

Pass It On®...

How an African American Woman Wrote her Way to Freedom.

The story of Phillis Wheatley and how she overcame the scrutiny of 18 men deemed “the most respectable characters in Boston” to publish a book of poetry that lives on today

Phillis Wheatley was sold into bondage at the age of 7 in the area of Senegal and Gambia. She made her way to Boston on a slave ship called the Phillis, and thus that became her first name. She was sold to a merchant named John Wheatley, who needed a servant for his wife, hence her last name, Wheatley.

Phillis showed incredible intellectual abilities and was tutored by Susanna Wheatley, the merchant's wife, who educated her in several languages. Phillis was particularly fond of poetry and at the age of 12 began reading the English poet Alexander Pope. She loved his writing. She loved the beauty of words and their multiple meanings and the way, when strung together, they create deep emotions. So she began writing her own poems, and at age 13, became the first published African American poet. The year was 1767.

Phillis Wheatley became the symbol of anti-slavery for abolitionists who pointed to her literary prowess, yet no publishers would take on the project of her anthology. That is, until she traveled to England with the Wheatleys, and several wealthy patrons took interest in her work. One publisher committed to publish her work if it could be proven that Phillis was actually the author.

Upon her return home, a jury of 18 literary men were chosen to judge whether or not the 18-year-old African American woman was a fraud. Imagine being put on trial for the works of your heart. Phillis captured the fire of existence and creativity in bondage. “Imagination! who can sing thy force?/Or who describe the swiftness of thy course?” she wrote.

The panel of “men of respectable character” were impressed in their interviews with Phillis Wheatley. She won them over, and her anthology was published as “Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral.”

Soon after its publication, the Wheatleys emancipated Phillis, yet her career was interrupted by the Revolutionary War. She wrote of George Washington: “Proceed, great chief, with virtue on thy side Thy every action let the goddess guide.”

The words we choose can be inspiring to those around us. They uplift and provide a higher voice that guides us to places yet to be imagined.

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