



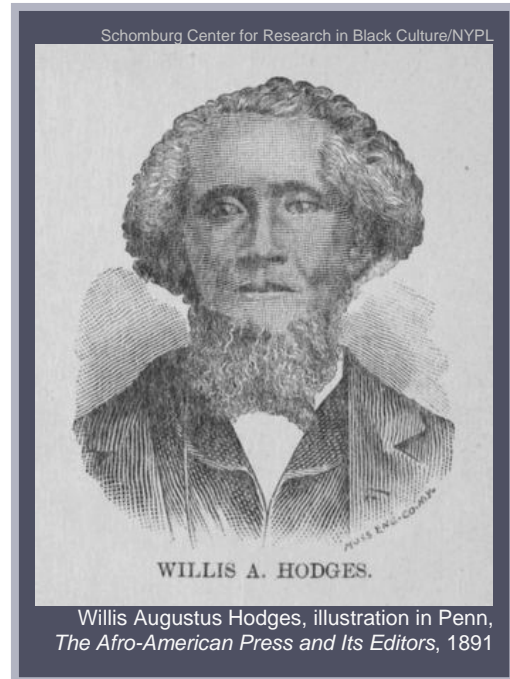
The Autobiography of Willis Augustus Hodges a Free Man of Color

written 1848-49, published 1896____excerpts

Born into a free African American family in Virginia in 1815, Willis Augustus Hodges channeled his anguish at the brutal treatment of free and enslaved blacks into political activism, organizing African Americans in the North and, in brief risky attempts, in his home state of Virginia. In his mid thirties, he wrote his autobiography, stressing his intent to make known “the wrongs and sufferings [of] the free people of color in the southern states.”

In these selections on his childhood, Hodges recounts how white men used lies, trickery, and terror to intimidate and control free blacks, using tactics like those of slave patrollers before 1865 and the Ku Klux Klan after 1865.

In 1896, half a century after it was written, Hodges’s autobiography was published by his son in the newspaper *The Indianapolis Freeman*.



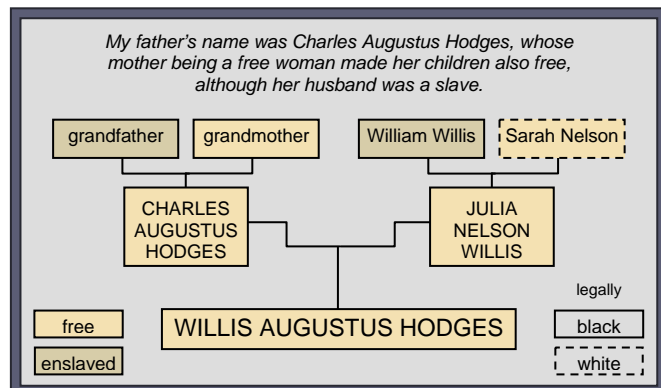
Preface

... There has been in my humble opinion, however, one all important subject which appears to have been neglected by the majority of our writers’ and lecturers’ toil:¹ the wrongs and sufferings the free people of color in the southern states have undergone, and are still undergoing. It shall not, however, be my intention to separate them from their bond² brethren, but rather present them both together to my readers as one man of sorrow worthy of your aid and sympathy. I shall not attempt to deny that the slaves suffer in many particulars more than the free people, for example being compelled to labor in sickness as well as health, without wages or sufficient food or raiment to make them comfortable. . . If any of them should run away they were hunted with blood hounds and are shot down without mercy by poor whites who often receive large rewards from their masters for killing them, and many other things, all of which have been treated upon by other writers. I have, however, seen and heard more than I have seen written or more than I now intend to write at this time. . . .

Feb. 12 (my birthday) 1849 Willis A. Hodges
Franklin Co. N.Y.

