

Letters to Phillis Wheatley

Long before your great-great grandparents were born, a little girl named Hannah Wheatley lived her life with her black "Aunt". She sees no color, and learns more about the hardships about life in "Aunt" Phillis's eyes through letters. There is a magical bond between Hannah and her "Aunt" Phillis, and there is nothing to break that bridge.

Most of this is factual, but information about Phillis Wheatley's children's names and marriage is fictional. This story is also not true, but the facts it holds are true. Without further notice, please read: Phillis Wheatley.

I came home from the store to find that Phillis Wheatley, my grandmother's slave, had written to me. My name is Hannah Wheatley and I am five years old. My Mother was considered a sister to Miss Phillis. I carefully opened the envelope and looked at the neat handwriting:

Little Hannah,

July 28, 1769

This is "Aunt" Phillis. I have written to inform you for your school biography, as instructed by your mother. I was born in 1753 in Africa. I was living peacefully and happily when one morning, I was snatched in the hands of a white and taken away. A ship brought me to Boston, and I was put on a low price in a slave market. John and Susannah Wheatley bought me and took me to their house, where I call home. I was taught by Miss Susannah, getting a complete education. But I loved poetry the most. And it became my career.

Little Hannah, I praise you for your hard work and time. This was my childhood, and I wish you a good time until I write again.

*Warm regards,
Phillis Wheatley*

This excited me. Mother gave me some pretty paper and a pencil. I sat down and in my neatest and bestest hand writing:

Dear Aunt Phillis,

August 21, 1769

It's me, Hannah! I thought that your childhood was very interesting. There were not many things about your childhood. I want to know more, because Mrs. Teerink, my teacher, said that I didn't have enough information on your childhood. Please tell me about your teens. But I heard that you have this special thought. Can you explain this thought?

Sincerely,
Hannah Wheatley

I put the letter in the envelope and sealed it shut. Then, I found a stamp and stuck it on. Mother wrote everything else on it. After that, I skipped out and dropped the letter in the mailbox. The next night Aunt Phillis wrote to me again:

My darling Hannah,

September 2, 1769

I received your letter last night. It made me think back to the days where that special thought existed. The thought was of my mother making her daily offering to the sun. This wasn't unusual in Afric'. I prized this thought like a precious jewel in my heart. I was always trying to write letters outside the house with charcoal. After my first poem was published when I was 14 in the Newport Mercury, Miss Susannah was stunned. Her little experiment of teaching a slave had gone beyond her wildest dreams.

Hannah, I have told you my true childhood. You will learn more about my life when I inform you again. Tell me when this project is due, and I shall increase or decrease my speed of the letters.

Good Luck,
Phillis Wheatley



I gasped. Aunt Phillis had just written back, and I already had her whole childhood. I knew that she was only 13... 14... 15...16! I wrote back to her with a small note saying that the project was due in six weeks, and she had to worry, unless, of course, the due date is postponed. I went to the kitchen to get a pretty piece of paper to write a

neater copy on. But Mother stopped me from getting what she calls stationary. She said the mail service had been delayed. So I went to school with the childhood of Aunt Phillis, and Mrs. Teerink said that because she was so young, I had enough of Aunt Phillis's life. But I still wanted to write so I wrote again:

Aunt Phillis,

December 15, 1769

I have completed my project in school now, but I just want to know some more about your life. There is still much to know about your life and knowledge. You seem to be a very interesting person to know about. How are your poems going? Have you heard that a war is forming?

*Love,
Hannah Wheatley*

A few weeks later, a letter from Aunt Phillis arrived in my mailbox. I took it out and read:

Little Hannah,

February 26, 1770

Alas, I have heard from you. The pony express was delayed. I have heard about the war. There are angry mobs on the street hoarsely crying, "Liberty! Property and no stamps!" I have started writing my poems on the violence in the streets of Boston, and sometimes the violence of being a slave. Here is a small excerpt of "'America'" a poem that I wrote.

*She laid some taxes on her darling son
And would have laid another act there on...
Why weeps my child. . .
Thus spake Brittania, thus benign and mild...*

Oh yes, and my inspiration for my poem were simple: an incident that painted a picture in my mind. It was 1765, five years ago. Two men were visiting, and they told a story of a terrifying trip to sea. It painted a picture in my mind of the rolling waves and crashing lightning. I just remembered it, because Miss Susannah and I were just sitting down and talking about happy memories. She says she misses your mother dearly, and that she would like to meet you soon.

I am afraid, because after this letter, I am being taken to a house. The house of the man who was commander of the ship, the Phillis that brought me to this new world.

