

Women in Black History

Stories of Courage, Faith, and Resilience

Tricia Williams Jackson



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A Word to the Reader

The fourteen African-American women you are about to meet were real women. They walked the same earth you and I walk, and they made their unique mark upon it. You've heard of some of them, and some of them will be new names to you. Several of them started their lives in slavery. Most started their lives in poverty. Some overcame both of those conditions, some overcame physical disability, some overcame obstacles put in their way by society.

The earliest woman in this book was born in 1753—before the American Revolution took place—and the most recent woman was born in 1940—before the Civil Rights movement made positive changes for African Americans. Each woman accomplished so much, particularly for the times in which she lived. Each in her own way believed in God's plan for her life—the reason she felt she was on this earth—even when the rest of the world threw roadblocks in her path.

With their unique gifts, a goal in mind, and faith to bolster their spirits, these fourteen women rose to heights nobody could possibly have imagined. Speaking before millions. Traveling the world. Writing for publication. Setting records in athletics. Starting schools. Marching for their rights and for the rights of others. Performing for kings and queens. Even becoming a friend to a US president. And always paving the way for the next woman.

Why is it so important to read about these remarkable women from long ago? Because they inspire us to think larger and broader than we ordinarily would about our own lives. They inspire us to wonder why we are here and to find out what God has in mind for us to do. And they inspire us to think beyond ourselves to the larger world.

You will read about terrible things done to some of these women—the worst kinds of physical violence, verbal abuse, emotional abuse, and discrimination. But here’s the thing they all had in common: they would not hate. Eventually each woman forgave the person, the people, the society—whatever burdened her. Then she moved on to do what she could to repair the world around her.

While each woman forgave, did she also forget? Not exactly—because she knew there must be justice. She also knew she had to pave a way for those who followed her, to help the next sister open a door that had been closed. And again, through it all, our fourteen women simply refused to hate. They are powerful examples for us all.

When I was in Sunday school, I often was told, “Remember, you are the only Bible some people will ever read.” That’s how these women lived. Most of them were not workers for a church—some could not even read—but each woman lived her faith. To those around her, she often exemplified a life guided by the love of Christ.

You will see in their stories that I refer to these great women by their first names. But if I were standing before them today, I would not speak to them by their first names—it would not be appropriate. I would address each woman as Miss, Mrs., Doctor—whichever title applies—followed by her last name. That would show my respect. But since I want to tell you their stories from childhood on, I chose to use their first names.

One more thing to keep in mind: thanks to the internet, we live in a world where it’s easy to access information. We need to remember, however, that while the internet is handy, its information is not always accurate. And the farther back in history we go, the harder it is to get facts. Sometimes I had

A WORD TO THE READER

to choose between conflicting details about a woman's life. So I chose what seemed to make the most sense or what revealed the clearest truth.

I have enjoyed getting to know these fourteen women. It was a privilege to read and write about them. Now I'm eager to introduce you, the reader, to each one . . .

Tricia Williams Jackson



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1

Phillis Wheatley

(1753–1784)

Imagination! Who can sing thy force?

Phillis Wheatley

On a chilly, overcast morning in 1761, the Boston slave market buzzed with activity. White Bostonians crowded around a stage to participate in something all too common in colonial America. They gathered to purchase human beings straight off the boats from Africa to become their personal slaves or to resell them to other white people for slaves.

Several dozen black Africans, including children, stood in a line across the stage and shivered in the damp bay air. Their ankles were chained together. Even the children wore special chains to fit their small ankles. Exhausted and filthy from the long ocean trip, these people had barely survived crossing

the Atlantic Ocean. They had been chained in the belly of a slave ship called *The Phillis*. Some of their shipmates had not survived. All of that had been horrible enough. But what was going to happen next?

A thin child from the country of Senegal stood barefoot on the stage. Her ankle chains rubbed her skin. After so long at sea, she felt wobbly standing on land, but she held her ground. She wore a dirty, frayed dress too big for her and a headscarf that once had been brightly colored; now it was dirty from the journey.

The child spoke no English, so she didn't understand a thing the throngs of people around her said. Everything was new and frightening—the shouting of the strangely clothed white men moving swiftly around her, the noisy jostling of the huge horses, the buildings taller than any she'd ever seen. She was shaken by the way the men milling about looked at her and sized her up for purchase, the same way her mother back home might size up chickens at the open-air market. She was even more shaken by the despair on the faces of her adult African shipmates standing with her on the auction block. The child looked around in silent panic.

