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"Justise Must Take Plase":
Three African Americans Speak of Religion
in Eighteenth-Century New England

Erik R. Seeman

LITTLE direct testimony exists of slave spirituality in colonial New England. Historians seeking to understand slave piety in the region have consequently relied on the published writings of Phillis Wheatley (of Boston) and Jupiter Hammon (of Long Island and Hartford). In addition, scholars have turned to the freedom petitions written by New England slaves during the Revolutionary era and the execution sermons that purport to include the words of African Americans. Each of these sources poses problems. Scholars have been rightfully wary about drawing generalizations from the writings of Wheatley and Hammon; these highly literate works seem unrepresentative of those slaves who, unlike Wheatley, had not read Alexander Pope and John Milton. The slave petitions are more valuable for understanding African-American agitation for freedom than slave spirituality, and the execution sermons may be complete fabrications created by ministers for didactic purposes.

Three documents, the subject of this article, allow us to hear the voices of pious slaves in eighteenth-century New England. First, in 1748 a twenty-

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six-year-old slave named Flora in Ipswich, Massachusetts, offered a confession for an unnamed sin. An exhorter during the Great Awakening, Flora was dismayed that her sin helped discredit the revival. Six years later, Greenwich, a member of the same Canterbury, Connecticut, church as his owner, denounced slavery. Offering a subtle and legalistic account, Greenwich mobilized the best tradition of scriptural exegesis to make his case. Finally, Phillis breathlessly recounted the conversion experience that allowed her to join the Fourth Church in Ipswich. Amid the pious fervor of the Seacoast Revival of 1763–1764, Phillis told the members of the Fourth Church how her enslaved state led her to Jesus.3

All three of these slaves embedded their statements squarely within the tradition of evangelical Euro-American Protestantism.4 This fact enhances our understanding of Christianization among people of African descent in colonial New England. Recently, the scholarly literature on African-American religion has focused on finding African cultural survivals in the rituals, hymns, and preaching styles of Afro-Christianity.5 These historical works offer a fascinating portrait of cultural blending, as Africans brought their religious sensibilities to the flexible practices of Euro-American Christianity. The search for Africanisms in the Christianity practiced by blacks, however, is much more fruitful in the South than in New England. At no point in the colonial period was more than 3 percent of New England’s population enslaved. Most slaves lived individually or in groups of 2 in white households. In Greenwich’s town of Canterbury, for example, only 20 (1.6 percent) of 1,260 residents were black.6 Because many New England slaves interacted more with whites than with other slaves, African values and practices rarely penetrated the religious culture. The documents

3 Naming these individuals is problematic. “Flora” was called both Flory and Flora, and later in life she adopted her husband’s surname. Nedson. “Phillis” was called Phillis Cogswell by her minister, who used the last name of her owner. Phillis seemed to accept that name, signing the church covenant as “Philesh Cogswell.” Subsequently, however, Phillis was referred to as Phillis Choate and Phillis Whipple, the surnames of her husbands. “Greenwich” had the most variable name of the three, alternately rendered as Grinnage, Grinnuage, Grinege, Grinnedg, Grinnig, and Greenwich, with no surname. I have chosen to use the first names most commonly used in the documents, and I have omitted surnames since they varied over their lifetime.

4 In the context of colonial New England, “evangelical” refers to Strict Congregationalists (that is, churches formed by New Lights) and Baptists.


by Flora, Greenwich, and Phillis reflect this milieu. Stylistically, each drew primarily on Euro-American evangelical idioms. Yet, all three slaves used the language of evangelicalism to further their own spiritual and political ends.

Slaveowners in eighteenth-century New England would not have been surprised to hear their bondspeople speaking in the distinctive cadences of Euro-American Christianity. Proselytization, after all, had been the goal of many white New Englanders since the first slaves had been brought in 1638. But aspirations did not guarantee conversions, and through the seventeenth century few Africans had been Christianized. In 1706, Cotton Mather urged his fellow slaveowners to attend more diligently to the spiritual well-being of their slaves. As Mather chided slaveholders, "You deny your Master in Heaven, if you do nothing to bring your Servants unto the Knowledge and Service of that glorious Master." But even those who did attempt to convert slaves generally received little response.

