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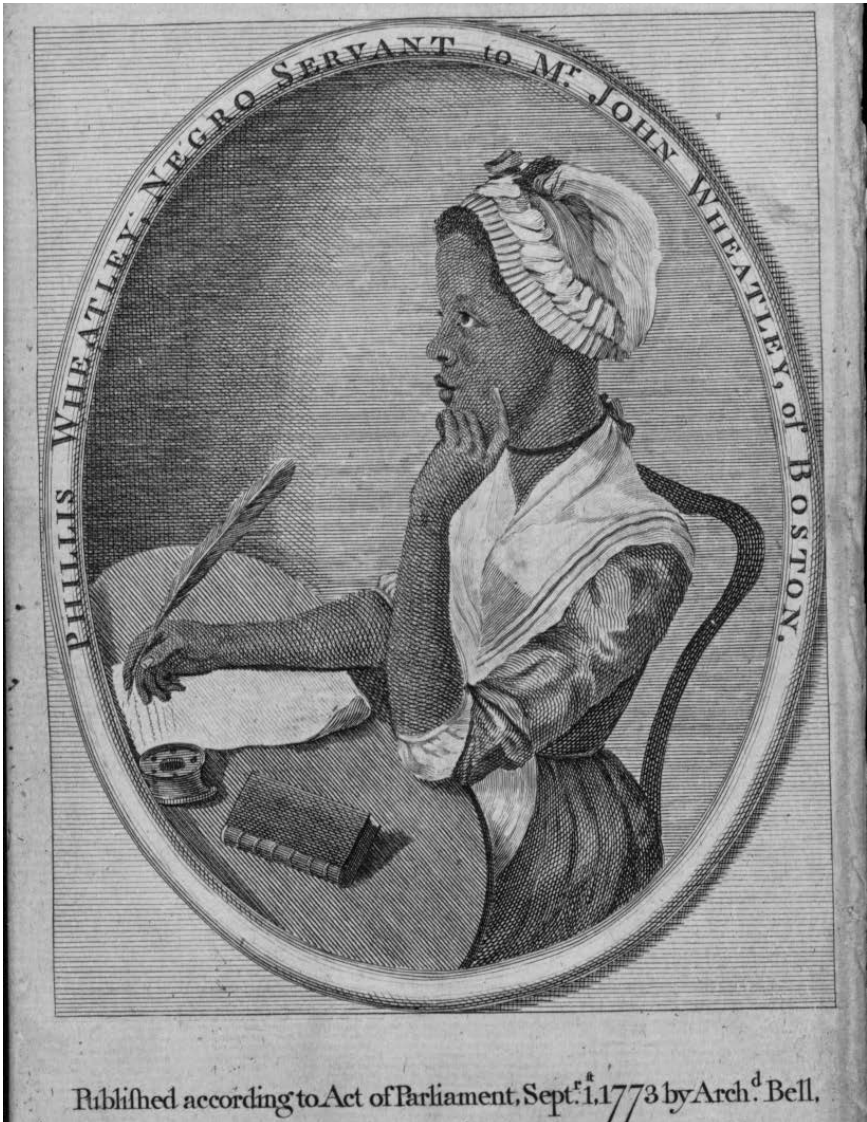
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**Title Page: Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London, 1773)**

This book was first published in London on September 1, 1773. The first American edition was printed in Philadelphia in 1786, two years after her death. The title page features an engraving of Phillis done after a portrait by Scipio Moorhead, the slave of a Boston minister.

# Phillis Wheatley: Researching a Life

VINCENT CARRETTA



**Editor's Introduction:** *Phillis Wheatley was the first published African American woman in North America. She was sold into slavery at around the age of seven and transported to the British colonies, where she was purchased by the Wheatley family of Boston. They taught her to read and write and encouraged her poetry when they saw her talent. The publication of her first and only book of poems in 1773 brought her fame both in England and the American colonies; figures such as George Washington praised her work. Although her name is widely known, the full history of her short life has remained obscure.*

*Vincent Carretta's recent study, Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage (2011), superbly fills that gap. It has garnered lavish praise from many scholars. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., writes: "At last, Carretta has written a biography of this great writer as complex and as nuanced as Wheatley and her work themselves. This book resurrects the 'mother' of the African American literary tradition, vividly, scrupulously, and without sentimentality, as no other biography of her has done." Historian John Wood Sweet concurs: "An*

*extraordinary achievement, Carretta's groundbreaking research and sensitive readings greatly enrich our understanding of Wheatley's life and work."*<sup>1</sup>

*This article expands upon excerpts from the book. The author addresses and explores the special challenges a biographer of Phillis Wheatley faces in trying to reconstruct the life of a married woman of African descent during the eighteenth century. New information about Wheatley's origins, the role she played in gaining her freedom, and her husband's character are some of the reasons she needs to be reintroduced to us. Dr. Vincent Carretta is Professor of English at the University of Maryland, specializing in eighteenth-century transatlantic English-speaking authors of African descent. He is the author of many works on African-American biography.*

\* \* \* \* \*

## INTRODUCTION

Phillis Wheatley (1753?–1784) is now recognized as a pioneer of American and African-American literature. Googling her name turns up several hundred thousand results. Elementary, middle, and high schools throughout the United States bear her name. A prominent statue on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston memorializes her. Wheatley is the subject of numerous recent stories written for children and adolescents. A few of her poems appear in every anthology of early American literature. Her reputation rests on her surviving 57 poems, most of which she wrote before she was twenty years old. Forty-six of her poems were published during her lifetime, and of those 38 appeared in her only book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, published in London in 1773. Wheatley also wrote four proposals for publications and 22 surviving letters. In November 2005, a 174-word letter sent by Phillis Wheatley in 1776 to a fellow servant of African descent sold at auction for \$253,000, well over double what it had been expected to fetch, and the highest price ever paid for a letter by a woman of African descent. Wheatley has clearly achieved iconic status in American culture.

But Wheatley's reputation has had its ups and downs. The literary quality and the political significance of her writings have been challenged since the eighteenth century. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. notes, Wheatley became "something of a pariah in black political and critical circles, especially in the militant 1960s, where critics had a field day mocking her life and her works (most of which they had not read.)"<sup>2</sup> The nadir of this hostility was marked by comments such as the accusation that Wheatley had "a white mind" and was "not sensitive enough to the needs of her own people to demonstrate a

kinship to Blacks in her life or writings.”<sup>3</sup>

One would think that anyone who has been the object of so much praise and defamation, and whose correspondence is worth over \$1,400 a word, has more than enough cultural significance to deserve an authoritative biography. Yet, Phillis Wheatley had never been the subject of a full-length biography until the University of Georgia Press published my *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* in 2011, 250 years after the little girl who is known to us as Phillis Wheatley first arrived in Boston from Africa aboard a slave ship.

