

Elizabeth Grimes (1825-1890)

Elizabeth Nealley was born in Lee, New Hampshire on May 31, 1825 and moved to Burlington, Iowa in 1844. There she met James Grimes, a wealthy and educated man in the community, and they got married in 1846. She lived in Burlington, Iowa City, and Washington D.C. intermittently after her husband was elected to political office. James Grimes served as Iowa's governor (1854-1859) and its senator (1859-1869) during the Civil War and Reconstruction era. He was a quiet and reserved politician who sought counsel from his wife Elizabeth on many occasions¹. He described her as “a sort of moral thermometer for [his] guidance,”² She leveled his head and acted as an advisor to him in his career serving Iowa, this letter from Mrs.Grimes also serves to show some views on death and religion in 19th century Victorian America. Eventually, Mrs. Grimes died June 22, 1890 as an 18 year widow in her house in Washington D.C. As an unofficial advisor to the Governor and Senator of Iowa, though he ended his career less gracefully than it began, Mr. and Mrs.Grimes had a good hand in the era of emancipation and represented Iowa in Washington dutifully for 15 years. Both her and her husband wrote a plethora of letters that all tell some different detail or story about the time.

When in Washington, Grimes often sent letters to his wife updating her about events there. A letter about the assassination of Lincoln includes his misgiving about the new president:

¹ Hudson, David, Marvin Bergman, Loren N Horton, and State Historical Society Of Iowa. 2009. *The Biographical Dictionary of Iowa*. Iowa City: The University of Iowa Press. <http://uipress.lib.uiowa.edu/bdi/DetailsPage.aspx?id=145>. 197.

² *The Biographical Dictionary of Iowa*. <http://uipress.lib.uiowa.edu/bdi/DetailsPage.aspx?id=145>. 197.

I am full of forebodings about Johnson. He is loyal enough, but he is a man of low instincts, vindictive, violent, and of bad habits. His course will depend much upon the hands he falls into at the outset. I hope he will be equal to the occasion and prove to be a good President.³

This letter unintentionally foreshadows the turning point in Grimes's political career, the impeachment trial of Andrew Johnson. Congress tried to impeach Johnson three separate times, finally succeeding the third time. Although he didn't support about President Johnson, Grimes voted against removal from office which, according the Iowa Republican convention of Louisa county, betrayed Iowans⁴. Had Grimes not intended to retire due to declining health, this vote would have ended his career.

The letter from Elizabeth Grime was written as a response to a letter that had told her that a friend named Ada had died⁵. The recipient of this letter is only referred to as "dear friend", but, based on the letter they have a connection to Bradford School, where Ada, the deceased, also went to school. One of the other people mentioned, Mrs. Salter, was the wife of pastor William Salter, the pastor who wrote *Life of James W. Grimes, Governor of Iowa, 1854-1858; a Senator of the United States*⁶. Grimes goes on to write about not yet seeing anything about the death of Ada in the paper or any public journals.

³ Salter, William. 1876. *The Life of James W. Grimes, Governor of Iowa, 1854-1858; a Senator of the United States, 1859-1869*. New York, D. Appleton And Co.
<https://books.google.it/ao/books?id=eShCAAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q=Elizabeth&f=false> (3/1/2022). 278.

⁴"People of Iowa vs. James W. Grimes". The Burlington Hawk-Eye. May 25, 1868.
<https://access.newspaperarchive.com/us/iowa/burlington/burlington-daily-hawk-eye-gazette/1868/05-25/page-2/> (3/1/2022).

⁵ Grimes, Elizabeth. "[07] Elizabeth Grimes, letter, death, and mourning". Letter. (1865). *Spring 2022 Iowa Documents Class Projects*. 6 https://scholarworks.uni.edu/his_iadocuments_sp2022/6

⁶ Salter, William. 1876. *The Life of James W. Grimes, Governor of Iowa, 1854-1858; a Senator of the United States, 1859-1869*. New York, D. Appleton And Co.
<https://books.google.it/ao/books?id=eShCAAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q=Elizabeth&f=false> (3/1/2022)

Grime's letter represents the times of the Victorian Era in America. The Victorian era was most of the 19th century into the early 20th century, and it marked a time of modernization in America both technologically and culturally. Victorian authors of the time included Longfellow and Poe. More people, especially women, were being taught writing and literacy at this time making it a more widespread medium of communication. An increase in literacy led people to write in more elegant and conceptual ways that reflected who they were and displayed their talents as a writer⁷.

