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WILLIAM AUSTIN (1778-1843)

- Biographical Milestones -

1778 (Mach 2): Birth of William Austin in Lunenburg (Mass.). His father, Nathaniel, a prosperous pewterer, had married Margaret Rand, the daughter of Deacon Isaac Rand of Charlestown, in November 1776. William was the third child of the couple. The Austin family was descended from Richard Austin who immigrated in America as early as 1651. William's mother was a fervent Tory who considered Bunker Hill as a defeat, whereas his father was an enthusiastic Patriot. Though the family had to leave Charlestown during the battle of Bunker Hill, they came back to Charlestown as soon as things had settled.

1786: Erecting of the Charlestown Bridge, which greatly helped in the reconstruction and economic future of the town.

1798: William Austin graduated from Harvard where teaching was then largely influenced by Unitarian theology. One of his schoolmates was Stephen Longfellow, the poet's father. William Austin published a stern pamphlet of Rousseauistic inspiration against the institution, entitled "Strictures on Harvard University."

1799: William Austin left the United States and served as teacher and chaplain on the frigate *U.S. Constitution.*

1802-1803: Austin studied law at Lincoln's Inn, in London. There he met William Godwin, and the painters Washington Allston and Heinrich Füssli. The latter, then curator of the *Royal Academy*, was already well-known for his famous "Nightmare."

1803: Austin came back to Charlestown. His reputation as a talented jurist spread to all of Massachusetts. He made friends with such major political figures as Alexander Hamilton and Daniel Webster.

1804: Publication of Austin's *Letters from London*, a combination of interviews with some celebrities of London and personal reflections on the British institutions and laws. This work, fiercely condemned by the American Federalists, was however a lasting success in New England judicial circles.

1806: In March, his faultless commitment and impulsive temper led him to fight a duel with James Henderson Helliot, the son of the Federalist General Simon Elliot, whom he had provoked in a letter published in the *Independent Chronicle*. In June, he married Charlotte Williams.

1807: Publication of *The Human Character of Jesus Christ*, an essay by Austin of Unitarian inspiration.

1815: Austin officially joined the Unitarian Church of Charlestown. His literary work fits in with the religious conflict opposing the Calvinists to the Unitarians in 1820s Boston.[1]

1820: Death of Charlotte Williams

1822: On October 3, he married his second wife, Lucy Jones. From his successive marriages, William Austin had fourteen children. Besides his activities as a jurist, he made a career in politics. As an abolitionist and a Jeffersonian — he was a Republican whereas his brother, Nathaniel, was a Federalist —, he participated actively in the government of Charlestown, the birthplace of his parents. He was a representative of Charlestown in the General Court in 1811, 1812, 1816, 1827 and 1834 and of the County of Middlesex in the Senate from 1821 to 1823. He was also a delegate in the 1820 constitutional convention of Massachusetts.

1824: Publication of Austin's first fiction, in the "Original Communications" columns of the *New England Galaxy* (September, 10), entitled "Some Account of Peter Rugg, the Missing Man, Laik of Boston, New England, in a letter to Mr. Herman Krauff." The text, signed by a Mr. Jonathan Dunwell, was an immediate success. Some readers, having mistaken the tale for an account of real facts, wrote to the magazine to have further details on Peter Rugg.

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1 See: Joseph A. Zimbalatti. *Anti-Calvinist Allegory: A Critical Edition of William Austin's "Peter Rugg, the Missing Man" (1824-1827)* (Fordham University, Ann Arbor University Press, 1992).

1825: Publication in the *Galaxy* of July, 8 of a second fiction entitled "The Sufferings of a Country Schoolmaster."
1826: Publication in the *Galaxy* of September, 1 of a sequel to the first episode of "Peter Rugg," entitled "Some Further Account of Peter Rugg, the Missing Man, Late of Boston, New England."
1827: The third and last episode of "Peter Rugg" appears in the 19 January *Galaxy:* "Arrival of Mr. Peter Rugg in Boston."
1831: Publication of "The Late Joseph Natterstrom" in the *New England Magazine*.
1834: Publication of "The Origin of Chemistry" in the *New England Magazine*.
1836: Publication of "The Man with the Cloaks: A Vermont Legend" in the *American Monthly Magazine*.
1837: Publication of Austin's last piece of fiction, "Martha Gardner; or Moral Reaction" in the December issue of the *American Monthly Magazine*.
1841: Death of William Austin in Charlestown, on the 27 June.
1890: James Walker Austin gathers the complete works of his father in *The Literary Papers of William Austin* (Boston). Of all his fictions, only "Peter Rugg" came down to posterity and became, with Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" (1819), an American national legend, often republished under various versions. Few people remember today that Peter Rugg was created by the Bostonian jurist William Austin in 1824. Even his son, James Walker Austin, thought it necessary to introduce his father as "the author of 'Peter Rugg, the Missing Man.'" With the passing of the years, William Austin has become a "missing" American writer.

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