

Ellison, Ralph W.

1741-1806

JUPITER HAMMON

Meaning (likely)
New York's first Negro poet, was Jupiter Hammon, whose position as the slave of a Long Island family seems to have been small hinderance to his literary activity. [While, however, there is some record of Hammon's literary work, little is known of his life. The date of his birth is estimated to have been between 1720 and 1730; that of his death between 1790 and 1806.]

These years Hammon spent at the Lloyd's estate on Long Island, with the exception of a period during the Revolution, when, to escape the British, the Lloyd's moved to Hartford, Connecticut. In His Address to the Negroes of New York, Hammon states, "When I was in Hartford...I published several pieces that were well received..." The first of these pieces, his first published work, was: An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ with Penitential Cries, which was composed in 1760. This was perhaps the first poem by a Negro to be published in America. During 1778 Hammon published An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatly, whose fame began during this period. Both this poem and an Essay on the Ten Virgins (1779) were published at Hartford. These with a sermon entitled A Winter Piece (1782), a Poem for Children, With Thoughts of Death, a prose piece entitled An Evening's Improvement, and a piece of verse, The Kind Master and the Dutiful Servant, were Hammon's contribution to the activity of America's literary capital.

Hammon ~~spanned the Revolutionary period and~~ lived to see the establishment of America as a nation, ^{yet} but his epochal activity seems to have left him unaffected. ^{For} in none of his work is there to be found a reflection of the ideas or political ideals of the times. His work was religious and conservative in tone, failing even to reflect the struggle for religious and political democracy being waged by such ^{Negro} contemporaries as Richard Allen and Prince Hall.

~~While these leaders articulated the hopes of a people fighting for freedom from all vestiges of the slave system,~~ Hammon was completely non-resistant. He himself did not wish to be free, and expressed only a half-hearted belief that only the younger Negroes should be given freedom. ~~Aside from his religious temperament, he expressed the desires of that group of the master class, who while fighting for a free society themselves, saw no place therein for free black men.~~

^{His} Hammon's most widely circulated work, the single piece to be reprinted, was one in which he advised New York Negroes to be submissive; they should wait for liberty until the masters were moved by "pity." This work, An Address to the Negroes of New York, (1786) contains a possible explanation as to why a slave was encouraged to write, and accounts, no doubt, for the work's being carried through three editions. ^{dependent as he was on his master for the preservation of his work.} To the Negroes he explains:

"I think you will be more likely to listen to what is said, when you know it comes from a Negro, one of your own Nation and colour; and therefore can have no

interest in deceiving you, or saying to you, but what he really thinks is your interest and duty to comply with..."

His Hartford pieces, Hammon informed them, were accepted by the whites because they thought they might "do good among the servants."

But though this piece was dedicated to members of the African Society of New York and received distribution by a Pennsylvania abolitionist group--who doubtlessly seized upon it as proof of the Negro's humanity--it failed to save Hammon's name from a century's oblivion after his death.

~~Jupiter Hammon's way was not the way of his contemporaries. And his writings possess little merit as poetry,~~
his significance today lies in his having been the first American Negro to express himself in verse.

Biography

~~Jupiter Hammon~~
JUPITER HAMMON -- Poet

The Lloyds were evidently humane and considerate masters; for Hammon, addressing his fellow slaves, wrote in 1786:

I have good reason to be thankful that my lot is so much better than most slaves have had. I suppose I have had more advantages than most of you who are slaves have ever known, and I believe more than many white people have enjoyed.

Whatever advantages and privileges the Lloyds might have granted him, there is no indication in his writing that they gave him opportunity for instruction beyond the most elementary training in reading and writing. But they undoubtedly allowed him to go freely to church, where he absorbed the doctrines of the Calvinistic Methodists, of which all of his work is an echo. His masters also, it seems, left him free at times to engage in preaching. Stimulated by religious indulgences, he read with avidity the Bible and hymn books and possibly such pious poems as Michael Wigglesworth's THE DAY OF DOOM. It was in all probability through this reading that he taught himself what he knew about prose style and the art of versification.]