Grimes' letter is in line with this Victorian writing style and her assessment of death and mourning give us an insight into the style of writing at the time. An example of ornate writing style of the time is how she chooses to explain why her friend deserves a quality publication about her death;

of our pastor Mrs. Salter, a classmate & friend of Ada's when at Bradford school. Mrs. Salter expresses the wish that "some memorial might be prepared of our departed friend; She thinks a greater service could hardly be done to cause of Christ than to give to the world the record of such faith & fortitude & virtue," What do you think of the suggestion & who will be willing to undertake so good a work. I have looked for an obituary notice of Ada's death in the "Journal", but nothing has yet appeared. Moses would be able to prepare some tribute which would be valued by Ada's friends, & draw many thoughtful minds to the contemplation of her beautiful life. It is good to have known her & enjoyed⁸.

This acts as a call to action towards writing about her death, dignity of the deceased was a Victorian trait that can be found at the time⁹. This passage shows during the Victorian Era

⁷ Howe, Daniel Walker. "American Victorianism as a Culture." *American Quarterly* 27, no. 5 (1975): 507–32. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2712438>.

⁸ Grimes, Elizabeth. "[07] Elizabeth Grimes, letter, death, and mourning". Letter. (1865). *Spring 2022 Iowa Documents Class Projects*. 6

⁹ Grimes, Elizabeth. "[07] Elizabeth Grimes, letter, death, and mourning". Letter. (1865). *Spring 2022 Iowa Documents Class Projects*. 6

importance of proper respect to the dead as they want a publication that'll properly honor the departed Ada¹⁰.

According to the letter, death is an occasion that requires the utmost passion and respect towards the deceased. Referring to the line, "She thinks a greater service could hardly be done to cause of Christ than to give to the world the record of such faith & fortitude & virtue", this tie in of religion shows that a proper eulogy aligns their sense of faith as well as their sense of responsibility to the dead¹¹. One of the paragraphs in the letter is different from the topic of Ada's death, it discusses what Grimes knew about Wahsington at the time. She shares her opinion on the topic in this passage;

Mr.Grimes left a week ago last Monday for Washington. I believe much excitement is anticipated in Congress.The present crisis seems to me full of the most serious interest but not an occasion of any great alarm. Of course, I may not very fully comprehend it¹².

This passage was written December 5th, 1860, just the month before Lincoln was elected, November 6th, this transition of power appeared peaceful to Mrs.Grimes and that it was no cause for concern. December 20th, 15 days after this statement South Carolina retaliates to the election of Lincoln by seceding from the union, with ten other states following the next month¹³. This letter was written four months before the Civil war started on April 12, 1861. Grimes's letter may not have been correct, but the time between Lincoln's election and the war was short, especially

¹⁰ Howe, Daniel Walker. "American Victorianism as a Culture." *American Quarterly* 27, no. 5 (1975): 507–32. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2712438>.

¹¹ Grimes, Elizabeth. "[07] Elizabeth Grimes, letter, death, and mourning". Letter. (1865). *Spring 2022 Iowa Documents Class Projects*. 6 https://scholarworks.uni.edu/his_iadocuments_sp2022/6

¹² Grimes, Elizabeth. "[07] Elizabeth Grimes, letter, death, and mourning". Letter. (1865). *Spring 2022 Iowa Documents Class Projects*. 6 https://scholarworks.uni.edu/his_iadocuments_sp2022/6

¹³ "Civil War and Reconstruction, 1840-1877." In American History, ABC-CLIO, 2022. Accessed April 28, 2022. <https://americanhistory2.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/270421>.

considering the bloody event the war would be. What she did know of the war can be observed in a letter her husband wrote on July 22, 1881 where he says;

Yesterday I was on the field of battle. No one can have a proper conception of its horror. Our army was totally routed, with immense destruction of life on both sides. I was not much exposed, except to capture, which I escaped by less than a minute. I have witnessed the last battle-field, certainly the last I shall visit voluntarily. I cannot picture it's horrible details but will tell you about them if I can¹⁴.

Elizabeth knew of the death and destruction of the war. With the previous addressed attachment to death and respect for the dead must've only made this knowledge more tragic.

¹⁴ Salter, William. 1876. *The Life of James W. Grimes, Governor of Iowa, 1854-1858; a Senator of the United States*, 147

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<https://books.google.it/ao/books?id=eShCAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q=Elizabeth&f=false> (3/1/2022)