Back on subject, just recently an angry mob of patriots was surrounding a British house, and the British man came out with a gun and shot into the crowd. A black boy, Christopher Snider, fell dead with a bullet in his chest. He was only eleven years old. I wrote a poem about the secret rage of a senselessly murdered child. I felt uneasy, and I feel for some reason that I will be next. I hope not though, because I will face the hardships in life and become the one and only Phillis Wheatley. I wish you luck, and will wait until we meet again.

*Sincerely,
Phillis Wheatley*

I received the letter a year after it was sent. I guess the pony express really was delayed. But same as it is, I sat down and started to write:

Aunt Phillis,

May 15, 1771

How are you? I just received your letter last night. Mother says violence is happening everywhere, more than ever now. What do you think?

*Love,
Hannah Wheatley*

After that, I received a letter late December. It also came with a package that was a Christmas present. Just to let you know, the day I got the letter and package on my birthday. What a coincidence (Mother taught me that word)! I took the letter opener and gently opened the package. I was a surprise to me to find a small stack of pretty paper, a candlestick, and a jar of pretty blue ink with a quill. I loved it so much; I couldn't believe my eyes. Then I took out the letter. Inside there was a note:

Darling Hannah,

November 16, 1771

Miss Susannah was fuming all right. "If he hasn't the impudence to sit upon the same seat with my Phillis!" she cried as she saw the carriage draw up in front our house. I, who has suffered cold and asthma, was sitting on the driver's seat with Prince in the cold weather.

Miss Susannah frets constantly over my health. Prince was scolded strictly for encouraging me to sit beside him in the cold. I felt bewildered. I was not supposed to

sit on the same carriage bench as a black. I felt like I was midway within two worlds. I would be scolded for sitting with my same race, but I was scolded for also sitting with whites in church. We blacks had a separate area for us to sit and listen.

But I love church. I loved the minister, who believed true Christianity meant love of every one, "orphans, paupers, Indians, and slaves." He spoke that the Christian God saw no color, and it makes me feel free. So when he passed away, his loss made me write a short poem in honor of George Whitefield:

Unhappy we thy setting Sun deplore,
Which once was splendid, but it shines no more.

The poem was published as a pamphlet and read on both sides of the Atlantic—in England and in the colonies. Only seventeen, and I'm became famous.

I read that line over and over again. Yes, I had seen that poem in the newspaper. My Aunt Phillis was FAMOUS! I looked back to see the rest of the letter, but there was no more. Instead, there was only a signature:

*Love,
Phillis Wheatley*

I wrote back to her. And this time I really meant every single thing I wrote:

Dear Aunt Phillis,

January 5, 1772

THANK YOU for the gift. I am starting to use quills, and Mother says that you gave me a beginner's quill. THANK YOU! And I mean it!☺ You are the best Aunt ever!

Hannah Wheatley

I waited for a few months, and then I got a letter in the mail. It was written in a hurry, or in a panic.

Little Hannah,

May 31, 1772

My, my, it was scary. It was a bright spring morning. But inside the courthouse, the air was still cold. Eighteen important men sat in a semicircle, with me standing in the middle. The men were well known. They included John Hancock, Thomas Hutchinson, and Andrew Oliver, the governor of the colony, the lieutenant governor, a merchant, and a distinguished minister.

I was afraid. White strangers again assessed me. I had to prove that I had written all these poems without assistance. Without proof of my education, the poems could not be published in a book. They thought that I had not written this, for I was a black, and black were almost never taught. After a while, convinced, the men wrote that they did, I indeed, believe that the poems were written by "Phillis, a young Negro girl, who was but a few years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa . . . and now is . . . a slave."

Even with this letter of proof, printers in Boston still refused to publish my work. They still believed that Miss Susannah or Mr. John had written these poems themselves. But Miss Susannah would not give up. She had grown to love me as a daughter. She will fight for my right to be published -even if it meant sending me to England.

*Love,
Phillis Wheatley*

I was scared. Aunt Phillis could be sent to England. Oh dear, what a dreadful thing. So for love and hope to her, I sat down and wrote:

Dear Aunt Phillis,

November 4, 1772

How are you? I wish you well and good. Hope you good wishes. I have some new news: Mother doesn't want to keep buying stamps, so she asked to write less often. Is this okay with you? I was upset at first, but I guess it would also save you money.

