

A Poem Links Unlikely Allies in 1775: Phillis Wheatley and George Washington

By James G. Basker

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Frontispiece from Phillis Wheatley's "Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral," 1773. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

One of the most surprising connections of the American Revolutionary era emerged at the very beginning of the war between the African American poet Phillis Wheatley and the commander in chief of the American forces, George Washington. For Wheatley, who arrived in Boston on a slave ship at the age of seven or eight in 1761, nothing might have seemed more improbable than that she would write a lavish poem of praise fourteen years later to Washington, the Virginia plantation owner turned general.

Wheatley had proved herself a prodigy, rapidly mastering English and learning Latin, history, and literature, while also publishing poems in New England periodicals from the age of thirteen. By 1773 she was something of a celebrity, publishing a volume of poems in London and making a literary tour to England that summer, moving her master to manumit her upon her return to America. She was also an ardent supporter of the American independence movement. When the British occupied Boston in the summer of 1775, she and her former master's family, the Wheatleys, withdrew for safety to Providence, Rhode Island.

It was in Providence that Phillis learned of Washington's appointment by the Continental Congress to take command of the American forces in Massachusetts, which he did upon his

arrival in Cambridge in September 1775. In response to the news, she composed a patriotic poem in Washington's honor, later published as "His Excellency General Washington." She sent the poem in manuscript to Washington at his headquarters in Cambridge, across the Charles River from British-occupied Boston. Washington's exuberant reaction might seem surprising to modern readers, remembering him as a slave owner. But it becomes more understandable when one reads the poem itself.¹

Wheatley prefaces her poem with a letter dated October 26, 1775, extolling Washington as "Generalissimo of the armies of North America," famous for his virtues, which, she gushes, "excite sensations not easy to suppress."² Then in a poem of 42 lines, redolent of the heroic style and rhyming couplets of Alexander Pope and other early eighteenth-century poets, Wheatley pours forth tribute and encouragement to the newly minted commander. Elevating America to the mythical status of a personified divine "Columbia," in her opening lines Wheatley emphasizes the themes of freedom and a struggle for independence that the world is watching:

Celestial choir! enthron'd in realms of light,
Columbia's scenes of glorious toils I write.
While freedom's cause her anxious breast alarms,
She flashes dreadful in refulgent arms.
See mother earth her offspring's fate bemoan,
And nations gaze at scenes before unknown!
See the bright beams of heaven's revolving light
Involved in sorrows and veil of night!

(lines 1–8)

Imagining glorious military triumphs far beyond anything Washington and his men would actually experience for many years, Wheatley reaches for a Homeric style, complete with an invocation of the muse:

Muse! bow propitious while my pen relates
How pour her armies through a thousand gates . . .

And then a few lines later:

Thick as leaves in Autumn's golden reign,
Such, and so many, moves the warrior's train.

In bright array they seek the work of war,
Where high unfurl'd the ensign waves in air.
(lines 19–22)

Having praised both Washington and his troops, Wheatley goes on to prophesy a grand if bloody victory for the Americans:

Anon Britannia droops the pensive head,
While round increase the rising hills of dead.
Ah! cruel blindness to Columbia's state!
Lament thy thirst of boundless power too late.
(lines 35–38)

Whether “the rising hills of dead” refers to specific battles such as Bunker Hill or more generally to the inevitable scale of death to come, Wheatley’s defiance of the British and condemnation of their “thirst of boundless power” mark her as one of Revolutionary America’s most outspoken patriotic voices.

Wheatley circles back in her closing lines to focus her attention on Washington himself in terms that might seem, ironically, more monarchical than democratic in a poem celebrating a fight against tyranny:

Proceed, great chief, with virtue on thy side,
Thy ev’ry action let the goddess guide.
A crown, a mansion, and a throne that shine,
With gold unfading, WASHINGTON! be thine.
(lines 39–42)

Fortunately, when he became the first President of the United States in 1789, Washington rejected “crowns” and “thrones” and all the apparatus that would have compromised the republican ideals of the new country.

Wheatley’s letter and poem were delayed in reaching Washington, and when he finally replied on February 28, 1776, he began with a formal apology, begging her forgiveness for “the seeming but not real neglect.”³ After praising her “poetical talents” and thanking her profusely, Washington invited Wheatley to come visit him at his headquarters. Though definitive evidence is lacking, many historians believe Wheatley did travel to Cambridge and met Washington in person, which if true would have been one of the most extraordinary encounters of the entire founding era.

