists beyond this point. These children manage to survive and prosper, despite many obstacles. One grows up to become a prominent civil rights leader, sometimes finding himself on one side, sometimes on the other, as a great philosophical debate rages within the African-American community over how to approach racial injustice. He never hesitates to speak out.

He is Archibald Grimke, born in 1849 near Charleston, South Carolina, the eldest of three sons of Nancy Weston and Henry Grimke. Henry seems to have developed a love relationship with Nancy after his wife died. Under South Carolina law he could not set them free. However, he told Nancy that he would see that they were taken care of. His will left Nancy and her children to his son, Montague.

After Henry died in 1852, his sister, Eliza, who was executor of his will, took the little family to Charleston to live. During the next eight years, they lived as though they were free, but with no assistance from Henry's family. At times near starvation, Nancy and her children survived on what she was able to earn washing and ironing. Despite their difficult life, she worked hard to instill moral values in her children and to ensure that they had an education. Nancy's sons attended school along with Charleston's free blacks.

Although the Grimke boys grew up with no illusions about their status as blacks in a white man's world, Montague's decision in 1860 to bring them into his house as servants must have been a shock. First Archie, and then his younger brother Frank, learned what it meant to be enslaved. Although they were permitted to return to their mother's house at night and to continue their education, they had conflicts with Montague. The two boys were unable to adapt to their enslavement. Each boy, in turn, was sent to the workhouse for a flogging. As a result of this experience, Archie decided to run away. He was forced to hide in a relative's house for more than two years, until Charleston fell to the Union in early 1865.

After the war, the Grimke boys had the opportunity to enroll in one of the new schools that were being established to educate African-Americans. The principal of the school quickly recognized their ability, and arranged for the two oldest boys, now 15 and 16, to go north. Initially, they were settled with families in New England, with the understanding that they would work in return for their room, board and education. Unfortunately, their situations did not meet their expectations, and arrangements were made for the boys to enroll in Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. Working their way through school, the Grimke boys spent four years at Lincoln.

During this period, the two also met their famous aunts, Sarah Grimke and Angelina Grimke Weld. When Angelina learned of their existence, she readily accepted them as members of her family. Both Angelina and Sarah provided financial help for the two boys and for their younger brother John, who came North for a short time. Later, after he married, Archie named his own daughter for Angelina Weld. He remained close to the two sisters and to Angelina's husband throughout their lives.

After leaving Lincoln in 1872, Archie enrolled in Harvard Law School. He was one of the school's first African-American students. Frank enrolled first at Howard University's law school and then in Princeton's Theological Seminary. Their younger brother, John, had returned to the South and seems to have virtually lost touch with Archie and Frank. The Grimke aunts helped financially as much as they could, and provided introductions to Archie among their Boston acquaintances. After graduation, Archie practised law in Boston, while Frank entered the ministry and moved to Washington, D.C. Archie married Sarah Stanley, a white woman studying in Boston, but the marriage was not successful. Sarah took their daughter, Angelina, and left. After Sarah began a career of her own, she sent Angelina, then seven, to live with Archie. Sarah died several years later. The talented Angelina later became a writer of note herself.

Although more opportunities than ever before existed for African-Americans in the years immediately after the Civil War, by the late 1870s Reconstruction had ended and the door to opportunity had closed. With the return of white supremacy, voting or getting decent jobs in the South became difficult for blacks. Archibald Grimke began to speak out on the issues of the day. He first became involved in politics in the early 1880s when he was appointed as editor of the Hub, a Republican newspaper aimed at an African-American audience. Grimke wrote on many important issues of the day, urging equal rights for blacks and

drawing heavily on the ideas of the Transcendalists in his thoughtful essays. A good speaker, he was well-received by white as well as black Republicans. He was chosen as an alternate to the party's state convention in 1884, and attended the national party convention as well. While he continued to practise law, much of his time and energy was devoted to the Hub, which was constantly short of money, and to politics. He was appointed to the board of a state hospital for the insane in 1884. Here he became friendly with Charles Codman, one of a number of Republican reformers who had left the party. Grimke also became involved in the women's rights movement, and supported it in his newspaper. He became president of the Massachusetts Women's Suffrage Association, a black organization.

