About the Subject

Flora was a woman of African heritage enslaved in Milford and Stratford, both towns in Connecticut. Her life spanned the crucial era of the American War of Independence that provided freedom from Great Britain for some but denied it to Flora and hundreds of thousands of other enslaved people. Nothing is known of Flora’s early life, but a bill of sale from when she was in the possession of the DeWitt family of Milford, Connecticut, provides a clue. The Bill of Sale notes that Flora was nineteen years old on December 13, 1796. Thus, her birth around 1776 coincided with both the onset of the American Revolution and the beginnings of antislavery activism in Connecticut.

During Flora’s lifetime, Connecticut’s free Black population grew, while the enslaved population dwindled. She became one of the last people in Stratford to remain in bondage. According to the 1790 census, among Milford’s population of 2,100, sixty-three people (or 3%) were enslaved. This means that the DeWitt family, which enslaved five people, was an exception.

Flora’s life was mostly controlled by the DeWitt women, who considered her their personal property. Like many other enslaved people, Flora would have had very little privacy or personal space and limited independence. At nineteen years old, Flora was sold to Asa Benjamin, a cordage and cable manufacturer in Stratford, Connecticut, where she lived from 1796 until her death around 1815.

For more information about Flora and her portrait, please read the article “Seeing Flora’s Profile as Portrait:” https://journalpanorama.org/article/seeing-floras-profile-as-portrait/?fs=e&s=cl
About the Artform and Artwork

A silhouette is a profile that is made visible through the contrast of dark and light, usually a dark silhouette against a light background. Before the invention of photography, silhouettes were the most democratic form of portraiture. Cheap and easy to produce, they were available to virtually anyone. This art form captured likenesses of many people who would otherwise be unrepresented in the historical record.

Silhouettes can be made in a variety of ways. The two basic cutting techniques are “hollow-cut” (in which the profile is cut out of a light-colored piece of paper that is then laid against a dark ground to reveal the image) and “blockhead” (in which the profile is cut out of dark-colored paper and laid on a light-colored background). They can be cut from a preliminary tracing or freehand, using only the eyes to guide the scissors. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, professional silhouette artists often used a mechanical device known as a physiognotrace to accurately trace the outline of a person’s face. Most silhouettes are miniature in scale, although there are examples of the rarely produced life-size silhouettes. Presented in many ways, silhouettes were often displayed in frames, preserved in albums, or worn on the body (ex. locket or pendant). Depending on how the silhouette was used, its condition might be weathered or pristine.

Flora’s silhouette provides an opportunity to learn about the practice of enslavement in New England. Although we often think of slavery as a solely Southern institution, enslaved people labored throughout the New England colonies from the mid-1600s through the American Revolution, with slavery existing legally in Connecticut until 1848.

A life-size silhouette of an enslaved woman of this period is extremely rare. Flora’s silhouette was created with the hollow-cut method. The profile was cut out of light-colored paper and adhered to a darker background so that the opening reveals the dark silhouette.

Flora’s silhouette was discovered in an eighteenth-century house in Stratford with no evident connection to the Benjamin family. The exact circumstances of the discovery are unknown, but the portrait was reportedly found tucked away in the basement kitchen, where enslaved women worked and slept. Also found there was the 1796 bill of sale. The two objects became conjoined, both physically (matted together in one frame) and in people’s minds. Scholars assumed a direct relationship, concluding that the silhouette had been made to document Flora as property for the purpose of the sale and to identify her if she tried to escape bondage. But there are further clues. The silhouette and bill of sale are made of distinct grades of material, each created with a very different degree of skill, in different sizes, and using different folds. In addition, there is no evidence that portraits were made during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to document or police enslaved people. Explore the information and activities presented here to draw your own conclusion about Flora’s portrait.
Know All Men by these Presents, that I, Margaret Dwight of Milford in the County of New Haven, State of Connecticut, for the consideration of Twenty five Pounds Sterling &c. thereof, received to my full satisfaction of A.D. Benjamin of Woodford in Fairfield County in the State of Connecticut, do by these Presents Bargain & Sold to &c. by these Presents Bargain, Sell, Decline, &c. with the above Benjamin a certain Negro Man, named Horace, to have Three &c. Negro Persons to work the. &c. Benjamin &c. Said Persons forever. I do by these Presents bind myself, my Executors &c. Administration family by these Presents to warrant &c. defend the said Persons FROM all Claims &c. whatsoever. In Witness whereof I have hereunto Set my Hand &c. the 13th Day of December 1796.