AN EVENING'S IMPROVEMENT, intended as sermons, are rhapsodic and incoherent, the ADDRESS TO THE NEGROES in the STATE of NEW YORK displays a regular and firm organization. It opens with personal reminiscences, and these are followed by a series of moral precepts. Negroes are admonished to be obedient and faithful to their masters, to be honest and not to steal, to be energetic and not to dally when sent on errands, to be always religious and never profane. In the

closing section, which deals with the subject of freedom for the slaves, Hammon praises the blessings of liberty. But concerning his own condition of slavery he mildly concludes:

Now I acknowledge that liberty is a great thing, and worth seeking for, if we can get it honestly; and by our good conduct prevail on our masters to set us free: though for my own part I do not wish to be free; for many of us who are grown up slaves, and have always had masters to take care of us, should hardly know how to take care of themselves; and it may be for our own comfort to remain as we are.

Perhaps because of this conciliatory attitude toward slavery, Jupiter Hammon's work was disregarded by the early Negro leaders, who in most cases kept alive the personalities of their predecessors of any distinction whatsoever. The name of America's first Negro poet dropped into oblivion soon after his death, to remain there for more than a century. His attempts at thoughtful composition, such as AN ADDRESS TO THE NEGROES IN THE STATE OF NEW YORK, fall low in the class of the subliterate. It is his poetry, with all of its artlessness and crudeness which makes his name important. As the product of the uncultivated Negro imagination and temperament, his verse, slight as the body of it is, forms a unique contribution to American poetry in the eighteenth century. The reader of today is likely to find a more sincere feeling in it than in most religious verse written in America during

Hammon's age. It is a quaint prelude to the rich and varied songs which were to burst spontaneously from the Negro folk a little later, songs which make up the great gift from Africa to the art of America.

By Wesley Curtwright

8/17/38

Assigned by Chas. Cumberbatch
Group XVI
1800 words

LIFE OF JUPITER HAMMON

Very little is positively known of the life of Jupiter Hammon. We do not know the exact date or place of his birth, nor the exact place or date of his death. We do not know what occupation he followed, except that he was a slave, nor the precise extent of his education. His contemporaries do not mention him at all, and until recently, he was almost completely neglected by subsequent historians of his period. Our chief authority for the facts of his life is his own work, especially his Address to the Negroes of the State of New York.

He was born, it seems, between 1720 and 1730, but we have no proof of it. He states in his address that he was then, 1787, "upwards of seventy years old."

Concerning the place of his birth, Oscar Wegelin remarks: "Where he first saw the light of day, I am unable to state, in fact, were his birth place in Africa, or more probably, the West Indies, he himself was without doubt unable to give the exact date of his natal day.

(The letter of Muirson seems to prove that he was born in this country.)" The letter of Muirson is the earliest known document referring to Hammon. It is dated May 19, 1730, from St. George's, and prescribes treatment for "Jupiter." It begins: "Sir: I'm informed by Mr. Lloyd Jupiter is afflicted with pains in his Leggs

"Jupiter Hammon", by Oscar Wegelin, New York, C. F. Heartman, 1915

*Jupiter
Hammon*

Knees and thighs..."]

published
As far as we know, Hammon's first poem was a broad-
side of 88 lines, printed double column, entitled:
An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ with Peniten-
tial Cries: Composed by Jupiter Hammon, a Negro Belong-
ing to Mr. Lloyd, of Queen's Village, on Long Island,
the 25th of December, 1760. This poem was probably
printed at New York, early in 1761. In it the word
"salvation" is used 33 times. Chiefly because of the
religious character of all his poetry, Wegelin concurs
with the late Arthur A. Schomburg in believing that
Hammon was a preacher.