Phillis Wheatley’s would-be biographer faces formidable—some would say insurmountable—challenges. First is the challenge every biographer must deal with—how to complete the puzzle of someone’s life despite missing pieces. Speculation begins when evidence ends, but a biographer must research as thoroughly as possible before leaping from certainty to possibility in reconstructing a past life. Speculation is unavoidable if one tries to convince readers of the likely motives behind actions. Even if a biographer has an autobiography to work with that was written up to the moment of the subject’s death, much research would need to be done. Autobiographies are not written under oath. Who knows all about oneself? Who among us tells all? And who does so transparently, without trying to influence one’s readers?

A second major challenge is the question of how to deal with the historical context of one’s subject. In Wheatley’s case, how much should her biographer say about the time in which she lived? How much will readers need to know (and want to learn) about contemporaneous events, such as the transatlantic slave trade, slavery in Massachusetts, Boston society, London society, the American Revolution, and the postwar economic crisis, for example? How does a biographer avoid losing sight of one’s subject amid the background of her life?

The challenge of context is especially great when one’s subject is a literary figure. If I may distinguish between literary critics and literary scholars, the former sometimes treat authors and their works synchronically, that is, as if they exist in an eternal present. For such critics, historical context quickly becomes irrelevant, if not annoying. The most dyspeptic reviewer of my biography of Wheatley opines that its hundreds of pages should have been pared down to about thirty by omitting most of the pesky background information and evidence.<sup>4</sup> Literary scholars usually consider their subjects diachronically, appreciating that authors and their beliefs evolve over time. If one is trying to write a critical biography—reading works in light of the author’s life and times—one must resist any urge to engage in biographical criticism—deducing her life from her writings by treating them as if they are transparently autobiographical, as if the author always writes in her own

voice, rather than through a fictional persona. The critical biographer must also decide how to deal with what I think of as the afterlife of one's subject: the history of how her writings have been evaluated and interpreted since her death. And to what extent should the biographer engage with modern literary critics of her work? A quick way to sink a biography is by trying to summarize modern-day criticism in an indigestible lump.

Trying to reconstruct the lives of eighteenth-century people of African descent is difficult because recovering their actions, even their existence, is often impossible unless they were legally considered enslaved property, of which records were kept. Often we cannot even be certain of the status of a person of African descent because in New England enslaved as well as free domestic workers were conventionally referred to as servants. Once free, former slaves frequently disappear from public records unless they ran into legal problems. A woman's life can be more difficult to reconstruct than a man's because her legal identity was subsumed under that of her husband when she married.

And then there are the challenges specific to Phillis Wheatley, including: where she was born; the date of her marriage; the character of her husband, John Peters (1746?–1801); the gap in records of her life between 1780 and 1783; the circumstances surrounding her death; the disappearance of her husband after her death; and the reliability of the major source of biographical information about Phillis Wheatley, Margareta Matilda Odell's brief "Memoir" that prefaces the edition of Wheatley's poems Odell published in Boston in 1834, fifty years after Phillis Wheatley's death.<sup>5</sup>

Odell is the source of much of the received wisdom about Wheatley's life. Odell was a collateral descendant of Phillis's owner, Susanna Wheatley (1709–1774), and she attributes much of her information to unnamed relatives and friends of the Wheatley family. Odell's "Memoir," however, needs to be treated with far more care and skepticism than critics and scholars, including me, have given it. Much of the information in Odell's account is unverifiable, unreliable, demonstrably incorrect, or apparently intended to serve Odell's literary and social agendas. Odell's comparison of Wheatley's life before and after she gained her freedom seems designed to represent the security of enslavement as preferable to the unpredictability of freedom for people of African descent. Odell's Phillis Wheatley is a humble, obedient, prim, and passive figure. Odell represents Peters as virtually the villain in a Dickensian narrative of the decline and death of a sentimental heroine. Writing in the 1830s, Odell disapproved of demonstrations of gentility by men of African descent that she probably would have left unremarked had she been describing the behavior of whites. During the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries, free people of African descent were often even more concerned than whites with acting, dressing, and speaking respectably to try to counteract negative stereotypes. But when people of African descent attempted to enhance their reputations, especially during the nineteenth century, they were frequently mocked and accused of acting “uppity.”

My methodological model in trying to deal with the problems facing a biographer of Phillis Wheatley has been a combination of dicta from two sources not always recognized as guides to conducting research. I mean of course Ronald Reagan’s counsel to “trust but verify” and its corollary from the New York–based power company Consolidated Edison, “dig we must.” Application of the Reagan/Con Ed methodology to the received wisdom about Phillis Wheatley’s African origins, her alleged lack of agency, or assertiveness, and John Peters yields surprising results.

But before I discuss in more detail why Phillis Wheatley needs to be reintroduced, a brief summary is needed of what we knew (or thought we knew) about her life and character. She was born around 1753 in the Senegambia region of West Africa. In 1761 the slave ship *Phillis* brought her to Boston, where the merchant John Wheatley (1703–1778) and his wife, Susanna, purchased her. Wheatley’s mistress enabled her to become literate and encouraged her to write poetry that soon found its way into New England newspapers. Phillis Wheatley gained transatlantic recognition with her 1770 elegy on the death of the evangelist George Whitefield (1714–1770), addressed to his English patron, the Countess of Huntingdon (1707–1791). By 1772 Wheatley had written enough poems to allow her to attempt to capitalize on her growing transatlantic reputation by producing a book of previously published and new works. Unable to find a Boston publisher, Phillis and her mistress successfully sought a London publisher through Huntingdon’s patronage. Having spent several weeks in London in 1773 with her owners’ son to promote the forthcoming publication of her *Poems on Various Subjects: Religious and Moral*, Phillis Wheatley returned to Boston to care for her ailing mistress before her book appeared. Her owners graciously freed her within a month of her return. Her mistress died the following year. John Wheatley died in March 1778. According to Odell, Phillis married John Peters, a free black, the next month. The last years of Phillis Wheatley Peters’ life were marked by personal and financial losses. Odell says that her husband was haughty and irresponsible, frequently changing occupations and often in debt. Odell claims that their three children all died young. Phillis was unable to find a publisher for her proposed second volume of writings. Abandoned by her husband, Phillis died in poverty in Boston on December 5, 1784. John Peters, Odell tells us, “went South.”

## PHILLIS'S HOMELAND

How can one separate fact from fiction in this account? What other sources can be uncovered to validate or challenge this narrative? Let's start at the beginning. Where was she from? Phillis Wheatley says virtually nothing about her native Africa in her surviving writings. The only time she mentions a specific location in Africa—a very romanticized “Gambia”—is in “PHILLIS'S [sic] Reply to the Answer in our last by the Gentleman in the Navy,” a poem published in Boston in January 1775 in the *Royal American Magazine*. Although exactly where Wheatley's journey from Africa to America began is impossible to identify, some commentators have asserted with varying degrees of conviction that she was born in Senegal. Others say Gambia. The noted African-American author Langston Hughes had no doubt that Wheatley was a native of Senegal and spoke “Senegalese,” a nonexistent language.<sup>6</sup> Senegal commemorated Phillis Wheatley as native-born with a stamp issued in 1971. Some literary critics leap to conclusions about her birthplace and upbringing that are unsupported by the available evidence.<sup>7</sup> Speculation rather than the historical record leaves a little girl bearing heavy cultural baggage on the “Middle Passage” (the transatlantic journey).

