On July 11, 1761, a slave ship named Phillis arrived in Boston. On that day, John Wheatley, a successful merchant in Boston, purchased a young girl from Gambia, Africa, and named her Phillis, after the vessel she arrived on. As was custom in those times, she was given the surname of Wheatley.

The Wheatley family quickly discovered that Phillis was an exceptionally bright child, and began to teach her how to read and write. Within 16 months of arriving in America, she could read the Bible, British literature, and Greek and Latin classics, and she also studied geography, according to the National Women’s History Muesum (NWHM). This type of education was rare. A few slave owners taught their slaves to read the Bible, but few received the extensive education that Phillis Wheatley did.

At the age of 14, Wheatley began writing poetry, publishing her first poem in 1767. However, it was an elegiac poem written for George Whitefield, an evangelical minister from England who died unexpectedly in Massachusetts, that put Wheatley in the spotlight in 1770. In it, she wrote,

“He pray’d that grace in every heart
might dwell:
He long’d to see America excell;
He charg’d its youth to let the grace
divine
Arise, and in their future actions
shine”

Newspapers in major cities including Boston, New York and Philadelphia published the poem, and it caught the attention of Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon and an admirer of Whitefield. Hastings sent the elegy to newspapers in London, where it was reprinted multiple times.

Wheatley continued writing poems, and by the early 1770s she had enough to publish an entire book. John Wheatley, knowing she would face opposition from people who believed she lacked the intellect, gathered a group of respected citizens in Boston, including

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What’s in a Name

Discover the meaning behind some of the DAR chapters’ unique names.

Lake Minnetonka Chapter, Wayzata, Minn., organized on October 8, 2005, serves the area west of the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. The chapter is named for the lake near where many of its members reside. “Minnetonka” originates from Dakota words meaning “Big Water” (minne is water; tonka is big or great). Though not the largest lake in the state, its proximity to the Twin Cities makes it one of the best-known. The lake covers 14,528 acres or 21.6 square miles, with a total shoreline of 125 miles.

The Lake Minnetonka headwaters flow into Minnehaha Creek, which means “Laughing Waters.” The creek feeds Minnehaha Falls, flowing thence to the mighty Mississippi River. Minnehaha was made famous in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem “The Song of Hiawatha.”

The 1880s were the glory days of Lake Minnetonka. Drawn by the cool summers and alluring atmosphere, visitors traveled up the Mississippi and then by railroad to Wayzata or Excelsior, where steamboats transported guests to plush hotels. Now a residential area, the lake is popular for outdoor activities like boating, sailing and fishing.

Hannah Weston Chapter, Machias, Maine, was organized on February 12, 1901, and named for a heroine of the Battle of the Margareta in Machias Bay on June 11–12, 1775. One of the first naval battles of the American Revolution, it was also known as the “Lexington of the seas.” The assault involved men of the settlement against two British cutters that had arrived in the bay seeking lumber to build barracks in Boston. The British also demanded that the town’s liberty pole be taken down. Accounts from the battle describe how a local woman, Hannah Weston, the wife of Josiah Weston, gathered 30–40 pounds of powder, lead and even silverware from her neighbors. Hannah and her sister-in-law, Rebecca, walked many miles through woods to deliver the much-needed materials for bullets to the patriots at Machias. Both women were rewarded with 12 yards of camlet (a strong woven fabric) for their courageous actions.

Cora Stickney Harper Chapter, Fort Pierce, Fla., organized June 19, 1914, was originally planned to be named Aiseehatchee, meaning “river of the deer people.” Cora Harper worked to organize a DAR chapter in Fort Pierce in 1913. She was a member of Miami Chapter and was appointed Organizing Regent by Florida State Regent Glenville Fissell. Through Harper’s tireless efforts, the required number of ladies signed the chapter register on June 14, 1914. Harper died on November 1, 1914, the same year the charter was accepted. The sense of personal loss was so great that at the November 1914 chapter meeting, the newly formed chapter voted to change the name from Aiseehatchee to Cora Stickney Harper to permanently honor its founder.

The Remarkable Life of Phillis Wheatley

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the governor and John Hancock, to vouch for the intellect of Phillis and the authenticity of her poems. Despite this, no publisher in the Colonies was interested in the book of poems, and the Countess of Huntingdon offered to finance the book in England.

At the age of 20, Wheatley became the first African-American (and the second woman) to publish a book of poems, when Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral was published in September 1773. In the first year, it was reprinted multiple times in London, though an American edition was not issued until 1786, notes the NWHM.

Shortly after her book of poems was published, Wheatley was emancipated. She married John Peters, a free Black man from Boston, in 1778 and had three children, none of whom survived. She continued writing poetry, though efforts to publish a second book did not succeed.

Wheatley died in December 1784, as a result of complications from childbirth, and she is believed to be buried in an unmarked grave in Copp’s Hill Burying Ground in Boston.