Weeks before, she had been kidnapped from her village and her family in western Africa, torn from the only home she knew at the tender age of eight. Now, here in the New World, in Boston, Massachusetts, the child could not communicate anything to the people in charge—not her name, not the name of her village, nothing at all. She felt helpless and afraid.

Suddenly, all eyes were on her. She froze as a big man stood behind her, placed his hand on the top of her head, and shouted at the crowd. Men in the crowd called back and forth to the man, and after a time, the man behind her stepped to the side and began shouting again. All eyes moved off the child to the next person in line on the slave block.

By the time the long, confusing day was over, the little Senegalese girl was so tired she could hardly stand. Her chains were removed and left behind. Then she found herself tucked into a horse-drawn carriage and en route to what was to be her new home. She had been purchased by a white man by

the name of Mr. John Wheatley, and he and his driver hurried them through the streets as the sun went down.

The carriage stopped at a very large house with many windows, and the child was led inside. The woman of the house, Susanna Wheatley, was powdery white and wearing a dress that made swishing noises when she moved. She smiled at the child while speaking with her husband in their strange language, and she seemed kind. Then the child was taken away by a black woman in white people's clothing who also did not speak anything understandable but was kind and gentle. She helped the child into a hot water bath, dried her with a large towel, slipped an oversized white nightgown over her head, then tucked her into the first bed of the child's young life. Once the child adjusted to the softness of the bed, she slept long and hard.

The next morning, the little girl from Senegal was given new clothes and a name: Phillis Wheatley, her first name after the slave ship that had brought her to America's shores and her last name after the man who had purchased her. It was the custom at the time for a slaveholder to give his last name to the enslaved.

That day, as little Phillis looked around her new setting and felt stiff shoes on her feet for the first time in her life, she knew everything for her was changed forever. In her heart, something shut down. From that day on, it would be as if her life before the ocean journey had never happened; she would never recall her original name after this day. In fact, for the rest of her life, she would remember nothing of her beginning years in Senegal except one vivid image: a sunny African morning in which she watched her tall, willowy mother pour water from a jug.



Phillis Wheatley was born in Senegal, probably in 1753, and like so many west coast Africans in that time was kidnapped to be shipped to America and sold. Slavery in America was the horrible trade of selling human beings—even children and babies—to become slaves to white people. Forced from their

homes in Africa and onto wooden ships, black people were then chained in the hold for a dangerous, horrific trip across the Atlantic. Many died on the way, and those who survived often arrived sickly from bad food and lack of fresh air. They would never again see their homes, and most of them would never again be free.

Although Phillis survived the journey, her health suffered greatly on the way. A naturally slender child, she was underweight at the time she was sold, and potential buyers probably thought she was ill. So under the circumstances, Phillis fared better than her shipmates by being purchased by John Wheatley, a wealthy Boston merchant in these days of British rule of the colonies. He purchased her to be a personal maid to his wife, which meant the child would be indoors, well fed, and not forced to work in the fields.

But things turned out even better than that for the little girl. Mrs. Wheatley could see right away that the child was exhausted and ill, so she immediately set to nursing her back to health. And when Susanna Wheatley looked into the child's eyes, she was immediately drawn to her soul. She did not see a slave; she saw a young, intelligent human being.

In spite of the initial language barrier, Susanna Wheatley became aware that this child was quite brilliant. In a time when slaves were never educated—in fact, educating them would become illegal—little Phillis quickly learned to speak proper English, and then she learned to read and write.

John and Susanna Wheatley had eighteen-year-old twins at the time of Phillis's arrival, Mary and Nathaniel, who were also charmed by the thin little African girl. It was Mary who first started teaching Phillis reading and writing, with some help from Nathaniel. Then mother Susanna stepped in and took over, teaching the child as fast as she could learn. The Wheatleys enjoyed teaching this bright child, and the fact that she was a black African child probably made the endeavor more interesting to the family.

This kind of treatment was highly unusual in those times, but John and Susanna decided that nobody would tell them how to handle their household. They certainly believed in slavery; they had many slaves working as servants.



Creation smiles in
various beauty gay
While day to night, and
night succeeds day.

—*Phillis Wheatley*



But Phillis did not work. She never did become a maid for Mrs. Wheatley. She became more like an adopted family member. She had her own room in the Wheatley mansion, dined at the family table, and was not required to do any work in the house. She attended church with the Wheatleys at the Old South Meeting House in Boston. She accepted Christ into her heart and was baptized in the Old South Meeting House in 1771.

