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The Letters of Phillis Wheatley

Tara Bynum 00:01

One of the things that always stands out to me are Wheatley's "P" as in Phillis and "D" as in deer. There's so much flourish, theatricality to them. We can imagine that every sort of flourish is that much more ink. It's that much more of the sharpness of the quill. It's that much more paper that's being taken up for enjoyment.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:34

[Intro music fades in] This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.

Katy Morris 00:41

This is Katy Morris.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:42

And this is The Object of History.

Katy Morris 00:45

The podcast of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:48

Since 1791, the MHS has sought to collect, preserve, and communicate the building blocks of history.

Katy Morris 00:55

Each episode examines an object, document or set of items from the society's millions of manuscript pieces and artifacts. We take you on a behind the scenes tour of our stacks to explore the incredible stories held within our collections.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:09

In this episode, we are examining a group of letters written by the poet Phillis Wheatley to her friend Obour Tanner. These documents provide a window into a relationship between two young, black women during the Age of the American Revolution. In Phillis' letters to Obour, we catch a glimpse of their spiritual lives, their joint efforts to publish Wheatley's books of poems, and the support they provided one another through hardship.

Katy Morris 01:36

With Peter Drummey, Chief Historian and Stephen T. Riley Librarian, we'll learn about Wheatley's early life, her rise to literary prominence, and how her letters to Obour Tanner came to the MHS. With early American literary scholar Tara Bynum, we'll challenge the idea of Wheatley as a singular genius, standing apart from her community. Together we'll revel in the beautiful letters penned by Wheatley to her friend that allow us to see inside her world.

Katy Morris 02:08

Let's start at the beginning. Can you share with our listeners what we do and do not know about Wheatley's early life?

Tara Bynum 02:16

So, here's what we know. Phillis Wheatley is most likely born in the Senegambia region of West Africa. And she's brought to Boston on a ship called 'The Phillis' in 1761. She's enslaved at about seven or eight years old to the Wheatley family of Boston. John, the husband, the kind of patriarch of the Wheatley family was a property owner, a merchant and tailor in the Boston area. She's taught to read and write, and basic literacy is something that is commonplace at the time, though it may not have been nearly as common among enslaved children. And there's some hypotheses or ideas about the fact that Susanna Wheatley, who's the matriarch of the family or her daughter, Mary, might have helped Phillis Wheatley learn to read and write. Stuff that we don't know is exactly what her education looks like. So, I don't know who exactly who her tutor is, or you know, what the curriculum looked like and oftentimes folks want a lot more than what we have about Wheatley's

early life but that's not to say that there isn't still a whole lot that we do know about Wheatley, but the day to day look of Wheatley's life is not presently extant, and there are times when I wonder like if it's any of our business.

Katy Morris 03:34

Can you say more?

Tara Bynum 03:35

You know, I think that when it comes to historical figures, the goal for us at present is always to know more and yet, I think that there's not enough kind of credit given sometimes to what those historical figures want us to know about, for us as researchers, scholars, students of history to think about what the historical person who was in fact a real person, what they would want us to know. So, I think so often people want to know what Wheatley's Middle Passage experience was like. Would Wheatley have wanted you to know that you know? Is that something that she talked about? Is that something that was up for discussion for her even as interesting and compelling, I would love to be the person who found, you know, Wheatley's writing about that I certainly would read that experience if someone else found it. But I think from time to time, I do wonder if our desire to know everything is what the historical person would have wanted.