The future Phillis Wheatley probably never even saw the person primarily responsible for having her brought from Africa to America. Timothy Fitch (1725–1790) was a wealthy merchant living in Medford, Massachusetts, today a northern suburb of Boston. Luckily, sixteen letters and invoices from Timothy Fitch to his employees and associates in the transatlantic slave trade survive at the Medford Historical Society.<sup>8</sup> They give us an extraordinary insight into the conduct of the trade because such correspondence is extremely rare. Even more extraordinary is the fact that these documents relate directly to the original enslavement in Africa and transportation across the Atlantic of the child who would become known as Phillis Wheatley.

On November 8, 1760, Fitch ordered his employee Peter Gwinn (also spelled Gwin or Gwynn), commander of “my Brigg Phillis,” to go with his eight-man crew first to “Sinigall,” on the west coast of Africa, to “purchase 100 Or 110 Prime Slaves.” “Sinigall” was Fitch's ironically misspelled attempt at Senegal. The Senegambia region had for decades been the site of contention between Britain and France for control of the local slave trade. The Senegambia region was the primary source for the British transatlantic slave trade during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries because of its geographical proximity to Europe and the British American colonies. The longer the Middle Passage, the higher the mortality rate of the enslaved Africans, which averaged about 13 percent per transatlantic crossing.<sup>9</sup> By



the mid-eighteenth century, however, Senegambia had become relatively less significant as a source of slaves than more densely populated areas farther south and east on the African coast. Human cargoes could usually be filled more quickly off the “Windward Coast” (present-day Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and the Ivory Coast), the “Gold Coast” (present-day Ghana), the “Bight of Benin” (Togo, Benin, and western Nigeria), and the “Bight of Biafra” (eastern Nigeria and Cameroon).

Fitch’s letter might seem to be evidence of the smoking gun variety proving that Phillis Wheatley was born in the Senegambia region. But a closer look reveals otherwise. Fitch goes on to tell Gwinn to spend only a few days in the area because Britain and France were at war. He commands him to continue down the coast of Africa until he completes his cargo of “Prime,” that is young male slaves, reprimanding Gwinn for having brought young girls back on his previous slave-trading voyage. The surviving evidence tells us less about where in Africa Phillis Wheatley was born and raised than about where she probably did not come from. Gwinn spent about four months along the west coast of Africa collecting his human cargo. An experienced slaver like Gwinn was extremely unlikely to have procured the least desirable slaves as soon as he reached Senegal. He was far more likely to have ignored Fitch’s orders and bought refuse slaves, particularly young girls, only as a last resort. And he most likely would have done so far down the coast of Africa from Senegal, just before he had to return to Boston. Gwinn probably acquired the future Phillis Wheatley near the end of the months he spent along the coast of Africa, either around Sierra Leone, where Fitch had ordered him to go after leaving “Sinigall,” farther down the Windward Coast, or even perhaps as far southeast as near the Gold Coast. A Boston newspaper announced the arrival of the *Phillis* with the future Phillis Wheatley among its human cargo “from the Windward Coast.”<sup>10</sup>

## REIMAGINING WHEATLEY’S 1773 LONDON TRIP

Phillis Wheatley never described her own Middle Passage in any of her known writings. Perhaps her experience was understandably so traumatic that she was never able or willing to reimagine it. Nearly one out of four of her fellow enslaved Africans died aboard the *Phillis* on their way to Boston in 1761. The seven-year old Phillis was clearly lucky to have survived. The sight of so much death around her may help account for her subsequent attention to death in so many of her earliest poems.

Although Wheatley’s home in Africa and experiences of the Middle Passage remain obscure, there are far more records and writings that hint

at a different story of how she won her freedom. She was not simply “freed by” her benevolent masters. Instead, a careful reading of the historical record suggests her far more active role in her own “self-emancipation.”

In 1773 Phillis Wheatley went to England with her master’s son, Nathaniel Wheatley (1743–1783), ostensibly to recover her health and also to find a British publisher for her collected poems. She may have had another reason as well, one she was not likely to have shared with her owners. Wheatley reached London on the eve of the first anniversary of a landmark legal decision against slave owners.

In 1771 Granville Sharp (1735–1813) had brought the Somerset case before the King’s Bench, the highest common law court in England. Lord Chief Justice William Murray (1705–1793), 1st Earl of Mansfield, ruled in June 1772 that a slave brought to England from the colonies could not legally be forced to return to the Colonies as a slave. Mansfield’s ruling made London a very dangerous place for any colonial slave owner to bring his human property.

Wheatley sent a letter dated October 18, 1773 to David “Worcester” [Wooster] (1711–1777) in New Haven, Connecticut, to tell him of her trip to London. She had returned to Boston barely a month before. She excitedly tells Wooster that she met many members of English high society who welcomed her “with such kindness[,] Complaisance, and so many marks of esteem and real Friendship as astonishes me on the reflection.”<sup>11</sup> Wheatley says that she had toured much of greater eighteenth-century London—from Westminster in the west, to the City of London in the east, Greenwich in the south, and Sadler’s Wells in the north. She visited the Observatory, Park, and Royal Hospital for Seamen in Greenwich, as well as the Tower of London, Westminster Abbey, and the British Museum. She informs Wooster that “Since my return to America my Master, has at the desire of my friends in England given me my freedom.”

Wheatley found her liberation from her accustomed status, duties, and regimen exhilarating. She spent her time in London very differently from the early-to-bed, early-to-rise schedule followed in the home of a successful Boston merchant. The social circle she travelled in while she was in London normally ate breakfast at 10 a.m., dinner (lunch) between 2 and 4:30 p.m., and supper between 10 and 11 p.m. Social calls were made between breakfast and dinner. Treated like an exotic visiting celebrity, Wheatley “Was introduced to Lord Dartmouth and had near half an hour’s conversation with his Lordship, with whom was Alderman Kirkman. Then to Lord Lincoln, who visited me at my own Lodgings with the Famous Dr. Solander, who accompany’d Mr. Banks in his late expedition round the World.”



