

GEORGE MOSES HORTON: CRAFTING VIRTUAL FREEDOM THROUGH POETRY

TEACHER TOOL 1

George Moses Horton defied considerable obstacles to define himself as a literary artist. He was born into slavery in Northampton County, North Carolina, in 1797, and despite the fact that he had no formal education, he became a published poet, the first African American living in slavery in the South to achieve this feat. When his owner moved to Chatham County, a rural community in the Piedmont region near Chapel Hill, Horton taught himself to read. His early love of music and poetry spurred his creativity, and he began to display his gifts when he went to the farmer's market in Chapel Hill to sell fruits and vegetables. There, Horton recited poems from memory and earned money by selling acrostic love poems (for 25 cents a piece) to the students at the University of North Carolina. Caroline Lee Hentz, a novelist and the wife of a university faculty member, guided Horton's poetic development and encouraged him, teaching him to write and promoting his poetry to newspapers and journals in the North. His first book of poetry, *The Hope of Liberty*, appeared in 1829 and *The Poetical Works of George Moses Horton, the Colored Bard of North Carolina* was published in 1845.

Horton's story is poignant because he exemplifies a dedicated "freedom crafter" who worked arduously and used his talents to increase his personal freedom even while enslaved. He sold his poetry in the hopes of someday earning enough money to purchase his freedom, but his owners adamantly refused, and Horton remained enslaved until Union troops appeared in Chapel Hill. He joined them and traveled with Captain William H. S. Banks and his company during the Civil War. During this time, Horton wrote poems for the Union soldiers. Captain Banks assisted Horton in the publication of his third book of poetry, *Naked Genius*, in 1865.

Horton's poetry is a testament to his love of liberty and was an inspiration to others. He clearly earned the esteem and respect of the University of North Carolina community, for in 1859 he delivered an address to the students at Chapel Hill titled, "The Stream of Liberty and Science," expressing his love of liberty and his thoughts on slavery. Although not much is known about the latter part of his life after the war, today Horton is nationally recognized for his extraordinary literary accomplishments and dedication to the democratic principles upon which this nation was founded.

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