Peter Drummey 04:38

We know that she grew up in the household of the Wheatleys which was at a very prominent address on King Street, what's now State Street, the main thoroughfare of Boston in the 18th century. The Wheatleys were deeply devout. They were members of a new congregation in Boston, the new South Church deeply engaged in religion. So, when she's a little older Phillis Wheatley's first recognized poem is an elegy to George Whitefield, the evangelist who had traveled through colonial America, a much-celebrated speaker. And so, she was deeply engaged by the religion of her day, but not to the exclusion of being exposed to neoclassical poets, Alexander Pope, John Milton, a whole range of writing and literature. So, this was a household in which books and reading were appreciated. And she certainly received some of this from where and how she lived. But she clearly

was extraordinarily precocious because she took this all in. This is an enslaved child, who comes from West Africa on a voyage that a number of people in this voyage didn't survive, and within a couple of years has learned English, both speaking and writing it. And by the time that she is a very young teenager is being recognized as a poet in a minor scale that is almost like who could believe such a child could be walking around among us?

Katy Morris 06:24

I guess poetry is something that as a student in this time, you would sort of try your hand at, is that right?

Peter Drummey 06:32

Yes, I think poetry in the 18th century has a power in people's lives that we perhaps don't understand or appreciate in the sense that many people thought that poetry was the highest literature and that sort of underneath that was your novel writing, the new form of literary enterprise that there was a kind of higher literature which was written in verse, and also that poetry had another purpose in the 18th century, which is largely not available to us that much of what Phillis Wheatley wrote was elegy. She was writing in verse memorials to people around her in Boston.

Tara Bynum 07:15

She writes all sorts of poems. There's elegies for any number of deceased husbands, wives and children. She writes hymns to mourning and muses about imagination and godly providence. She writes about mythological characters. And I think my favorite and this comes from Thoughts on the Works of Providence, it's like the image of Aurora in Titan's bed. I guess the cool thing about Wheatley's poems is the breath that they have. Some are short, some are long, and I think all of them kind of reveal the infinite possibilities of interest that Wheatley may have had and I think they also kind of speak to Wheatley's larger network. You know, I think so often, Wheatley is imagined as this singular figure. But you know, I think if we pay attention to something like the elegies, we can see who Wheatley is in conversation with or who she is imagining herself to be in conversation

with. I think what's interesting is that we should acknowledge that Wheatley intends to publish a book of poems, and that intention it characterizes her approach. It shapes her approach and I think it's important to think about Wheatley as her own agent-publicist, kind of in route to fame. You know, I think the deeper I get into the Wheatley archive, the more becomes clear to me that she is very intentional about getting this book published.

Peter Drummey 08:38

There was an effort to publish her poems by subscription here in Massachusetts, in Boston in 1772. And in fact, there was an advertisement for that, which is quite wonderful, because it was like this will be published by this remarkable teenager still, but it's where subscribers people would pay in advance for a book to provide funds to then publish it and then get copies. It was like crowdsourcing crowdfunding for a project. But it also had a secondary aspect because in this list of subscribers, if you had notable figures, and of course put you at an advantage. So, the attempt to publish her poems here in America in Boston failed, and it's not entirely clear why. This might have been something of a speculation that is she really hadn't necessarily written all these poems yet, but had a list of what she was going to provide for this volume. So, Wheatley family supported this. Her poems were sent to England to be published there. Again, she had through the recognition of some of her early works published separately, she had started having sponsors and people interested in her work in England. The most important of these is the Countess of Huntington, who was a benefactor and patron but with this stamp of approval for a major benefactor in England, her poems were published there, and Phillis Wheatley with Nathaniel Wheatley goes to England herself in 1773.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 10:14

When Phillis left for London, at about the age of 19, her work reached new levels of recognition and her life changed dramatically. We asked Tara and Peter to share with us the intertwined stories of Phillis' publication and her path to freedom.

Tara Bynum 10:14

In London, she also was able to kind of meet and interact with this interesting assortment of high-profile Londoners that also, I think, helped to shape Wheatley's trajectory as simply put a famous person, you know, a well-known artist, and poet. And when I think about it, the important thing seems to be to remember that Wheatley wants to do this. And that Wheatley takes charge over the publication in some respects and ensuring that the book is published the way that she wants it to be. And it's interesting that she, she goes to England secures the publication of the book, and it's kind of in the era of the Mansfield's Decision. There these discussions about you know, what happens when enslaved people come to British soil. Are they allowed to be free? Ultimately, Britain says, "Yes, they can be."