***Phillis Wheatley, from the Boston Women's Memorial,  
by Meredith Bergmann, 2003.***

William Legge (1731–1801), 2nd Earl of Dartmouth, had been appointed in August 1772 secretary of state for the colonies and president of the Board of Trade and Foreign Plantations. Phillis Wheatley addressed a poem to him in October 1772. John Kirkman (1741–1780), a silk merchant, was an alderman of the City of London from 1768 to 1780. Lord Lincoln, a courtesy title for Henry Fiennes Pelham Clinton (1750–1778), was a Member of Parliament for Aldborough, 1772–1774, and a supporter

on the North ministry. He was styled Lord Lincoln because he was the eldest son of Henry Fiennes Pelham Clinton (1720–1794), whose highest title had been the 9th Earl of Lincoln until he succeeded his uncle Thomas Pelham-Holles (1693–1768) in 1768 as 2nd Duke of Newcastle. Dr. Daniel Solander (1736–1782) was a Swedish-born botanist who accompanied Sir Joseph Banks (1743–1820) as a researcher in the South Pacific, 1768–1771, aboard the *Endeavor*, commanded by Captain James Cook (1728–1779). Solander, who had become keeper of the natural history collections in the British Museum just before Wheatley's visit, was probably her tour guide in the Museum.<sup>12</sup> Others she met in London included Israel Mauduit (1708–1787), who had represented Thomas Hutchinson (1711–1780), governor of Massachusetts, as his private agent in London since 1771.<sup>13</sup> Thus, to think that Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) was the most significant person Phillis Wheatley mentions meeting in London would be a mistake. He had been representing the colonial interests of Pennsylvania, Georgia, New Jersey, and Massachusetts in London since July 1757 and would return to America in 1775. He visited Wheatley and offered her his services at the prompting of Jonathan Williams (1750–1815), his nephew-in-law in Boston. Wheatley's owners had encouraged Williams to mention her in his letters to his uncle. On July 7, 1773, Franklin described his meeting with Wheatley to Williams: "Upon your Recommendation I went to see the black Poetess and offer'd her any Services I could do her. Before I left the House, I understood her Master was there and had sent her to me but did not come into the Room himself, and I thought was not pleased with the Visit. I should perhaps have enquired first for him, but I had heard nothing of him. And I have heard nothing since of her." Nathaniel Wheatley was probably almost as much of an oddity in England as Phillis. New Englanders rarely visited London, and they were generally viewed as much less sophisticated and far more mercenary than other British Americans.<sup>14</sup> Phillis's master may have seemed to Franklin to exemplify Edmund Burke's characterization of New Englanders as "a mean shifting peddling nation."<sup>15</sup> In light of Nathaniel Wheatley's uncivil behavior toward Franklin, Williams responded on October 17, 1773, "The Black Poetess master and mistress prevailed on me to mention her in my Letter but as its turned out I am Sorry I Did."<sup>16</sup>

Like many of his white contemporaries on both sides of the Atlantic, Franklin initially accepted both slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. For years before meeting Phillis Wheatley, Franklin's attitudes toward both the transatlantic slave trade and the institution of slavery were ambivalent, and continued to be so until just before his death.<sup>17</sup> Franklin had been a slave owner for decades by 1773, even though he had printed antislavery writings while

living in Philadelphia, including one of the earliest antislavery arguments published in America. He also published advertisements for runaway slaves in his *Pennsylvania Gazette*, and in 1731 and 1732 he advertised his own slaves for sale: "To be sold: A likely Negro wench about fifteen years old and talks English. Inquire of the printer hereof. A breeding Negro woman about twenty years of age. Can do any household work." Franklin supported the establishment in America of schools for blacks, and he sent his own slaves to the school in Philadelphia.

As the agent in London representing the economic interests of the originally slave-free colony of Georgia, after 1750 Franklin defended the colony's right to have slaves. Franklin's strong objections to slavery in 1751 in "Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind" were based on economic rather than moral grounds. In his will written in 1757 Franklin granted his slaves freedom at his death, but he owned slaves until 1781. Franklin defended American slavery as uncommon and benign in the "Conversation Between an Englishman, Scotchman and an American on the Subject of Slavery" he published anonymously in 1770. He likened the English "working poor" to slaves in the way their employers treated them. And he demeaned enslaved blacks in America: "the majority are of a plotting disposition, dark, sullen, malicious, revengeful and cruel in the highest degree."<sup>18</sup> Two years later marked a turning point in Franklin's moral development. In April 1772, the Philadelphia Quaker abolitionist and emancipationist Anthony Benezet (1713–1784) began to correspond with Franklin. Franklin, however, did not publicly embrace and privately practice an emancipationist position opposing slavery itself until very late in his life. When Phillis Wheatley met Franklin, she may also have met his slave, Peter, whom he had brought with him to England. King, the other slave Franklin had brought to England, had run away from him within two years of arriving there. Franklin took Peter with him back to America in 1775, where he remained his slave.

Far more consequential than Franklin among the "friends" Phillis met in London, at whose desire she gained her freedom upon returning to Boston, was Granville Sharp. The risk Nathaniel Wheatley took in bringing Phillis to London was vastly increased by her primary London tour guide: "Grenville [sic] Sharp Esqr.[.] who attended me to the Tower [of London] & Show'd the Lions, Panthers, Tigers, &c. The Horse Armoury, Sma[ll] Armoury, the Crowns, Sceptres, Diadems, the Fount for christen[in]g the Royal Family." With the Somerset ruling, Sharp seemed to have gone from winning battles to winning the war against slavery in England.

Although Mansfield's ruling technically established only that a slave could not be seized by his master and forced against his will to leave

England, and that a slave could get a writ of habeas corpus to prevent his master's action, the judgment was widely considered then and since as the moment slavery was abolished in England. The Mansfield ruling did not abolish slavery in England *de jure*, but it certainly undermined it *de facto* by indisputably denying slave masters the legal coercive power of removal to the colonies. Lacking that power, slave owners could no longer legally enforce their claims of possession because slaves on English soil could legally emancipate themselves by flight. Sharp made sure through his publications that the ruling's implications would not be ignored. Friend and foe of slavery alike immediately recognized that the Mansfield decision of 1772 enabled slaves to emancipate themselves in England.<sup>19</sup>

It is unimaginable that while Wheatley and Sharp were looking at caged African animals, as well as the emblems of British regal glory, Sharp would not have brought up the subject of his judicial triumph the preceding year in extending British liberty to enslaved people of African descent. Sharp considered himself ethically and morally bound to help people in Wheatley's condition: "the glorious system of the gospel destroys all narrow, national partiality; and makes us citizens of the world, by obliging us to profess universal benevolence: but more especially are we bound, as Christians, to commiserate and assist to the utmost of our power all persons in distress, or captivity. ..." <sup>20</sup> Nothing would demonstrate the significance of the Mansfield ruling more than the emancipation of the most celebrated enslaved person of African descent in the British empire. A slave owner could not have thought of a more dangerous tour guide than Granville Sharp for an enslaved celebrity newly arrived from the colonies.

But was Wheatley aware of the status of slavery in England even before she reached London on June 17, 1773, and was she willing to take advantage of the opportunity that knowledge offered her? The circumstantial evidence that she knew about the Mansfield ruling before she left Boston is compelling. Colonial newspapers, including ones that had advertised and published Wheatley's poems since 1767, were discussing the possible significance of the Mansfield decision by the end of the summer of 1772. In reporting news from June in London, the *Massachusetts Spy* noted on August 27 that "Yesterday the Court of King's Bench gave judgment in the case of Somerset the Negro, finding that Mr. Stewart, his master, had no power to compel him on board a ship, or to send him back to the plantations."

We have increasingly come to appreciate Wheatley as a manipulator of words; we should have more respect for her as a manipulator of people as well. Rather than being a gift passively received from her master "at the desire of my friends in England," the promise of freedom was probably

a concession Phillis Wheatley manipulated from Nathaniel Wheatley in exchange for her promise to return to Boston: one promise for another. As a businessman engaged in transatlantic commerce, Wheatley's word was his bond. In this negotiation, Phillis Wheatley had the stronger hand.