As Phillis grew, she was almost always with white people. In an apparent desire to keep Phillis somehow different from other black people, the Wheatleys did not want her to associate with other slave children. So Phillis did not have many playmates, with one exception. Phillis developed a relationship with one little friend also from Africa named Obour Tanner. Obour had also been purchased by a family who treated her kindly, though they were not as accepting as the Wheatleys. Around Boston, Phillis would be referred to by

others as a Wheatley “servant,” but this was more polite than true; by law, Phillis was still a slave.

By the time she was age twelve (and some sources say age nine), Phillis was most likely the best educated female in Boston—even more educated than the Wheatley women. Phillis not only studied classic literature, geology, history, astronomy, and the Bible, but she could read Greek and Latin. She was so bright that the family liked to show her off to visitors. Most colonists didn’t believe a nonwhite person, much less a female, could be so intellectually accomplished. But seeing was believing. When Phillis began writing poetry, eventually even getting it published, Bostonians were more amazed.

Phillis Wheatley loved writing poetry. It soothed her sensitive spirit, and she found a thrill in developing a beautiful, musical piece of structured writing—that is, a poem. When she was twelve, her first poem was published in the newspaper *Newport Mercury*. She wrote poems with Christian themes and ideas, and she also liked writing elegies, which are often poems written to honor the dead. She seldom wrote about herself, though she wrote eloquently about her observations and beliefs.

Her best-known poem is one she wrote in 1770 about coming to America to be enslaved and what that ultimately meant to her.

On Being Brought from Africa to America

’Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there’s a God, that there’s a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
“Their colour is a diabolic die.”
Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,
May be refin’d and join th’angelic train.

In this poem, Phillis expresses herself in the manner people wrote in those days by using formal language and rhymed lines. The poem talks about her Christianity and her gratitude for it. She calls it a “mercy” that she was kidnapped from her “Pagan land” because it led her to her faith. Some modern readers today find the poem offensive, as if Phillis were making slavery somehow good. But it’s best to take it as she meant it—that through Christ a great good can come out of a horrible bad.

Besides, in her lifetime Phillis would write plenty against slavery. Even in this poem, she says: “Some view our sable race with scornful eye.” This is where Phillis gently scolds racist readers who believed black people could not be Christians—a common belief of the day when many white people saw black people as not fully human and not even possessing a soul. Regardless of any controversy, readers realized it was a masterful poem.

Phillis eventually challenged herself by writing poetry about the events of the day. These were the years colonists lived in America before the Revolutionary War. When war issues became more heated, Phillis wrote a poem praising King George III of England. But as the revolutionary energy in New England grew stronger, she found things at home to write about. In the days just before the American Revolution, there was plenty going on in Boston!

News of this fine young poet spread around New England. Then, in 1772, young Phillis was taken in front of a committee of eighteen male judges to discuss her poetry and to determine if they should publish a book of her poems. The men were very impressed with the poetry, but they could not believe such writing could come from a woman or a black person, much less both in one young person. They simply did not believe she wrote her poems. So they did not publish them.

Nevertheless Susanna Wheatley continued to encourage young Phillis in her poetry writing. Susanna made sure Phillis had plenty of paper and ink for her quill pen. Often she took Phillis out to meet influential people of the times, including Ben Franklin.

Phillis and the Wheatleys' son Nathaniel traveled to England. Since her landing in Boston, Phillis had always been frail, suffering chronically from an ailment that was either asthma or tuberculosis. The Wheatley family doctor suggested she take this trip for her health. Given the danger and discomfort of sea voyages then, one might wonder why he would suggest such a thing. But in those days, salt sea air was seen as truly beneficial to one's health, especially if one were, as they said then, "delicate." Phillis was delicate indeed. A change of scenery was also seen as helpful for the sickly.

So she prepared to take the long journey with both joy and trepidation. She had always wanted to meet England's King George, the subject of one of her poems. She mostly wanted to see if her poems might be published in England since the American publishing judges did not believe she wrote them.

But it was the first time she had left the shores of America since she had arrived in chains. Her mind did not remember much about that horrible sea journey from Africa, in which she was chained in the hold while all around her people were sick and dying. But she was anxious. What if something happened to the Wheatleys while she was away? It was hard not to worry about the only family, of sorts, that she had. Regardless of her fears, Phillis boarded the ship and made the journey safely to London, England, with Nathaniel Wheatley looking out for her.