Peter Drummey 11:35

Phillis Wheatley's status really changed, at least in theory, being in England, according to the court decision in the Somerset [v Stewart] case meant that she could not be forced to leave England by a slave owner. It didn't free her under the law, but it made it practically impossible to keep her enslaved there. We think of 1773 events leading up to the American Revolution, much talk of freedom and independence in the air here in America. But paradoxically, when she goes to England, she is free there where she would still be enslaved in America.

Tara Bynum 12:16

When Wheatley returns to Boston and the book is out and has relative success. She is ultimately freed by the Wheatley family. And I think that there's a way to kind of imagine that chronology not as distinct and separate events but as representative of a particular kind of historical moment.

Katy Morris 12:41

During this critical period of Phillis' life, when she travelled to London, secured the publication of her book and her own freedom. She was also writing letters to her friend Obour Tanner. We asked Peter and Tara to introduce us to these documents, and how they came to reside at the MHS.

Peter Drummey 13:02

We have about a dozen of her letters, and then there are about an equal number of poems. Now these are not the literary manuscripts of poems. But in the fashion of the day, once a person became a notable writer, poet, you would make a manuscript copy of one of your published works or known works, and that itself would have extra value as being in the handwriting of the author of the poet.

Katy Morris 13:31

And how did these manuscripts come to the MHS? Did they come in one collection?

Peter Drummey 13:36

No, they didn't. Several of them are individual pieces in collections of papers from the 18th century that people essentially staff members of the [Massachusetts] Historical Society discovered that is in someone's correspondence or papers. There were these individual documents a sample of Phillis Wheatley's poetry in her own hand, or a letter written. I think the extraordinary body is a small body of letters that was brought to the attention of the Historical Society during the Civil War. During the Civil War with arguments about emancipation and the recruitment of black soldiers here in Massachusetts, there was enhanced interest in black presence in colonial America and America at the time of the Revolution. And Phillis Wheatley is again brought to the fore held up as an exemplar from an earlier time and at a meeting of the Historical Society in 1863, there was a presentation of letters written by Phillis Wheatley to Obour Tanner, a young black woman a friend through the 1770s.

Tara Bynum 14:46

So, here's what we should know about Obour Tanner. Obour Tanner's likely appeared to Wheatley, though it's not entirely clear how old she is. She does live until 1835. She is enslaved to James Tanner and Hannah Hazard Tanner. She's baptized at First Congregational Church in Newport by William Vinal, and she remains a church member for the rest of her life and is a part of one of the earliest iterations of wanting to return to Africa because what the U.S. is offering is not where folks

want to be. She later becomes president of the Women's Auxiliary of the Free African Union Society in Newport. She's Barry Collins' wife, and she is the friend who holds on to the letters, and ultimately through a series of twists and turns ensures that the letters get to the Massachusetts Historical Society. So Obour Tanner, to me, it's kind of a big deal. The letters would not exist, but for the fact that Obour Tanner saves them for 50 years and gets them into the right hands. The other thing that I think is really important about these letters that like I said, go from 1772 to 1779, is that it's two black women talking and communicating across colonies, across miles and miles. And they are doing so at a time where the political landscape is deteriorating. War at some point becomes inevitable over the course of their correspondence. Phillis Wheatley is going to be a refugee in Providence, Rhode Island. Obour Tanner is going to be a refugee in western Massachusetts. Their lives are up ended, and yet they still find a way to communicate. And they talk about all kinds of things. They talk about God. They talk about Wheatley's book sales. They talk about their health and their ill health. They talk about praying for each other. It's a very intimate sort of relationship and it's a different kind of intimate than some of the other letters that are a part of Wheatley's extent archive of letters. So, I'm obsessed with them and I'm hoping to get everybody obsessed with them.

