

Fact or Fiction?

Name: _____

Below is a biography on Phillis Wheatley. On the following page is a chart with ten statements. Indicate whether each statement is fact or fiction.

Early Life

Phillis Wheatley was born in Gambia on May 8, 1753. 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 below:

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." (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/phillis-wheatley>)

The 12 Year-old Poet

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.

Short-lived Fame

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. In 1775, Phillis wrote a poem for George Washington, who praised her work. They met in 1776. Phillis supported independence for the colonies during the Revolutionary War. She became the first African American and the first slave in the United States to publish a book.

A Short Life

After her master died, Phillis was emancipated (freed). 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, who suffered from respiratory ailments for most of her life, died in December of 1784, and was buried in an unmarked grave.

	FACT	FICTION
Phillis Wheatley was born in Africa		
Phillis Wheatley was a Loyalist and was against American independence		
Phillis never became famous in America		
The Wheatley's taught Phillis to read and write		
At first, people in America did not seem interested in Wheatley' poetry		
Phillis Wheatley never lived as a free Black woman		
Phillis Wheatley's later life is well-documented		
Phillis was named after the slave ship that brought her to Boston		
Phillis Wheatley met George Washington		
Phillis Wheatley was the first slave to publish a book in America		
Phillis Wheatley married a wealthy former slave owner		

Answers:

	FACT	FICTION
Phillis Wheatley was born in Africa	X	
Phillis Wheatley was a Loyalist and was against American independence		X
Phillis never became famous in America		X
The Wheatley's taught Phillis to read and write	X	
At first, people in America did not seem interested in Wheatley' poetry	X	
Phillis Wheatley never lived as a free Black woman		X
Phillis Wheatley's later life is well-documented		X
Phillis was named after the slave ship that brought her to Boston	X	
Phillis Wheatley met George Washington	X	
Phillis Wheatley was the first slave to publish a book in America	X	
Phillis Wheatley married a wealthy former slave owner		X