

Enslaved People's Experiences 1—Phillis Wheatley

Introduction: Phillis Wheatley was stolen from her home in West Africa and taken to Boston in 1761, where she was purchased by John Wheatley. Mr. Wheatley had originally bought Phillis Wheatley with the idea that she would become a servant for his wife, Susannah, but that never happened.

As it turned out, Phillis learned English quickly and began right away to read the Bible. The Wheatleys recognized her intelligence and because she was also of very poor health, they never trained her as a servant. Instead, the couple encouraged Phillis to take up academic subjects, such as religion and literature.

In 1767, Phillis Wheatley published her first poem. Six years later, Wheatley became the first African American, the first enslaved person, and the third woman in the United States to publish her own poetry book. She titled it *Poems on Various Subjects*.

The same year that her book was released, Wheatley was released from slavery by her owners. With her emancipation, she immediately began to travel in order to promote her book and even went as far as London. She drew international attention and world leaders and writers recognized her work.

In 1778, Wheatley married a free black Boston man, John Peters. She was not able to find a publisher for her second book, and died in poverty in 1784.

Read the poem below and answer the questions that follow. Be prepared to share your group's findings with the class.

On Being Brought from Africa to America

'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die"
Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,
May be resin'd and join th' angelic train.



Courtesy New York Public Library. Used with permission.

This portrait of Phillis Wheatley appeared in Paris in the early nineteenth century.

Questions:

1. What do you notice about the picture? Does it tell you anything about Phillis Wheatley?
2. What do you think the first line of the poem means? To what "Pagan land" is she referring? Why do you think she says mercy brought her from that land?
3. What do you think the line, "Their colour is a diabolic die" means? Who are the people who say this?
4. What do you think the point of this poem is? Who or what might have encouraged her to think this way?

Enslaved People's Experiences 2—Crispus Attucks

Introduction: Crispus Attucks was born into slavery around 1723 as the son of an African father and a Native American mother. He lived as a slave of William Brown in Framingham, Massachusetts. He became known for his skill in buying and selling horses and cattle for his master.

In about 1750, Attucks apparently ran away from William Brown. An ad in the *Boston Gazette and Weekly Journal* sought his return to Framingham: "Ran away from his Master William Brown from Framingham, on the 30th of Sept. last, a Molatto Fellow, about 27 Years of age, named Crispas, 6 Feet two Inches high, short curl'd Hair, his Knees nearer together than common: had on a light colour'd Bearskin Coat."

There is little known of the life of Crispus Attucks for the next twenty years. Historians speculate that he worked on whaling ships and as a rope maker around Boston.

In 1770, tension arose in Boston between British troops and American colonists. On March 5th, 1770, a group of American sailors and eight British soldiers took their hostility to the streets. Historians debate who was the instigator of the interaction, but there is little question that Crispus Attucks led the Americans. Attucks was the first killed by the British in the event that was later coined the Boston Massacre. Some consider it the first act of the American Revolution.

Many have proclaimed Crispus Attucks to be the first martyr for the American cause, while others have declared him to be a rabble-rousing villain. Still others consider him to be of no importance to American history.

Look at the two contemporary paintings of the Boston Massacre on the next page, one by Paul Revere and the other by John Bufford. Discuss the questions with your group and be prepared to share your responses with the class.

Questions:

1. Who was Crispus Attucks?
2. What are the major differences and similarities between the two images?
3. What part does Crispus Attucks play in each of the two images?
4. These two paintings of the same event tell us different stories about U.S. history. How does the telling of history affect our understanding of events in the past?

Enslaved People's Experiences 2—Crispus Attacks



The Bloody Massacre, by Paul Revere.

Courtesy of Archiving Early America. <http://earlyamerica.com>. Used with permission.



Boston Massacre, March 5, 1770, by John Bufford.

Copy of chromolithograph Courtesy of The History Place (www.historyplace.com).

Enslaved People's Experiences 3—Renaming

Introduction: Throughout the eighteenth century, most owners renamed the slaves they brought to the New World. This practice was a way for masters to assert control over their slaves and attempt to erase their previous identities. Even when slaves were bought and sold within the colonies, new masters would often give slaves new names in order to demonstrate how little the slaves' previous lives mattered. There were various types of names slave owners often used, including the following:

Classical names, such as Jupiter, Caesar, Pharaoh: Masters used these types of names in order to display their social status. By renaming slaves after classical heroes, they demonstrated their own level of education—only the well-educated were familiar with classical names.

Place names: Slaves were occasionally named after the place they resided in the colonies, such as Newport, Bristol, or Boston.

Both place names and classical names were also commonly used for naming cattle. This shows how masters purposefully de-humanized slaves by putting them at the same level as their livestock.

Occupational names: Masters also named slaves after whatever work they were involved in, such as Handsaw, which demonstrates that masters associated their slaves with their economic purposes rather than their personality.

