Slave literacy and orality (the spoken word) are at once complex and intertwined themes in the history of blacks in the United States. Once designated as chattel, slaves were bound by words on paper. Like typeset or handwritten letters, they were rendered physically trapped within socially constructed molds or artfully stylized characters inscribed on parchment, forged and set by slaveholding grandees. Indeed, as early as 1680, the “generall assembly” of the Virginia colony explained, it was unlawful “for any negro . . . to goe or depart from his master’s ground without a certificate.”¹

Such unlawful behavior could carry heavy burdens. Slaves found away from their masters without written consent, for example, received “twenty lashes on the bare back well layd on.” Over time, they were taken up and held as fugitives. Taken up a second time, absconded slaves ran the risk of being branded, mutilated, or dismembered.² Consequently, for well over 200 years, the written word stood for the planter’s power and the slave’s confinement.

The boundaries of literacy also consigned slaves to the margins of early American society intellectually. In the Western tradition, people of African descent have been written out of “culture” because they were identified with oral traditions. In that setting, literacy signified reason and civilization. Performance in print earned the “a special distinction” for “the laurel of humanity.”³

Still, despite attempts to deny them their humanity, blacks persevered. Many learned to read. Others learned how to write. What is more, for slaves like poet Phillis Wheatley, literacy became a form of resistance, a way of snatching the laurel of civilization from Western hands, forcing otherwise silent books to speak.

Wheatley’s story began in 1761 when she was kidnapped by Africans from her parents in a Wolof village. Like other captives in the slave trade, she became the property of several others before reaching the Gold Coast and the infamous “door of no return” on Goree Island, Senegal, that marks the symbolic entry into the Atlantic Slave Trade. Only seven years old, she survived her Middle Passage aboard the schooner Phillus. She was declared unsalable in the Caribbean, so traders carried the young girl to Boston and sold her for a trifle to Susanna Wheatley.

In the Wheatley household, Phillis thrived as a domestic. Not long after she became a member of the family, Phillis tried to “make letters upon the wall.”⁴ As a result, her
mistress took pity on her, and with the help of her daughter, Mary, began instructing the young bondservant. "In sixteen Months Time," Phillis's master John Wheatley wrote," she mastered "the English language . . . to such a degree, as to read any, the most difficult Parts of the Sacred Writings." Less than three years later, she learned to write. In 1773, a modest volume, Phillis Wheatley's Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral, appeared in print.

Not surprisingly, the book aroused many critics. Thomas Jefferson, for one, denounced Poems because they punctured the socially grafted veneer of African racial inferiority. In his view, although "religion" could indeed produce "a Phyllis Whately," it could not "produce a poet." Because "the heroes of Dunciad," Jefferson explained, "are to her, as Hercules to the author of that poem." The French philosopher Voltaire disagreed, yet his acknowledgment of Wheatley reflected the deep-seated prejudices of the day nonetheless. "Genius," Voltaire observed in a 1774 letter to Baron Constant de Rebecq, "which is rare everywhere, can be found in all parts of the earth. Fontenelle [French author, 1657–1757] was wrong to say that there would never be poets among Negroes; there is presently a Negro woman who writes very good English verse." For Wheatley, literacy represented a way to claim humanity; for other slaves, particularly those who were literate yet uneducated, it met the more pragmatic goal of securing liberty. That is, with knowledge of letters, they could pass for free. They could convince others that they owned themselves. Simply put, literacy gave slaves an opportunity to move about more easily, less encumbered by the fear of being captured and returned to slavery.

That was certainly the case of Peter Custis, whose story begins and ends with a runaway advertisement that his master, John Custis, placed in the Virginia Gazette in May 1745 for his safe return. Presumably, as a child, Peter received a scar on his forehead after falling into a fire. The accident suggests that the young lad may have been the child of one of Custis's house servants, possibly the slave cook. Like other domestics, he also probably worked about his master's house, performing minor tasks.

By age 30, Peter had clearly grown rebellious. Though bred to be a domestic of some type, he adopted another line of work. Indeed, for a time, truancy became the Virginia-born slave’s choice of professions. Not quite a real fugitive, Peter stayed in the vicinity of his master’s Williamsburg house. There, he lurked about town and...
engaged in mischief from time to time. But eventually, like other truants, he returned home, weary or in want of food and shelter.

Not surprisingly, the local residents were not as understanding of Custis's boisterous bondservant. In many of their minds, Peter made a nuisance of himself. Evidently, during a previous escape from Custis, he had been found stealing and slaughtering livestock and committing “other injuries to the inhabitants” of Williamsburg. In retaliation, townspeople went to the local justices and got him officially outlawed as a danger to the community.

Fortunately for Custis, Peter was returned and unharmed. Back in his master's possession, Peter was forced to wear leg irons to reduce his mobility and deter future escapes. Custis, like other slaveholding grandees, received many guests at his home on Francis Street, especially on the Sabbath, so Peter's clothes were altered to preclude alarm. For the sake of politeness, his shackles were disguised to hide the brute facts of power in his master's genteel household. Finally, or so it seemed, Peter's wayward behavior had come to an end. His days of truancy were no more.