Katy Morris 16:53

Yeah, they're super fascinating. I kind of can't believe that they exist, that they survived.

Tara Bynum 16:59

Think about what it means for Obour Tanner to have kept these letters. The last letter is in 1779. It's a whole war, not a play war. It's a whole war and it's happening where she lives. She cannot be in Newport, Rhode Island because it's occupied by the British, and the British have leveled Newport, Rhode Island. They bombed it to death. They burnt it to death, and she lives in Worcester, makes her way back to Newport is therefore the making of a of a country and who knows what's happening in her day-to-day life. But throughout all of that she has kept these letters enough to give them to Catharine E. Beecher, who is her pastor's wife. And it's just amazing to kind of think about, like, 50 years later, she still has Wheatley's letters. How many times has Obour

Tanner moved? I'm imagining a couple, you know, at the very least. She had a she had a move when the British came. We should also think too, about which letters Obour Tanner chooses to give to Catharine Beecher. The six letters that are at the Massachusetts Historical Society, should we assume that those are the only six that Obour had? Let's just imagine. I do not have the answer. There's no way for me to fact check that. But I can only imagine that she is as intentional as her friend is. And there's some letters that aren't our business. There's some letters that do get lost from place to place and there some letters that she decides no, no, this is important. This is how I want to remember my friend.

Katy Morris 18:43

So, let's look at some of the letters to Obour. What is the earliest one that we have?

Peter Drummey 18:51

The earliest letter to Obour Tanner is interesting to me because Obour, "O-B-O-U-R," but the first letter to Obour Tanner in 1772 is addressed to Miss Arbour Tanner with an, "A-R" at the beginning and this may be simply not an you know, their connection might be long standing, but Phillis Wheatley perhaps didn't know exactly what name to use at that time. But the first one is a single page. This is before envelopes. So, you had a plan out writing your letter to leave a blank sheet at the end of it that so it could be folded up and there would be a place to address it. So, this is an early letter. These are sheets of paper that are about more than a foot long, 13 or 15 inches long and about nine inches wide. It's kind of agreeing upon their mutual interest in religion. In 1772, you're talking about Phillis Wheatley, who's likely still a teenager, an older teenager at this time and again, Obour Tanner may be two or three years older, but two young women clearly animated by religion. That's what may have brought them together. But people in some respects in similar circumstances. Phillis Wheatley has good clear handwriting.

Tara Bynum 20:13

Wheatley's cursive is gorgeous, simply put. It is easy to read and it's just beautiful to look at. And the letters themselves are not long. They are, you know, relatively brief. And one of the things that

always stands out to me are Wheatley's "P" as in Phillis and "D" as in deer. You know, they have so much flourish, and the "D", both the lowercase "d" and the uppercase "D", there's so much I guess I would call it theatricality to them. When we also kind of go back in time and imagine that she is not using a ballpoint pen but is using likely a quill pen with an ink well. If we imagine that then it just adds so much more beauty, skill, intention, and care to the writing itself. And if we add that added layer of, she's writing during war time. I mean, the British are good for blockade in a harbor. So, with that in mind, it then becomes even more interesting to think about like, yeah what does it mean to find a quill pen, and enough ink and enough paper to write a letter and the thing about it is, is that these Wheatley letters have space. And there are countless examples of 18th century letters where the entire page is taken up because the letter writer needed to use every single part of the page because there wasn't enough paper. So yeah, I think that there, there's so much beauty and care in Wheatley's letters, and I think it's evident in her penmanship and the way that the "P" also has some flourish. Sometimes the "W"s do like I said, the "D" is always showing off. And I think, you know, we can imagine that every sort of flourish is that much more ink. It's the that much more of the sharpness of the quill. It's that much more paper that's being taken up for enjoyment and not for and not to say something very specific. You know, I think that there's, yeah, just beauty and care and...

Katy Morris 22:30

Delight.

