
Phillis Wheatley, Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral. ([Albany]: Thomas Spencer, 1793).

Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. Written by Himself. (Boston/Rochester, New York: Published at the Anti-Slavery Office/Published at the North Star Office, 1847).

The James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection includes important printed books and ephemera by African American writers. The collection includes various early British and American printings of the work of Phillis Wheatley, the first published African American poet. Born in Gambia, Senegal, Wheatley was seven when she was purchased as a slave by the Wheatley family of Boston; the Wheatleys taught Phillis to read and write and encouraged her interest in writing poetry. After the success of her writing, Wheatley was eventually emancipated. Nineteenth-century highlights include a rare variant edition of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. A recent addition to the collection, this edition of one of the most important volumes in African American literature includes sheets Douglass apparently bought from the Anti-Slavery Office which had published an earlier edition and had them bound for his own North Star printing office in Rochester, New York.


Robert Reed, “The Life and Adventures of a Haunted Convict, or the Inmate of a Gloomy Prison,” unpublished manuscript, [ca. 1858].

Unique manuscripts written by nineteenth-century African American writers exemplify the extraordinary richness and historical significance of materials in the James Weldon Johnson
Memorial Collection. “The Bondwoman’s Narrative,” a fictionalized autobiography, is thought to be the first novel written by an African American woman and the only known novel written by a fugitive slave. Written in the gothic and sentimental style favored at the time, “The Bondwoman’s Narrative” is the story of a girl whose escape from a North Carolina plantation leads to a series of adventures and obstacles, including passing as a young white man and encounters with slave hunters tracking fugitive slaves. She eventually finds freedom and safety in the North. In his memoir, written around 1859, Robert Reed attributes the wayward course of his life to the tragic loss of his father at the age of six. Reed recounts his experiences at the New York House of Refuge, the first juvenile reformatory in the United States, and later in New York’s Auburn State Prison. Reed provides a wealth of vivid detail about his incarceration at Auburn, including a description of the horizontal black-and-white striped uniform which originated at the prison: “streaked clothes of shame and disgrace.” Released from Auburn on May 1, 1842, he was reincarcerated there before the close of the year, “I return’d home and committed a crime which brought me back to a gloomy prison.” This unparalleled narrative is a unique resource documenting the lives of African-American prisoners in antebellum America.

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