

The Life of Phillis Wheatley

by Max Tensing
illustrated by Ron Himler



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An Unusual Meeting

In 1776, Phillis Wheatley was 23 years old. That spring, she left her home in Boston, Massachusetts. She traveled to nearby Cambridge. This happened during the early days of the Revolutionary War. At that time, going on even a short trip was difficult. But Phillis Wheatley's journey was worth the trouble. She had been invited to meet George Washington. The meeting was unusual for three reasons.

 First, men did not usually listen to women's opinions about politics and public affairs. Women were not usually invited to meet with important leaders.

Secondly, Phillis Wheatley was black. Until two years before, she had been enslaved. She had worked for a well-known Boston family. She was freed just before her mistress died. Free and formerly enslaved blacks were treated somewhat better in New England than in the South. Even so, a formal meeting between a black woman and the leader of the Continental Army was not common.

 Finally, the others waiting to see Washington were businessmen or politicians. These men gave money and supplies to help the war effort. Phillis Wheatley was there because of a poem.

Phillis wrote several poems in favor of the Revolution. A few months earlier, she sent a poem to Washington. The poem was titled, "To His Excellency General Washington."

🔊 The poem said Washington was a good leader. Washington wrote back to Phillis. His letter said, “If you should ever come to Cambridge, [...] I shall be happy to see a person so favored by the Muses.” That was a fancy way of saying he liked her poetry and wanted to meet her.

🔊 We can only guess about Phillis Wheatley’s feelings that day. She might have worried about her dress. Perhaps it was too plain. She might have worried about being nervous. Perhaps she would be too nervous to speak. Or she might have looked back on her life and been amazed. So many different things had happened to her. Now she was with some of the most powerful men in America.



🔊 Phillis Wheatley waits to meet General George Washington.

Stolen from Africa

We know very little about Phillis Wheatley before she was kidnapped and sold into slavery. A person who wrote about Phillis said that she told only one story from her life in Africa. In the story, Phillis's mother kneeled and bowed. In this way, Phillis's mother began the new day. This was a Muslim custom. It came from the Fulani tribe. The Fulani tribe lived on the west coast of Africa. Phillis's story has helped researchers figure out where she probably came from.

 We also know that Phillis was brought to Boston on a slave ship. It arrived during the summer of 1761. The journey was very hard. Phillis arrived scared and sick. She had only one piece of fabric as clothing. Phillis waited on the Beach Street wharf. She did not know what would happen next. She was about seven years old.

 Everything about Boston was new to Phillis. The sights, sounds, and smells were different. Her home in Africa was remote and rural. But Boston was a big city. Horses pulled carriages. Large brick houses stood on either side of cobblestone streets. The peal, or ringing, of church bells and the cries of seagulls could be heard.



▶ The seagulls seemed to be **mocking** the fishermen. Smells of tea, coffee, and spices filled the air. The people spoke a language Phillis did not understand. Everyone dressed very strangely. Some of the men had powdered wigs. The women wore fancy gowns with many petticoats under their skirts.



▶ Phillis arrives at the Beach Street wharf in Boston.

🔊 One of these women was Susanna Wheatley. She came to the wharf with her husband, John. The Wheatleys hoped to buy a girl to work in their house. They also hoped the girl would be a friend to Mrs. Wheatley as she grew old. Mrs. Wheatley chose Phillis. She thought that Phillis looked intelligent, gentle, and modest. These qualities helped Mrs. Wheatley ignore the fact that Phillis was so young. So the Wheatleys bought the young girl. They called her Phillis, after the name of the ship that brought her to North America.

🔊 The Wheatleys had a nice house and a comfortable life.



Life with the Wheatleys

The Wheatleys were different from many other families who might have chosen Phillis. This was the first good luck Phillis had since being taken from her home in Africa. The Wheatleys lived in a large house on a busy Boston street. John was a successful businessman. The family **lacked** for nothing.

 The Wheatleys were rich. But more important was their attitude toward enslaved people. The Wheatleys' religion taught them to treat enslaved blacks as part of the family. Phillis never had to do **tedious** chores. She had a special place in the family. Mrs. Wheatley's daughter, Mary, wanted to be a teacher. Mary **personally** taught Phillis how to read and write English.

 Perhaps Mary was a very good teacher. Perhaps Phillis was a very good student. Whatever the reason, Phillis learned very quickly. She did not speak English when she came to Boston. A year later, she was able to speak English well. She could also read and write.