Tara Bynum 22:30

Yeah, delight and in that delight, kind of the excess of it. I've got enough time, space or whatever, to be able to do this.

Katy Morris 22:39

Yeah, the little flourishes underneath her name too that aren't connected to any anything. It's just there to flourish. Those are really fun.

Tara Bynum 22:46

Yeah. You know, like, we got to get to see her, not doodle, but let me decorate the page.

Katy Morris 23:05

I know you flagged a couple of specific ones like let's do it. Let's take a close look. I think one was the March of [17]74. That right?

Tara Bynum 23:12

There's March of 1774 and May of 1774. And I picked these two in particular because of the conversation about Wheatley's books. They talk about some other things, and we can kind of engage with that too. But it's the book sales that really captured my attention and I think that another part of their relationship of course is that Tanner is like a subscription agent for Wheatley. Tanner's selling Wheatley's books, and Wheatley is documenting those book sales and making note of how much money she brings in, how many books are coming in, how many books are being sold and I guess I would add to the list of things that we don't talk about when it comes to Wheatley is how much she is her own accountant. There's another letter where she kind of is mad that there could be I'm gonna use our word for this. This is not Wheatley's word, but like bootleg copies of her books and she's not about that. You know, but in this correspondence with Tanner, you know, I think it is amazing for me, given how we understand what black women can and cannot do in the 18th century to think of these two black women who if Obour Tanner is in fact peerish to Wheatley, they're in their 20s selling books across those miles and miles again. And in the March 21st letter, she closes out by saying you know, quote directly, "I shall send the five books you wrote for the first convenient opportunity if you want more, they shall be ready for you. I am very affectionately your friend, Phillis Wheatley." So, there are five books that are on their way to Tanner and presumably we can imagine that Tanner has the letter and kept the books. So y'all don't have the five books because Tanner did with those books, what she was supposed to do, which was to sell them. First Congregational Church in Newport has Wheatley's book. Why? Because Tanner made sure that her church had the book. And I think Tanner made sure that everybody in Newport

has Wheatley's book. Newport was full of first editions of Phillis Wheatley's book because Obour Tanner is hulking books everywhere. Did you get my friend's book? I got this book, you know, like, I have no idea what this looks like for real, but I can only imagine that that's what she's doing. Because by the time we get to May, she, Wheatley, is talking about receiving the money. And there's this exchange of books and cash. And I think that is what makes the letters so compelling to me. Is that in kind of bearing witness to their bond, we are then able to imagine that in that frontis piece, it's Obour Tanner that Wheatley is looking at. Wheatley had someone who would want to keep her legacy.

Tara Bynum 23:28

Yeah, and helps her build it from the beginning.

Tara Bynum 26:16

Yeah, that helps her build it!

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 26:24

As we looked at the letters from 1774, Peter and Tara drew our attention to a passage from March of that year, in which Phillis reflects upon the death of Susanna Wheatley, the woman who had enslaved her as a child.

Peter Drummey 26:39

She addresses, I think, the dilemma of her own life and that is she writes to Obour Tanner after her return to Boston in the fall of 1773. So, this is a letter from the spring of 1774. This is March 21st, 1774. "Dear Obour, I received your obliging letter enclosed in your Reverend Pastures and handed me by his son." This is how letters moved. There was a postal system but often it meant someone was going in the direction of the recipient. But she goes on, "I have lately met with a great trial and the death of my mistress. Let us imagine the loss of a parent, sister or brother, the tenderness of all these were united in her. I was a poor little outcast and a stranger when she took me in, not only into her house, but I presently became a share in her most tender affections. I was treated by her

more like her child than her servant. No opportunity was left unimproved in giving me the best of advice." And it goes on in that character. But it's such a powerful image and something that I think can be surprising or even shocking to, again, the modern eye. This is the person writing about her enslaver. She was this woman's human property, but their connection was different than we would I think necessarily expect it to be. And she can't figure it out. And she's probably writing to the only person who can understand, you know, appreciate her perplexity in the circumstance. How am I to think about this person that I don't know whether to call mother or mistress?