In England the year after Somerset, and in the presence of Sharp and her other "friends in England," to whom she could attribute the idea for her emancipation and in front of whom she could insist that her master's son give his word that she would be freed if she returned, Phillis Wheatley could neither legally nor practically be forced back to the colonies. In effect, the choice of freedom, the terms, and the place were hers to make.

Wheatley tells Wooster that she was also clever enough to have taken out an extra insurance policy by sending a copy of her manumission papers to Israel Mauduit in London. She was clear about her motives for having done so: "The Instrument is drawn, so as to secure me and my property from the hands of the Exectutrs [executors], administrators, &c. of my master, & secure whatsoever should be given me as my Own. A Copy was sent to Isra. Mauduit Esq. F.R.S. [Fellow of the Royal Society]." Wheatley apparently already had property to protect, besides her own person. And she clearly expected to gain more, all of which she sought to keep out of the hands of John Wheatley's heirs. She knew the truth that Olaudah Equiano (1745?–1797) had learned a decade earlier about how vulnerable any free person of African descent remained in any societies where slavery was legal.

The proactive role I am arguing that Wheatley played in gaining her freedom is reflected in the shift from the passive voice she uses in her letter to Wooster to describe her tour of London to the active voice she employs to tell him to stop printers in New Haven from reprinting her book and thus depriving her of profits. Speaking as the savvy businesswoman she has become, she writes, "If any should be so ungenerous as to reprint them the Genuine Copy may be known, for it is sign'd in my own handwriting."

### **PHILLIS'S AND JOHN'S MARRIAGE, 1778–84**

Approximately twenty years old, Wheatley returned to Boston and gained her freedom in October of 1773. Had she remained in London, she very probably would have found a publisher for her proposed second volume of poems, which she never succeeded in publishing. In the spring

of 1775, the British occupied Boston; Susanna Wheatley died that March. John Wheatley and their married daughter, Mary Wheatley Lathrop (whom Phillis lived with in Providence, Rhode Island, while the British occupied Boston), both died in 1778; John Wheatley left her nothing in his will. That same year Nathaniel Wheatley left for London with his wife, then returned and died in Boston in 1783. With the outbreak of war and the death of her closest supporters, Phillis's life became harder. By 1778 nearly half of the prominent Bostonians who had signed the "attestation" to her *Poems* were dead. Although internationally known, her fame offered little material support through the lean years of war and the depression that followed. She struggled to make a living by selling copies of her poems. Meanwhile, her health deteriorated after 1774. An "asthmatic complaint" continued to afflict her for the remaining ten years of her life, particularly during the winter, and may have caused her death.<sup>21</sup>

Much about Phillis Wheatley's life between 1776 and her death in 1784 remains a mystery. Who or what accounts for her relative silence in America during her final years despite her continuing celebrity in Europe? The answer may be John Peters.<sup>22</sup> Does the evidence support Odell's condemnation of John Peters: "In an evil hour he was accepted; and he proved utterly unworthy of the distinguished woman who honored him by her alliance?" Church, tax, court, prison, and census records now enable us to fill in many of the gaps in what little was known about John Peters and his relationship with Phillis Wheatley. Lawsuits were often the only hope creditors had of collecting debts. Luckily for Wheatley's biographer, in "a society as culturally litigious as Massachusetts," John Peters had more encounters with the legal system than most of his contemporaries, white or black.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, in September 1793 the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts issued a warrant for the arrest of Peters as a "common Barrator," someone who repeatedly initiates frivolous lawsuits. The charge was dropped the following February. The Court seems to have made its point: Peters's lawsuits apparently ended after he was charged.

Even before I attempted to verify the April 1, 1778 wedding date that all Wheatley critics and scholars, including me, had trusted as accurate, I had been uneasy about reaffirming it by repetition. But, mea culpa, I (along with every other editor of Wheatley's writings) accepted April 1 as the date she married John Peters, rather than simply the date they announced their intentions, even though we knew that she continued to use her maiden name for months after April 1, 1778. She sent two surviving letters signed "Phillis Wheatley" to women correspondents in May and July 1778. She asks each to reply to her at John Peters' address. Digging in the archives cured my



queasiness. Their wedding occurred on November 26, Thanksgiving Day, 1778, which means that Phillis Wheatley and John Peters lived together for months before they married.<sup>24</sup> Margaretta Matilda Odell would not have approved.

In 1780 Phillis Wheatley Peters appeared to be on the verge of an *annus mirabilis* (wondrous year) equivalent to that of 1773, the year that saw the publication of her book and brought her freedom. She apparently had a new book ready to be published, and she and her husband were seemingly relatively prosperous.<sup>25</sup> The 1780 "Taking Book" for taxes records "John Peters (Negro)" as living in Boston's Ward 2 and assessed "150 Rents," a very respectable sum.<sup>26</sup> Peters heads the list of 172 names in the ward, most of whom were tradesmen. He was the only person in Ward 2 identified as a Negro. The assessed rents range from William White, "Shopkeeper," at 260, to Thomas Volintine, "Cooper" at 7.10. Peters was one of thirty residents with rents of 100 or more. In October 1780, Peters won a suit against his business partner, Josias Byles, "determining that the Defendant pay to the Plaintiff Forty eight shillings Lm. Also that the Deft Relinquish all that part of Goods now at Rutland wch Belonged Jointly to Plaintiff and Defendant as companys Stock in Trade, or Pay the Plaintiff One hundred pounds in thirty days after Judgment."<sup>27</sup> Peters was now worth in property alone upwards of 250 pounds lawful money. But by October 1780 he and Phillis had already begun their nearly four-year-long absence from public records. Why? And where did they go?

One can only speculate on the basis of negative evidence, but one plausible explanation for why the evidence is lacking can be found in the records we do have. In November 1779, the month after Peters initiated his suit against Byles that was judged in his favor the following October, Susannah Child Sheaffe (d. 1811) brought a suit against Peters himself. She was the widow of William Sheaffe (1706-1771), who had been Deputy-Collector of his Majesty's Customs for the Port of Boston for many years before his death. Friends helped his widow establish a store at the north corner of Queen-Street, where she sold "All kinds of Grocery, by Wholesale and Retail for cash only, upon as good Terms as can be bought in Town."<sup>28</sup> She also ran a boarding-house, which British Major-General Hugh Percy (1742-1817) used as his headquarters during the occupation. In 1780 she was living in Boston's Ward 1 and assessed "70 Rents." If Sheaffe was the wholesaler who supplied the goods Peters sold in Western Massachusetts, that might explain why the court awarded her the impressive amount of nearly 400 pounds in July 1780 in her suit against him.<sup>29</sup> Not even liquidating all of Peters' known assets would have covered that judgment against him.

Eighteenth-century debtors had several choices: pay the debt; go to jail until either the debt is paid, or the creditor gives up trying to collect it; hide in one's house; or skip town. Peters apparently chose the latter option. Since Peters' suit against Byles awarded him costs, we have a record of the quarterly expenses he reported to the court. He requested no travel allowance in October 1779 and January 1780, which meant that he was living in Boston during those quarters, but for each of the April, July, and October 1780 quarters he reported travelling thirty miles roundtrip to court.<sup>30</sup> He may have been planning his escape if he anticipated the judgment against him in Sheaffe's suit.

