PEOPLE IN HISTORY

Phillis Wheatley was born in Gambia (in Africa) on May 8, 1753, and died in Boston on December 5, 1784.

When she was 7 or 8, she was sold as a slave to John and Susanna Wheatley of Boston. She was named after the ship that brought her to America, The Phillis.

The Poetry Foundation describes her sale:

In August 1761, "in want of a domestic," Susanna Wheatley purchased "a slender, frail female child ... for a trifle"... The captain of the slave ship believed that the waif was terminally ill, and he wanted ... at least a small profit before she died.... The family surmised the girl—who was "of slender frame and evidently suffering from a change of climate," nearly naked, with "no other covering than a quantity of dirty carpet about her" - to be "about seven years old ... from the circumstances of shedding her front teeth."

Phillis was very intelligent. The Wheatley family taught her to read and write and encouraged her to write poetry. Her first poem "On Messrs. Hussey and Coffin" was published when she was only twelve. In 1770, "An Elegiac Poem, on the Death of that Celebrated Divine, and Eminent Servant of Jesus Christ, the Reverend and Learned George Whitefield" made her famous. It was published in Boston, Newport, and Philadelphia.

When she was eighteen, Phillis and Mrs. Wheatley tried to sell a collection containing twenty-eight of her poems. Colonists did not want to buy poetry written by an African. Mrs. Wheatley wrote to England to ask Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, for help. The countess was a wealthy supporter of evangelical and abolitionist (anti-slavery) causes. She had Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral published in England in 1773. This book made Phillis famous in England and the thirteen colonies. She wrote a poem for George Washington in 1775, and he praised her work. They met in 1776. Phillis supported independence for the colonies during the Revolutionary War.

After her master died, Phillis was emancipated. She married John Peters, a free black man, in 1778. She and her husband lost two children as infants. John would be imprisoned for debt in 1784. Phillis and her remaining child died in December of 1784 and were buried in an unmarked grave. Nevertheless, the legacy of Phillis Wheatly lives on. She became the first African American and the first slave in the United States to publish a book. She proved that slaves or former slaves had a valuable voice in the Revolutionary era.

Question 1 The slaveowner who sold Phillis to the Wheatley family believed ___.

A. she would soon recover from her illness

B. she was very intelligent

C. she was worth a lot of money

D. she would soon die

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Question 2 The Wheatley family estimated the age of the slave girl they named "Phillis" by _____.

A. her size

B. the condition of her teeth

C. her color

D. her weight

Question 3 By the age of twelve, Phillis was _____.

A. no longer a slave

B. married

C. a published poet

D. still not able to read or write

Question 4 Phillis' first attempt at selling her poetry in America (the colonies) was _____.

A. illegal

B. imaginary

C. unsuccessful

D. successful

Question 5 It can be inferred from the passage that the Countess of Huntingdon _____.

A. didn't care about Phillis' poetry

B. helped Phillis get her writings published

C. believed in slavery

D. was surprised that Phillis could read and write

Question 6 Who was John Peters?

A. A military general

B. Somebody who Phillis admired greatly

C. Phillis' husband

D. A slave owner

Question 7 Phillis finally became free _____.

A. when she published her poems in England

B. after meeting the Countess of Huntingdon

C. when she became wealthy

D. after her master died

Question 8 Where is Phillis Wheatley buried?

A. No one knows

B. Africa

C. Boston

D. Virginia

LIVEWORKSHEETS

Question 9 What question is answered in the last paragraph?

A. Who did Phillis marry?

B. Where were Phillis' works published?

C. What did Phillis prove?

D. Why was Phillis a slave?

Question 10 Which of the following is TRUE about Phillis Wheatley?

A. She was the first African-American slave to visit England.

B. She was the first African-American and slave to publish a book in the United States.

C. She was the first African-American and slave to be able to read and write

D. She was the first African-American and slave to meet George Washington.

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