

## Slave Poet of Chapel Hill

The first American to protest his bondage in published form, George Moses Horton burst the shackles of his heart through verse.

by Steven Wilson

George Moses Horton, the first black slave to protest his bondage in published verse, has been referred to as “the most remarkable literary figure ever born in North Carolina” and the state’s “most amazing natural poet.” He was the first black slave to publish a book in the South. He was a professional man of letters, able to pay his way by the sale of his words. In all of this, Horton said his motive was “to spread the blaze of African genius and thus dispel the septic gloom so prevalent in many parts of the country.”

### Called to the rhythm

George Moses was born the property of William Horton, as were his mother, brother, and sisters; his father was another man’s property. Although no birthdate was recorded, he is believed to have been born some time during 1797. As George Moses said later, “to account for my age is beyond the reach of my power.”

William Horton’s farm was a small tobacco operation located in Northampton County, but continual tobacco production eventually depleted the land of its richness, and in 1800, William Horton moved to newly settled Chatham County, where corn, wheat, and the grazing of cattle were the rule. There, it was young George Moses’ job to drive the cows to and from the pasture.

During this period, Methodist revivals were sweeping across North Carolina. At camp meetings, young George Moses observed men and women speaking and singing from books, and the desire to read took hold of him. He studied from old spelling books at night, of which he said, “I had to sit sweating over my incompetent bark or brush light, almost exhausted by the heat of the fire and almost suffocated with smoke.”

Eventually, he started to read the Bible and Methodist hymnals. It was in the simple rhythm of the hymns that he found his fascination with poetry.

As his fondness for poetry grew, he gathered verses to hoard, storing the rich words in his mind and the meter and rhyme in his heart. Eventually he tried his own hand at composing. His early attempts had the themes of the camp meeting:

“Rise up, my soul, and let us go”

Up to the gospel feast;

Gird on the garment white as snow,

To join and be a guest.

In 1814, the elder William Horton, now 77 years old, decided to hand over some of his slaves to his sons. Lots were cast, and George Moses went to James. Under James, his work changed from tending the cattle to plowing and sowing in the fields.

The order of the day

Was push, the peal of every tongue,

The only word was all the way,

Push along, push along.

Working the clay soils of Chatham County was not easy. But a man could learn his plow, learn his horse, and learn his land. Mastery of the work came when routine became rhythm and rhythm became the work. Horton's body kept to the rhythm of the work, but his mind kept to the rhythm of his rhyme.

Far, far above this world I soar;  
And almost nature lose;  
aerial regions to explore,  
With this ambitious Muse.  
My towering thoughts with pinions rise,  
Upon the gales of song,  
Which waft me through the mental skies,  
With music on my tongue.

Separated from his family, George Moses' world was a private one. His thoughts were his own. No one cared much for a poet's flight of fancy, and he had not yet learned to write. The poet needed an audience.

#### Public appearance

Eight miles from James Horton's farm, located in neighboring Orange County, was situated the village of Chapel Hill, where resided the University of North Carolina. Around 1817, George Moses persuaded his master to let him travel there under the guise of selling pears and apples that Horton's farm produced. It is doubtful if George Moses knew exactly what role a college could play in the life of a slave other than an opportunity for servitude. Even so, as he neared the end of his eight-mile trek, he was eager to find out.

Making his Sunday trips to Chapel Hill routine, George Moses became a familiar figure to the students, who started to taunt the Chatham County slave. But the outcome was not as they expected. As George Moses was later to say, "they discovered a spark of genius in me, either by discourse or other means, which excited their curiosity." To satisfy their curiosity, and maybe to make fun, they asked the country slave to give a speech. George Moses was flattered at this request and, the opportunity to make a speech "inspired in me a kind of enthusiastic pride." As he was caught up in that enthusiasm, words and phrases spilled out with abandon. But soon he realized he was playing the fool and that what he took for smiles of appreciation were really smiles of condescension. As he would later recount, "I soon found it an object of aversion and considered myself nothing but a public ignoramus. Hence, I abandoned my foolish harangues and began to speak of poetry ... the true center to which I was so early attracted by the magnet of genius."

As he began to show his talent, "all eyes were on [him], and all ears were open. Many were at first incredulous, but an experiment of acrostics established it as an incontestable fact." No doubt the skeptics thought they could expose a fake when they gave George Moses a name and asked him to put it to verse. But the black bard proved himself equal to the task, and as George Moses, pleased with himself, would later tell: "My fame soon circulated like a stream throughout the college." The poet had found his audience.

What had started as a contest soon ended up a business. George Moses' genius for acrostics and quick verse provided enterprising students with customized content for

pleading their affections to their beloveds. Business had begun. The going price was 25 to 75 cents.

Still unable to write, as he said later, “I composed at the handle of the plough and retained them in my head until an opportunity offered, when I dictated, whilst one of the gentlemen would serve as my amanuensis” (stenographer).

In spite of this crude method, George Moses sold up to a dozen poems a week, some more than once, resulting in a weekly income as high as three or four dollars, at a time when a day laborer in the North received 50 to 87 cents a day. The slave poet had become a professional man of letters.

