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Classics, A Clever Wench & Columbia for the USA: Phillis Wheatley

This paper discusses the creation of the neo-Latin Columbia (Gem of the Ocean) for the USA. It shows that Columbia for the USA was first penned by the slave-poet Phillis Wheatley in 1775. She learned at least four languages and earned her freedom by her translations of the Classics and her poetry; hence, a "clever wench" to Jefferson and other racist Rationalists. Admired by Hancock and Washington, she exchanged flirtatious dueling verses with John Paul Jones. To the poetry where she created Columbia, she also added the theme that American freedom must be universal, for black and white Americans alike. She demanded an end to slavery in the new country "conceived in liberty." She stressed this demand in all her Columbian poems. The same themes appear in her teenage translation of Ovid Metamorphoses 6 on Niobe. Her version of Ovid in neo-Classic verse parallels her own poetic cries for freedom, lamenting the forcible loss of children cruelly torn from their mother. Phillis' own mother and countless other Africans were reduced like Niobe, to living death, in slavery. Wheatley uniquely stresses Niobe's African connection, and implies that Niobe is a mother like Africa, children taken away from her forever, by the slave trade. Her later poems plead with Columbia that this same injustice end.

Enslaved in Senegambia at 4 years old, she was named Phillis for the ship she crossed on, and Wheatley for the Boston merchant family who bought her, pronounced "Whately" as Jefferson spelled it. She became a devout New England Christian, and multi-lingual poet. She learned English, her original West African language, Latin, Hebrew and possibly Greek. The popularity and neo-Classical skill of her verses earned her freedom as a young woman, at the same time that a full volume of her verse was published in London in mid-1773. She and her mistress returned to America, Phillis more devoted to the American cause than the older Wheatleys. By mid-October 1773 at latest she was free, by 1778 she married an "uppity" free black man, John Peters; he may have fought in the Revolution; I use her full name Wheatley Peters. By Christmas 1784 after her final Columbian poem, Liberty and Peace appeared, she and their three children were dead.

This paper shows that she most probably created the use and description of Columbia, why she was denied her priority. The other candidates are a Princeton graduate, classmate of James Madison, and called the Poet of the American Revolution, who used the word around the same time, and Mercy Otis Warren, a wealthy, independent woman of two great patriot families, Otis by birth and Warren by marriage. Ex-slave Phillis Wheatley had little chance to be considered creator of poetic names for America over those higher-status patriots.