Mary also taught Phillis astronomy, history, math, poetry, geography, and Latin. Phillis was like a sponge. She soaked up all the knowledge she could.

▶ People thought the things Phillis accomplished were amazing. At that time, most Americans thought that Africans could not learn as well as white colonists. Some people believed that Africans could not learn at all. Of course, these people rarely tried to teach enslaved Africans.

▶ Phillis Wheatley proved many people were wrong. She worked very hard at her studies. She wanted to learn. She soon had a better education than many free girls in the colonies did.

▶ Phillis Wheatley was eager to learn all she could.





 Phillis Wheatley did not eat at the same table with the other guests.

 Phillis faced obstacles to becoming educated. But she succeeded. Social obstacles were a bigger problem. Sometimes wealthy Boston families invited Phillis to their homes. At these gatherings, people talked with Phillis about many topics. But, because Phillis was black, she was not allowed to eat at the same table with the other guests.

 At the same time, Phillis was not allowed to speak freely with other enslaved people. One day, Susanna Wheatley sent an enslaved man named Prince to get Phillis. When they arrived at home, Mrs. Wheatley learned that Phillis had sat with Prince on the carriage driver's seat. Mrs. Wheatley became angry with Prince. She said Phillis should have been inside the carriage. Eventually Phillis did become friends with another enslaved girl, Obour Tanner. But Phillis must have felt trapped between two worlds.

A Poet Is Born

Phillis Wheatley loved to write. By the time she was 12, she was writing letters. She exchanged letters with the smartest people in Boston. Phillis began to write poetry as well. At first, she **mimicked** the style of writing of a favorite writer, English poet Alexander Pope.

 **Alexander Pope** (1688–1744) was famous for writing “heroic couplets.” In this style of writing, poets tell a story with pairs of rhyming lines.

*“In Wit, as Nature, what affects our hearts
Is not th’ exactness of peculiar parts;
'Tis not a lip, or eye, we beauty call,
But the joint force and full result of all.”*

This example of heroic couplets comes from Alexander Pope’s “An Essay on Criticism.”

 One day, two friends visited the Wheatleys. The friends were Mister Hussey and Mister Coffin. They came from Nantucket Island. During dinner, the men told the story of their trip to Boston. The ship had almost sunk in a storm. The men had almost died. Phillis listened closely to their story. A few days later, she wrote a poem about the story. Susanna Wheatley liked the poem. She sent it to a newspaper editor. The editor also liked the poem. In 1767,

the newspaper printed “On Messrs. Hussey and Coffin.” It was Phillis’s first published poem. She was just 14 years old.

Phillis continued to write poetry. She wrote poems about events that led to the American Revolution. She wrote about the Stamp Act. With this act, Britain taxed American colonists for printed paper. Many colonists felt that the tax was unfair. Phillis also wrote a poem about the Boston Massacre. At this event, British soldiers shot at protesters. Another poem was about a boy who was killed by a British Loyalist.

Phillis Wheatley wrote a poem about how Mister Hussey and Mister Coffin almost died at sea in a storm.



“Suppose the groundless Gulph had snatch’d away
Hussey and Coffin to the raging Sea”

— *Phillis Wheatley*



Phillis Wheatley summons, or thinks of, new ideas for a poem.

The Book

The teachings of George Whitefield were important to Phillis Wheatley. Whitefield was a minister in England. He wrote that slavery was wrong. Whitefield traveled to America. He shared his ideas throughout New England. Mrs. Wheatley met him. She agreed with his ideas. When Whitefield died, Phillis wrote a poem about him. Many people in both England and America thought the poem was beautiful. In London, the poem was read by the Countess of Huntingdon, who supported Whitefield. The countess was grateful to Phillis for her kind words about Whitefield. Suddenly, Phillis became an internationally famous poet. Susanna Wheatley felt it was time to publish a book of Phillis's poems.

 It was difficult for any writer to publish a book in the 1770s. But it was even more difficult for Phillis Wheatley to publish her poems. No publisher believed an enslaved person could write such poems. Susanna Wheatley decided to **organize** a group of important people in Boston. They would say that Phillis did write the poems.

 Phillis Wheatley met with 18 important men from Boston. Among them was John Hancock, the governor of Massachusetts. He would later sign the Declaration of Independence. We do not know exactly what happened at this meeting. But Phillis must have done a good job. All the men signed the letter that said she wrote the poems. She would soon publish a book.

 This is part of the letter that said Phillis had written the poems.

