



BACKGROUND

Phillis Wheatley was the first African American to publish a book of poetry. Born in West Africa, probably in 1753, she was enslaved in 1761 and brought to Boston. There she was purchased by a local merchant, John Wheatley. He named the little girl Phillis, and she became the personal assistant of his wife, Susannah. Phillis learned to read and write English very quickly, and the Wheatley family tutored her in Latin, Greek, English literature, and the classics. Wheatley was quickly recognized as a prodigy, and respect for her talents grew. She published her first poem at age 13 in 1767. The poem was about two men who nearly drowned at sea, and it was printed in the Newport Mercury.

ON BEING BROUGHT FROM AFRICA TO AMERICA

by Phillis Wheatley



Wheatley went on to publish a number of other poems, increasing her fame, and by 1770 her work was known throughout the colonies.

In 1773, Wheatley published her first and only book of verse, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. To prove she was the actual author of the book, 17 men who lived in Boston, including John Hancock, had to verify that Wheatley wrote the poems. Their assertions appear in the preface of the book.

Poems on Various Subjects is considered a landmark achievement in U.S. history. With its publication, Wheatley became the first African American and first U.S. slave to publish a book of poems. She also became the third American woman to do so.

Phillis was given her freedom after Susannah Wheatley's death in 1774. In 1778, she married John Peters. They had three children together—all died in infancy. The couple fell into extreme poverty, and Phillis was forced to work as a maid. Phillis Wheatley died in her early 30s in 1784.