Part One: Growing Up in Tidewater Virginia

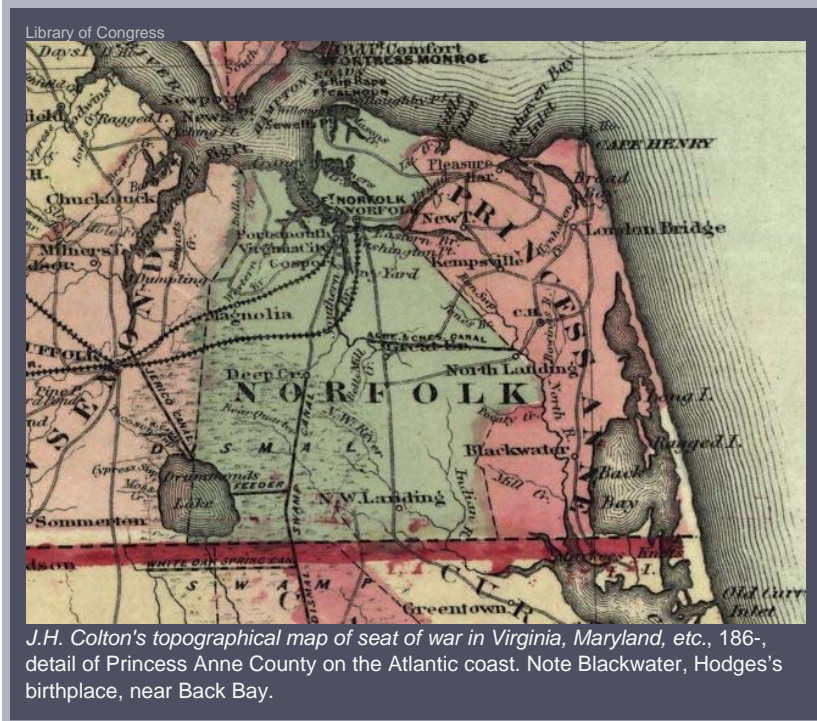
My name is Willis Augustus Hodges. I was born in Blackwater, Princess Anne county, State of Virginia, on Feb. 12, 1815. My parents were free, as well as my grandmothers. My grandfathers were slaves. My father’s name was Charles Augustus Hodges, whose mother being a free woman made her children also free, although her husband was a slave. When my father arrived at the age of twelve, his mother used to send him to work two days in the week for her husband that he (my grandfather) might be home with her one day. My



National Humanities Center, 2008: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/. In Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., ed., *Free Man of Color: The Autobiography of Willis August Hodges* (University of Tennessee Press, 1982). pp. 4-10, 15-20. Permission pending. Bracketed comments in Gatewood edition. Images, genealogical chart, and some paragraphing added by NHC. Complete image credits at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/imagecredits.htm.

¹ i.e., anti-slavery writers and lecturers [NHC note]

² bond: enslaved. [NHC note]



father giving two days' work for one day's rest for his father, although he could almost do a man's task, being an uncommon, strong and large boy for his age. As soon as he was able to do a man's work, he worked the greater part of his time until he was of age, in his father's place and let the old man stay at home with grandmother, and work around the house and garden, etc. One of the first things that my father did after he was of age was to purchase his father's freedom.

It was a large sum that my father paid for my grandfather's freedom (the exact amount I am unable to state correctly, but have heard him say that it took him three years to pay it). It is safe to say, however, that he gave the

slave-holder twelve years of his youthful life and labor, beginning when he was 12 years of age and ending when he was 24. At the age of 26 he married a young woman by the name of Julia Nelson,³ the daughter of a white woman whose husband was a black man — her father's slave, and died a slave, being murdered in his old age by a white man and a Methodist minister at that. A short time after my father's marriage he contracted for a farm in Norfolk county that was known as "Castile's farm."⁴ On this tract of land my father settled and cleared off quite a large field and made many valuable improvements. The land proved to be exceedingly good when tilled, so much so that when father had paid for it all but a small sum (having bought it on installment payments from a white man named Horatio Woodard) the former owner (Woodard) wanted to get it back into his possession. My father refused to leave at his request, and Woodard used intrigue to make him move off.

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It will be well for me to state that there is a law in all the slave states forbidding all free persons of color from harboring or dealing with slaves, under the penalty of heavy fines or removal out of the county in which it takes place, if the owner of the slave demands it. This unjust law Woodard was determined to bring to bear upon my father, which he did, with the aid of one of his slaves, a man called Anthony, who acted in concurrence with old Woodard, partly through ignorance and partly through fear. The master took a peck of peas and gave them to Anthony, and told him if he could manage to leave them in father's house, he (Woodard) would give him a new hat; and that he himself would, with another white man, follow close behind with a search warrant, and find them in father's possession.