But where did John and Phillis Peters go? Odell says that during the occupation of Boston "Phillis accompanied her husband to Wilmington," Massachusetts, which was indeed "an obscure country village" in Essex County north of Boston.<sup>31</sup> Wilmington had less than 750 residents at the time.<sup>32</sup> Although Odell is obviously wrong about when Phillis and John Peters might have gone to Wilmington, a move to Wilmington, which is approximately thirty miles roundtrip from Boston, would be consistent with Peters' claim for travel reimbursements. Peters may have considered Wilmington a village especially sympathetic to people of African descent. Wilmington had freed its slaves on 3 March 1779, well before slavery was abolished in Massachusetts. No records of Phillis and John have been found in Wilmington, but that is to be expected if they had gone there to escape a creditor.<sup>33</sup>

Phillis and John were definitely back in Boston by June 1784, when John Peters, "Labourer," had another writ issued against Joseph Scott, a Loyalist Peters successfully sued repeatedly for nearly a decade. Unfortunately for Peters, Scott had fled Boston with the occupying British troops when they evacuated the city in 1776. Peters again won his suit by default when Scott, of course, did not appear at the July quarterly session.<sup>34</sup> Winning, however, gained him nothing because Scott remained in England. The identification of Peters as a "Labourer" should not surprise us. In the eighteenth century, especially during the depression following the Revolutionary War, many men had multiple occupational identities, simultaneously as well as successively.<sup>35</sup> John Wheatley, for example, even before the War, was normally listed in records as a tailor, but he was also a shopkeeper who engaged in transatlantic commerce. Peters seems to have been scrambling to try to get back on his feet in 1784. "Shopkeeper" Peters successfully petitioned town officials on July 28, 1784 to allow him to sell liquor at the shop he had recently opened in north Boston "for the purpose of supporting himself & Family."<sup>36</sup>

John Peters was unfortunately unable to exploit his temporary success in having his petition to sell liquor approved. Indeed, his petition may have alerted his creditors that he had returned to Boston. The "Taking Book" for 1784, "taken on the 1st Sepr 1784," includes "Jno Peters Negro" in Ward 7. Ward 7 was a far more economically and ethnically diverse ward than the one John and Phillis Peters had lived in 1780. Of the 297 names in the 1784 list, 78 own real estate of over 100 value, 40 are identified as poor and/or infirm, and 32 Negroes are identified. At the other end of the economic scale, Dr. Joseph Gowen is assessed at 175, and "Physician" Dr. Thomas Bulfinch, at 600, owns two houses. Although Peters owns one "Dwellg House," he is described as "In Prison for Debt." His debt to Mrs. Sheaffe may have been what sent him there. She was still living in Boston when he returned: the same "Taking Book" places "Widow Sheaff" in Ward 8, where she 'Keeps Boarders' and owns "125 Value Real Estate."<sup>37</sup>

Phillis and John Peters were victims of the severe depression throughout the former colonies that followed the end of the War, when "The decline of prices, the scarcity of cash, depreciation, competition from British manufactures, the obstacles to establishing export markets when no longer part of the British empire, and efforts by British commercial creditors to collect pre-war debts all contributed to a wave of business failures after the Revolution."<sup>38</sup> Peters had no chance of collecting the money Scott owed him. He had almost as little chance of collecting the money Byles owed him because most businessmen in Western Massachusetts were in an even more dire financial situation than those in Boston. As Bruce Mann explains: "When the postwar depression arrived . . . . The demand of coastal merchants for specie to satisfy their foreign creditors echoed across the state, as debt collection suits flooded the courts and imprisoned debtors crammed the jails. Particularly hard hit were the farmers of Worcester and Hampshire counties, where lawsuits for debt more than tripled over war levels and where debt actions embroiled nearly a third of the adult males of each county. These debtors were at the end of the chain of credit that ran from British merchants to Boston wholesalers to inland retailers and other commercial intermediaries."<sup>39</sup> No doubt complicating the financial situation of Phillis and John Peters was the fact that Massachusetts was the only state that required all debts and taxes be paid in very scarce specie rather than in much depreciated currency.<sup>40</sup>

Boston did not have a separate prison for debtors, and prison records were kept quarterly. They tell us whether a particular person was in the prison on the day the record was made, but not necessarily whether or for how long that person was there before or after the quarterly recording. John Peters was

not included on the January 6, April 2, July 6, or October 5, 1784, or on the January 4 and July 5, 1785 prisoner lists, but he was on the April 19 and October 1785 lists. He may have been in and out of prison for debt during much of that period. Peters meanwhile continued to pursue his hopeless suit against Joseph Scott in October 1784 and January 1785.<sup>41</sup> The available evidence does not appear to support either the accusation that Peters “had become so shiftless and improvident, that he was forced to relieve himself of debt by an imprisonment in the county jail,” or the insinuation that Phillis Wheatley Peters died alone on December 5, 1784 in desperate circumstances because her husband had abandoned her.<sup>42</sup> He almost certainly had no choice but to be absent. I found no birth, baptismal, or death records of any children of Phillis and John Peters.

### **JOHN PETERS’S LATER YEARS, 1784–1801**

Necessity was often the mother of simultaneous occupations during the eighteenth century. Peters seems to have regained his economic footing by early 1788, when the “Assessors’ Taking Book,” recorded in April, lists “John Peters Black Man,” living in ward 1. In the “Taking Book” for Ward on April 1, 1789 John Peters was listed as 1 Poll, blank “Rl Estate,” “Blk Man.” By 1790 Phillis’s John Peters was clearly financially and socially upwardly mobile. That year’s “Taking Book” identifies him as a “Blck M docter pintle” worth \$25. A list of “Names of the Inhabitants of the Town of Boston in 1790,” includes John Peters as head of a family that includes no “Free white Males of 16 Years and upwards, including Heads of Families,” no free white males or females under 16, no slaves, and one other free person.<sup>43</sup> The 1791 “Taking Book” describes John Peters as a “Lawyer Physician Gentn pintlesmith.” (Pintles are the pins or bolts on which other parts, such as rudders or hinges, turn.) Odd though it may be to see someone described as both a doctor and a maker or mender of pintles, John Peters was not extraordinary in practicing medicine, law, and multiple other careers.

Accusations that John Peters practiced law and medicine without a license are based on fact. He would have been the source of the occupational information recorded in the “Taking Books.” But the accusations need to be historically contextualized. By the time Odell wrote her account of Phillis Wheatley’s life, both law and medicine had become professionalized to a degree largely unknown in the eighteenth century, when one was still defined almost as much by what one did as by what one was officially authorized or certified to do. Most eighteenth-century medical practitioners did not have medical degrees, and most had more than one occupation. The

situation was similar in the practice of law during the eighteenth century. The overwhelming majority of men who entered the legal profession before the late nineteenth century did so by studying standard legal texts such as William Blackstone's Commentaries on the Laws of England (1765-1769) under the tutelage of an experienced attorney. There were no law schools in colonial America. And although a few opened following the American Revolution, none admitted people of African descent.

