Wheatley, Phillis

(b. c. 1753, Senegal, West Africa--d. Dec. 5, 1784, Boston, Mass., U.S.), the first black woman poet of note in the United States.

She was sold from a slave ship in Boston in 1761 to work for the family of John Wheatley, a merchant. The Wheatleys soon recognized her talents and gave her privileges unusual for a slave, allowing her to learn to read and write. At the age of 14 she began to write poetry, and her first published work, "An Elegiac Poem, on the Death of the Celebrated Divine . . . George Whitefield" (1770), attracted much attention. In 1773 her Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral was published in England under the sponsorship of the Countess of Huntingdon, and Wheatley's reputation spread in Europe as well as in America. A poem published in 1776, dedicated to George Washington, brought her further acclaim.

The dissolution of the Wheatley family by death left Phillis Wheatley alone, and in April 1778 she married John Peters, a free black man who failed in business and apparently also failed to support Phillis and her children. At the end of her life she was working as a servant, and she died in poverty.

Wheatley's poetry, largely concerned with morality and piety, was conventional for its time. Her significance stems from the attention that she drew to her successful education. Her poems were reissued in the 1830s by Abolitionists eager to prove the human potential of blacks.