Nicknames, such as Joe, Tom, Jenny, Peg: In eighteenth century society, using proper names showed respect, while shortened names, or nicknames, were used for children. The fact that slaves were often called by nicknames showed how little respect masters had for their slaves—of any age.

Many enslaved people rebelled against this renaming. Some slaves took ownership over their given names by naming their children the same thing, therefore attempting to take the power out of the master's hand. Others used two first names—one African name in private and their given name only in their master's presence. And still others refused to answer to their master's assigned name. These enslaved people kept their original African names, such as Cudjo, Cuff, and Mingo.

The chart below shows the percentage of enslaved people in Narragansett, Rhode Island who were given each type of name described above. Using the information above and the chart below, discuss the questions in your group. Be prepared to share your conclusions with the class.

Enslaved People's Names in Narragansett, Rhode Island

	1692-1724	1725-1749	1750-1774	1775-1799	Total
Classical names	13%	9%	9%	13%	10%
Place names	—	4%	6%	7%	5%
Occupational names	—	1%	—	2%	1%
Nicknames	31%	32%	23%	18%	25%

data from Fitts, Robert K. *Inventing New England's Slave Paradise: Master/Slave Relations in Eighteenth Century Narragansett, Rhode Island*.

Questions

1. Why are names important to a person's identity? What do names symbolize?
2. Why would masters rename slaves?
3. How did enslaved people rebel against their masters' forced names?
4. Why would rebellion have been risky?
5. Why might it have been worth the risk?

Enslaved People's Experiences 4—Runaway Ads

Introduction: Below are examples of two ads placed in newspapers for runaway slaves and a small poster ad placed in Newport seeking the return of a slave. Two of the ads were placed by masters of runaway slaves, the other by a person who captured a runaway slave and who was looking for his owner. Several of these types of ads appeared each month in the newspapers in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and colonies further south. Read the questions with your groupmates and be prepared to share your responses with the class.

Date: 7.11.1763 **Master:** James Richardson

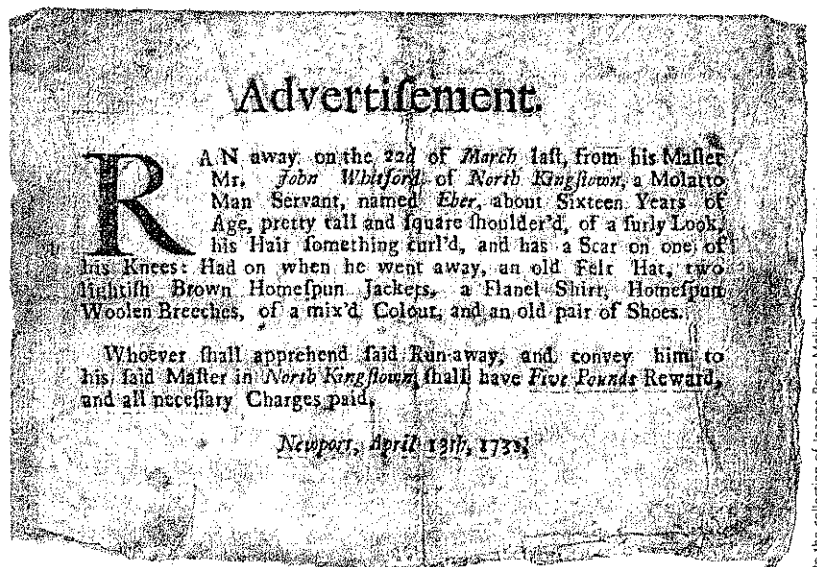
Source: *Newport Mercury*

Runaway from James Richardson of Stonington, Connecticut, a mulatto servant man named Joseph Smith alias Joseph Mingore passes as a soldier. He says that he was brought up with Stephen Cottril of South Kingstown is about 6 feet high, 24 years old, much pock-broken, talks good English. Had when he ran away 2 suits of broad cloth clothes: 1 blue, 1 a light color; red waistcoat; calico waistcoat; dussil great coat; pair buckskin breeches; and a leather jockey-hat. 10 dollar reward.

Date: 10.17.1767 **Master:** Unknown

Source: *Providence Gazette*

Found
Taken up strolling in Warwick, a runaway slave Negro male, thirty-nine years old, five feet ten inches tall. Talks in broken English. Had on old blue great coat, old leather breeches, grey yarn stockings, a linen shirt and cap, and a small felt hat. He is much cut and marked on each side of his face. Found him on October Third.



Questions

1. How are the enslaved people described in these ads?
2. In what ways do these ads demonstrate that slaves were treated as property?
3. Why do the ads mention the slave's level of English? Why might a slave not be fluent in English?
4. What does the advertisement for a "found" slave tell us about the values of the society at that time?
5. How would a person who "found" a slave know he or she was a slave?
6. How are the enslaved people described physically? What might that tell us about the slaves' masters or the slaves themselves?
7. Why would an enslaved person run away? What risks might be involved?