

# LOUISA

Richard Emmel

Parson Place Press  
Mobile, Alabama

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All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James  
Authorized Version of the *Holy Bible*.

Trade paper:  
ISBN 10: 0-9786567-3-3  
ISBN 13: 978-0-9786567-3-7

Library of Congress Control Number: 2007943689

This first novel is dedicated to Andrew Emmel, our precious, youngest son, who died too early. In his brief twenty years, he taught us how to live, and we shall be forever thankful.



### Publisher's Note

If you are a middle school student or the parent of a middle school student, please recommend *Louisa* to your teacher or school as a resource for study. If you are an educator for students in the upper elementary and middle school grades, we recommend you obtain the companion *Resource Book for Louisa: A Guide for Teachers* to use with your study of *Louisa* in your classes. It will provide an excellent resource for the study of such topics as slavery in colonial America, human rights and civil rights, religious influences on early America, literature and literacy in early America, and more.

The *Resource Book for Louisa* is co-authored by the author of *Louisa*, Richard Emmel, who is a 37 year veteran educator as both middle school teacher and former elementary school principal in Little Rock, Arkansas, and by Ms. Gena McReynolds, who is a middle school teacher in Bellevue, Washington. You may order directly from the publisher's web site at [www.parsonplacepress.com/store](http://www.parsonplacepress.com/store) and receive a special volume discount when you order *Louisa* in paperback for each of your students. The *Resource Book for Louisa* is scheduled for public release in the spring of 2008. You may direct any questions you have to the publisher at [info@parsonplacepress.com](mailto:info@parsonplacepress.com), or you may visit the publisher's web site at [www.parsonplacepress.com](http://www.parsonplacepress.com) for more details.



## Contents

Chapter 1—An Overview .....	9
Chapter 2—How a Child of Africa Became an American Slave .....	15
Chapter 3—Servitude and a Surprise .....	27
Chapter 4—Fifteen Years of Learning While Performing Slave Labor .....	38
Chapter 5—A Blessed Slave .....	50
Chapter 6—Becoming a Woman .....	65
Chapter 7—Heaven Help Us .....	71
Chapter 8—Teaching Prejudice .....	77
Chapter 9—Free at Last .....	83
Chapter 10—Two Unforgettable Events .....	97
Chapter 11—Becoming a Mother .....	115
Chapter 12—A Friend in Braintree .....	123
Chapter 13—Happiness Taken .....	138
Chapter 14—On Our Own .....	143
Chapter 15—A New Beginning .....	152
Chapter 16—Our First Article .....	160
Chapter 17—The First Column .....	169
Chapter 18—The Improbable Dream .....	183





### *Recollecting My Life*

*Memory, immortal pow'r, I trace thy spring:  
Uplift my strains, while I thy glory fling:  
The acts of long departed years, by thee  
Recover'd, in due order rang'd we flee:  
Thy pow'r the long-forgotten calls from night,  
That sweetly plays before the fancy's flight.*

*Phillis Wheatley*

## **Chapter 1—An Overview**

**G**od made me smart. I learn things quickly, write well, and enjoy thoughts about the future. Being a slave, I could not enjoy my gifts, but had to practice much self-control, lest I was considered smart. White people punished slaves who acted the least little bit smart, sometimes even killing them. I could never say what I thought, for fear of insulting white people. The only time I could relax was when I was with other slaves. As a house servant, there was seldom a time I was not around white people. Working in the big house had many advantages, but a big disadvantage was keeping a respectful silence at all times when on duty, typically eighteen hours straight. I longed for the day when I would be free to talk. In my bones, I knew the good Lord would someday grant me freedom. Until that day, I had to work hard at being common and not draw attention to myself.

I learned this lesson early. As a young slave, I waited on my master's twins during their tutoring sessions. I

wanted so much to play with them rather than stand around waiting on them hand and foot. Mary and Nathaniel Wheatley were my age. Mary was sickly, and everyone pampered her, but Nathaniel was a healthy and mischievous boy whose personal magnetism endeared him to all who knew him—even me. I say “even me” because I saw how he abused other slaves, but never me. I am sure my relationship with his mother had something to do with the fact he never mistreated me. Although they were my contemporaries, they were never my playmates; I was their servant, and so I had to hide my thoughts and problems while at the same time showing concern for them. Oh, how I wanted just a little attention and the soothing hand of a caregiver.

I wanted to learn and craved the opportunities they so took for granted. My soul longed for the instruction that the twins disregarded. As I sat behind the twins and listened intently to the schoolmaster’s lessons, they bedeviled the poor man with nonsense questions. Most annoying was their habit of asking me for a drink just when he was about to make an important point. Not only did I have to leave the room’s wisdom, but I also had to leave what I can only describe as a delightful stupor brought about by the allure of knowledge.

Although I doubt they deliberately made me miss the instruction, I could never be sure. To keep us constantly in place, whites routinely abused us. That aspect of life never ceased, even after I became free. The color of my skin has always dictated my status on this earth and kept me socially enslaved. There were some people, like Mr. Franklin, who thought highly of me. The good people of England also cared for me. Loyalty to my second family brought me back to America, even though I could have easily remained in Britain. I got that loyalty from my African family—my real family. The beliefs of my father

and mother were so much a part of me that I returned to enslavement rather than stay where I enjoyed freedom and respect.