But as to what Jupiter Hammon actually did during
most of his life, we can only conjecture. Vernon Log-
gins remarks that "he lived through the years when the
church in America was being democratized, ~~through~~,
through the period when the Revolution was remaking the
thought of the country, and on until the definite es-
tablishment of the United States as a nation. All of
his life he passed in slavery, belonging, as the title-
pages of his publications attest, to three different
members of the Lloyd family of Long Island. Except
for the time during the War of the Revolution when the
British were in possession of Long Island and the patriot
Lloyds with their slaves were in exile in Hartford,
Connecticut, Jupiter Hammon's residence was probably on
the Lloyd estate, near Queen's Village."

, in "The Negro Author," by Vernon Loggins, Columbia U. Press, N. Y., 1931

(3)

According to Brawley's deduction, Hammon was first owned by Henry Lloyd. On the death of Henry Lloyd, he went to Joseph Lloyd, one of four sons. Joseph Lloyd died during the course of the Revolution, and Hammon went to John Lloyd. The Lloyds evidently highly esteemed Hammon, and assisted him in publishing his verses. Without such aid, Hammon, who was not well known like Phillis Wheatly, could not have had his work printed. Loggins credits him with elementary training, and thinks that he went freely to church, and probably preached, and read the Bible a great deal. As to his work, it was probably light for a slave, as he himself seemed satisfied with his master, and spoke of himself as having had many "advantages," and as being "able to do almost any kind of business."

The above-mentioned was probably the first poem published by an American Negro. Writing in 1786, Hammon said:² "When I was at Hartford, in Connecticut, where I lived during the war, I published several pieces which were well received, not only by those of my own colour, but by a number of the white people, who thought they might do good among the servants." The first of these that has been preserved is a broadside of 21 ballad stanzas, entitled An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatly, and is dated "Hartford, August 4, 1778." The next, An Essay on the Ten Virgins, was advertised "to be sold" in the Connecticut Courant, Dec. 14, 1779. No

*"Early Negro American Writers," by Benjamin M. Brawley, Univ. of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1935
in his "Address"*

copy of this work is now known to be in existence. In 1782, Hudson and Goodwin of Hartford printed in pamphlet form A Winter Piece, a sermon, with "A Poem for Children with Thoughts on Death" at the end. Another prose pamphlet, An Evening's Improvement, included with "The Kind Master and the Dutiful Servant" in verse, was published at Hartford with no date. All of these writings, Brawley thinks, show the religious influence of the Wesleyan revival of that time, and of the works of Charles Wesley, John Newton, and William Cowper.

None of the above-mentioned writings went through more than one edition, which would seem to be a fair gauge of the extent of Hammon's fame. But, according to Wegelin, "Hammon's most important work...was...an address to the Negroes of the state...Its influence was felt beyond the borders of New York." It was first presented to the African Society in the City of New York, September 24, 1786. It was printed the following year by Carroll and Patterson. Another edition was printed in New York in 1806, after Hammon's death. It was also reprinted by the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery." The style of this address seems to be Hammon's own, but he got editorial assistance before printing it.

There is a receipt extant which mentions Hammon. It runs as follows: "Oysterbay, 6th Oct 1790 Recd of John Lloyd Junr twelve Pound in full of the last years

"Jupiter Hammon," by Oscar Wegelin

(5)

Interest on his bond Recd by the hand of Jupiter Hammon & have endorsed it on the Bond

P LORETTA COOK

L12-0-0

Hammon died between the years 1790 and 1806. Wegelin says: "In the edition of the Address to the Negroes issued in 1806 three residents of Oyster Bay, Long Island, attest over their own signatures that Hammon was a man of good parts and an esteemed neighbor." The publishers of the 1787 edition of the Address say that "they have made no material alterations in it, except in the spelling, which they found needed considerable correction." In contrast to Phillis Wheatly, we have no sample of Hammon's handwriting.

After his death, Hammon sank into oblivion, it is believed because the Negro leaders of that time disliked his personal submission to slavery. He is mentioned, however, in Wilson Armistead's "Tribute for the Negro": "Jupiter Hammon, a Negro Slave of Long Island, attained to considerable advancement, both in an intellectual and religious point of view. He published an address to the negroes of New York, which contains much excellent advice, embodied in language so excellent, that were it not well attested, its genuineness might be justly questioned."