The Great Awakening of the early 1740s was a transforming event. Suddenly, it seemed, free and enslaved blacks could be found anywhere an itinerant preacher delivered the good news of the gospel; sometimes the preachers were themselves black men and women. Old Lights tried to discredit the Awakening by using African-American participation as evidence that the revival was satanically inspired. Charles Brockwell, an Anglican missionary for the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) in Salem, claimed that the revival overturned hierarchies based on race, sex, and age. He reported that "Men, Women, Children, Servants, & Nigros are now become (as they phrase it) Exhorters." Similarly, Nathan Bowen, a lay antirevivalist from Marblehead, Massachusetts, complained that people "of the meanest Capacity ie women & even Common negros" began to "take upon them to Exhort their Betters, & even Common negroes" began to "take upon them to Exhort their Betters," as Flora appears to have done, frightened those for whom racial hierarchies had served to justify slavery. The fulminations of Old Lights could not, however, quell the ardor of blacks, who continued to attend and lead revivalist meetings. Even after the fervor of the revival ebbed, numerous blacks—including Flora, Greenwich, and Phillis—joined the Strict Congregationalist and Baptist churches forged during the Awakening.

To explain why the Awakening had such a powerful allure for African Americans, historians most often cite the emotionalism of revival preaching and worship. Scholars argue that the effusiveness of Awakening piety appealed to people who had a cultural memory of the dances and shouts of

7 Cotton Mather, The Negro Christianized: An Essay to Excite and Assist That Good Work, the Instruction of Negro-Servants in Christianity (Boston, 1706), 5.
African religious practice. Although this argument may explain some African interest in revivalism, more convincing is that the Awakening's fervor enticed African Americans for the same reason it appealed to other people "of the meanest Capacity," as Bowen phrased it. These marginal New Englanders, black and white, found the emotional emphasis of the revival more fulfilling than the increasingly intellectualized piety of the Old Lights. No less important, the evangelical churches formed out of the Awakening accepted blacks and even reached out to them. Pre-revival churches had always been, at least in theory, open to African-American members; John Winthrop reported that a slave woman joined the Boston church as early as 1641. But post-Awakening evangelical churches actively recruited black members and even allowed male communicants to vote, as Greenwich did.

Although evangelicalism helped produce these three documents, each reflects a particular individual's piety. Unfortunately, only the barest outlines of these slaves' early lives can be traced. Flora, for example, was born in 1723, but her parents and her place of birth are unknown. Ipswich was likely her original home, given the localism that marked the lives of most whites and, consequently, their slaves. A coastal town about twenty-five miles north of Boston, Ipswich was a small seaport with a large agricultural interior. In 1765, 100 slaves lived in Ipswich, 2.7 percent of the town's 3,743 residents. Flora belonged to Thomas Choate (1693-1774), a well-off man from a prominent local family.

When the religious fervor of the Great Awakening engulfed Ipswich, it ultimately resulted in a church separation. In 1746, the New Lights formed the Congregational Church of Chebacco (named after the parish in which it was located), later called the Fourth Church. This evangelical congregation welcomed African Americans: four of the first twenty-two full members, including Flora, were slaves. On June 15, "the Neagro Binah Declar'd what God had Done for her Soul in Relating his various Dealings with her in Conviction & Consolation: voted that she be Propounded for full Communion . . . and Likewise Negro Flory." Both whites and blacks thus had to offer a conversion narrative before they could join the congregation. After Flora had been accepted as a full member, she signed the church's articles of faith and the church covenant with a mark, indicating that she could not write (although that did not mean she could not read).
Flora had not been part of the congregation long before she found herself in trouble. Her confession, written by her minister John Cleaveland, is idiosyncratic enough to suggest few editorial changes. Confessions were common in evangelical churches, which constantly sought to root out sin, but Flora’s was much longer than most.

After confessing her guilt to an unspecified transgression, Flora listed the sins that had led her into “Temptation.” Her catalog was standard until she reached “great Freedom to utter the same before men, & also after freedom in persuading sinners to repent [sins?] and live.” Apparently, during or shortly after the Great Awakening, Flora had assumed some of the trappings of an itinerant minister, not unlike other African Americans who occasionally preached during the revival. Whether Flora exhorted only among fellow slaves or also to whites is unclear.