Apparently, however, the privilege of domestic work failed to produce a contented slave. Peter escaped again, and within a month after his disappearance, Custis posted an advertisement in the paper for his recovery. The reward was two pistoles, which was a Spanish gold coin worth almost a pound, or a little more than 18 shillings and twice the usual sum in such cases. Clearly, Peter was a valuable as well as troublesome slave. To judge by the few facts in the runaway advertisement, his ability to read and probably write may have made him so.

Considering the number of runaways who appeared in colonial newspapers, the ranks of literate slaves grew. In Massachusetts, Philadelphia, and New York, they represented approximately 10 percent of those who stole away; in Virginia 5 percent. In South Carolina, they barely totaled 1 percent. Geography and the varying nature of work in early America explain in part the disparity in these figures.

Slave rebellions also may explain why more slaves were not literate. In 1740, for example, after the Stono Rebellion in South Carolina, legislators thought it wise to prohibit slave education. Similar legislation emerged in Virginia after Gabriel Prosser’s failed attempt in 1800 to free slaves in Richmond County. Increasingly, whites came to believe that education made slaves rebellious. Almost 100 years after Stono, those latent fears became painfully real, when a literate domestic slave by the name of Nat Turner and a group of his supporters took the lives of 55 whites in Southampton County, Virginia. In the wake of the white riots that followed that slave insurrection, whites judged that teaching slaves was a dangerous and therefore illegal enterprise.

In spite of whites’ efforts to deny slaves education, blacks pressed on and continued to gain knowledge of reading and writing. Judging from recent archaeological findings unearthed in subfloor pits (probably root cellars) in slave quarters, they may have even redoubled their efforts. Pencil leads, pencil slates, and writing slates found at several sites in the Tidewater and Piedmont regions of the Chesapeake reveal a picture of slaves learning to read and write and teaching one another. As a result, before the Civil War an estimated 10 percent of the enslaved black population in the United States was literate.

Slave spirituals represent another enduring legacy in literacy. Embodying both the rich and complex oral traditions of Africa, where music, song, and story took on multiple meanings, and a selective reading of Christianity, the religious songs of black
slaves in 18th- and 19th-century America reveal a deep understanding of the Bible that may reflect their knowledge of letters. For well over 200 years, slaves found solace not so much in the New Testament but in the Old Testament. Believing themselves the modern-day Israelites, enslaved blacks sang songs of deliverance and reproachment. Merging African oral traditions together with Western religion and literacy, they imagined freedom and protested slavery. In “Go Down Moses,” for example, they invoked the Exodus story, which resembled their own plight. In “O Daniel,” that connection is made even more explicit. Reflecting on the story of Daniel’s deliverance from the lion’s den, 19th-century slaves pondered aloud: if God could save Daniel “why not deliver me?”\(^\text{11}\) In “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel,” they invoked not only the story of Daniel but also that of Jonah and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. If God could deliver them, they asked, “why not deliver me too?”\(^\text{12}\)

Slaves also invoked African traditions in their songs. Like the Wolof, Bambara, and other West African tribes, antebellum slaves held fast to the idea that water separated the living from the dead. In “Roll Jordan Roll,” for instance, they sang of passing over the river Jordan to see the Promised Land. In “Trouble of the World,” slaves crossed Jordan to escape the horrors of their earthly environment. In “Let God’s Saints Come In,” water again divided “Canaan land” from “Egyptian land.”\(^\text{13}\) Clearly, on one level, these songs were based on Western biblical traditions. On another level, they demonstrated slaves’ use of older, African traditions in which water separated the living and the dead, the past and the present.

Yet another legacy of African tradition was found in the stories that enslaved African Americans told to each other, to their own children, and to the children of their owners. These stories, couched in language that made them seem to be humorous tales of an enemy tricked by the cleverness of his opponents, or animals acting out stories with all-too-human traits, were not only a way of transmitting communal values but also a method through which the enslaved were able to soften the harshness of their bondage by poking fun at their owners. Although generally difficult to date, two of the earliest stories were recorded by Eugène A. Vail, a young Frenchman who visited Monticello in 1816 and heard them from Martha Jefferson Randolph, who had heard them from her nurse, Ursula. These tales of “Mammy Dinah and Her Three Dogs” and “Mr. Fox Tricks Mr. Rabbit and Is Tricked in Return” were published in Vail’s commentary on American arts and letters, *De la Littérature et des Hommes de Lettres des États Unis d’Amérique* (Paris, 1841). They give a glimpse into an oral tradition that sustained and nurtured people who otherwise had little enough of it in their lives.

**NOTES**

1. William W. Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large Being a Collection of all the Law of Virginia . . .* (Richmond, VA: Samuel Pleasants Jr., 1819–1823), 2:481. References to the Statutes at Large are abbreviated as SAL.


**FURTHER READING**