

THE LIFE AND POETRY OF PHILLIS WHEATLEY

Phillis Wheatley was born around the year 1753 in West Africa, where present-day Senegal and Gambia are. She was kidnapped from the area and brought to the islands of the West Indies in the Caribbean Sea where she was enslaved. Because she was a little girl around the age of seven, she was considered too young to work in the sugar cane fields there. So, she was put on a ship that brought her to Boston with other enslaved Africans considered too feeble for the harsh conditions of the Caribbean.

Upon arriving in Boston in 1761, Phillis was purchased and enslaved by John Wheatley. He intended for Phillis to be a personal servant to his wife, Susanna. The family who enslaved her named her after the ship that brought her to Boston, the “Phillis.” They gave her their last name, as was the custom at the time. Therefore, we cannot know what Phillis Wheatley’s name was before her enslavement or what her family in West Africa called her.

Susanna Wheatley and her family quickly saw how intelligent Phillis was. They began educating her. With rare exceptions, slaveholders in the South generally opposed slave literacy for fear that it would encourage enslaved people to revolt. Some Southern states, like South Carolina, passed laws forbidding teaching basic literacy to enslaved children and adults.

In the North, there were more literacy resources for enslaved children, even though their literacy was often discouraged. Teaching them reading and writing was not illegal. In Boston religious groups like the Quakers established formal schools. And household private instruction was allowed. In this environment, the Wheatleys taught Phillis to read and write in English, Latin, and Greek. They also taught her theology, history, and literature. She was allowed to obtain this education as long as her other obligations (full-time work for the Wheatley family) were completed.

Wheatley wrote her first published poem at around age 13, which was printed in the *Newport Mercury*. The poem was a story about two sailors who nearly drowned at sea in a storm. Phillis had met the two men when they visited the Wheatleys’ home and told their story.

In the poem, Wheatley asked what would have happened to the men, if they had died in the storm:

*To Heaven their Souls with eager Raptures soar,
Enjoy the Bliss of him they wou’d adore.*

(NOTE: In her poetry, Wheatley used English spelling conventions of the time. “Gulph” meant “gulf,” and “wou’d” meant “would.”)



This 1773 engraving of Phillis Wheatley appeared in her book *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. It is also the first known portrait of an individual American woman of African descent.

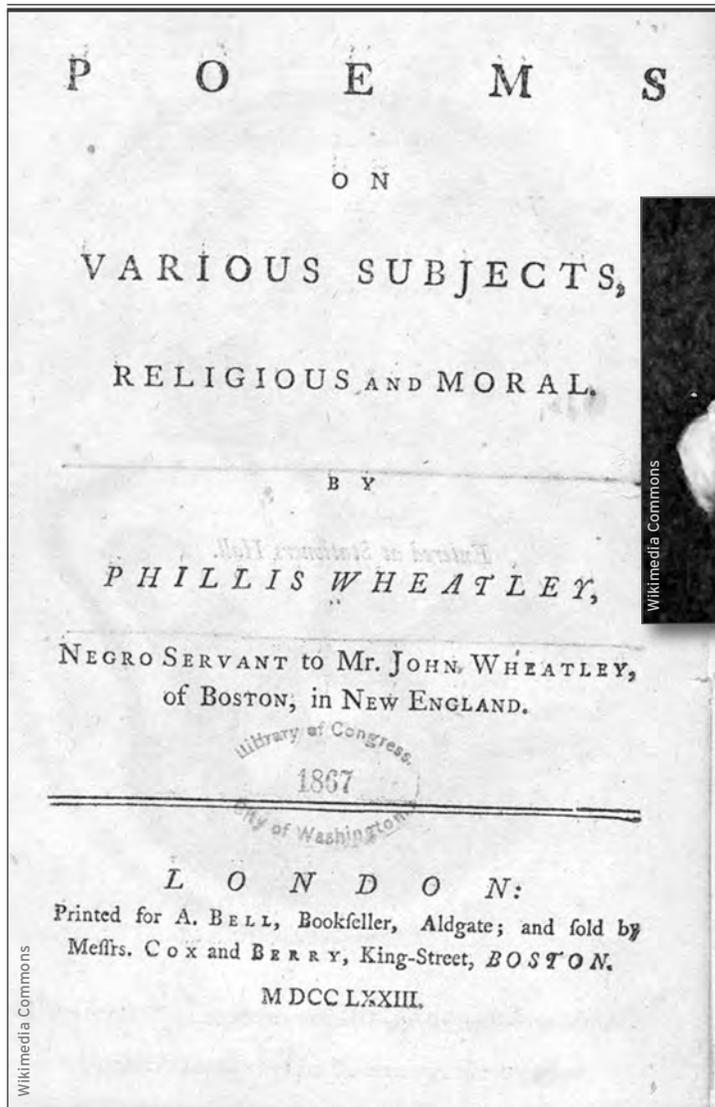
Fame and Freedom

Soon she published more poems. At that time, poems were often published individually on large sheets of printed paper called broadsides. At age 17, she wrote the poem that would make her famous. It was “On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield, 1770.” George Whitefield was a Christian minister who was one of the founders of the Methodist Church. Whitefield had converted Susanna Wheatley to Methodism, and she had, in turn, converted young Phillis. The poem began with these lines:

*Hail, happy Saint, on thy immortal throne!
To thee complaints of grievance are unknown . . .*

A Boston newspaper advertised broadsides of the poem in October 1770. Within weeks, newspapers throughout the Northeast advertised her poem. By mid-November, it was published in London, England. Other poets became admirers of Wheatley. Soon, Wheatley was famous in England and in the American colonies. But no American publisher would publish a whole book of Wheatley’s collected poems.