Flora noted that Satan’s “Temptations and Snares” could arouse a person to “wantonness and concupiscence.” These words hint that her sin might have been sexual, a fairly common cause of discipline among women in eighteenth-century New England. Through her sins, Flora had provoked God to leave her to “Satan” and her “own Lusts.” She addressed the congregation, in true exhorter fashion, to “take learning by such an Instance as I am.”

Flora felt her sins were especially inexcusable because she had already received “pardon” from God and, even worse in her eyes, she had impeded God’s work in the spiritual revival. Flora asserted that her acts had ramifications beyond her individual sinfulness. Her behavior had the effect “to make such settle down in their opposition (as being in the right) that have all along appeared against the work of God.” Thus, Old Lights might use evidence of a sinful black female exhorter as an example that the revival was a delusion of Satan. Even those who were not Old Lights might interpret Flora’s sin as a sign that her cause was not holy. Her fallen state caused “the holy name of God, to be blasphemed, especially by such as I have heretofore endeavoured to persuade and beseech to Embrace a precious Christ.” Her ministry, and potentially the cause of revived religion more generally, suffered serious setbacks.

Although Flora envisioned a terrifying God who could cast her “below Devils,” she also emphasized God’s mercy, his willingness to pardon sinners. In fact, Flora had a more active vision of God than was typical: “He ran to my Relief, he kissed me with the Kisses of his mouth and I found his Love to be better than wine.” Although the latter part of that phrase, from Song of Sol. 1:2, was standard (albeit a more physical and sensual reference than nonevangelicals would make), the image of God running to Flora’s relief was unique. She had a deep and personal relationship with her God.

Flora then cataloged how she learned of God’s saving grace. Conventionally, God brought scriptural texts “home to my soul.” The first, John 7:37, was commonly cited in conversion narratives. One of the most welcoming phrases in all the Bible, the passage hints that people have some degree of

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13 Flora’s confession is located in box 1, folder 1b, John Cleaveland Papers.
spiritual agency. Jesus urges any person who thirsts to come to him and drink, implying that all who approach Jesus may be saved. Jesus and his love were central as Flora realized that Christ had pardoned her.

This realization was, in effect, a moment of re-conversion. Even though she had offered a conversion narrative when she first joined the church, she experienced a reaffirmation of that original experience. In the style of a New Light conversion, which could occur almost instantaneously, Flora now knew that she was pardoned. She responded with a typically emotional New Light expression of piety, wishing “my head a Fountain & my Eyes Rivers of water to weep over my Sins” (Jer. 9:1). She wept because she had sinned and because of Christ’s power to save her from sin.

After this inwardly directed portion of her confession, Flora invoked the congregation in her reconciliation. “I beg your Prayers,” Flora implored, that she might uphold “what I have now been Declaring unto you.” She wanted to behave correctly “so as to declare God’s Glory abroad.” Like her work exhorting in favor of the revival, Flora’s spotless behavior would now work to convince others of the pardoning love of Christ. Instead of impeding the work of God, Flora hoped to be an advertisement for evangelical religion. She then concluded with a stern warning to her fellow parishioners that they learn from her mistakes. A model to her mostly white brothers and sisters in the gospel, Flora offered a profound message of the power of an African-American woman’s behavior.

Flora’s confession was an extraordinary occurrence, and the church members called a special Tuesday meeting to hear it. At roughly twelve hundred words, her statement was so long that the congregation needed to hear it read twice, which must have taken about twenty minutes. Members of the church then asked her “several Questions upon her Confession,” which satisfied them enough to restore her “to our Charity and Fellowship.”14