John Peters' economic situation did not stabilize until twelve years after Phillis's death. The 1796 "Taking Book" identified him as "100 RI Estate, Physician Blk," and in 1798 he was listed as a "Blk M. 200 RI Estate. The Statistics of the United States Direct Tax of 1798, as Assessed on Boston; and The Names of the Inhabitants of Boston in 1790, as Collected for the First National Census describes Peters' property: John Peters, owner and occupier; wooden dwelling; fronting Northerly on Prince Street; Southerly & Westerly on Thomas Hopkins; Easterly on [Thomas] Whitman. Land, 202 square feet; house, 202 square feet; 1 story, 7 windows; value \$200. Peters' house was the least valuable of sixty-three listed in Book 2 "on lots not exceeding 2 acres. The others were two valued at \$300, one at \$400, four at \$500, seven at \$600, one at \$700, one at \$750, one at \$800, one at \$900, and the rest from \$1,000 to \$3,000. Phillis's widower was doing so well by the end of the decade that he may have been the John Peters who had enough social ambition to run for senator from the County of Suffolk in 1798. On the list of the twenty-five candidates dated April 2, 1798 Peters received the fewest votes, two. The highest vote-getter, Oliver Wendell, received 1574.

Odell's claim that after Phillis's death Peters "went to the South" no doubt discouraged aspiring biographers.<sup>44</sup> A daunting amount of territory lies "to the South" of Boston. Faced with the improbability of being able to verify Odell's assertion, I decided to ignore it and follow my ferret-like urge to keep digging in the archives. The "Taking Book," Ward 1, compiled in May 1799, includes "John Peters, gone to Cambridge, 200 RI Estate, Doctr Pintle Mender." Peters' political defeat may have contributed to his decision to leave Boston. Peters' story seems to end in 1800, when the Boston "Taking Book 1800" for Ward 1, records "John Peters Blk M. dead, 200 RI Estate."<sup>45</sup> Thinking it curious that he would move back to Boston so quickly, I decided to keep digging.

The report of his death in 1800 proved premature. Instead of heading south, Peters went to Charlestown, just north of Boston. The 9-12 March 1801 issue of the *Independent Chronicle and Advertiser* (Boston) announced his actual death: "At Charlestown, Dr. John Peters, aged 55." The administration of the estate of "John Peters late of Charlestown negro & physician, deceased,



### Desk Believed to Be Owned by Phillis Wheatley

This folding mahogany table may have been used by Phillis Wheatley while composing *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. The frontispiece of Wheatley's *Poems*, engraved while Wheatley was visiting London, shows Wheatley writing at a round table. This table, in a classic Chippendale style, was possibly given to Phillis by the family of John Wheatley of Boston, who purchased her as a slave in 1761. Following Wheatley's death in 1784, her possessions, including this writing desk, were sold at auction to pay her debts. Courtesy of Massachusetts Historical Society.

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intestate" was dated June 2, 1801.<sup>46</sup> On May 2, 1802 his property was valued at \$213.93, including "13 Book & 1 Bibel," together worth \$10," and "2 small mahogoney" tables valued at \$9. One of the tables may be the writing desk now at the Massachusetts Historical Society, believed to have belonged to Phillis Wheatley before her marriage.<sup>47</sup> Like many of his white as well as black contemporaries, Peters died as he had lived—in debt. His debts far exceeded the value of his assets.<sup>48</sup>



### Wheatley through Foreign Eyes

This rare portrait of Phillis Wheatley appeared in the *Revue des Colonies* in Paris between 1834 and 1842. It was unusual for showing her in full face and wearing jewels as well as an evening dress. Courtesy of the Schomburg Center.

The evidence suggests that rather than accepting Odell's characterization of John Peters as something of a con man or scam artist, we should recognize him as a go-getter, perhaps even a bit of a hustler, always trying to succeed against the odds. Peters' ownership of a "Sorel hors," a sleigh, a feather bed, leather-bottomed chairs, and other luxury goods reflects his aspirations to be recognized as a gentleman. His books indicate that he was an unusually educated man and probably a religious one as well. Peters' possessions suggest some of the reasons Phillis was attracted to him.

New information about the origins of Phillis Wheatley, the role she likely played in gaining her freedom, and the character of her husband are some of the reasons she needs to be reintroduced to us. *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* gives us more.<sup>49</sup>

## Notes

1. Reviews by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and John Wood quoted on the University of Georgia Press website at [http://www.ugapress.org/index.php/books/phillis\\_wheatley/1/0](http://www.ugapress.org/index.php/books/phillis_wheatley/1/0) accessed Sept. 8, 2014.
2. Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 74.
3. Eleanor Smith, "Phillis Wheatley: A Black Perspective," *Journal of Negro Education* 43 (1974): 403. For surveys of the reception history of Phillis Wheatley and her writings, in addition to Gates, Trials, see William H. Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley: A Bio-Bibliography* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1981), and Julian D. Mason, Jr., *The Poems of Phillis Wheatley*, 23–34. Although often tendentious, John C. Shields, *Phillis Wheatley's Poetics of Liberation: Backgrounds and Contexts* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2008) is the most thorough and up-to-date survey.
4. John C. Shields, review of Vincent Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*, in *African American Review* 45 (2012), 245–49.
5. Margaret Matilda Odell, "Memoir," in *Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley, a Native African and a Slave. Dedicated to the Friends of the Africans* (Boston: Geo. W. Light, 1834).
6. Langston Hughes, *Famous American Negroes* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1954), 2, 3, 5–15.
7. For example, John C. Shields, an editor and often perceptive critic of Wheatley's writings, refers without qualification to "her native Gambia" twice before he more carefully considers the evidence "that she may have come to America carrying with her a rudimentary knowledge of Arabic script adapted to the Fulani language" of Gambia. But after asserting that he has "established the land of her origins with some degree of probability," Shields leaps from one conclusion to another. He finds it "probable that Wheatley's family comprised members of the ruling class" and "plausible to posit that, as a student between the ages of one and seven, Wheatley absorbed from her African years images of the land of her birth, especially of its worshipped sun, and retained memories of the intellectual and artistic pursuits which characterized the people of that land": John C. Shields, *Phillis Wheatley's Poetics of Liberation: Backgrounds and Contexts* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2008), 20, 82, 97–100, 102, 100, 101, 104.
8. Medford Historical Society: The Medford Slave Trade Letters, 1759–1765. Letters quoted below are A (5) and A (7).
9. Joseph Miller, "Mortality in the Atlantic Slave Trade: Statistical Evidence on Causality," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2 (1981): 385–424; Miller, *African Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730–1830* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 384–385; Herbert S. Klein, *The Middle Passage: Comparative Studies in the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); Herbert S. Klein and Stanley L. Engerman, "Long-Term Trends in African Mortality in the Transatlantic Slave Trade," *Slavery and Abolition* 18 (1997): 36–



48; Herbert S. Klein, Stanley L. Engerman, Robin Haines, and Ralph Shlomowitz, "Transoceanic Mortality: The Slave Trade in Comparative Perspective," *William and Mary Quarterly* 58 (2001): 93-117; Kenneth F. Kiple and Brian T. Higgins, "Mortality Caused by Dehydration during the Middle Passage," in Joseph E. Inikori and Stanley L. Engerman, eds., *The Atlantic Slave Trade: Effects on Economies, Societies and Peoples in Africa, the Americas, and Europe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 321-337.

