



Phillis Wheatley and the Countess of Huntingdon

As we celebrate Black History Month, we look at Phillis Wheatley - the earliest African-American woman poet to be published - and one of her key patrons: the Countess of Huntingdon.



Images from *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, by Phillis Wheatley (1773) – reproduced with the permission of the Trustees of Cheshunt Foundation, Westminster College, Cambridge

This picture, showing Phillis sitting at her desk, quill in hand, is from the frontispiece of her 1773 book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*.

Born in West Africa, she was stolen and enslaved aged seven or eight, and taken to America in 1761. Here she was bought by John Wheatley, a tailor, who lived in Boston, and his wife Susannah. Although the Wheatleys did not free Phillis, they did provide her with an unusually varied and deep education, and encouraged her as she began writing poetry.

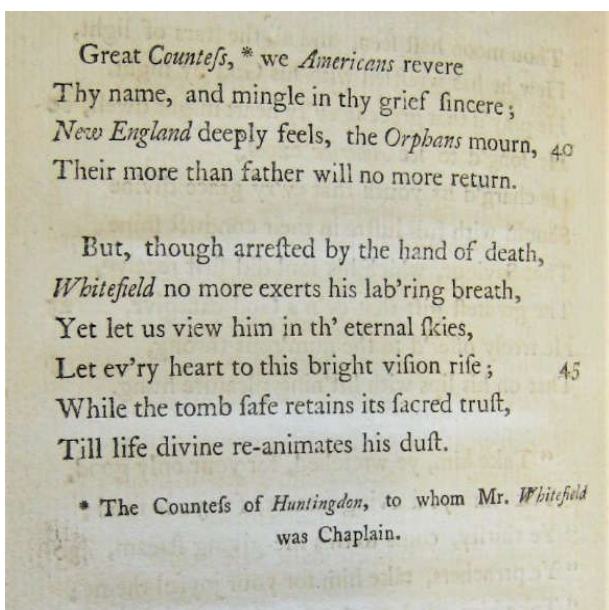
The introduction to her book included a letter to the publisher from John Wheatley, to say how fast she had learned. “Without any Assistance from School Education, and by only what she was taught in the Family, she, in sixteen Months Time from her Arrival, attained the English Language, to which she was an utter Stranger before, to such a Degree, as to read any, the most difficult Parts of the Sacred Writings, to the great Astonishment of all who heard her.”

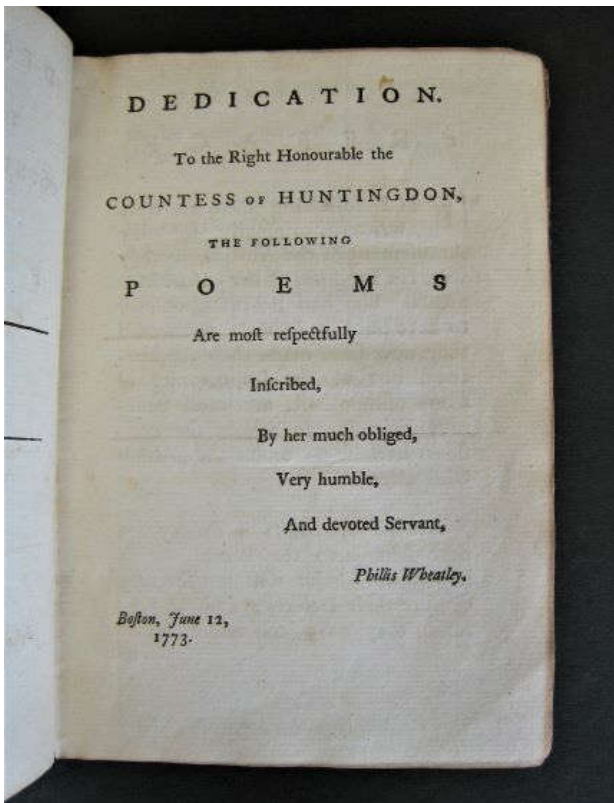
One of Phillis Wheatley’s earliest and most famous poems was written on the death of George Whitefield, who – though English – owned an estate at Bethesda, in Georgia. Whitefield was Chaplain to the Countess of Huntingdon, and when he died, he left his American estate to the Countess in his will.

Phillis Wheatley addressed the poem in part to the Countess of Huntingdon, saying:

**“Great Countess, we Americans revere
Thy name, and mingle in thy grief sincere;
New England deeply feels, the Orphans mourn,
Their more than father will no more return.”**

(The reference to ‘the Orphans’ comes from Whitefield’s Orphan House at Bethesda, designed to a school and refuge for forty or so orphans.)





After public interest in this poem, the Wheatleys tried to organise subscribers for a published volume of Phillis's poetry. It proved impossible in America – so they asked the Countess of Huntingdon for help, and she agreed. When *Poems on Various Subjects* by Phillis Wheatley was published in 1773, it was dedicated to the Countess.

The copy of Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects* in our special collections is the one owned by the Countess of Huntingdon, as can be seen from the Countess's own personal bookplate inside the front cover.

Because the Cheshunt Archives include a collection of over 2,000 letters sent to the Countess of Huntingdon, as well as Phillis's book we also have three letters from Phillis Wheatley to the Countess of Huntingdon. In the letters, Phillis thanks the Countess for acting as a patron and for allowing the book of Phillis's poems to be dedicated to her; and tries (unsuccessfully) to arrange a meeting with the Countess. You can read these letters in the [Journal Of Negro History Vol 57 No 2 \(1972\)](#).



Phillis Wheatley was freed in 1778, and married John Peters, a free Black man, the same year. But life was very harsh for the free Black population, and John was not always able to find work: the family lived in poverty and their three children died in infancy.

In the uncertainty of war in the years immediately following the Declaration of Independence, Phillis was unable to raise subscriptions or find patrons to publish her second volume of poetry. She died in 1784, aged just 31.

Helen Weller, Archivist
October 2019

Bibliography and Further Reading:

"Phillis Wheatley: the First Published African-American Poet", by Abdul Rob, for Black History Month UK (Feb 2016)

<https://www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk/article/section/bhm-heroes/phillis-wheatley-the-first-published-african-american-poet/>

"Phillis Wheatley, 1753-1784", by Sondra A O'Neale, for the Poetry Foundation (2019)

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/phillis-wheatley>

"Letters of Phillis Wheatley and Susanna Wheatley" by Sara Dunlap Jackson, in *The Journal of Negro History* Vol 57. No. 2 (Apr 1972) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2717232>

"Lady Huntingdon, Religion and Race" by John R Tyson, in *Methodist History* 50: 1(Oct 2011) <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/c213/8bbd2a2064bdf5d7621ceff0f4a98ce4c57d.pdf>