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Phillis Wheatley: Young Revolutionary Poet

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One of the most astonishing stories from the American Revolution is that of Phillis Wheatley, a young slave in Boston, who became a famed poet, popular for her often political writings. Her poems were heralded by both a king and a future president.

The authors were good friends (Speicher is now deceased). Thirty-seven years after they co-wrote this book on this remarkable girl, it is being republished as part of the Young Patriots series from Patria Press. The publisher is reproducing wonderful biographies originally introduced decades ago in the Childhood of Famous Americans Series, along with new biographies.

The story of Phillis Wheatley is particularly inspirational. When she was purchased as a slave in 1761 by kindly Susannah Wheatley to help in the house, the frail seven-year-old from Africa understood no English. The Wheatleys immediately took an interest in her and treated her less as an enslaved servant than a daughter, despite criticism from friends.

The authors dramatically portray Philliss desire to learn. As she acquires English vocabulary, she begins to speak. In fact, she talked and talked and talked. She followed Mary and Mrs. Wheatley everywhere, tugging at their skirts and pointing at everything in the house. In a few more weeks she was putting words together and making short sentences. The girls appetite for mastering language was insatiable. The older Wheatley children, Mary and Nat, taught her Latin as well.

Nat, one of the rebellious colonists, introduced Phillis to politics. When King George repealed the Stamp Tax, Nat took her to see the celebration cheering the monarch. After Phillis went to bed that night in 1768, the muse came to her, and she decided to write a poem to the king, praising him for his action: But how shall we the British king reward? / Rule thou in

peace, our father, and our lord! / Midst the remembrance of thy favors past, / The meanest peasants most admire the last. / May George, beloved by all the nations round, / Live with heavens choicest constant blessings crowned.

Thinking no one would be interested in a servant girls poem, she kept it to herself. After its discovery, Mr. Wheatley shared her poem with members of the State House. Impressed, Samuel Adams said her poem would be sent to the king. You have a great gift, young woman, a very great gift, and it must be used, Adams said. Phillis did use her gift of poetry. During her brief life she wrote 100 poems, and she was the first African-American to publish a book.

Phillis was often asked to read her works at high-society parties, and was invited to meet both King George and General George Washington, for whom she wrote and read her last known poem. In 1773, the Wheatleys freed Phillis before letting her travel to England, where her poems were published, but before she had her audience with the king, she returned to Boston to be with the ailing Susannah.

There are pages of additional facts at the books conclusion, but it would have been helpful to have more of a timeline embedded in the story itself, such as her age at various points. Readers also would have benefited from an explanation of why she died in poverty in 1784 after her popularity and successes.

Morrisons pencil sketches, like her illustrations for other books in the Young Patriots Series, vividly depict the settings and characters, such as when an angry mob protests the Stamp Act. That drawing is crowded with emotion-filled faces and raised arms, pulling readers into the tense scene. She has illustrated more than thirty childrens books, including the award-winning [i]Ignacios Chair[i].

Borland and the Spiecher, with backgrounds in journalism and editing, wrote fifteen books for children and adults, separately and as a team, including [i]Alan Pinkerton, Young Detective[i], and [i]Eugene Field, Young Poet[i], [i]These Tigers Hearts[i], and [i]The Southern Yankees[i]. Having also written reading textbooks for McGraw Hill and Scott-Foresman, they well know their audience of eight- to twelve-year-olds. These pages are action-packed, the characters are real, and descriptions are high-interest.

Like their parents, who once read the orange-cover books in the earlier Childhood series, the newest generation of young readers will be fascinated by Young Patriots like the gifted Phillis Wheatley, her self-doubts, and her ultimate triumph over circumstances that would defeat most people.

Linda Salisbury