The bargain being made and the plans all arranged as to how the parties would act, Anthony came to

³ Julia Nelson (Willis), Willis A. Hodges' mother, was the daughter of Sarah Nelson, a white woman, and William Willis, a slave. Sarah Nelson was the daughter of Charles and Julia Nelson, both born in England, who had emigrated first to the West Indies, then moved to Florida and South Carolina before settling in Princess Anne County, Va. William Willis is described merely as a "Negro slave on an adjoining plantation." See Moore, "Nelson-Hodges Papers," 1; Register of Free Negroes, Princess Anne County, #277. [Gatewood note, p. 6]

⁴ Instead of Castile's Farm, it should probably read Casteen's farm, which may have belonged at one time to Jeremiah Casteen who late in the 18th century owned land in Norfolk County in the "district from Edmund's Hill to Princess Anne and Carolina lines." See *First Census of the United States, 1790: Virginia*, 96. [Gatewood note, p. 6]

father's with the peas and offered to sell them to him for a trifle. Father told him he did not wish to buy any. Anthony then said he had about a mile further to go, and told father that if he would let the peas stay there until he came back, he (Anthony) would be much obliged. My father consented. Anthony put the peas down in the corner and was soon out of sight. In a few minutes in popped his master with a search warrant, and said he had lost some peas and that Anthony was in the habit of stealing them and other grain, and he believed my father was harboring him in his acts. He looked around and saw his peas near the door where Anthony had placed them. He at once claimed his property, and said that my father had unlawful dealings with his slaves. The lost peas were a positive proof, he said, and told my father if he did not leave the county at once, he (Woodard) would have the law put in force and make him do so. Father, knowing that law and prejudice were against him, stood no trial with Woodard, but moved out of the county into Princess Anne county without delay, where he lived the rest of his life, but not without much suffering and many wrongs from the hands of the slave-holders, as will be seen in another chapter. The trick played by this fellow Woodard is to-day often practiced upon the free people of color, not only to get them to move from place to place, but also to keep up disunion between them and their bond brethren, which has to a great extent been successful.

I am happy to say, however, that is not now so much the case⁵ as in past years, for oppression on both sides has made the free man of color and the slave man united: They begin to believe in race unity; they begin to see that the interest of one is the interest of both.

Father, now being 30 years of age, with a large family, he could not help looking back on his hard lot and bad luck; he could not help looking back and seeing all his useful labors wrongfully taken from him by these slave-holders. He was, however, at the age when men can, if they ever can, overcome their troubles, so he resolved to try again. He, therefore, contracted for a farm in Princess Anne county, and moved there on it. He not only succeeded in paying for it, but also bought the two adjoining farms; here I was born being the sixth heir and second son. My elder brother was named William J.,⁶ and there were six children younger than myself, three boys and three girls. My father, by hard work, aided by the older members of the family, soon got ahead again, and was what was called in those parts, "a good liver." He was well liked by his neighbors, both white and black (he being a very quiet man). He had some knowledge of herbs and soon became a sort of "herb doctor"; for this reason our folks lived in peace for some time, when the other free people of color were at one time or another molested.

But, alas! that peace was soon to be broken, and at a time it would be most keenly felt by us all. Until this time the free people of color in this part of Virginia were allowed to receive education. Many did receive enough to be able to read and write. Father sent his children to school to a poor white woman whose name was Wilson.⁷ This woman taught us to read, etc. I was between 7 and 8 when I began to go to school, and continued for several months, which is all the schooling I have ever had. Father, finding it hard to give his children an education in a proper manner, by sending them to Mrs. Wilson's house, resolved to try to educate my brother William J., who was 12 years older than myself, that he (William) might teach the rest of the children. My father, therefore, sent him to the city of Norfolk to school, where he got a tolerable good education. But father was disappointed in his expectations of his (William's) learning being of any benefit to the family, for instead of it proving beneficial to us, it proved a snare, and our family was divided, our peace destroyed, our future hopes all blasted, and desolation, misery and shame were brought to our peaceful and happy home.

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⁵ i.e., in 1849, when Hodges completed his autobiography. [NHC note]

⁶ William J. Hodges, Jr., better known as Johnson Hodges, born about 1803, escaped to Canada in 1829 but shortly afterward returned to the United States and settled in Williamsburgh, Kings County, New York, where he was active in the campaign for black suffrage and in antislavery and educational reform movements. By 1860 Hodges was the pastor of a church in New York on the corner of Broadway and Eleventh Street, See *Colored American* (New York), Aug. 15, 1840, Aug. 14, 28, 1841; *Weekly Anglo-African* I (Jan. 7, 1860), 2. [Gatewood note, p. 8]