10. *Boston Gazette*, 13 July 1761.

11. All quotations from Wheatley's writings are taken from *Phillis Wheatley, Complete Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin, 2001).

12. A search by Carole Holden, Head of American Collections at the British Library, of the archives of the British Museum and the papers of Daniel Solander in the British Library found no references to Phillis Wheatley (private correspondence 16 and 17 August 2010).

13. Israel Mauduit, a dissenter, was a very familiar figure in Massachusetts. He had assisted his brother Jasper Mauduit (1697-1772) when Jasper was the agent representing Massachusetts (1762-1765). Israel published both *A Short View of the History of the Colony of Massachusetts* (London, 1769) and *A Short View of the History of the New England Colonies* in London in 1769. In 1773, Ezekiel Russell reprinted a Boston edition of Israel Mauduit's *The Case of the Dissenting Ministers*, an argument supporting greater religious tolerance that was first published in London in 1772. In 1774 Mauduit joined Alexander Wedderburn (1733-1805), the British solicitor-general, in defending governor Hutchinson against Benjamin Franklin's attempt to have him removed from office. Mauduit defended British interests in *Considerations on the American War. Addressed to the People of England* (London, 1776).

14. Julie Flavell, *When London Was Capital of America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 127-129.

15. Edmund Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ed. Paul Langford. Vol. 3: *Party, Parliament, and the American War, 1774-1780*, eds. Warren M. Elofson and John A. Woods (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 219. Quoted in Flavell, *When London Was Capital of America*, 127.

16. Benjamin Franklin, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, Leonard W. Labaree, ed. Vol. 20, William B. Willcox, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 291-292; 20: 445.

17. See David Waldstreicher, *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and the American Revolution* (New York, 2004).

18. J.A. Leo Lemay, ed., *Benjamin Franklin: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1987), 648, 649.

19. See Srividhya Swaminathan, "Developing the West Indian Proslavery Position after the Somerset Decision," *Slavery and Abolition* 24 (December 2003): 40-60.

20. *An Essay on Slavery* (Burlington, Vermont, 1773), 22-23. Emphasis in original.

21. Phillis Wheatley to Rev. Samuel Hopkins, 9 February 1774.

22. Fortunately for Phillis Wheatley's biographer, there are few men named John

Peters in relevant Boston records, and Phillis's husband can usually be distinguished from them by comparing contemporaneous records. For example, Phillis's husband was certainly neither the John Peters listed in *The Boston Directory* (Boston: John West, June 1796) as "Peters John, labourer, Short street," nor the John Peters, probably the same person, listed in *The Boston Directory* (Boston, 1800) as "Peters John, labourer, Belknap's lane." Tax assessment records prove that Phillis's widower lived in a different ward.

23. Quoted from Douglas R. Egerton, *Death or Liberty: African Americans and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 104. Egerton does not discuss either Phillis Wheatley or John Peters.

24. Massachusetts Historical Society: Second Church (Boston, Mass.) records, Ms. N-2037 Tall, Vol. 7: 109.

25. Her advertisement to solicit subscribers for her never-published second book appeared on the front page of the *Boston Evening Post* and *General Advertiser* on 30 October 1779.

26. Boston Public Library: Taking Books (tax assessments), 1780-1820.

27. Massachusetts Archives: Suffolk Files, Vol. 531, #93097.

28. *Boston Post-Boy*, 17 August 1772.

29. Massachusetts Archives: Suffolk Files #93027.

30. Massachusetts Archives: Suffolk Files, Vol. 531, #93097.

31. Margaretta Matilda Odell, "Memoir," 20.

32. Everts B. Greene and Virginia D. Harrington, *American Population before the Federal Census of 1790* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), 33.

33. For help in locating town and Congregational Church records in Wilmington, I thank Andrea Houser, Adele Passmore, Caroline Harris, and Terry McDermott.

34. Massachusetts Archives: Suffolk County Court of Common Pleas, Record Books, Vol. 1784, 55; American Antiquarian Society: Massachusetts Court of Common Pleas, Record Book, Mss. Dept., Octavo vols. "M," 1783-1790, f. 56, 6 July 1784.

35. For a description of post-war Boston, see Jacqueline Barbara Carr, *After the Siege: A Social History of Boston, 1775-1800* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2005).

36. Massachusetts Archives: Suffolk Files Collection, Vol. 679, #95576.

37. The Taking Books reveal that "Prince Hall (Negro)," servant of the wealthy merchant "Isaac Smith Esqr.," was also living in ward 8 in 1784, and that Widow Sheaffe outlived Peters by ten years.

38. Bruce H. Mann, *Republic of Debtors: Bankruptcy in the Age of American Independence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 176.

39. Mann, *Republic of Debtors*, 180.

40. Mann, *Republic of Debtors*, 180, notes, "Debtor-creditor relations had long been more hostile in Massachusetts than elsewhere."

41. On 15 July 1785, Deputy Sheriff Benjamin Hemans witnessed John Peters's signed testimony that the execution of the 6 October 1784 warrant against Joseph Scott had been "in no part satisfied" [Peters's signature looks the same as the one

on the 28 July 1784 petition for a liquor license]. Massachusetts Archives: Suffolk County Court of Common Pleas, *Peters vs. Scott*, Docket #244, July 1785 Session.

42. Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, "Phillis Wheatley, the Negro—Slave Poet," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 21 December 1863.

43. "Names of the Inhabitants of the Town of Boston in 1790. Collected by Samuel Bradford. Printed from the original manuscript in the Library of the New England Historic-Genealogical Society."

44. Odell, "Memoir," 29.

45. William H. Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1984), 65, mistakes the "Peters John, labourer, Belknap's lane" in *The Boston Directory* (Boston: John West, 1800) for Phillis's husband, who lived in a different ward.

46. Massachusetts Archives: Middlesex County Probate Court File Papers 17255.

47. Massachusetts Archives: Middlesex County Probate Court File Papers 17255, "The Inventory of sundry Effects Belonging to the Estate of John Peters late of Charlestown decd takn the 6 day of augst 1801 by the apprisers."

48. His administrators were "Josiah Wellington, gentleman, & Micah Brigden blacksmith, principals, John Nutting gentleman & Jabez Frothingham, gentleman." Jabez Frothingham (d. 1801), a wheelwright, was the cousin of Benjamin Frothingham (d. 1809), the cabinet maker thought to have designed the writing desk in the Massachusetts Historical Society. See Thomas Bellows Wyman, *The Genealogies and Estates of Charlestown, in the County of Middlesex and Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1629-1818* (Boston, 1879), 2 vols.

49. Earlier versions of portions of this essay appeared in my *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*. I thank the University of Georgia Press for permission to include that material here.