In England publishers were more friendly to the idea of publishing a book by an African American poet. ▶



from enslavement in 1773. The following year, Susanna died. Phillis lived for the next few years with the Wheatleys as a free woman.



Supporting Independence

Wheatley was a strong supporter of the fight for independence from Britain and used her poetry to show support for the movement. Wheatley wrote a poem in 1776 titled "To His Excellency General Washington" in which she praised the military commander of the Continental Army, George Washington. She sent her poem with a

letter to General Washington, who would one day be the first U.S. president.

Washington appreciated her poetry so much that he invited her to visit him in his quarters in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in March 1776, just months before the official start of the American Revolution. In his letter Washington said of her poem that "the style and manner exhibit a striking proof of your great poetical talents."

Washington also wrote that he felt it would be "vanity" for him to publish her poem himself. Nonetheless, he sent her poem to his former secretary, who had the poem published in the *Virginia Gazette* newspaper. Revolutionary writer Thomas Paine, famous for his pro-independence pamphlet *Common Sense*, republished Wheatley's poem in his own magazine in April 1776. Historians disagree whether Wheatley and Washington ever did meet in person.

While Wheatley greatly supported the American Revolution, she grew increasingly frustrated that the cause would allow a great many to remain enslaved. In a written eulogy for an American general she criticized patriots who claimed to be Christians wanting freedom, yet who supported the enslavement of Africans, "a blameless race." She compared American slavery to that of slavery in ancient Egypt, as recounted in the Bible. To her predominantly Christian readers, this was a serious admonishment.

A Short but Full Life

John Wheatley died in early 1778 but left no inheritance for Phillis. For a young Black woman on her own — with no money — in wartime Boston, life was challenging. She soon met trader and shop owner John Peters, a free Black man. Later in 1778, they were married.

Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, was the British aristocrat who funded the publication of Wheatley's only book of poems. Wheatley dedicated the book to her.

Susanna Wheatley reached out to friends there, and Phillis travelled to London in 1773. An English countess (female noble) admired Wheatley's poetry as well as several other formerly enslaved African American writers. The countess funded the publication of Wheatley's first and only book of poetry in 1773, titled *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. The book made Wheatley's fame grow more.

Wheatley's achievements in poetry are very significant beyond her fame. She became the first African American and first enslaved person in American history to publish a book of poems. She was also only the third American woman to do so.

While in London, Wheatley befriended abolitionists. Phillis could have declared her own freedom while in London, but she chose to first return to Boston in 1773. Susanna herself had grown to oppose slavery. "At the desire of my friends in England," Phillis wrote, John Wheatley granted Phillis her freedom

Even though Phillis Wheatley had achieved great fame early in life, she struggled to publish any poetry during the war years. She also struggled with health problems due to chronic asthma. At first, John's business trading goods like rye, wheat, nails, and sugar was successful. But Phillis still had to sew clothes for money to help support hers and John's young children.

Due to legal troubles from business debts, the Peters family moved out of Boston in 1780. They were able to buy some land on a rural farm where John had once been enslaved. Little is known of their life there, but in 1784, they returned to Boston. Phillis published a couple of poems, including "Liberty and Peace, A Poem," which celebrated the Treaty of Paris that ended the Revolutionary War. She wrote with optimism for the new nation, the United States of America:

*So Freedom comes array'd with
Charms divine,
And in her Train Commerce and
Plenty shine.*

...

*To every Realm shall Peace her
Charms display, And Heavenly
Freedom spread her golden Ray.*

Phillis died in 1784 due to complications in childbirth. None of her three children survived into adulthood.

While her life was short, Phillis Wheatley contributed much to American history and literature. Her poetry is considered part of the great body of American culture.



Columbia depicted on a 20th century half-dollar coin.

Wikimedia Commons

In her poems, Wheatley often wrote of Columbia, a goddess used to symbolize the United States. It is where the District of Columbia, the nation's capital, gets its name. Columbia also appears in her poem for Washington (below).

*Fix'd are the eyes of nations on the scales,
For in their hopes Columbia's arm prevails.
...
Proceed, great chief, with virtue on thy side,
Thy ev'ry action let the Goddess guide.
A crown, a mansion, and a throne that shine,
With gold unfading, WASHINGTON! Be thine.*

WRITING & DISCUSSION

1. In what ways did Phillis Wheatley overcome hardships in her life?
2. Why were Phillis Wheatley's achievements as a poet historically important?
3. How did the American Revolution influence Wheatley's life and career as a poet?