I dream about seeing my father and mother again, but hold out little hope for that happening. I was only with them seven years, but they still have a powerful influence on me. I will write about my early training in the African bush to dispel the attitude that Africa is a country of savages. I have seen more savagery in America than I ever did in Africa. My father was the chief of a large tribe, so I knew what happened both in my village and the surrounding area. Just because my people are primitive does not mean we are savages. I would like to see a Bostonian make an elaborate costume from just leaves, light wood, shells, and feathers, but my people could easily live in Boston. I am getting away from my story, but I promise another book about Mother Africa.

I arrived in Boston in the spring of 1760 as a frail little African girl who was the last bit of cargo sold by a cruel slaver. The brutality of the three-month voyage from Africa left me broken in both body and spirit and very nearly dead. The slave ship captain would likely have dumped me in the harbor if John and Susannah Wheatley hadn't bought me for a few shillings. For having saved my life, such as it was, I suppose I owe the Wheatleys something.

When the slave catchers took me, I lost everything and everyone—my parents, my brother, my home, my identity. By the time they packed me aboard the slave ship, I felt nothing but despair, and it wasn't long before I saw that despair in others, too. While at sea, it was a rare thing for the captured Africans to be brought up on deck, but when the slavers did so—to wash us down and air out the hold—some of our number jumped over the side and into the endless sea. A sure death in the ocean was better than a filthy life below the deck.

As I write this, I don't know my exact age. My life in America began the day Susannah Wheatley gambled on my potential as a house servant. She thought that with just a little food and care, I might live, and if I didn't, she would have lost only five shillings, less than the cost of a dress in her husband's dry goods store. I think I am twenty-nine years old now, but I could be as young as twenty-seven or as old as thirty-one. Slaves rarely know their age, because we have no birth records. My master has birth records for his livestock, but not for his slaves. As far as a slave-owner is concerned, a slave has no past. For a slave, only today and tomorrow matter, and for me, the bleak future robbed me of my tomorrows.

I am talking about the block of time from my arrival until I was freed. Every day I knew my life could be taken for an action thought of as being inconsiderate by a white person. Yes, it could be any white person, not just my master or mistress. I saw harsh physical punishment and death meted out to slaves for false reasons. I never could adjust to the abuse I saw. Trying not to be mistreated was a daily challenge that took much energy and effort. It made me tense, but I had to appear friendly and respectful. Knowing that I could be hurt by any white person kept me fearful, even after I got my freedom. It is yet another unseen scar of slavery.

As you will read, I spent fifteen years as a slave for the Wheatley family. Mrs. Wheatley remained true to her word and released me on her death. My last few years as a slave were awkward, because I had become a well-known writer, yet I continued my enslavement. My British friends did not understand how the Wheatleys could continue ownership of me. Mrs. Wheatley was ill during my entire servitude. Many times during my fifteen years with the family, Mrs. Wheatley was near death, so I was used to it. I had to return to Boston when I got word

that she was on her deathbed, but I fully expected her to pull through, as she had done so many times before. As much as I wanted my freedom, I could not bear to think about the cost—the death of my mistress and best friend.

The illness that enslaved Mrs. Wheatley was a much harsher master than were my owners. She regularly let me know that sharing books with me brought enthusiasm to her life. When I wrote my first poem, she called me a genius and told me that I had a special gift. At her death, a new life began for me.

Guessing my age to be a young twenty when freedom came, I immediately married a strong, intelligent African. Also, I soon became quite ill and thought that I would have but a brief taste of freedom before death took me.

Influenza moved through Boston, taking many people who were too weak to fight its deadly grip. I was still very weak and felt as if the time for my eternal pilgrimage would be soon. As dreadful as the thought of death was at such an early age, for the first time since coming to America, I felt free. It was our misfortune that our first son was a breach birth. The midwife was unable to move him properly, turning our happiness into grief. I recovered from influenza, but will never recover from my little boy's death.

Just a year later, and this time not cursed by sickness, I am again close to the miracle of birth. Yet, I know my body still bears the scars of slavery that could keep us childless. Not any richer, we must depend on the skills of the same midwife who was there at the birth and death of our first child. I pray that the Lord will take my life this time and spare the precious child inside of me.

Perhaps the reader is wondering what I meant when I wrote "the scars of slavery could keep me childless." I had a sickness when I first arrived that made me very weak and filled my lungs with vile mucus. I do not know if that

affected other parts of my body. Also, I was abused while being held captive at Boston Harbor. I will write no more, because I do not want the ugly facts to sully this book. Like a bird on a perch, I seek balance. It would be easy for me to write about the unthinkable, because it was part of being a slave in America, but I also know the good America. In this book, I have chosen to write mostly about the good America. I faced this issue when slaves began to rebel. Should I revolt or continue serving the Wheatleys? I balanced things by writing rebellious lines in my poetry, while continuing to be the good servant.

I remember looking up at the night sky and thinking that death would take away all shackles and unite me with my little boy whom the Lord called so early. Now, near my ninth month, I realize that my second child may join his brother in heaven. This I keep to myself, so as not to cause my husband, John Peters, any more grief than he has already endured.

In the hope that our child may be spared the fate of his brother, I write my life's story, so that he will know his mother and what I and so many other slaves struggled to accomplish. By the grace of God, my child and this story will survive.

I have waited until now to write, because writing about myself is difficult. It is easier to write about other people. People consider me a good writer, but perhaps that is because I describe the subjects of my writing not as they are, but as they should be. I do not want that to happen with my own story. I want my son to know the truth.

Who better to write the story of a slave but a slave? Certainly, no white man could do so. After all, who would read such a thing? Most slaves are not permitted to read. When we die, our owners don't honor our memories; they give no more thought to our passing than they would to the loss of a worn-out shoe. No, I must write my story and trust in Providence that someday it will be published.