Present

A.M. 4th Dec. 1796

19 yrs old

Margaret Dwight
Key Terms and Concepts

The Non-Importation Act of 1774: An effort to end importation of enslaved peoples into Connecticut. It stated that, “no Indian, negro or molatto [sic] slave shall at any time here-after be brought or imported into this Colony, by sea or land, from any place or places whatsoever, to be disposed of, left or sold within this Colony.” Similar acts were passed by other colonies as well as by the Continental Congress.

Enslaved Person: An individual viewed as a commodity to be purchased, sold, and exploited for labor purposes.

Anti-Slavery Activist, or Abolitionist: A person who worked to end the enslavement of individuals of African descent in the United States.

Bill of Sale: Bills of sale are documents written to ensure the legality of the sale of property. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this included the sale of enslaved people. Bills of sale were carefully preserved and guarded by the purchaser in case they were needed to support a claim of ownership. When they pertain to human beings, bills of sale offer evidence of the lives and families of those being bought and sold. (Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition, Yale University)

Emancipation: To be free from restraint, control, or the power of another.

Elements of Portrayal Terms

Facial Expression: The look or perceived movement of muscles on someone’s face. The facial expression can help identify the sitter’s emotion(s) and provide clues about their thoughts and feelings.

Clothing: The items a sitter wears on their body. In a portrait, the clothing might reveal something about the sitter, such as their occupation, personality, economic or social status, or the era in which they lived.

Hairstyle: The way a person wears their hair, including the color and style. The hairstyle can offer hints about the sitter’s age and when and how they might have lived.

Color: The various hues that often set the tone, mood, or overall feeling. Color can help the artist convey their message about the sitter.

Medium: The material used to create a work of art. Some popular media for portraiture include painting, charcoal, clay, wood, marble, photography, and video.

Artistic Style: The characteristic ways in which a person manipulates materials and techniques to create a work of art, such as a portrait. Often, the artist’s style can give us clues about who the sitter is or when the portrait was created.
Portrait Observations and Analysis

We know very little about Flora. While much of her story must remain a mystery, we will draw on available clues to piece together a sense of her life and a better understanding of her portrait. In order to do this, we’ll use Description, Deduction, Speculation, a routine for understanding the deeper history of material culture.

A Note to Teachers: please use the historical and biographical information in this teaching poster to layer in context as you use this routine with your students.

Description: Close observation of material evidence provided by the process of silhouette-making that supports a visual analysis of Flora’s silhouette.

Take a close look. What are your initial visual observations?

• What materials were used to create the silhouette? Why might these materials have been used to create Flora’s portrait?
• Why might Flora’s portrait be life-size when miniatures were in fashion?
• Based on your visual observations, what condition is the silhouette in? Why might the silhouette be in this condition?
• What do the fold lines indicate to you? What size would the silhouette be when folded? Why might it have been folded and unfolded so many times?
• Why might Flora have been sold in 1796?

Deduction: Careful consideration of the historical evidence of enslavement in New England, especially women’s experiences, and archival evidence concerning Flora.

• How might primary sources inform your understanding of the portrait?
• How does the 1796 Bill of Sale both extend and challenge our understanding of the silhouette?
• How does the Non-Importation Act of 1774 relate to Flora?

Speculation: Informed imagining of the circumstances surrounding Flora’s portrait. Drawing on what we’ve discussed about the social history and technique of silhouette-making, the material evidence of Flora’s silhouette, the circumstances of her life as far as we know them, and the conditions of enslavement in Connecticut, let’s think imaginatively.

• Who might have made Flora’s silhouette and why?
• Based on the material and historical evidence, what are your ideas and questions related to the portrait?
• What questions do you have about Flora’s experience?
• What else would you like to know about Flora?
The National Portrait Gallery’s collection tells the multifaceted story of the United States through its portrayals of individuals who have shaped the nation’s history and culture. Flora’s silhouette and the two portraits discussed below help us to better understand the history of Black people in the eighteenth century.