And so it went. Six days a week, George Moses was the master’s slave, and on the seventh day he was the slave poet of Chapel Hill. Almost 10 years went by in this fashion, during which George Moses composed “love pieces in verse for courtiers from all parts of the state and acrostics on the names of many of the tip-top belles from Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia.”

The published word

Then, in 1826, a published writer and poet, Caroline Lee Whiting Hentz, arrived in Chapel Hill with her husband, Nicholas Marcellus Hentz, who had accepted the position of professor of modern languages at the college. Chapel Hill now had two poets — the slave poet and the professional. A meeting between the two was inevitable.

George Moses and Caroline Hentz soon established a working relationship founded on mutual admiration. “Being a professional poetess herself and a lover of genius, she discovered my little uncultivated talent” — a discovery that would set into motion the slave poet’s introduction to a wider audience through the printed word. With an “air of inspiration,” George Moses would recite, and Mrs. Hentz would transcribe, making editorial comments as they went along.

During this time, tragedy struck the Hentz household, as their infant child fell from a chair and died instantly from a broken neck. In grieving with the family, George Moses recited a dirge he had composed. The compassion of the slave touched Mrs. Hentz, and as George Moses would later recall, “she strove in vain to avert the inevitable tear, slow trickling down her ringlet-shaded neck.” She now saw George Moses in a new light. He ceased to be the oddity of a black slave who could come up with rhymes — he became a fellow poet, one who deserved freedom.

Through the influence of Hentz, one of George Moses’ poems, entitled “On Liberty and Slavery,” was sent to the Lancaster Gazette in Massachusetts. It began with an impassioned indictment against the institution of slavery:

Alas! and am I born for this  
To wear this slavish chain?  
Deprived of all created bliss,  
Through hardship, toil and pain?

The Gazette published it in April 1828, and for the first time, from behind the iron mask of slavery came a voice of protest in the reasoned passion of poetry. George Moses proved African genius.

Riding on this newborn fame, George Moses’ poetry started to appear in other periodicals in the same year. In New York, the Freedom’s Journal, an anti-slavery weekly published by blacks, printed several poems that would later be used to promote the abolitionist cause.

At home in North Carolina, the Raleigh Register published “On the Evening and the Morning,” a romantic poem descriptive of the mood change from nightfall to dawn. Other North Carolina newspapers followed suit, and soon George Moses was eliciting praise from many of his readers.

Influential people started to take notice of the slave poet and consider how they might assist his cause. Among these were Joseph Gales, editor of the Register; Dr. Joseph Caldwell, president of UNC at Chapel Hill; and John Owen, governor of North Carolina. The governor went so far as to offer \$100 over the fair market value for the purchase of George Moses from his master, James Horton. The offer proved to be bittersweet for George Moses. His master would not sell.

Then like a plaintive dove I mourn'd,  
To bitter all my sweets were turn'd,  
And tears began to flow.

The year ended in a cold winter for George Moses. But by the time spring plowing began, the slave poet of Chatham County had reason to rejoice. Robert Gales had agreed to publish 21 of his poems in a small booklet entitled, *The Hope of Liberty*. A portion of the proceeds were for the possible future purchase of George Moses' freedom.

*The Hope of Liberty* was released for sale in July 1829. Response was slow. Summer days counted off into autumn, and with autumn came the time of harvest — the time when hopes, fulfilled or not, are laid to rest. George Moses' hope of harvest was laid to rest, unfulfilled. In September of that year, David Walker, a free black abolitionist, wrote a pamphlet inciting slaves to rise up against their masters. When the pamphlets were found in the possession of slaves across the South, fear swept through the legislatures, and laws were passed to block the emancipation of any slave.

George Moses, however, was

able to pay his master sufficient to reside in Chapel Hill. With his newfound freedom from the plow,

he soon learned to write. In 1845, a 96-page book of 44 poems was put together and published under the title, *The Poetical Works of George M. Horton, the Colored Bard of North Carolina*. But, due to North Carolina's preoccupation with maintaining the status quo of slavery and dealing with the political tensions developing between North and South, the slave poet's achievement was little noticed.

As years went by, the tension between the North and South increased until the inevitable war began in the spring of 1861. Chapel Hill, now deserted, was an empty theater for the slave poet. With his audience gone, George Moses remained on his master's farm. Four years later, at the end of the war, he would join his liberators and proceed North. But, before he left North Carolina, he made one more attempt to publish.

George Moses titled this little volume *Naked Genius*, and it was published in Raleigh in the fall of 1865. In the aftermath of war, however, this small volume of verse by a former slave was met with silence. The book is the last known published work of George Moses Horton. His activity during its publication is obscure, but it is thought that George Moses Horton died in 1883 in Philadelphia. There is neither a written record of his death nor a grave marker.

Throughout my life I've tried the path,  
Which seemed as leading out of gloom,

Beneath my feet still kindled wrath,  
Genius seemed leading to a tomb.

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