⁷ In 1831 a Virginia statute prohibited free Negroes from assembling any place for the purpose of being taught to read and write. "Any white person assembling to instruct free Negroes to read and write shall be fined not over \$50.00 . . ." Guild, *Black Laws of Virginia*, 175-76. [Gatewood note, p. 8]

Brother William J. was a promising young man and was the pride of the family, and “a mother’s son.” He was quick, apt, full of wit and life. At the age of 23 [he] was a member of the Baptist church and an “exhorter” (it being then as now, unlawful for a black man to preach or take a text from the bible. Think of this fact, ye christians of the North and England?) By being an exhorter, brother thereby got acquainted with a great many people of color, both bond and free. He was bold, and would always speak his mind to the slave-holders and poor whites, no matter what would come from so doing. This being a fact, he was accused of writing free papers for slaves. This was very unlawful, and of course against the slave-holders’ views. Let me say right here, that I will not say at this time whether brother was guilty of the “crime” or not, but I will say that it [is] a just act to write free papers for the slaves, but God is God and a just God at that, I pray each and every day that He will in His own mysterious way, some day write a free paper for all my poor bond brethren and sisters and their children, yes and their children’s children all over the known world where men are under the yoke of bondage, as He did of old.

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To return to brother William. He was arrested and brought before a magistrate to answer the charge of the “great crime.” They did not, however, attempt to prove the charge against him, but demanded to know if he could write. Brother informed them that he could do so. The magistrate gave him pen, ink and paper, and demanded to see a sample of his writing. Without the least fear as to what the results might be, William wrote about half a page. When they saw his handwriting, they deemed this sufficient to put him into prison, say[ing] that anyway he was a “dangerous free ‘nigger’ to be in the county,” and if he had not written passes and free papers, he could and perhaps would do so. He was, therefore, sent to jail. Oh! never shall I forget the feeling and the scene this unhappy news created in our family. Our sky was darkened for the first time and gloom settled upon every brow. My poor mother was like Rachel of old, “weeping for her first born, and would not be comforted,” and father walked up and down the floor and yard with his head uncovered, breaking the silence with a deep groan or exclaiming, “my son, Oh, my son!” We children seemed to forget that we had any claim on our parents’ affections, and felt at a loss how to act, for fear of adding to their grief. . . .

William Hodges, Willis’s brother, was tried and convicted of falsifying a document. He and five other prisoners escaped through a hole they had dug through the jail wall and fled into the woods.

It is impossible for me to attempt to describe the great commotion the escape created, or the convulsion and disaster which followed. The results of which are felt to this very day,⁸ and will be spoken of long after I have gone the way of all the flesh. The jail keepers, slave holders and others gave vent to their rage in all manner of ways. Large rewards were offered for them dead or alive.⁹ Large bands of armed men with boys drove through the woods for weeks, like wolves hunting their prey. Their rage did not stop there, being naturally unmerciful they visited the houses of every free colored family in the neighborhood and all within their reach, spreading crime, famine, and disaster wherever they went.

I remember well the first time they came, father was away from home and I was the only male person about the place. I was out in the field plowing when I saw about one hundred white men on horseback and all armed, coming at full speed towards the house. I left my horse and plow in the field and ran back to the house, arriving there about the same time they did. A portion of them formed a guard about every outhouse and the dwelling, while another portion rushed in the house. Some of the others rushed in every barn, crib, and outhouse on the land to search, plunder, etc.

The largest part, however, rushed for the dwelling house where my mother was. One of these fellows, by the name of Benjamin Woodard, immediately upon his entrance in the house began to act in a very

⁸ i.e., twenty years later in 1849, when Hodges is writing his autobiography. [NHC note]

⁹ The Portsmouth jailor, William Bernard, offered a reward of \$160 for information leading to the capture of the seven men. See *American Beacon*, July 7, 1829. [Gatewood note, p. 15]

improper and ungentlemanly manner, and grossly insulted my mother in various obscene ways. He was asked if that was the way he acted in people's houses. He called mother a "d— yellow b—" and at the same time attempted to snatch a watch which she wore in her bosom, saying, "you look handsome with a watch and chain, don't you?" Mother at this point took up a large hickory walking stick belonging to my father, and gave him two or three blows with such success that it made the pirate's blood flow. She was not long able, however, to defend herself, for they rushed on her in numbers and soon brought her down, when some were disarming her and some holding her arms, Woodard gored his thumbs into her eyes, with the intention of putting them out. When I heard my mother scream, I ran to her assistance, but was not permitted to enter the house, being stopped at the door. "Don't let him pull my eyes out! Oh don't!" she cried. I was only 13 years old and could not force my way by the men that stood in the door, but I looked through their legs in the room where my mother was. Oh heavens! what did I see? I saw what I hope no other son will ever see, and what my feelings will not allow me to write. I saw my mother, whose acts had ever been such as to cause me to love and respect her, that mother I saw beaten down by those demons in human shape. I saw a wretch in the act of putting out her eyes; I saw the blood trickling down her face; I saw her struggle against unequal power with unconquerable spirit, whilst I, her son, was unable to help her.

