

Hughes, Louis

(1832–19 Jan. 1913),

John Ernest

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author, businessman, and nurse, was born into slavery near Charlottesville, Virginia, the son of a white man and a black woman, possibly John and Susan Hughes. When he was about six years old, Hughes was sold with his mother and two brothers to Dr. Louis, a physician in Scottsville, Virginia. When Dr. Louis died, young Hughes was sold with his mother and brother to Washington Fitzpatrick, also of Scottsville, who soon sent him, then about eleven years old, to Richmond on the pretense of hiring him out to work on a canal boat. Parting with his mother at such a young age was difficult; even more difficult was his realization that he would never see his mother again. For Hughes this experience became the central symbol of the fundamental inhumanity of the system of slavery, a symbol to which he returns at key points in the autobiography that is the sole source for most of the information on his life, *Thirty Years a Slave* (1897).



Louis Hughes, former slave, businessman, and nurse.

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George Reid owned Hughes for a brief time after his arrival in Richmond; however, Reid sold Hughes because of the latter's frequent illnesses. Edmund McGehee, under whose ownership Hughes remained for the next two decades, purchased the young boy in November 1844. McGehee relocated Hughes to Pontotoc County, Mississippi, where he presented Hughes to his wife as a Christmas gift. In August 1850 McGehee sent Hughes to Memphis, Tennessee, to assist in the construction of a new house, in which Hughes would soon be established as butler and body-servant. Among Hughes's duties were the tasks of "working with medicine, giving it and caring for the sick" (Hughes, 2002, 57), an occupation to which Hughes would return years later following his escape from enslavement. While serving at the new house in Memphis Hughes met his future wife, Matilda. Matilda was born on 17 June 1830 in Fayette County, Kentucky, and was purchased by McGehee in 1855. Hughes and Matilda were married three years later, on 30 November 1858. The ceremony was held in the McGehee house parlor and presided over by the McGehee's parish minister, a rare privilege among the enslaved and proof of the couple's high status in the household. A year later Matilda gave birth to twins.

But while Hughes expressed his appreciation for McGehee's acknowledgment of the sanctity of marriage, he emphasized the limitations of McGehee's humanitarianism and the harshness of everyday life for himself and his wife. Hughes had tried to escape twice before his marriage and was severely punished after the second unsuccessful attempt. After their children were born, Matilda made her own desperate attempt to change her situation because she felt she was being forced to neglect them. She left with the twins and returned to Forrest's slave market, presenting herself to be sold again. Matilda was returned to the McGehees, who, according to Hughes, "beat her by turns" (Hughes, 2002, 78). The twins died six months later, weak from insufficient care. "Things continued in this way," Hughes reports, "until about June, 1862," when the McGehee family fled from advancing Union forces and Hughes was sent to the family plantation in Bolivar, Mississippi. After this forced separation from his wife, Hughes was reunited with her in 1863 when he was sent to a family farm in Panola County, Mississippi.

The couple did not succeed in escaping from enslavement until close to the end of the Civil War. Before that time, after the outbreak of the Civil War, Hughes had made two more unsuccessful escape attempts. The first of these efforts, in the winter of 1862–1863, ended when Hughes was captured by Confederate soldiers. A few months later, Hughes and Matilda tried to escape with another couple, but all were recaptured. Shortly after that, in the spring of 1863, the couple was sent with most of McGehee's other slaves to Alabama to be leased out to the state-run saltworks on the Tombigbee River, where Hughes and his wife remained for two years, and where Matilda gave birth to their daughter Lydia. Finally, on 26 June 1865, Hughes successfully escaped to Union-occupied Memphis. With the help of two Union soldiers, Hughes returned to Mississippi for Matilda and Lydia. They finally arrived in Memphis and their long-sought freedom on the Fourth of July 1865, which was after General Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox Courthouse, but before they would otherwise have been freed.

After about six weeks in Memphis, the family moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, in August 1865, where Matilda hoped to find relatives. She was reunited with her mother and one of her sisters, and the family lived for a few months in Hamilton, Ohio. But they were determined to go to Canada, "as we regarded that as the safest place for refugees from slavery" (Hughes, 2002, 141), and so they traveled north through Detroit and entered Windsor, Ontario, Canada, on Christmas Day 1865. Hughes and Matilda secured positions at a hotel

and remained there until the following spring, when Hughes returned to Detroit in hope of earning higher wages. Following two years of working first as a waiter in Detroit and then on a steamboat, Hughes secured a position in a Chicago hotel, where he worked until 1868. During this time Hughes also attended night school. In Chicago he met John Plankinton, who offered Hughes a position in his new hotel in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The Plankinton House was opened in September 1868, and Hughes's family, now enlarged by the recent birth of twins, was soon settled in what would be their permanent home. Sometime later Hughes rediscovered his brother, from whom he had been separated since childhood, living in Cleveland, Ohio. He looked forward to a life “in which the joys of social intercourse had marvelously expanded” (Hughes, 2002, 147).

In Milwaukee, Hughes established himself as an enterprising businessman and a leader of the city's small African American community. In 1869 he was one of the founders of St. Mark's African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, a congregation in which the Hughes family remained prominent and active members. After a year's work at the Plankinton House, Hughes and his wife began to supplement their income with an independent laundry service. By 1874 their laundry work had increased so significantly that Hughes left the hotel to develop the growing family business. In the 1880s, though, Hughes returned to his earlier interest in caring for the sick and established himself as a nurse, his last and fondest professional enterprise. In his work as a nurse, Hughes traveled the country, going first to New Orleans and eventually as far as California and Florida.

While the events of his life make for a rich story of individual determination, religious faith, and familial devotion, Hughes's life, like so many others of the time, would have remained unknown had he not written the autobiography for which he is remembered. The book was copyrighted in 1896 and published by the South Side Printing Company in Milwaukee. Scholars disagree about whether Hughes wrote it himself or with the help of another person, but the book clearly represents Hughes's perspective on his many experiences. In addition to relating the dramatic story of his life in and escape from slavery, Hughes presents a panoramic view of the South—including descriptions of various locales, agricultural methods and commerce, and southern society—as well as a revealing glimpse into post-emancipation life for African Americans in both the South and the North. By arranging for the independent publication of his narrative, Hughes freed himself “to write about his experience in the South and the North in his own way,” and the story that he tells “identifies Hughes in several ways as more representative of the African American rank-and-file, both before and after slavery, than [Frederick] Douglass or most of the other celebrated fugitive slaves whose antebellum narratives have dominated our understanding of what slavery was like” (Andrews, 9).

Matilda died on 7 October 1907, and Hughes followed some years later on 19 January 1913. Before his death, his church published a history that included prominent attention to the Hughes family, and at his death, Hughes's status in the larger community was acknowledged in the form of obituaries in various Milwaukee newspapers.

Further Reading

Hughes, Louis. *Thirty Years a Slave: From Bondage to Freedom; The Institution of Slavery as Seen on the Plantation and in the Home of the Planter; Autobiography of Louis Hughes* (1897, repr. 2002).

Andrews, William L. "Foreword," *Thirty Years a Slave: From Bondage to Freedom; The Institution of Slavery as Seen on the Plantation and in the Home of the Planter; Autobiography of Louis Hughes* (2002).

Ash, Stephen V. *A Year in the South: Four Lives in 1865* (2002)

Stevens, Michael E. "After Slavery: The Milwaukee Years of Louis Hughes," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 86 (Autumn, 2002): 40–51.

See also

Douglass, Frederick <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-34351>>