

Phillis Wheatley: Primary Sources

Name: _____

On October 26, 1775, Phillis Wheatley penned a letter to George Washington in which she enclosed one of her poems, hoping for Washington to publish it. The poem she wrote exalted Washington as the leader of the Revolution. On February 28, 1776, Washington authored the following response:

Mrs Phillis,

Your favour of the 26th of October did not reach my hands 'till the middle of December. Time enough, you will say, to have given an answer ere this. Granted. But a variety of important occurrences, continually interposing to distract the mind and withdraw the attention, I hope will apologize for the delay, and plead my excuse for the seeming, but not real, neglect.

I thank you most sincerely for your polite notice of me, in the elegant Lines you enclosed; and however undeserving I may be of such encomium and panegyrick, the style and manner exhibit a striking proof of your great poetical Talents. In honour of which, and as a tribute justly due to you, I would have published the Poem, had I not been apprehensive, that, while I only meant to give the World this new instance of your genius, I might have incurred the imputation of Vanity. This, and nothing else, determined me not to give it place in the public Prints

If you should ever come to Cambridge, or near Head Quarters, I shall be happy to see a person so favoured by the Muses, and to whom nature has been so liberal and beneficent in her dispensations. I am, with great Respect, Your obedt humble servant,

G. Washington

Answer the following questions about Washington's response.

1. What is the theme of the first paragraph? What is Washington hoping to express?

2. What does the second paragraph reveal about how Washington feels toward Wheatley?
3. Why does Washington decide against publishing Wheatley's work?
4. What is the tone of the conclusion?
5. Find and define five unfamiliar vocabulary words in Washington's letter to Phillis Wheatley.