One other mention of Hammon: "Joseph (Lloyd) had a negro slave, Jupiter Hammon, who was quite a literary

*In "Jupiter Hammon"
Published at Manchester, Eng., 1848*

well and able to do almost any kind of business, to live much longer...I suppose I have had more advantages than most of you, who are slaves, have $\frac{1}{4}$ ever known, and I believe more than many white people have enjoyed...

"1st. Respecting obedience to masters. Now, whether it is right and lawful, in the sight of God, for them to make slaves of us or not, I am certain that while we are slaves, it is our duty to obey our masters in all their lawful commands, and mind them, unless we are bid to do that which we know to be sin, or forbidden in God's word...

"Now I acknowledge that liberty is a great thing, and worth seeking for, if we can get it honestly; and by our good conduct, prevail on our masters to set us free: though for my own part I do not wish to be free, yet I should be glad if others, especially the young Negroes, were to be free; for many of us who are grown up slaves, and have always had masters to take care of us, should hardly know how to take care of themselves; and it may be more for our own comfort to remain as we are. That liberty is a great thing we know from our own feelings, and we may likewise judge so from the conduct of the white people in the late war. How much money has been spent, and how many lives have been lost to defend their liberty. I must say that I have hoped God would open their eyes, when they were so much engaged for liberty, to think of the state of the poor blacks,

and to pity us...Think very little of your bondage in this life; for your thinking of it will do you no good. If God designs to set us free, he will do it in his own time and way; but think of your bondage to sin and Satan, and do not rest until you are delivered from it...I will conclude...with a few words to those Negroes who have their liberty.

"To most to which I have said to those who are slaves, may be of use to you; but you have more advantages, on some accounts, if you will improve your freedom, as you may do, than they. You have more time to read God's holy word, and to take care of the salvation of your souls..."

From An Evening Thought, etc:

Salvation comes by Jesus Christ alone,

The only Son of God;
Redemption now to every one,
That love his holy word.

Dear Jesus we would fly to Thee,
And leave off every Sin,
Thy tender Mercy well agree;
Salvation from our King.

Salvation comes now from the Lord,
Our victorious King;
His holy Name be well ador'd,
Salvation surely bring.

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Come Blessed Jesus, Heavenly Dove,
Accept Repentance here;
Salvation give, with tender Love;
Let us with Angels share. Finis.

From the Address to Miss Phillis Wheatly:

I
O come you pious youth ! adore
The wisdom of thy God,
In bringing thee from distant shore,
To learn His holy word.
Eccles. XII

IV

God's tender mercy brought thee here;
Tost o'er the raging main;
In Christian faith thou hast a share,
Worth all the gold of Spain.
Psal. ciii, 1, 6, 4

V

While thousands tossed by the sea,
And others settled down,
God's tender mercy set thee free,
From dangers that come down.
Death

VI

That thou a pattern still might be,
To youth of Boston town,
The blessed Jesus set thee free,
From every sinful wound.
2 Cor. v, 10

IX

Come you, Phillis, now aspire,
And seek the living God,
So step by step thou mayst go higher,
Till perfect in the word.
Matth. vii, 7, 8

#

XVII

While thousands muse with earthly toys;
And range about the street,
Dear Phillis, seek for heaven's joys,
Where we do hope to meet.
Matth. vi, 33

From the Poem for Children:

I

O ye young and thoughtless youth,
Come seek the living God,
The scriptures are a sacred truth,
Ye must believe the word.
Eccle. XII, 1

JUPITER HAMMON, first Negro poet

The Lloyd family, of Lloyd's Neck, L.I. where Jupiter Hammon the first Negro poet of America was born, a slave. The "Papers of the Lloyd Family of the Manor of Queens Village, Lloyd's Neck, L.I. 1654-1826," 2 vols. 1927, as well as other documents examined fail to even mention the man who added so much fame to that family. The ~~Hammond~~ descendants who published such elaborate records and family trees were not particularly interested in paying tribute to those who built the manor and was the source of its great wealth.