

George Moses Horton

PROVIDED BY NORTH CAROLINA FREEDOM MONUMENT PROJECT

The historic poet laureate of Chatham County, North Carolina, George Moses Horton, was the only person to publish a book while living in slavery. George was born into slavery about 1797 on William Horton's tobacco plantation in Northampton County in North Carolina. His master moved to Chatham County in the Piedmont region of North Carolina, where George grew up as a cow-hand. Young George Moses Horton taught himself to read by using an old speller, the scriptures, and a copy of a Methodist hymnal. He composed poems in his head, but he was unable to write them down. Therefore, he recited his poems while others transcribed them.

In the year of 1815 when Horton was 17, he became the property of William's son, James Horton. He plowed the farm with a horse-drawn plow and was often sent to Chapel Hill by his master to sell produce. In Chapel Hill, his opportunities expanded by meeting students from the University of North Carolina. Recognizing his sophisticated vocabulary, the students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill encouraged Horton to recite his own verses. The literary reputation of George Moses Horton spread, and he began to sell poems for students to send to their sweethearts. Writing acrostic poems based on the names of the young men's sweethearts, Horton would compose many of the poems while plowing the fields. He would retain the poetry in his head until he could dictate the poems to one of the gentlemen for which he wrote. He received 25 cents for each of his poems. However, some gentlemen bestowed upon Horton 50 to 75 cents a poem in addition to giving him respectable suits of clothes and books. Horton's goal was to use the money he earned to buy his freedom.

Through his literary accomplishments, he earned the admiration and support of astute people such as Governor John Owen, Joseph Caldwell and David L. Swain, presidents of the university, and newspapermen, William Lloyd Garrison, and Horace Greeley. Caroline Lee Hentz, a professor's wife and novelist, befriended Horton and helped him publish some of his poems in local newspapers. *The Hope of Liberty*, a book of twenty-one poems, was published in 1829. The book did not sell enough copies to purchase his freedom. Using his income from selling his poems and from doing handyman work for the university, Horton paid his master in lieu of service. In 1845, George published *Poetical Works*. However, the books failed to raise sufficient funds for Horton to buy his freedom.

He spent the Civil War on the farm of his master. In April 1865, George Moses Horton walked to Raleigh to be with the liberating Union army who took him under their

protection. *Naked Genius*, Horton's last volume of poetry, published in 1865, was written in the three months that he was with the northern army. In his sixties when *Naked Genius* was published, Horton had written ninety poems for the book. After gaining his freedom, Horton spent his final years in Philadelphia writing Sunday school stories and working for North Carolina friends who had moved to the North. He did not attain the popularity in Philadelphia that he had in Chapel Hill, and the details of his death are unknown.

George Moses Horton was the first African American to publish a book and was considered a genius of his time. In June 1978, Governor Jim Hunt declared June 28 as George Moses Horton Day. In 1996, George Moses Horton was inducted into North Carolina's Literary Hall of Fame. In 1997, Chatham County Commissioners declared Horton "Historic Poet Laureate" of Chatham County and a national organization was created in his name, the George Moses Horton Society for the Study of African American Poetry. In 1999, the North Carolina Division of Archives and History approved placement of a historic marker, the first for an African American. The marker was placed on Highway 15-501 near Mt. Gilead

Church Road and reads:

GEORGE MOSES HORTON
Ca. 1798-1883
Slave poet. His *The Hope of
Liberty* (1829) was the first book
by a black author in the South.
Lived on farm 2 mi. SE.

On the web

George Moses Horton at UNC

<http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/exhibits/slavery/horton.html>

Part of "Slavery and the Making of the University," provided by UNC Libraries.

George Moses Horton

<http://www.sog.unc.edu/programs/civiced/resources/docs/georgemoseshorton.pdf>

In this lesson from the North Carolina Civic Education Consortium, students will learn about the life of North Carolina's "first professional poet," George Moses Horton, who was born into slavery in Chatham County. By reading, discussing, and preparing dramatic presentations of Horton's poetry, students will gain an understanding and appreciation of Horton's literary contribution, even under the great adversity of enslavement.

Acrostics

<http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/exhibits/horton/mssgmh.html>

Horton was known for his acrostics, which he sometimes wrote as love letters on behalf of UNC students. In an acrostic, the first letter of each line spells a word, phrase, or name. Several of Horton's acrostic poems can be seen here in manuscript form.

More from LEARN NC

Visit us on the web at www.learnnc.org to learn more about topics related to this article, including African Americans, George Moses Horton, North Carolina, history, literature, and poetry.