Authors: Leslie Smith and Damon Huss

ACTIVITY: Time Travel to 1776

As a man who enslaved other people, what might Washington's choice to invite Phillis Wheatley to meet him tell us about his beliefs about enslaved people? What might Wheatley have been hoping for during her meeting with Washington?

Imagine the two did, in fact, meet in Massachusetts in 1776. And imagine you could travel back in time to observe and report on their meeting:

- 1) With a partner, discuss what questions you would ask both Wheatley and Washington.
- 2) List three questions you would ask each of them.
- 3) Include 1-2 sentences for each question explaining why you would ask that question.
- 4) Be ready to share your questions and explanations with the class.

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Standards Addressed

The Senate Filibuster: Abolish, Keep, or Reform?

National Civics Standard 15 (McREL): Understands how the United States Constitution grants and distributes power and responsibilities to national and state government and how it seeks to prevent the abuse of power. **High School Benchmark 2:** Understands how the legislative, executive, and judicial branches share power and responsibilities (e.g., each branch has varying degrees of legislative, executive, and judicial powers and responsibilities).

National Civics Standard 21 (McREL): Understands the formation and implementation of public policy. **High School Benchmark 4:** Understands why agreement may be difficult or impossible on issues such as abortion because of conflicts about values, principles, and interests.

California History-Social Science Standard 12.4: Students analyze the unique roles and responsibilities of the three branches of government as established by the U.S. Constitution. (1) Discuss Article I of the Constitution as it relates to the legislative branch . . .

California History-Social Science Framework (2016), Chapter 17, page 440: What can Congress do? Why is it so hard to get a law passed? Who gets elected to Congress, and who does not? Who has power in Congress? Besides members of the House and Senate, who else can affect the legislative process? Which house of Congress is the most democratic? Which house is the most effective? How can individual citizens actually participate in the legislative process? They may consider how a topic is affected through the committee system, lobbying, the media, and special interests.

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National U.S. History Standard 6: Understands the causes of the American Revolution, the ideas and interests involved in shaping the revolutionary movement, and reasons for the American victory. **Middle School Benchmark 2:** Understands contradictions between the Declaration of Independence and the institution of chattel slavery.

California History-Social Science Standard 8.1: Students understand the major events preceding the founding of the nation and relate their significance to the development of American constitutional democracy.

California History-Social Science Framework (2016), Ch. 12, p. 243: With careful guidance from the teacher, students can speculate on the question What were the long-term costs of slavery, both to people of African descent and to the nation at large?

Common Core State Standards: RH.6-8.4, RH.6-8.10; RL.8.10; WHST.6-8.10.

Buddhism in China

Calif. HSS Framework (2016), Ch. 11, p. 204: Next, students examine the question **How did Buddhism spread and change over time?** Buddhist missionaries and travelers carried Buddhism from the Indian subcontinent to Central Asia and then to China, as well as to Southeast Asia, during this period. At the same time, Christian and Muslim missionaries were also spreading their religions. As it moved outside the

Indian subcontinent and became a universal religion, Buddhism changed. In 600 BCE, Buddha was a sage, a wise man; but by 300 CE, his followers were worshipping the Buddha as a god. Nirvana changed from “nothingness” or “extinction” to a kind of heaven for believers in the afterlife.

Calif. HSS Framework (2016), Ch. 11, p. 209-210: Buddhism spread widely and gained many followers in China during the Tang period and began to alter religious life in neighboring Korea and Japan as well. Students return to the question **How did Buddhism spread and change over time?** In China, Buddhist ideas intermingled with those of Daoism, a Chinese religion emphasizing private spirituality, and Confucianism, the belief system that stressed moral and ethical behavior. At its height in the ninth century, Buddhism had 50,000 monasteries in China. As Confucian scholar-officials and Daoist priests felt threatened by this “foreign religion,” the Tang emperors reversed their earlier acceptance of Buddhism and began to persecute it. One result of this persecution is that Buddhism did not become the official religion of China. Instead, Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist beliefs and practices fused together in China to form a syncretic popular religion, emphasizing moral living, daily ritual, and dedication to family and community.

California History-Social Science Standard 6.6. Students analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the early civilizations of China. (8) Describe the diffusion of Buddhism northward to China during the Han Dynasty.

California History-Social Science Standard 7.3. Students analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the civilizations of China in the Middle Ages. (1) Describe the reunification of China under the Tang Dynasty and reasons for the spread of Buddhism in Tang China, Korea, and Japan.

National World History Standard 12 (McREL): Understands the Imperial crises and their aftermath in various regions from 300 to 700 CE. **Middle School Benchmark 2:** Understands how the spread of Buddhism and Christianity influenced different regions.

National World History Standard 14 (McREL): Understands major developments in East Asia and Southeast Asia in the era of the Tang Dynasty from 600 to 900 CE. **Middle School Benchmark 2:** Understands how Buddhism was introduced from Tang China to Korea and Japan.)

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