
Gronniosaw, James Albert Ukawsaw

(c. 1710–c. 1773),

Vincent Carretta

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.34427>

Published in print: 15 March 2013

Published online: 31 May 2013

A version of this article originally appeared in *African American National Biography*.

slave narrative author, was born Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, probably between 1710 and 1714 in Bournou (Bornu), a kingdom in what is now northeastern Nigeria. He was the youngest child of the oldest daughter of the king of Bournou. All that is known about James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw is found in *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself* (1772), one of the earliest “as-told-to” slave narratives recorded by a white amanuensis. According to this account, Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, spiritually dissatisfied with the animist faith in which he was raised, alienated himself from his friends and relatives by his constant questions challenging their faith in physical objects, as well as by his growing belief in the existence of an uncreated creator. Consequently he became increasingly “dejected and melancholy.”

When an African merchant from the Gold Coast invited the adolescent Gronniosaw to return with him to his home, more than a thousand miles away, Gronniosaw seized the opportunity. There, the merchant promised, Gronniosaw could play with boys his own age, and “see houses walk upon the water with wings to them, and the white folks.” On arrival at the Gold Coast, however, the local king thought him a spy and decided to behead him. Affected by Gronniosaw's obvious courage in the face of death, the king relented, choosing to sell him into slavery rather than kill him. Rejected by a French slave trader because he was so small, Gronniosaw successfully implored a Dutch captain to buy him. On the voyage to Barbados, in a scene imitated in later slave narratives, Gronniosaw watched his new master reading, and thinking the book talked to the Dutchman, he held his ear close to it, hoping it would speak to him as well. He blamed his complexion for the book's silence.

A man named Vanhorn purchased him in Barbados and took him to New York City, where he was soon sold as a domestic slave to Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen, a wealthy Dutch Reform clergyman in New Jersey and friend of the English evangelist George Whitefield. Introduced to Christianity by Frelinghuysen and to reading by his schoolmaster, Peter Van Arsdalen, Gronniosaw experienced despair when he became convinced that his own sins were too great to deserve salvation. Around 1747, after reading the spiritual writings of John Bunyan and Richard Baxter, an attempt at suicide, and a three-day illness, Gronniosaw experienced his own spiritual rebirth when he recalled the words from the Bible, “Behold the Lamb of God.” Gronniosaw's newfound happiness was quickly ended by the death of his master, who freed him in his will, and by recurrent spiritual doubts. As a freeman Gronniosaw worked for various members of the Frelinghuysen family, all of whom, however, died within four years of the minister's death.

Having lost his friends in America, Gronniosaw decided to go to England and above all to Kidderminster, the birthplace of Baxter. Gronniosaw's reading and his experience in meeting Whitefield in New Jersey had convinced him that the English “people must be all *Righteous*.” During the Seven

Years' War, known in North America as the French and Indian War, debts forced Gronniosaw to work his way across the Atlantic, first as a cook on a privateer, and later as an enlistee in the Twenty-eighth Regiment of Foot. His lack of interest in money caused him to be cheated repeatedly. Landing at Portsmouth, England, near the end of 1762 brought Gronniosaw further disappointment when he discovered the English to be no more pious than Americans. Disillusioned, Gronniosaw went to London, where Whitefield found him housing. There he fell in love at first sight with an English weaver named Betty, who introduced him to the preaching of the eminent Baptist minister Dr. Andrew Gifford.

After about three weeks in London, Gronniosaw agreed to go to Holland at the request of some friends of his late master Frelinghuysen, to be examined about his experiences and his faith by several Calvinist ministers. While there, he was hired as a butler in the household of a very rich Amsterdam merchant, who treated him more as friend than a servant, and whose wife wanted Gronniosaw to marry her maid, an attractive young woman who had saved a good deal of money. But Gronniosaw chose to return to London after a year to be baptized by Gifford and to wed Betty, despite the objections of his English friends to his marrying such a poor widow. Although Betty normally earned a good living as a weaver, Gronniosaw and his wife and growing family soon fell on hard times because of the postwar economic depression. Through a series of Quaker contacts, Gronniosaw was able to find employment outside of London, first in Colchester, then Norwich, and later Kidderminster.

Unfortunately, much of his work was seasonal, leading to long periods of deprivation and near-starvation during the winters, with the brief exception of the time spent in Norwich, where Betty was also able to find employment before their children contracted smallpox. They experienced the generosity of benefactors like Henry Gurney, a Quaker worsted manufacturer and banker in Norwich. But they also suffered the cruelty of an unnamed Baptist minister, Quakers, and an Anglican minister, all of whom refused to give a proper burial to one of Gronniosaw's daughters, who had died of fever in Norwich. His *Narrative* closes with the "very poor Pilgrims" living in abject poverty in Kidderminster, their faith in God still intact.

Dedicated to Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, Gronniosaw's *Narrative* was first advertised in December 1772 in *Boddley's Bath Journal*. According to its preface, written by the countess's cousin, Walter Shirley, the *Narrative* "was taken from his own Mouth, and committed to Paper by the elegant Pen of a young LADY of the Town of LEOMINSTER." In 1809 the "young LADY" was identified, probably incorrectly, as Hannah More. By 1800 the *Narrative* had appeared in at least ten editions in England and America, as well as in a Welsh translation (1779) and serial publication in the *American Moral and Sentimental Magazine* in New York (1797).

The publication of Gronniosaw's *Narrative* in 1772 marked the beginning of the modern anglophone tradition of autobiographies written or dictated by slaves of African descent. As a foundational text, the *Narrative* contains many tropes, themes, character types, events, historical figures, and situations that reappear in various ways in subsequent writings by and about African British and African American figures. Perhaps most significantly, Gronniosaw's *Narrative* introduced in anglophone-African writing the trope of the "talking book," by which an illiterate African is introduced to the concept of reading. Although Paul Edwards first identified the trope in the narratives of Gronniosaw, John Marrant, Quobna Ottobah Cugoana, Olaudah Equiano, and John Jea, the significance of the relationship between literacy and freedom was subsequently developed at length by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in *The Signifying Monkey* (1988).

Further Reading

Gronniosaw, James Albert Ukawsaw. A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself (1772).

Costanzo, Angelo. Surprising Narrative: Olaudah Equiano and the Beginnings of Black Autobiography (1987)

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "The Trope of the Talking Book," in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988).

See also

Equiano, Olaudah <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-34374>>

Gates, Henry Louis "Skip," Jr. <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-36461>>

Jea, John <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-35768>>

Marrant, John <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-34562>>