Tara Bynum 28:38

So I think what's interesting about the March letter too is hearing her talk about this relationship with Susanna Wheatley, and I think that for the listeners who are hoping for some sort of resistance story, or something other than grief and bereavement, they will be disappointed because Wheatley is sad that Susanna Wheatley has died and she says, "Let us imagine the loss of a parent sister or brother, the tenderness of all of these were united in her." So, I think that it's clear that Wheatley has a way of understanding the importance of Susanna Wheatley to her life and Susanna Wheatley is sick over I think much of 1773 so the letters that precede this one often include some reference to Susanna Wheatley's illness and her decline. So, we also get to see the long arc of Whitley's grief and I think it does do the work of situating her within her community and in this household and I think the May letter does do a good job of making clear the extent to which Wheatley and Obour Tanner are faithful women and Christian women. In addition to asking Tanner to, you know, sell some books and get some more money, I think there's also this moment where they praise God together, you know, and I think that that also shows up not just in this letter, but throughout their correspondence. You know, I almost think that there's a sort of praise and worship that happens on the page. Wheatley says to Tanner, "Your tenderness for my welfare demands my gratitude. Assist me dear Obour to praise our great benefactor for the innumerable benefits continually poured upon me that while he strikes when comfort did, he raises up another!" So, you know, I love that, "Assist me, dear Obour" with an exclamation point. And I guess I think about it as worshiping together on the page. Tanner receiving that letter and knowing exactly what to do in that moment, which is presumably pray with her friend, and to send correspondence back that does exactly that. And I

think so often, there are these moments where Wheatley is offering Tanner gratitude for praying on her behalf, that speaks to their relationship like Tanner is somebody who prays for Wheatley. And presumably, Wheatley is also praying on behalf of Tanner too. You know that what I really wish were extant were Tanner's letters to Wheatley.

Katy Morris 31:21

Yeah, though, that would be a very different picture to have it all together.

Tara Bynum 31:26

It'd be a very different picture. But I do think that these sorts of moments, like what I just read that, "Your tenderness for my welfare demands my gratitude," like, we know that at some point in Tanner's letter, she must make clear her tenderness and affection for Wheatley. And I think it becomes that much more tender and caring when we remember that a war is coming. And they, they must know that. That must be the talk of the town.

Katy Morris 32:10

You've mentioned a couple of times the engraved image on the front of the book of poetry and I think we've all kind of seen that. I think it's just about every textbook.

Tara Bynum 32:20

Yeah.

Katy Morris 32:20

And I just wondered if you could reflect upon it a little bit like what that image tells you or what questions it maybe raises for you? Anything you want to share about sort of your reactions to that image of her.

Tara Bynum 32:31

I would say that one of the things that strikes me both about the image and our present day understanding of the image is that because Wheatley is by herself that has become how we understand her. I think it's her positionality as enslaved as black as a woman that then allows us to assume that she has to be singular. And I think it's really interesting that that assumption has lingered for so long. The image itself has helped create this mythology around Wheatley that reinforces her is a singular genius that reinforces this idea that she is kind of by herself to do this genius work. Like she lives in a city you know, and, and, and we don't imagine that she's looking out the window at all of the people on the street walking down the street or something like we just make her trapped in the attic, doing genius work. And Phillis Wheatley is not a woman alone. Phillis Wheatley has a whole arc of human life, and that life is complicated. That life is messy. That life is during war time. I think that is ultimately my goal is to get us to imagine that Phillis Wheatley is counting money. She's walking down the street. She's writing to a friend. She's writing to an acquaintance. She's looking to be her own project manager. She's looking to be her own entrepreneur. Phillis Wheatley is a woman who lives to be about 31. How do we remember her humanity in that?

Katy Morris 34:39

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