

# 8 FACTS The Life and Legacy of Phillis Wheatley



## 1. Phillis Wheatley was born around 1753.

Though the date and place of her birth is not known with certainty, historians believe that Phillis Wheatley was born in 1753 most likely in present-day Gambia or Senegal in West Africa.

## 3. Phillis Wheatley started writing poetry by the age of thirteen.

By the age of 9, Phillis Wheatley had learned to read and write; and by the age of 12, she had become familiar with Latin and Greek. Wheatley wrote her first poem when she was 13, and from the age of 14, her poems appeared in certain newspapers and periodicals in U.S. and Britain.

## 5. Phillis Wheatley's collection of poetry was published in 1773.

By 1772, Phillis Wheatley had gathered a collection of her poems, and she was looking for a publisher. No American publisher was willing to publish her work. Susanna Wheatley took Phillis with her to England, where, at the time, black authors were more respected. Wheatley's poetry collection was published in London in September 1773.

## 7. Phillis Wheatley made a phenomenal contribution to African American literature.

Phillis Wheatley was not only the first African American to publish a book. But she was also the first African American to achieve an international reputation as a writer.

## 2. Phillis Wheatley was captured in Africa and sold into slavery when she was seven.

Wheatley was sold to a slave trader and brought to Boston, Massachusetts on a slave ship called *The Phillis*. She arrived on July 11, 1761. John and Susanna Wheatley purchased her as a servant and named her Phillis after the ship that brought her to America. Her given name is not known.

## 4. Phillis Wheatley had to prove in court that her poems were her own.

Many white people couldn't believe that it was possible for person who was enslaved to write quality poetry. Influential thinkers and politicians of Boston ultimately conceded that the poems attributed to her were in fact written by Wheatley.

## 6. Phillis Wheatley is the first published African American.

Wheatley's poetry collection was titled *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. Publication of Wheatley's book was a landmark achievement as it made her the first published African American and one of the first women in the U.S. to publish a book.

## 8. Phillis Wheatley's honor lives on.

Phillis Wheatley was honored with a monument at the Boston Women's Memorial on the Commonwealth Avenue in 2003. The monument contains a brief biography and an excerpt from her poem "On Imagination."