

Issues of Slavery



Time Line overview

- 1761 • Phillis Wheatley brought to Boston aboard slave ship *Phillis*
- 1770 • Boston Massacre; British soldiers shot at civilians
- 1773 • Wheatley's manuscript: *Poems on Various Subjects: Religious and Moral* published in London
- 1773 • Benjamin Rush, future signer of the Declaration of Independence, abolitionist, publishes *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements in America, Upon Slave-keeping*
- 1776 • Progressive signing of the Declaration of Independence
- 1789 • French Revolution begins
- 1791 • Slave Revolution in Haiti begins
- 1804 • The American South grows 60 percent of the world's cotton and provides 70 percent of the cotton consumed by the British textile industry.

Phillis Wheatley

- labeled as America's "slave poet"
- approximate birth 1753 - death December 5, 1784
- the only published female poet from the American colonies after Anne Bradstreet
- born in Africa, kidnapped, and brought to Boston around 7-8 years old (1761)
- She was named after the slave ship *Phillis* and her owner's last name.
- The Wheatley family (John and Susanna) purchased her as a house servant
- They raised her in the Protestant faith in the same church founded by John Winthrop in 1630, in Boston.
- within 16 months she was reading English
- By the time she was 12 she was reading Latin, translating Ovid.
- Her first poem was published when she was just 13: "On Virtue."
- Her full manuscript was published in 1773.

Phillis Wheatley

Three General Thoughts regarding her overall work:

- Was Phillis Wheatley's restrained style a matter of imitation of popular poets?
- Or was it due to her role as a slave that she could not express herself freely?
- Does a *subtle* critical undertone of abolitionist thought exist in her work—
is a subtle message hidden between the lines of her poems?

Where further discussions can be developed is in the notions of the culture of 1776 itself. The common language of the Colonial people and the publications of the time all used frequent statements which relate the bondage of the various colonies into slavery for the British crown; items she would be certainly be aware of and could easily apply to her own situation. Unfortunately, Wheatley does not state in any poem whether she did make such a connection of her own slave state to the notions of the beginnings of the colonial revolution.

Benjamin Rush

Aside from the discussions of breaking ties with England, the debate regarding slavery was intense during these years as well. Abolitionists such as **Benjamin Rush** published frequent essays on the subject, debating the existence of the slave market and the need for slave labor in the southern plantain colonies.

One of Rush's popular anti-slavery essays appeared in public; Wheatley's would have been aware of the document.

One of the major points in this essay, contrary to pro-slavery allegations, was the necessity of educating the "negro race." Rush is quick to defend the notions of the African intellect within the opening paragraphs of the document.

Benjamin Rush

Overview of the Essay

“An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies in America,
Upon Slave-Keeping”

- the opening of the essay (page 2) starts by jumping into the current debate; Rush states he will not detail the histories of the industry, rather he will be countering the material used in defense of the selling of Africans for labor. He also depicts the slaves in a strong *humanistic* manner—he is promoting the Africans as a group of people with a conscious social attitude, with families and functioning societies.
- page 3: Rush briefly mentions Wheatley here as a strong example of a civilized, moralistic being. She is presented as an ideal African and servant: intelligent and honorable to her sex.

Benjamin Rush

- page 4 he discusses the notion of the mark of Cain.
- page 5-6 enters into the debate regarding sugar production; the French and English production resulted in different quantities—Rush uses the arguments that a freeman would produce better results
- page 7 discusses life expectancies of white versus black on the islands
- page 8-9 takes on the arguments that since slavery is in the Bible God must sanction it.
- page 10: he continues with scriptural defenses of his concept, here using the New Testament to view all people as brethren and not enemies.

Benjamin Rush

- page 14 Here Rush begins his most passionate arguments: the mistreatments of slaves by men who call themselves Christians.
- page 15-16 introduces a proposal of ideas for the slave population in America.
- page 16 begins with first having the King and Parliament dissolve the Royal African Company.
- page 16-17: he proposes a slow assimilation into the free American public.
- page 17-18 carries a footnote of relevance: it mentions the Spanish colonies.
- page 18 indicates the general notion that the slave trade incites civil wars in Africa itself; it causes the various coast land countries to seek prisoners in the central African countries.

Benjamin Rush

- page 19 mentions the atrocities of branding slaves with the master's name, like livestock. He begins to use an orators's strategy as well by increasing his emotive voice, phrase by phrase.
- page 19-20 increases in passionate tones; wants the reader to react in kind.
- page 21 contains a census of the slaves within the Colonies in 1775. Furthermore he mentions that the legal system needs to change:
- page 22 predicts the general notion of American sensibilities as well; Paves the way for the events to spiral out in a few short years.
- page 24 closes with a warning