*Lots of LLW,
Hannah Wheatley*

I sealed it shut, and pressed it under my four-leafed-clover candleplate (a four-leafed-clover stuck onto a giant wax circle. Candle is made of wax, you know) for luck. Then, Mother let me run down the street and drop the letter off. It wasn't until 1774 that I received the next letter. I pulled it out and read:

Hannah,

August, 1, 1773

How are you? I was about to see the king in England, but news told me that Miss Susannah wasn't well. I hurried on home, and left visiting the king behind my mind. In late spring last year, my book, POEMS on Various Subject: Religious and Moral came out.

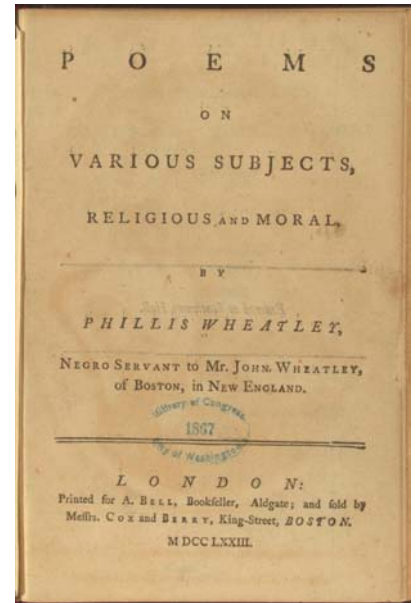
*The book sold well. About three **thousand** copies were placed on order. Miss Susannah was ill. A few weeks later, she passed away. She had lived long enough to see me succeed to her heart. I am free now, but I don't want to leave the house that comforted me for so long. So now, I am writing my poems, and enjoying life as it goes.*

Now I don't have anyone to guide me through this harsh world. I want people to understand my race and see the future in this world.

*Thinking of you,
Phillis Wheatley*

Yes, I had a copy of the book. Mother wanted it very badly, so she placed one on order. We received it last summer.

I ran into the kitchen to give Mother the letter to read. I thought that she might need to know that her mother had passed away last year. When she read it, her eyes started watering, and her body started to tremble. Then, she tried to stop, I think because I was right in front of her. Her eyes started to turn red. Then suddenly she burst out crying. I took one look at Mother crying, and I started to cry too. It was a pitiful sight, and Father was away to meet General Washington about the war and wasn't here to comfort her. Oh yeah, and after we both wiped our tears away, Mother handed me a piece of pretty paper and blew her nose. I took it and ran back to my room and started to write:



Aunt Phillis,

March 22, 1776

Mother and I were crying about Grandma Susannah's death. We are both sending love and hope to you. I have a copy of your book too. 😊 Mother wanted it because you were her beloved "sister" and Grandma Susannah would be VERY, VERY proud of your hard work and time. Mother will be married next year. I hope you have a wonderful time and send me to be your flower girl (if you get married)! 😊

*Love,
Hannah Wheatley*

I sent it in the mail. I think Aunt Phillis really did pay attention to my note. I FINALLY received a letter back, and it's already 1777. I opened it and pulled out a letter. It said:

Dear Hannah,

June 30, 1775

I can't believe how much you've grown! You will still be my beautiful flower girl at my wedding, though. Please come to my house. Your mother will know which one is mine. Bring your old flower girl supplies. I am getting married to John Peters, and I

feel that I want another child. I have forgotten to tell you, but I gave birth to a child a few years ago, and his name was Samuel, and he died of disease. I hope to be meeting you at the wedding.

*See you,
Phillis Wheatley*

I told Mother the news. She said she knew she would be a bridesmaid, but she never knew I was going to be the little flower girl! We hopped onto a carriage and drove up to Boston. We saw Aunt Phillis right away, and hurried over to greet her. She looked pretty, and her future husband looked nice.

Aunt Phillis looked down at me and smiled. She said, "My future husband, John Peters, is a business man. He runs a small grocery shop around town. He is also a free black. I know he doesn't do so well in business, but I guess we can work it out together. You know, I want a new child, and I would like it to be a girl. If not, then we will just name him after my dear Samuel. But if it is a girl, what do you think we can name her?"

I told Aunt Phillis, "Katherine Peters sounds nice. Or, I personally like Sarah Peters. Andrea Peters sounds good also. But I like 'Sarah' the best."

Aunt Phillis smiled. Then she turned to Mother and said, "The wedding is in fifteen minutes. I couldn't afford to rent the room for another day to hold the rehearsal. We should head over to the dressing rooms to change.

On the way there, I asked Aunt Phillis, "Can you show me more of your life and some poems?"

She answered, "Yes, but I don't think I could show you some more poetry. It all depends on my luck on finding it. And by the way, I got some fresh rose petals for our beautiful flower girl.

