POEMS
ON
VARIOUS SUBJECTS,
RELIGIOUS AND MORAL,
BY
PHILLIS WHEATLEY,
NEGRO SERVANT TO MR. JOHN WHEATLEY,
of Boston, in New England.

LONDON:
Printed for A. BELL, Bookseller, Aldgate; and sold by
Mellrs. COX and BERRY, King-Street, BOSTON.

M DCC LXXIII.

Published according to Act of Parliament, Sept. 4, 1773 by Archd. Bell
Bookseller No. 8, near the Saracen's Head, Aldgate.
In 1753, at the age of 7 or 8, a young girl was kidnapped from the Senegambia region of West Africa (now The Gambia and Senegal) and shipped to Boston, Massachusetts. Renamed Phillis, after the name of the ship that carried her, she was purchased by a Boston tailor named John Wheatley as a present for his wife, Susanna. They gave her their last name.

In keeping with their religious beliefs, the Wheatleys taught her to read and write English, and – after noticing her creative and intellectual abilities – encouraged her in her writing of poetry, even sending her work to local newspapers. In the 1770s, they began seeking a publisher to print a book of her poems. However, many people did not believe that an enslaved person, or a person of African descent in general, was intelligent enough or creative enough to actually write poetry. Wheatley had to convince a dozen of Boston’s most prominent men that she had truly written the poems, but even with a letter of support written by them, Boston publishers refused to print it. Wheatley was taken to London by her owner’s son Nathaniel, where a publisher agreed to work with them. Wheatley became the first African woman in North America to be a published author.

Somehow, by the time Wheatley returned to Boston, the Wheatleys had been convinced to free her. She left a copy of her freedom papers in London, in case anything happened to the copy she kept with her and someone tried to claim her as a slave. At a time when American rebels complained that the British treated them like slaves, Wheatley needed to defend herself from actual slavery. She wrote at least one letter arguing against slavery and even wrote a letter to George Washington, celebrating him for his work in the defense of freedom. In a unique show of respect, Washington wrote back to Wheatley, calling her Miss Phillis, ending his letter with “Your obed[ien]t humble servant,” and even inviting her to come visit. It is unknown if the two ever actually met.
In 1915, these pieces of Hessian military headgear dating from the Revolutionary War were found in the Delaware River near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. During the War, Britain’s King George III hired soldiers from several regions of what is now known as Germany in order to supplement his army. Collectively know as Hessians, because the largest group – over 18,000 – came from an area known as Hesse-Cassel, these troops also came from Hesse-Hanau, Brunswick, Waldeck, Anspach-Beyreuth and Anhalt-Zerbst. They fought alongside the British in every campaign of the War and were present at the Battle for New York, the Battles of Trenton, Princeton, Brandywine and Monmouth, and at the Siege of Yorktown. This cap, and others like it, were likely lost when a British transport ship carrying supplies and Hessian soldiers sank in the river in March 1778, after striking underwater obstructions placed by American soldiers the year before.

These brass fragments would have originally decorated the front, sides and back of a pointed felted wool cap. The embossed decorations provided information about the soldiers who would have worn these caps. The front shows a lion wearing a crown, representing royalty and/or power and strength. It holds a sword, representing might or the military. Underneath it are the initials F.L., for Frederick Langgrave II, the name of the ruler of Hesse-Cassel during the American Revolution. The back contains an image of a bomb shooting fire, and cannons, flags, scrolls and other decoration can be seen as well.

Fun Fact
The American Revolution was not the first time German-speaking peoples traveled to British North America. Immigration began in the 1600s and by the Revolution, there were German speaking communities throughout the colonies. Many of them supported the Revolution.