There was a man in the company whose name was Arthur Butts. I had been in the habit of bringing him papers from Great Bridge post office, where I used to team. This place, Great Bridge, was about fifteen miles from our house and ten miles from Butts'. This man was standing on the stoop when I came up, and when my mother was screaming, I begged him not to let them kill her. He informed me that he had nothing to do with the matter. After struggling a long time, my mother at last got on her feet before the scamp had succeeded in putting out her eyes. Her watch was gone, however, and she was badly handled. There was a man by the name of Isaiah Wilson, a magistrate, and the very man my brother William and cousin Samuel had been brought before when they were committed to jail. He asked mother what was the matter and forced his way into the house, adding that he was a justice of the peace and would see that justice was done her. Mother stated her case to him, telling how she had been insulted and robbed of her watch. Wilson then said, "Didn't you know better than to wear a watch in your bosom? How dare you resist against a white man if he did take it from you?" When she "talked back," the unjust justice said that he had a great mind to blow her brains out and pushed a pistol in her face, calling her vile names.

Woodard at this point came out in the yard where I was standing and demanded me to tell where my brother William was, telling me if I refused he would blow my brains out, putting a loaded pistol cocked at my head. I would not have told him had I have known, for I had been taught by my parents that it was far more honorable to suffer death than to betray one that had run away from the slave-holders, be the runaway bond or free man. I told him I did not know (I did not know in truth), and he called me a liar, stating that I knew but would not tell him, and for that reason he would shoot me. I saw him again cock his pistol and place it at my head. I then shut my eyes expecting to open them in eternity. I heard the report and thought I was shot until I heard our dog that was by my side howl out. I looked and saw that he had received the contents of the would-be murderer's pistol instead of myself.

After plundering the house, shooting all the dogs, hogs and cattle they saw in sight, they left us to our unhappy condition until they should come again and make us more miserable. That day I swore eternal war against slavery and to avenge my mother's wrongs.

It was a dark and foggy night in April, 1827 [1829] when they made the second attack upon us. It was about 2 o'clock in the morning when all were in the enjoyment of nature's blest report, and little expecting an assault from midnight ruffians and murderers; it was to be, however. The dead silence of the night was broken by the tramp of horses, as the band drew near our house. I was one of the first to jump out of

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bed, thinking at once it was the same lawless gang. It was not long before I saw that I was right. The darkness of the yard was soon illuminated by the flash of their guns, which shook the house with their reports. I looked from my room window and saw by the blaze of their guns the yard full of frightful looking faces (they all had on masks or false faces) of all colors and forms and shapes. Some looked like dogs, others wolves, and some had their faces painted half black and half red, others had their faces so muffled up that they could not be known.

In a few minutes they forced open the door and rushed in the house with a yell, knives and pistols in hand, and made a light, showing their horrid looking faces to our already surprised eyes. They commenced their outrages by pressing their pistols at my father's head, bidding him to cross his hands or receive the contents. It was useless to resist, so my father suffered himself to be tied. They then tied mother, but not before she gave them a warm battle. They then went to the bed where two of my sisters slept (they were young women) and hauled them out of the bed and tied them. They dragged the whole party out of doors and tied them to a tree and gave them a shameful whipping, amid oaths unfit for publication here. The sound of the whip and the cries of the sufferers rings in my ears at this writing and will as long as I live.

A party of them then came up stairs where I, with two men, slept. One of these men was 40 years old and subject to fits; the other was a young man about 18. We had been up, put on our clothes and gone back to bed. One of these fellows whose face was painted red and black, came to our bed and bid the oldest man get up and strip himself. He arose and got out of bed, but seeing so many coming towards him with faces like dogs, wolves, etc., he fell in a fit upon the floor. They bid him stand up (which, of course, he could not do) striking him two or three times. They then stood him up, but he fell as if he had no feet, therefore, they let him go. They next told the young man to stand up and take off his clothes as soon as he could. He obeyed, taking off all but his shirt. The painted face man began to whip him. After beating him until he was tired, and the poor fellow's skin was all cut up, painted face told me to get up and take off my jacket. I did as he requested and stood before him. As I stood there, I looked in his eyes and recognized him, notwithstanding his paint and long false nose about four inches long. I did not speak to him, but he spoke to the leader of the gang just as he was about to strike me, and said: "I beg for him, he's too little." Upon hearing this, they let me go unwhipped.