Grimke had begun to feel that the Republicans were no longer concerned about rights for African-Americans, and in 1886 he left the party. His mentor Codman had become a Democrat by this time. Grimke supported a Democratic candidate who ultimately lost the gubernatorial race. Although he chose to remain an Independent, he worked for Democratic candidates in 1887 and 1888. He received the Democratic party's nomination for state representative in 1888, but lost by several hundred votes. With Codman's support, Grimke was nominated to be consul to the Dominican Republic in 1889, but the nomination by an outgoing president died in the Senate. Archie stayed involved in politics over the next few years, speaking out on issues that affected African-Americans and working for the Democratic party.

Over the next few years, Archie was less active politically, concentrating on writing and speaking on a wide range of topics in addition to race. After he had authored two biographies, making a name for himself as a writer seemed likely, but in 1894, President Cleveland named him consul to Santo Domingo at Codman's urging. Leaving his daughter with his brother Francis and his wife, Grimke spent most of the next four years in the Dominican Republic. Life in the Dominican Republic had both pluses and minuses. Grimke found that here the color of his skin was irrelevant. He was treated with respect, even by Americans who might have had a different attitude at home. The experience of living in a society that lacked the racism of the U.S. greatly impressed him. However, the political situation was uncertain, and a dictator controlled the country. Grimke was involved in a number of issues of international importance in his role as consul. Despite his competence, newly elected Republican President William McKinley replaced him. In 1898 Grimke returned to the United States.

Life at home involved accepting many changes. Grimke's mother, Nancy, died shortly after his return. He also found himself responsible for raising a teenage daughter with a mind of her own. Despite her ability, Angelina was not a conscientious student, and changed schools several times before entering Boston Normal School of Gymnastics, later Wellesley College. She graduated in 1902. The racial climate in the U.S. continued to worsen in the years after Grimke's return. How African-Americans should respond to racism was to divide the leadership of the black community in the years that followed. Grimke found himself immersed in that struggle through much of the first decade of the twentieth century. Always his own man, he was at times allied with, and alienated from, both of the great leaders of the early civil rights movement, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois.

Grimke began to write and speak again after his return to the U.S. Both black and white publications accepted his work. He traveled from his home in Boston to Washington, D.C., where Francis lived, on a regular basis. He became involved in the American Negro Academy, serving as its president from 1903 to 1919. Through Francis, he became involved in the Bethel Literary and Historical Association, founded by Rev. Daniel Payne. Both organizations provided a forum for him to speak out against racism.

It was during this period that Booker T. Washington became a well-known figure in American society. His views on race relations greatly differed from those of militants such as Grimke. Washington favored a conciliatory approach toward whites. He was the best-known black leader of his day, and the two men developed a reasonably cordial relationship despite their disagreements. One issue on which they differed was the franchise. To Grimke, the right to vote was essential. Washington saw it as less important. Grimke had little hope that most whites would be willing to allow blacks to assume an equal role in American society. By the early years of the twentieth century, it was evident that the two men held different views on the future of black-white relations. In 1901, Grimke and several others started a newspaper, called the Guardian, in order to publicize their views. The editor was Grimke's friend, William Trotter, who along with Grimke, organized the Boston Literary and Historical Association. This group became a focus of anti-Washington sentiment. By 1903, the split between the two groups of black leaders was widening. A riot at a meeting of an organization associated with Washington led to several arrests, including that of Trotter. Grimke testified for Trotter in court, and lauded him after his release from jail. For Washington, this placed Grimke clearly on the other side of the fence, along with W.E.B. Du Bois, who had now

achieved fame with publication of his book, *The Souls of Black Folks*. For a time, Grimke found himself allied with DuBois. He then associated with Washington after DuBois left an organization they both belonged to and founded a rival group. All during this period, Grimke continued to write and speak on racial issues, militant as ever, regardless of the views of other African-American leaders. He became involved in politics again, supporting the Republican candidate for president, Theodore Roosevelt. He did some original work, publishing an essay linking sex and racism.

In 1905 Grimke began to write for the *New York Age*, the most important black newspaper of the day. The *Age* was allied with Washington. Grimke's friends in the Du Bois camp were angry. However, Grimke continued to be his own man, speaking out against discrimination and urging greater militancy in the battle for equal rights. Grimke's relationship with Du Bois continued to deteriorate. Despite this, Grimke criticized both groups in a newspaper column. Neither group appeared interested in a reconciliation.

In time, Grimke found himself back in the Du Bois camp. His alienation from Washington can be traced in part to Washington's failure to speak out when President Roosevelt took action against a group of black soldiers who were held responsible for a riot in Texas in the summer of 1906. Grimke and many others felt they were blamed unjustly. Much of his writing during that period focused on that issue. Grimke finally left his position with *The Age* in 1907, feeling pressure from the Washington people to stop criticizing the president. He did not give up his interest in that issue, continuing to write and speak about it until some of the soldiers were exonerated several years later.