The publication history of the poem is another story altogether. For many years it was widely believed that Wheatley's poem "His Excellency George Washington" was first published in the *Pennsylvania Magazine*, where it did indeed appear in the April 1776 issue (published April 30, 1776). But modern scholars have determined that in fact it was first published a month earlier, in the March 30, 1776, issue of the *Virginia Gazette*. Why would Washington and his advisors want to publish Wheatley's poem in Virginia, where he was universally esteemed, rather than in a state like Massachusetts, where his reputation was more equivocal? By the agency of his staff officer Joseph Reed, who arranged the poem's publication in the *Virginia Gazette*, Washington probably wanted to show his fellow Virginians a former slave who was not only literate, but loyal to the American cause—an astute tactic at a time when Virginia was wracked with fear of slave insurrections, incited by Governor Dunmore's call in November 1775 for slaves to come fight on the British side.⁴ Those Dunmore-incited slave escapes and insurrections would still be haunting fellow Virginian Thomas Jefferson when he drafted the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia in late June 1776.⁵

For obvious reasons, Washington was an unqualified admirer of Wheatley, describing her as "favored by the Muses" and a poet "to whom Nature has been so liberal and beneficent in her dispensations."⁶ But her reputation had its ups and downs. The black British writer Ignatius Sancho admired her writings and felt indignant that she was still a slave—a "Genius in bondage"—when her book of poems was published.⁷ Thomas Jefferson, on the other hand, felt it necessary in 1785 to attack her, denouncing her writings as "below the dignity of criticism."⁸ The French abolitionist Henri Grégoire, in his monumental treatise on black equality published in 1808, raised Phillis Wheatley as the greatest example of black literary talent and achievement in the whole of the eighteenth century.⁹ There were a few editions of her work in the early nineteenth century, such as that edited by Margaretta M. Odell in 1834, but then almost nothing for more than one hundred years, until her works and reputation were revived during the Civil Rights Movement in the late twentieth century.

Wheatley's life, sadly, wound down to a tragic and premature ending. She endured an unhappy marriage, the deaths of two of her three children, poverty, and long illness before dying in 1784, scarcely aged 30. Her poetic writings, however, remain the cornerstone of the African American literary tradition, as well as a major force in the broader history of America.

Her impact on Washington, though subtle, may well have contributed to one of the most important changes in his life. Beginning shortly after his encounter with this extraordinary black poet, Washington, who had heretofore seemed no different from the typical Virginia

slave owner, began to show signs of an evolving attitude about slavery and race. In 1776 he reversed an earlier decision and allowed the enlistment of black soldiers in the American army; in 1779 he supported a plan to free slaves in South Carolina if they fought on the American side; in 1786 he wrote to fellow Virginians such as John Mercer announcing his hope that the legislature would abolish slavery; and in his last will and testament Washington freed the slaves he owned (he could not touch the dowry slaves owned by Martha and her family) and arranged for them to be educated and trained in trades so they could support themselves. Phillis Wheatley's patriotic poem to "His Excellency George Washington" may have had a greater effect on American history than she ever knew.

¹ The Virginia Gazette, March 30, 1776, p. 1, reprinted in *Amazing Grace: An Anthology of Poems about Slavery, 1660–1810*, ed. James G. Basker (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 181–182.

² *Amazing Grace*, 181. All further references are to this edition of "His Excellency General Washington."

³ Letter from George Washington to Phillis Wheatley, February 28, 1776, reprinted in *The Complete Writings of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin, 2001), 187.

⁴ James G. Basker, "'The Next Insurrection': Johnson, Race, and Rebellion," *The Age of Johnson* 11 (2000), 47–51.

⁵ For Jefferson's denunciation of British incitements of slave insurrections in the first draft of the Declaration, see <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/declara/ruffdrft.html>.

⁶ Washington to Wheatley, February 28, 1776, quoted from Carretta, *Complete Writings of Wheatley*, 187.

⁷ Letter from Ignatius Sancho to Mr. Fisher, January 27, 1778, *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, An African*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin, 1998), 112.

⁸ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. Frank Shuffelton (New York: Penguin, 1999), 147.

⁹ Henri Grégoire, *De la littérature des nègres* (Paris, 1808); translated and reprinted as *On the Cultural Achievement of Negroes* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 108–112.

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