Long nose then told me to go down into the yard and hold the horses. I started down stairs, but could not pass the gang on the stairs, The fellow who sent me down appeared to have some authority over them, and told them to let me pass. I went down in the yard and instead of watching or holding the horses, I turned all loose I could get to and then hid. They soon after went away after destroying everything, leaving us to again mourn over our unhappy condition. We learned the next day that they had the day before been through Long Ridge and whipped every free person of color in the place and plundered their houses. The worse outrage was committed upon cousin James Cuffee, Samuel's father, whom they whipped until he fainted twice. They never came to our house again, although they continued their outrages in Long Ridge until they broke up almost every free family of color in the place (there being about forty) who lived on their own lands.

Father and cousin James secured a passage for brother William and cousin Samuel to New York, at a great price, where they arrived safely, and from there they went to Canada, where Samuel yet resides. In the rebellion of 1837, he was an officer in the Queen's troops.¹⁰ Brother William came back to New York City, where he went into business and purchased valuable real estate in Williamsburg[h], Kings county[,] New York.

Months after the young men were in New York or Canada the woods were hunted through and through by men and dogs looking for them. In one of their rambles they came upon Jeremiah Bracey,

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¹⁰ i.e., Samuel, Hodges's cousin, was an officer in the British army which defeated a rebellion against British colonial rule in Canada. [NHC note]

of whom I mentioned.¹¹ They got between him and the river, with the dogs. He was unable to swim but ran out in the river to his armpits. He had in his hand an old scythe blade to defend himself. With this he killed three of the dogs that came out in the water after him. He at last made up his mind to come out; as he started to do so the cowards shot him in the head and, of course, killed him [in 1829]. Bracey had been sentenced to state prison for beating a white man, who died from the results of said beating. The circumstances were as follows: The white man went to Bracey's house and assaulted his (Bracey's) wife in an immoral and nameless manner. Bracey, hearing her screams from the fields, ran to the house. Upon learning the nature of the case and knowing it would be useless to go to law, took the law in his own hands, and beat the man so badly that he died from the effects of the punishment he needed. Bracey defended his wife's honor, or at least avenged her wrong but in the end it cost him his life.

After Bracey's death, hearing that William and Samuel were out of their reach, the main body of the lawless gang disbanded, but the fragments of the lowest order of them formed in small bands and went prowling through the two counties. No free person of color within their reach was safe in person or property, for these wolves had tasted human blood and liked it too well to let it alone.

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In 1831, two years after these events, white violence against free blacks in Virginia erupted again after Nat Turner's slave rebellion, just three counties west of the Hodges farm. After considering buying property in New York, where William lived, Hodges and his parents decided to stay in Virginia. In 1836, however, after witnessing the continued harsh treatment of African Americans in the South, Hodges moved to New York to join his older brother and sister. With his brother he opened a grocery store in Williamsburgh on Long Island and soon became involved in community affairs, culminating in the formation of the Union Temperance Benevolent Society in 1841 and the New York Society for the Promotion of Education Among Colored Children in 1847.

In 1840 Willis and William Hodges became more active for political rights, especially suffrage, after serving as delegates to a convention of "colored citizens" in Albany, New York. After an ill-fated attempt to return to Virginia and organize black citizens to campaign for fair treatment, Willis Hodges returned to New York in 1845 and, in 1847, began publishing a weekly anti-slavery newspaper, *The Ram's Horn*. Two years later he sold his interest in the paper to direct a short-lived land-ownership project providing farms for black citizens in upstate New York where, during the settlement's first winter, he wrote his autobiography.

Throughout the rest of his life Hodges alternated between New York and Virginia, and between activism and withdrawal from the public sphere. He died in 1890 at the age of seventy-five, soon after the last of many returns to his home state of Virginia.¹²

¹¹ Bracey was a free black man who escaped from jail with William Hodges and the other prisoners. [NHC note]

¹² Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., ed., *Free Man of Color: The Autobiography of Willis August Hodges* (University of Tennessee Press, 1982), Introduction.