In 1907 Grimke became associated with the Niagara Movement, a group that Du Bois had founded three years earlier. Grimke had not been invited to join previously due to conflicts with his former friend, Trotter, with whom he traded a series of attacks. Grimke was now clearly associated with the radicals in the movement, although he and Du Bois did not always see eye to eye. Grimke continued to speak and write and was active in politics, working against Taft's election in 1908 and supporting Roosevelt's Progressives in 1912.

While Grimke did not play a major role in the founding of the NAACP, he became an important leader of the organization. At first, he joined its Boston chapter and worked with its leaders. After Wilson's election as president, southern Democrats began to push for legislation codifying segregation in a number of areas. In 1913, when the NAACP lobbied

Congress in an effort to stop legislation outlawing interracial marriages, Grimke wrote the letters for the Boston branch. Whatever role he may have played, the legislation did not pass.

At the urging of the NAACP's national leaders, Grimke became president of the Washington, D.C. branch in 1913. He found himself in the middle of the battle to protect the fledgling black middle class there from employment discrimination. Democrats in Congress were attempting to fire the African-American employees so that they could be replaced by whites. Grimke organized and spoke at a well-attended meeting called to protest this proposal. He dealt with local matters, such as the exclusion of black groups from meetings where decisions were made concerning recreation facilities. He testified before Congress against segregation of black government employees in 1914, unhesitatingly confronting angry white southerners on the committee. He was constantly fighting fires. Once again, a bill was introduced into Congress to make intermarriage illegal. A federal agency decided to segregate its eating establishments. Congress failed to provide enough money for black schools in the District. Grimke had a number of successes.

Meanwhile, he had become involved in the internal conflicts within the NAACP, and was appointed an officer of the organization. Soon he was a national vice-president. A number of years earlier, he had spoken in pessimistic tones of the need for whites to recognize that blacks and whites each wanted the same things for themselves. A 1914 speech before the NAACP on this same theme was somewhat more positive in tone, even as he spoke out against racism. By 1915 Grimke and other black leaders were lobbying Congress to prevent passage of a bill that would prevent any black immigration to the U.S. It was defeated. While the Washington, D.C. chapter had grown and thrived, Grimke again became involved in internal political conflicts within the national organization, with Du Bois among those on the other side. Despite this, he seems to have had a fairly happy personal life during this period, including a close relationship with his daughter. He had received some public acclaim, and continued to have regular public speaking engagements. But the focus of his life was the NAACP and he remained active even as he aged, fighting for racial equality.

In 1917, the U.S. entered World War I. NAACP leaders felt obligated to support the war effort despite the irony that the people who were now their enemies, would have, in Grimke's words, a freedom to move about the country denied to black soldiers. Grimke became involved in the battles over segregation in the armed forces, finally breaking with the

official NAACP position. At one point, he suggested that black men let the whites fight the war, and instead go to work in the war industries. When black soldiers were convicted and condemned to death for their role in a racial incident, he wrote to the president. Although some of the men were given life sentences, he was so distressed that he wrote a poem about the affair. During and after the war, Grimke continued to lobby against discrimination in the armed forces and other areas of public life. He worked for an anti-lynching bill in Congress and held a protest meeting.

In 1919 Grimke was the recipient of the Spingarn Medal, awarded to him at the age of seventy in recognition of his life's work. Despite this, he continued to be involved in the internal problems within the black movement, including conflict with Du Bois. Grimke left his leadership position as president of the American Negro Academy as the result of an internal struggle. This was the beginning of the end of his role as a public figure. He continued to speak out and lobby on racial issues, but he was getting older, and some bitterness remained from the factional battles of many years. In 1923, when his term on the NAACP national board was completed, he was not renominated. He was asked to retain an honorary post only, as a vice-president. He remained with the District of Columbia chapter for another year, a transition period. He did little writing during the next few years. In 1928 he fell ill. Cared for by his daughter Angelina and his brother Francis, he lived two more years. **Grimke had always maintained that racism would exist as long as black and white Americans saw themselves as different.** The battle for racial justice in hearts and minds would continue well beyond his death.

Louis George Gregory was president of the Bethel Literary and Historical Association from 1909-1913 and would have had considerable interaction with Grimke during this period.