

## Phillis Wheatley

Lots of folks might recognize this name, Phillis Wheatley, and may remember that she was the first African American woman to publish poetry. But not so much about her life. Phillis was born on the coast of Africa, probably Senegal. When she was about 7, in 1760, she was kidnapped by slave traders and brought to the American colonies. She was purchased by John Wheatley and named Phillis after the slave trader ship that had transported her. John gave her to his wife Susannah to be trained as her personal servant. It was common at the time, especially among the upper classes in the Northern colonies and often colleges and universities, to specifically request a child slave. It was thought that children could be trained to accept the slave role more easily and would not rebel as adults.

It wasn't very long before Susannah recognized the intelligence of the young Phillis and allowed her to be educated rather than trained into a slave role. Mary, Susannah's daughter, became her tutor. By the time she was nine, Phillis was reading English and at 12 she was reading Latin and Greek classics as well as the English translation of the Bible. Influenced by writers such as Alexander Pope, John Milton, Homer and Virgil, Phillis began to write poetry. When she was eighteen, she had completed a volume of poetry she titled *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. When she tried to publish, she was challenged in court as it was believed that a woman, especially a black woman, couldn't possibly have written the poems she claimed as hers. A group of "experts" were appointed to examine her (one of the "experts" was John Hancock); after reading her poetry and examining her, the group declared her work authentic.

Because of continued difficulty getting the book published, Susanna sent Phillis with her son Nathaniel to London where her book was published in 1773. It was either published or made available in the colonies in 1774. Her poetry demonstrated her mixed feelings about her capture and slavery. In one poem she expresses gratitude for having been brought from Africa as a slave because that is what led her to Christianity. In another, she wrote that "slavery is a cruel fate," Her poetry was often about Christianity, but also included referenced thought to reflect the sun worship of her African heritage. She sometimes used sun and Son in similar ways.

She was freed by John Wheatley's will at his death in 1778. Her primary benefactor, Mary Wheatley, died soon after and Phillis was emancipated and she not able to find the resources to publish a second volume of poetry. She married a free black man, John Peters, who ran a small grocery. Largely due to the loss of benefactors and the Revolutionary war, the couple fell on hard times. Her husband spent some time in debtor's prison and died soon after his release. They had two children who died as infants and a third baby died hours after Phillis she died in childbirth at age 31. Her second volume of poetry was never published although some poems were printed as broadsheets.

Note: although dates and ages aren't consistent in all sources, the basic facts are reported by most sources.

For more information: Google *Phillis Wheatley* and *Phillis Wheatley poems*