I smiled and laughed. It was fun sitting next to my famous Aunt. Mother didn't decide to bring Daddy along. He was too busy trying to fix our roof. Someone's ball broke it.☺ But I guess it's okay. I was getting a new cousin and a new "Uncle"! I couldn't sit still. I fiddled around with my hair all the way.

When we reached the dressing room, Mr. Peters went into the boys' section and the rest of us turned the other way. The rooms were filthy, because they were for blacks. But I didn't want to insult Aunt Phillis by using the whites' room. I wouldn't be fair. Anyhow, who cleans these filthy things? When we all came out, I looked pretty, Mr. Peters looked handsome, Mother was very soft and happy, and Aunt Phillis was so beautiful. The couple was married in a small room, and the celebration party was in the Wheatley house.

We stayed for a few days, and when the first train back home came, we rode home.

It is even later in time now. I am older now, at sixteen years old, and Mother says I am more mature now. I got a letter from Aunt Phillis. I took it out and read:

Hannah,

September 2, 1781

I have given your uncle John three children now. Their names are Sarah, Hannah, and Jonathan. I named Hannah after you, because she loves life how it is. Jonathan was named after your Uncle John. They both don't do to well in financials. Jonathan begs for "shiny orange candy" all the time.

Because your Uncle John isn't doing to well in his business, I must earn money for the family by working as a maid in a scullery. I'd rather work for Miss Susannah again. I don't really like it here working for strangers that don't appreciate and care for me.

My health isn't doing too well. But still, I must fight to support my family as it goes. I wish you well, and I love you forever. I predict that this will be good-bye, and here it is: Good-bye.

*Luv you in my heart 4ever,
Phillis Wheatley*

I tried hard not to cry. I showed Mother. She grew misty in the eyes also. She handed be a box and some canned foods. "Here," she said, "mail this along with your letter." I obeyed and ran into my room to write my letter.

Dear Aunt Phillis,

December 15, 1782

I am sorry. Mother and I have enclosed and supplies for your family. I hope you can use them. I miss you so much. I want to wish you happy holidays, and love through my heart forever.

*Luv you in my heart 4ever,
Hannah Wheatley*

Aunt Phillis didn't write back for many years. I thought she was mad at me. I felt guilty for no true reason, just hope that I would hear from her again.

A few years later, Mother asked me, "Do you know why Aunt Phillis isn't writing back to you?"

I shook my head. I believed that it was my fault Aunt Phillis wasn't replying. I didn't want to hear about it. I was mad at myself.

Mother tilted my chin so I stared into her eyes. She spoke in a soft, soothing voice. "She died the year you sent the last letter," she told me.

I was depressed. I moped around like a sick dog in the pound. I loved Aunt Phillis, and she had left me. I learned later that her work was unsuccessful. She died in poverty nearly penniless.

I am nineteen years old now. Mother is taking me to meet Aunt Phillis's only remaining child, Sarah. She is eleven now, and very outgoing and happy.

"Hello Cousin Hannah," she called, "How are you today? She happily skipped with brown, wavy braids. She was wearing a light purple top with matching velvet pants underneath. She had light brown skin that matched her hair perfectly.

"I am very well, Sarah, and please call me Hannah. Who are you raised by now?"

Sarah grinned, "You in two hours. I am moving in for a few years because Dad recently died and they are looking for a home for me. Mother very much appreciated the food. It somehow came a week after you sent it. She loved you, and she will always remember you."

We played soccer, swam, and chatted. I grew to learn a lot about Sarah and her life. But when we did all this I had one special thought, and that was, "I want Aunt Phillis. I grieve for her presence. She will remain in my heart, as Sarah will be my reminder of her, Sarah, looks like a small version of Aunt Phillis. I love my life, I hope for new judging and ways for different races, and I will always remember Aunt Phillis as my guide because of her courage and bravery through races. Though I am white and do not have any troubles with this problem, at this time, people are not treating Blacks the way they should. I find that this is hard on Blacks, their families, and life, but still, Aunt Phillis is my guide through this harsh, unfair world called life.

Author's Note:

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed 'Letters to Phillis Wheatley'. This has been a very difficult project to do, because many people out in the world don't know Phillis Wheatley. As you have read in the beginning, this story is NOT true in some ways. The facts are true, not including marriage and children. All of Phillis Wheatley's children died before her, and no one knows what their names were. Phillis *was* married to John Peters, an unsuccessful businessman, but where they were married is fictional.

I hope you luck in researching or just reading about Phillis Wheatley, for she is an extraordinary and amazing woman to our modern day.

Sincerely,
Cyndia, Author
February 2004

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