### Absalom Jones (1746–1818)

Adorned with a silhouette of the Reverend Absalom Jones, this jug likely commemorates the tenth anniversary of the first African American Masonic order, a fraternal organization that Jones cofounded in 1798. Born enslaved in Delaware, Jones was freed in 1784, when he was about thirty-eight. He subsequently worked to form the Free African Society, an organization that provided resources for the formerly enslaved. Jones became the first African American Episcopal priest; he petitioned Congress to abolish “the oppression and violence which so great a number of like colour and National Descent are subjected.” Congress did not heed his call.

### Phillis Wheatley (1753–1784)

Phillis Wheatley, who spent most of her life as an enslaved person, was the first African American to publish a book and the first American woman to earn a living from her writing. Although most enslaved people were denied an education, Wheatley’s enslavers taught her to read, and she began to write poetry. Her book *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), published in London, drew the praise of George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and French writer and philosopher Voltaire, helping Wheatley gain her freedom. This engraving, published as an illustration in her book, emphasized her dignified appearance and creative intelligence. Learn more about Wheatley in the National Portrait Gallery’s podcast, **PORTRAITS: [https://npg.si.edu/podcasts/phillis-wheatley](https://npg.si.edu/podcasts/phillis-wheatley)**

- Take a moment to compare the silhouettes of Flora and Absalom Jones. What can we learn about the sitter and their time period based on the Elements of Portrayal that we see in the portrait?
- Compare the stories of Phillis Wheatley and Flora. What are the similarities and differences in their experiences? How can these comparisons help us understand the lived experiences of enslaved African American women?
- Use the Elements of Portrayal to describe the similarities and differences among the three portraits. What makes each portrait unique?

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Absalom Jones by an unidentified artist, c. 1808. Liverpool ware jug, 8 3/4 × 7 × 9 in. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of Sidney Kaplan

Extensions

• Teach students how to create a silhouette by sharing this short video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iAZ3rjA5-OE. Ask students to select a photograph of a woman from the National Portrait Gallery’s collection as the inspiration for their silhouette.

• Explore chapter two of the digital resource “Legacy of Slavery at Harvard,” https://legacyofslavery.harvard.edu/report/slavery-in-new-england-and-at-harvard#indigenous-slavery-and-african-slavery. Discuss your initial observations of the report and respond to this question: How can Flora’s portrait help us further our understanding of the experiences of enslaved women in New England?

• Flora, Absalom Jones, and Phillis Wheatley lived during a crucial era of national liberty for colonists that excluded them and hundreds of thousands of other enslaved people. Discuss the question: What would have Flora, Absalom Jones, or Phillis Wheatley thought about the American Revolution?

• In groups, students use primary and secondary sources to create a timeline that describes the events and legal acts between 1770 and 1812 that helped to grant emancipation for enslaved people in the Northeast.

For more information, visit Traces of a Life in Bondage: Flora’s Silhouette

• Learning Lab collection: https://learninglab.si.edu/collections/traces-of-a-life-in-bondage-flora-s-silhouette/Zi8tr54KkIQRhyqw
For Teachers at the National Portrait Gallery

Want to learn more about the lives of remarkable Americans, past and present, who have contributed to the nation’s history and culture? Teachers, be inspired to use portraiture in your classroom. No matter what subject you teach—social studies, English, visual arts, etc.—we offer ways of using portraiture as a springboard into deeper discussions about biography and our collective history.

Summer Teacher Institutes at the National Portrait Gallery:
http://npg.si.edu/teacher-workshops/learning-look-summer-teacher-institute

Teacher Workshops: https://npg.si.edu/teachers/teacher-workshops

Student Programs: https://npg.si.edu/teachers/student-groups

Classroom Resources: http://npg.si.edu/teachers/classroom-resources

Resources from the Smithsonian American Women’s History Museum
Women have contributed to America’s most defining moments—times that shaped constitutional rights, yielded scientific breakthroughs, created the symbols of our nation. Yet a diversity of women’s stories has not been widely told. The Smithsonian wants the role of women in American history to be well-known, accurate, acknowledged, and empowering. For related resources, events, and news related to the Smithsonian American Women’s History Museum, visit https://womenshistory.si.edu/learn