 *“...The Poems specified in the following Page[s] were (as we verily believe) written by PHILLIS, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought... from Africa, and has ever since been, and now is, under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town.”*

Journey to England

Even with the letter, no American would publish a poetry book by an enslaved person. So Susanna Wheatley wrote to the Countess of Huntingdon. The countess agreed to pay for the book to be published in London. This was not the most **efficient** way of publishing a book. But Susanna Wheatley wanted Phillis to succeed. So Phillis boarded a ship. The Wheatleys' son went with her. The ship went to England. The English welcomed Phillis, even though she was still enslaved. England's most important families wanted to meet Phillis. She was even supposed to meet King George III!

 But before Phillis could meet the king, she got a message from Boston. Susanna Wheatley was dying. Phillis got on the first ship home.

Susanna Wheatley died in the spring of 1774. She lived to see Phillis publish a book. Mrs. Wheatley was modest to the end of her life. She asked Phillis not to write a poem about her death.

 Phillis did not write a poem about Susanna Wheatley's death. But we know that Phillis was very sad. She wrote to a friend about her sadness. "I have lately met with a great trial in the death of my mistress... I was treated by her more like a child than her servant."

🔊 Before his wife’s death, John Wheatley freed Phillis from slavery. Phillis had overcome many challenges. She was the first enslaved female African to publish a book. And now she was a free woman as well.

🔊 *The General Will See You Now*

As Phillis Wheatley sat in George Washington’s waiting room, perhaps she thought of these events in her life. Then Phillis was called in to see General Washington. Everyone else in the room had to wait. Phillis and Washington might have talked about the war, books, or Phillis’s poetry. We don’t know for sure. Washington spent half an hour with her. Later, he only spent a few moments with other important guests. From this, we can guess that the conversation between “the father of our country” and “the mother of African American literature” must have been very interesting.



The End of an Amazing Life

The Revolutionary War was hard for colonists. It was especially hard for Phillis Wheatley. People spent their money on food and shelter. They did not have money for poetry books. Phillis continued writing, but earned little money. Mr. Wheatley provided a home for her until his death in 1778. Then Phillis married. Her husband was a free black grocer. He made some bad business deals. Phillis had to work as a housemaid. This was a kind of work she never did for the Wheatleys. Phillis Wheatley died, very poor, at the age of 31.

 This statue of Phillis Wheatley is in Boston.



Phillis Wheatley's Life

- 1753 — Phillis Wheatley is born in Africa.
- 1761 — Phillis is kidnapped, brought to America, and sold into slavery.
- 1765 — Phillis writes to important people in Boston.
- 1767 — Phillis's first poem is printed.
- 1770 — Phillis writes a poem on the death of George Whitefield.
- 1773 — Phillis's book of poems is published in London.
- 1774 — Susanna Wheatley dies. Phillis is freed from slavery by John Wheatley.
- 1776 — Phillis meets General George Washington.
- 1778 — John Wheatley dies.
- 1784 — Phillis Wheatley dies.

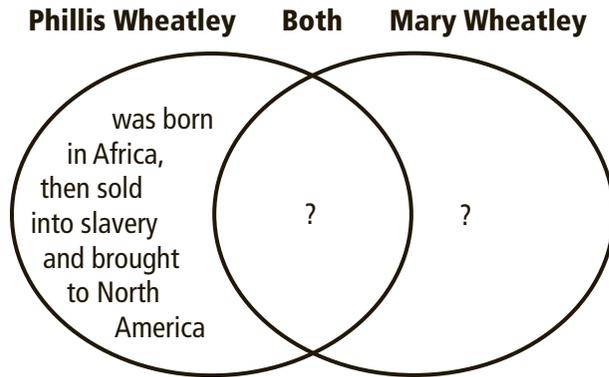
Responding



TARGET SKILL

Compare and Contrast

How were Phillis Wheatley and Mary Wheatley alike? How were they different? Copy and complete the diagram below.



Write About It

Text to Text Think about another selection you have read that tells about a writer or poet. Write a few paragraphs telling about that person's life.

**TARGET VOCABULARY**

efficient
lacked
mimic
mocking
organize

peal
personally
rural
summons
tedious

**TARGET SKILL** **Compare and Contrast** Examine how two or more details or ideas are alike and different.**TARGET STRATEGY** **Monitor/Clarify** As you read, notice what isn't making sense. Find ways to figure out the parts that are confusing.**GENRE** **Narrative Nonfiction** gives factual information by telling a true story.

Level: T

DRA: 44

Genre:

Narrative Nonfiction

Strategy:

Monitor/Clarify

Skill:

Compare and Contrast

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