

## Phillis Wheatley (c. 1753-1784)

A brigantine owned by a man named Timothy Finch and captained by a man named Peter Gwinn, set sail out of Boston Harbor with a crew of eight on November 8, 1760, heading to the Windward Coast to purchase Africans who had been enslaved. According to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, 96 Africans embarked on the return journey; 75 survived the dreaded Middle Passage, arriving 245 days later in Boston on July 11, 1761. According to the woman who purchased her, the last African to be sold—probably from somewhere in Senegal or Gambia—was the youngest, a little girl, wearing only rags. She named her “Phillis,” after the ship that had brought her to this strange, new world

Phillis Wheatley was born in West Africa around 1753. She was purchased by Susannah Wheatley, wife of Boston merchant John Wheatley. After her owners observed Phillis attempting to write, their daughter Mary taught her to read and write in English, which she mastered within sixteen months of arriving in Boston. By the time she was ten or eleven, she had begun to learn Latin and would soon be able to translate sections of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

In 1767, she published her first poem in the Newport (R.I.) *Mercury*. Her poem on the Boston Massacre, “On the Affray in King Street, on the Evening of the 5<sup>th</sup> of March, 1770,” commemorated the sacrifice of “Caldwell, Attucks, Gray, and Mav’rick” in “Freedom’s Cause.” Her 1770 elegy “On the Death of Mr. George Whitefield,” a catalyst of America’s great religious awakening, brought the young poet to local, then national and international, prominence. Its success prompted her owner to publish a book of Phillis’s poems in 1772, but not enough subscribers could be found to finance it, in part because Bostonians doubted a person of African descent—no less a teenage girl—had the intellectual capacity required to reason or craft a poem on her own.

This led to a remarkable “examination” of some sort of Phillis, either individually or collectively, by eighteen men of learning, 14 of them educated here at Harvard, including Thomas Hutchinson, Royal Governor of the British North American Province of Massachusetts Bay, collectively labeled as “the most respectable characters in Boston.” As a result of their questioning, they were sufficiently convinced of Wheatley’s abilities that they signed their names to a letter of attestation, stating: “We whose Names are under-written, do assure the World, that the Poems specified in the following Page, were (as we verily believe) written by Phillis, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from *Africa*, and has ever since been, and now is, under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town. She has been examined by some of the best Judges, and is thought qualified to write them.”

Their imprimatur aided the 1773 publication in London of Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, the first book written by a sub-Saharan African in English and the second book of poetry published by a sub-Saharan African (Juan Latino’s *The Austriad*, written

in Latin, was published in Granada, Spain, in 1573, exactly two centuries before). The publication of Wheatley's poems was greeted as a major historical event, earning praise from Voltaire, the abolitionist Granville Sharp, and Benjamin Franklin, among others; George Washington even asked to meet her at his headquarters in Cambridge, during the Revolution. She was feted as a prodigy by London's literati when she visited in 1773. Following her return to Boston in late 1773, the Wheatleys granted Phillis her freedom.

Despite the success of her book of poems, and her 1775 poem in honor of General George Washington, Wheatley died in poverty and obscurity in Boston in 1784, having been predeceased by her three children. Her husband, who abandoned her, sold off a proposed second volume of her poems, dedicated to Benjamin Franklin. It has never been found. In 2003's *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley*, I noted that "If Phillis Wheatley stood for anything, it was the creed that culture was, could be, the equal possession of all humanity. It was a lesson she was swift to teach, and that we have been slow to learn."

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.