Londoners immediately took to this bright and slender young woman, and Phillis was pleasantly surprised by this. She wrote back home that she was pleased with "the unexpected and unmerited civility and complaisance with which I was treated by all." In other words, the people of England liked her very much and treated her with genuine hospitality.

As the year turned over into 1773, Phillis found her success. Her first and only book of poems was published in England. It was the first book ever to be written by a black American woman. Titled *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, the book of thirty-nine poems brought Phillis literary fame in England.

PHILLIS WHEATLEY

By 1774 her book arrived in America to be sold there, and it was advertised immediately. The books sold out and more had to be ordered from England. Phillis was thrilled, and so were the Wheatleys. It was a dream come true.

Susanna Wheatley, who by now considered herself Phillis's adopted mother, took ill that spring, and Phillis hurried back to America to assist her. But Susanna died soon after Phillis's arrival. Before she passed away, she expressed how proud she was that she lived long enough to see Phillis's book published. Devastated by Susanna's death, Phillis funneled her grief into her poetry.

The American Revolution was in full swing by now, and Phillis became a fan of George Washington. In 1776 she wrote him a letter of support and included a poem she had written called "To His Excellency General Washington." Washington was impressed. He called Phillis a "poetical genius," and he invited her to visit him, saying that he would be "happy to see a person so favored by the muses."

In Washington's reply to the poet, he referred to her as "Miss Phillis." This was a surprising show of respect for a black person at the time. They were never referred to as Mr., Mrs., or Miss by a white person. Phillis traveled to meet George Washington, and they met and talked for about half an hour. They remained long-distance fans of one another.

In 1778, only a few years after Susanna died, John Wheatley also died. Very soon after, Mary Wheatley died too. Each death was a great personal loss for Phillis. She also lost her way of life. She had been the member of a wealthy household and had lived an unusually privileged life. Now that household and that life were gone.

Phillis was shaken to the core, living without the people who had literally taken care of her. John's will left Phillis a legally free woman, but she was also left to support herself, something she had never done in her life. In all of her years in America, Phillis had been treated mostly the same as a wealthy white female. Writing paid a little but not often or enough. She did find work as a seamstress, since even fine ladies were taught to use needle and thread. But she was simply unable to make a living sewing clothing for others.

This trouble in earning a living is probably why, three months after Mary's death, Phillis married. Her husband was a free black man named John Peters. He was in business for himself as a grocer, but not successfully, and the two lived in poverty. John Peters also had debt, which was considered a serious legal offense then.

Probably due to Phillis's delicate health, their first two children both died soon after they were born. After the birth of their third child, John was taken away to debtors' prison. Now Phillis was alone with an infant to care for. She and her baby lived in a tiny room in a boardinghouse. Phillis was unable to find publishers to buy her writing anymore, so now she worked off her rent as a maid at the boardinghouse. Nothing in her background at the Wheatley home had prepared her for this life. And her health continued to go downhill.

Life was not kind to Phillis in the end. Poverty, grief, and the aftereffects of childbirth worsened her chronic health problems. In 1784, at age thirty-one, she died in her room in the boardinghouse. A few hours later, her baby died too. Phillis and her baby were buried together in an unmarked grave somewhere in Boston, Massachusetts.

While those final years of Phillis's life were sad ones, today we remember Phillis Wheatley as a fine poet in the early years of our nation. She had many "firsts." She was our first African-American poet. She was the first African-American woman and the first slave to have a published book. And she was the first African American to earn money with her writing. In her life, she wrote over a hundred poems, the last one about George Washington. Some of her poems are forever lost, but many of them were collected after her death, thanks to her husband and some Boston literary collectors.

A lovely bronze statue of the brilliant and elegant Phillis Wheatley can be seen at the Boston Women's Memorial. Her face is serious, her expression thoughtful. It's as if she's composing a poem. Or maybe she's thanking God for the gift of imagination—a gift that could help a spirit soar no matter what.

■ **Think...**

1. What one childhood memory did Phillis Wheatley have of her life in Africa?
2. Phillis came to America before it was officially a nation. When was the American Revolution?
3. Why was Phillis Wheatley's book of poems published in England rather than in Boston?

● **Imagine...**

Young Phillis had her own room in the Wheatley house in Boston. Think about what that room looked like. How many windows? How many books? Can you name any titles?

■ **Get Creative!**

Use pencils or markers to illustrate one of Phillis's windows. What is framed in that window? What is in the sky? What did Boston look like then?