



## Celebrating Phillis Wheatley

*“In every human Beast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance” - Phillis Wheatley*



Phillis Wheatley was the first African American woman to publish a book of poetry in the colonies in 1773. She was born in Senegal/Gambia around 1753. As a young girl, she was kidnapped and brought to Boston on an enslaved person ship. Upon her arrival, John Wheatley purchased the young girl, who was in fragile health, as a servant for his wife, Susanna. But her name, whatever it was, was obliterated by her abduction. As was the custom at the time, the young girl adopted her master's last name and the Wheatleys called her Phillis, after the ship that took her from her home.

The family provided her with schooling and when they saw her talent, they encouraged her to pursue poetry. Wheatley received lessons in theology, English, Latin and Greek. At a time when African Americans were discouraged and intimidated from learning how to read and write, Wheatley's life was an anomaly.

She mastered Latin and Greek, going on to write highly acclaimed poetry. She gained recognition in both American and English colonies with her 'Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral.' Her works,



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thoughts, writings and poems received a lot of appreciation and she was praised by eminent figures like George Washington. She published her first poem in 1767 and her first volume of verse, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, in 1773. Having been freed from slavery, she later married and struggled financially, with Wheatley unable to find a publisher for her second volume of poems.

Wheatley wrote her first published poem when she was just a young teenager. The work, a story about two men who nearly drown at sea, was printed in the *Newport Mercury*. Other published poems followed, with several also being published, further increasing Wheatley's fame.

In 1773, Wheatley gained considerable stature when her first and only book of verse, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, was published, with the writer having received patronage from Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon, in England. As proof of her authorship, Phillis Wheatley met with a tribunal of 18 white men, including John Hancock, in Boston to prove she, being a young Black woman, wrote these poems. As a result, the volume included a preface in which these men asserted that she had indeed written the poems in it.

After the death of Susanna Wheatley, in 1774, Phillis became more vocal in expressing her antislavery views. In a letter to the Native American minister Samson Occom, published in the *Connecticut Gazette*, she condemned slave owners as “modern Egyptians,” drawing a parallel between enslaved Africans and the Hebrews of the Old Testament. “In every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom,” she wrote. “It is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance; and by the Leave of our Modern Egyptians I will assert, that the same Principle lives in us.”

A strong supporter of America's fight for independence, Wheatley penned several poems in honor of the Continental Army's commander, George Washington. Wheatley sent one of said works, written in 1775, to the future president, eventually inspiring an invitation to visit him at his headquarters in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Wheatley accepted the offer and visited Washington in March of 1776.

Phillis wrote those words in the midst of the American Revolution, and she was hopeful that freedom for the colonies would lead to freedom for the enslaved. In 1775, she addressed a poem to George Washington aligning herself with the cause. (“Proceed, great chief, with virtue on thy side, / Thy ev'ry action let the goddess guide.”) Though complimentary to the slave-holding general, the poem also established Phillis's claim to her status as, to use Carretta's phrase, “the unofficial poet laureate of the new nation-in-the-making,” and she would come to feel conflicted about that nation's character. In a 1778 poem on the death of General David Wooster, Phillis castigated the hypocrisy of fighting for the freedom to enslave others:

But how, presumptuous shall we hope to find  
Divine acceptance with th'Almighty mind  
While yet (O deed ungenerous!) they disgrace  
And hold in bondage Afric's blameless race?



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Another poem alluded to her capture, accusing slaveholders including, implicitly, her own master and mistress of “tyrannic sway”:

I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate  
Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat:  
What pangs excruciating must molest,  
What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?  
Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd  
That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd:  
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray  
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?

In 1778, Wheatley married a free African American from Boston, John Peters, with whom she had three children, all of whom died in infancy. Their marriage proved to be a struggle, with the couple battling constant poverty. Ultimately, Wheatley was forced to find work as a maid in a boarding house and lived in squalid, horrifying conditions.

Wheatley did continue to write, but the growing tensions with the British and, ultimately, the Revolutionary War, weakened enthusiasm for her poems. While she contacted various publishers, she was unsuccessful in finding support for a second volume of poetry.

Sadly, Wheatley's second book of poems was never published. Though Phillis left a rich paper trail of poems and letters, she never recorded her own account of her life, and, in her writings, which brim with her spiritual and political ideas, biographical details are sparse. Wheatley died in her early 30s in Boston, Massachusetts, on December 5, 1784.

### Sources

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