



Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London: Printed for A. Bell, 1773). Image Courtesy of the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation.

Phillis Wheatley was born in Senegal on the West African coast in 1753. She was sold into slavery at age seven and sent to America. John and Susannah Wheatley purchased Phillis at a slave market in Boston in 1761 and Phillis became an enslaved laborer in their household. The Wheatleys made the unconventional decision to teach Phillis to read and write and Phillis began writing poetry in 1767.

As Phillis saw the American Revolution develop in Boston, she was drawn to the patriots' struggle. In 1768, she wrote a poem celebrating the repeal of the hated Stamp Act. In 1772, she decided to publish a book of poems. John Wheatley sent her collection to a bookseller in London. The bookseller sent it to the Countess of Huntingdon, an anti-slavery advocate, who supported the book and also said that Phillis' portrait should be on the cover. Scipio Moorhead, an enslaved man, inked the front page of the book, titled *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. Phillis became an instant success on both sides of the Atlantic. She also became the first enslaved person, the first Black person, and the third woman in the American colonies to publish a book of poems. The Wheatleys emancipated Phillis shortly after.



In 1775, Phillis published a poem addressed to General George Washington. In it, she portrayed Washington as a champion of freedom. After the war, Phillis maintained her devotion to the cause of liberty. In 1784, a year after the formal peace with Britain, Phillis published "Liberty and Peace," her ode to victory. On December 5, 1784, Phillis Wheatley died at the age of 31. In the years after her death, abolitionists and others looked back with awe at the legacy of her poems.