

CONSTITUTION 101

Module 12: Slavery in America: From the Founding to America's Second Founding
12.3 Primary Source

PHILLIS WHEATLEY, LETTER TO REVEREND SAMUEL OCCUM (1774)

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SUMMARY

Historical accounts describe Phillis Wheatley as a woman traded out of Gambia or Senegal in 1761 and shipped to Boston, where she was purchased by Susanna Wheatley. Susanna's 18-year-old daughter, Mary, became Phillis's tutor in English and classical languages, in which Phillis succeeded sufficiently to accomplish a translation of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. There ensued the development of a poetic craft, nurtured by a British matron when Phillis had difficulty having her work received in Boston. Born circa 1753, by age 12 she was reading works in Greek and Latin. She produced her first poem at age 14, and went on to celebrate classical themes and modern heroes, including George Washington, who invited her to meet him at his headquarters when he heard of her poem. In "On the Affray in King Street, on the Evening of the 5th of March," she celebrated the event of the Boston Massacre that led to the martyrdom of Crispus Attucks, the Black patriot who organized the "affray." Wheatley published her first poem on December 21, 1767, in the *Newport Mercury* of Newport, Rhode Island. Two years earlier, her first composition was a letter to Samson Occum, the Mohegan minister. Her name, Phillis, was derived from the slave ship, Phillis, in which she was shipped. Though freed by her master, she remained with him through his death.

Excerpt

The following is an extract of a letter from Phillis, a Negro Girl of Mr. Wheatley's, in Boston, to the Rev. Samson Occum, which we are desired to insert as a Specimen of her Ingenuity. —

Rev'd and Honor'd Sir,

Thank you for defending the natural rights of African Americans; God has given every human being a love of freedom; this includes African Americans; therefore, we want an end to slavery. I have this day received your obliging kind Epistle, and am greatly satisfied with your Reasons respecting the Negroes, and think highly reasonable what you offer in Vindication of their natural Rights: Those that invade them cannot be insensible that the divine Light is chasing away the thick Darkness which broods over the land of Africa, and the Chaos which has reigned, so long, is converting into beautiful Order, and [r]eveals more and more clearly, the glorious Dispensation of civil and religious Liberty, which are so inseparably united, that there is little or no Enjoyment of one without the other: Otherwise, perhaps, the Israelites had been less

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solicitous for their Freedom from Egyptian Slavery; I do not say they would have been contented without it, by no means, for in every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom; it is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance, and by the leave of our Modern Egyptians I will assert, that the same Principle lives in us. God grant deliverance in his own Way and Time, and get him honor upon all those whose Avarice impels them to countenance and help forward the Calamities of their Fellow Creatures. This I desire not for their Hurt, but to convince them of the strange Absurdity of their Conduct whose Works and Actions are so diametrically opposite. How well the Cry for Liberty, and the reverse disposition for the Exercise of Oppressive Power over others agree, — I humbly think it does not require the Penetration of a Philosopher to determine.

***Bold sentences give the big idea of the excerpt and are not a part of the primary source.**

