

Phillis Wheatley

by Simonetta Carr

with Illustrations by Matt Abraxas



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Phillis Wheatley

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Cover artwork by Matt Abraxas

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The letter from Phillis Wheatley to Obour Tanner is in the public domain. It has been slightly edited to make it more accessible for young readers.

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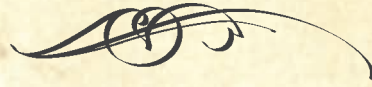
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MAP CREATED BY TOM CARROLL

When she was about seven years old, Phillis traveled from West Africa to Boston as a slave. Thirteen years later, she traveled from Boston to London as a famous poet.

Introduction



None of the people who watched seven-year-old Phillis disembarking a slave ship at Boston, Massachusetts, could have imagined that she would become the first published African American woman, changing some of the mistaken opinions many people in Europe and the American colonies still held about Africans.

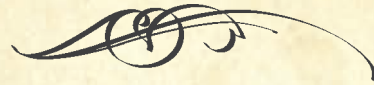
They also never could have imagined that the same frightened and hesitant girl would one day write poems to King George III, George Washington, and other important leaders, encouraging them to protect their people and grant them freedom. And she meant freedom for all people—Black and White.



Phillis Wheatley, in an engraving probably done by eighteenth-century African American artist Scipio Moorhead

CHAPTER ONE

Kidnapped



There are no records of Phillis Wheatley's childhood. We don't even know her name at birth or where and when she was born. One of her poems suggests she grew up happy in her African homeland with a family who loved her—that is, until 1760, when she was kidnapped, probably by some Africans paid by European traders.

At that time, the people of Africa didn't consider themselves citizens of a united continent. They saw themselves as members of different tribes and were often at war with each other. For this reason, it was easy for European traders to find Africans who were willing to kidnap people of other tribes in exchange for some goods.

A view of Senegal, on the west coast of Africa. Most likely, Phillis lived somewhere around the west coast.

JEAN-MARIE, FLICKR



In 1760 Phillis was kidnapped, probably by some Africans paid by European traders.

To do their trading, Europeans preferred to stay on the coast, where they had fewer chances of contracting the diseases that were common on the African continent and for which they had no immunity. Besides, Africans knew the region much better and raised less attention when they approached a village to take captives. Once they kidnapped enough people, these paid Africans made their captives walk to the coast to meet the European traders.

The man who took Phillis and other slaves on his ship was a captain named Peter Gwinn. He had been commissioned by an American merchant, Timothy Finch, to buy about one hundred “prime slaves” from local traders in exchange for 2,640 gallons of rum (a strong alcoholic beverage) and other goods.



RICHARD ORR, FLICKR

Bracelet made of copper alloy and identified as “no longer used slave-bracelet.” Bracelets like this were often used instead of money. This particular one seems to have been worn, even though it seems too small for an adult wrist.

Finch had repeatedly told Gwinn to buy as few women and girls as possible. His first choice was strong men who could perform hard work. Somehow, Gwinn included little Phillis in the group of slaves he took to America. He might have taken her on board around the end of his journey down the west coast of Africa. Years later, Phillis recognized this as part of God's plan.

Slaves were usually packed tightly on ships and had hardly any air to breathe. Being a harmless child, Phillis might have enjoyed a little more freedom of movement. The trip to America took about 240 days. When the ship arrived in Boston at the end of the journey, only seventy-four of the ninety-five slaves who were with Phillis were alive. It was a traumatic experience for a young girl.

This slave trade memorial in Zanzibar, East Africa, was built to remind viewers of the evils of the slave trade.

KEVIN H., FLICKR



TO BE SOLD & LET
BY PUBLIC AUCTION at 11 o'Clock
On the ~15th day of July, 1820
UNDER THE TREES
FOR SALE
FIVE
SLAVES.

TOBIAS about 28 Years old, a good House Servant.
HANNIBAL about 20 Years old, a Labourer.
JOSHUA about 40 Years old, a Excellent Fisherman.
ABRAHAM about 25 Years old, Strong and Healthy.
ELIZA a Young Woman, used to House Work and the Nursery.

All the above SLAVES belonging to a Local Plantation

TO BE LET
On the usual Conditions of the Hirer finding them in Food, Clothing, and ~
Medical Attendance
MALE and FEMALE
SLAVES,
of Good Character ~ from other Districts ~

LUTHER about 30 Years old, a Labourer.
WILLIAM about 37 Years old, an Excellent House Servant.
HARRY about 24 Years old, and Strong in Limb
FANNY an Excellent Washerwoman.
LUCY about 14 Years old, House Servant.
SARAH a Good House Servant and Nurse.
NANCY about 16 Years old, Servant.
CLARA about 20 Years old, a Good Cook

Also for Sale, A quantity of Fine Silk & Other Goods.

We don't know if Phillis was sold on the ship or in the harbor. In any case, she probably didn't attract many buyers. Small and frail, she didn't seem fit for work. But John and Susanna Wheatley saw some potential in this little girl.

Phillis was missing her front teeth, and this might have reminded them of their daughter Sarah, who had died a few years earlier when she was seven. They assumed this young girl was the same age. They called her Phillis, after the name of the ship that had brought her to America.

This auction sign, posted in 1820 in Gambia, shows that slavery continued in some countries long after Phillis Wheatley's life.

DAVID AND CHERYL MARSHALL, FLICKR



Small and frail, Phillis didn't seem fit for work.