Flora remained a member of this church for the rest of her life. She had at least three children: Rubin was baptized in August 1749, a second Reuben was born in 1756, and in 1761 a daughter Jane arrived. In 1767, at age forty-four and most likely past her childbearing years, Flora married Titus (1718–1783), a slave of Francis Choate (1701–1777). Owned separately by brothers, the married couple lived in different households. After Thomas Choate died in 1773, Flora experienced a wrenching separation from her twelve-year-old daughter Jane. Reflecting her advanced years, Flora was then valued at only three pounds and was willed to Choate’s daughter Elizabeth (Choate) Perkins, while Choate gave the younger and more valuable Jane (twenty-four pounds) to Abigail (Choate) Low. Perhaps in recognition of the pain that separation from Jane caused Flora, Choate indicated that Flora’s new owner was “not to dispose of her out of Chebacco against her Will.” In the next few years, Flora managed to gain her liberty. Although it is unclear when Flora became free, her husband was manumitted in the will of Francis Choate in 1777. Flora and Titus took the last name “Nedson,” in honor of

14 Sheet of temporary church records, Nov. 6, 8, 1748, box 1, folder 3, John Cleaveland Papers.
Titus’s father Edward, commonly referred to as Ned. Titus died of a fever at age sixty-five in 1783, and Flora outlived him by only two years, when she at age sixty-two also succumbed to fever.\textsuperscript{15} Whereas Flora’s preaching challenged the role typically assigned female slaves, Greenwich attacked slavery directly in his own—and his master’s—church.\textsuperscript{16} Born in 1727, Greenwich was baptized as an adult in the Canterbury Separate Church twenty-five years later. Located in a rural hamlet some twenty miles north of New London, this congregation, like Flora’s, emerged out of a Great Awakening dispute. In this case, the Old Lights left the meetinghouse in 1744 and formed their own congregation, leaving behind the New Lights, who were labeled “Separates” but preferred to be called “Strict Congregationalists.”\textsuperscript{17} Captain Obadiah Johnson, Jr. (1702–1765), Greenwich’s owner, was a leader in this New Light church and was elected deacon in 1747.\textsuperscript{18} Captain Johnson does not conform to the image of a typical New Light: he was the wealthiest man in Canterbury. Yet, Johnson suffered from his connection with revived religion. Before the Awakening, he had been elected to fifteen consecutive terms representing his town in the General Assembly, but the legislature expelled him when he became a deacon of a Separate church.\textsuperscript{19}

Perhaps as Johnson became more involved with the New Lights he urged his four slaves to attend meetings, or perhaps the initiative came from the slaves themselves. In either case, Greenwich had been actively attending the Separate Church for at least two years when, on March 29, 1754, he offered his argument against slavery. Whether Greenwich wrote the piece or dictated it to someone else is unknown. The only evidence available is that the spelling and handwriting are poor and do not match that of Obadiah Johnson, one obvious candidate for amanuensis.

Some ambiguity surrounds the exact meaning of Greenwich’s speech, since the document breaks off in the middle of a sentence. Overall, though, it seems to be a critique of slavery based narrowly on biblical grounds. Greenwich did not criticize all slavery, perhaps because of the Bible’s numerous examples of slavery and rules for the proper keeping of slaves. Instead, Greenwich’s argument had two main components. First, he contended that slavery is permitted when a people are conquered in a just war, as when the Israelites conquered the Canaanites. Thus, he tried throughout his statement


\textsuperscript{16} Greenwich’s statement is in the Records of the Canterbury Separate Church, 1733–1815, Mar. 29, 1754, vol. 1, 139, Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford.

\textsuperscript{17} Records of the Congregational Church in Canterbury, Connecticut, 1711–1844 (Hartford, Conn., 1932), iv, 82.

\textsuperscript{18} To distinguish Captain Johnson from his son, Colonel Obadiah Johnson III (1736–1801), I will refer to both by military rank.

\textsuperscript{19} Alfred Johnson, History and Genealogy of One Line of Descent from Captain Edward Johnson Together with His English Ancestry, 1500–1914 (Boston, 1914), 27, 30.
to demonstrate that slaves mentioned in the Bible were Canaanites, a conquered people. Second, Greenwich maintained that the Bible prohibits stealing individuals to become slaves, as happened in the African slave trade.

Greenwich began his critique of slavery with the sort of declaration that made the establishment shudder: “As I have been Instructed by the Lord.” Throughout the ages ruling authorities have learned to fear claims of direct communication from God. It is difficult to gainsay a person who claims divine authority for his or her words. Perhaps Greenwich’s brethren and sisters listened openmouthed as he sidestepped the argument of whether Africans were “the seed of Canaan” or the “Tribe of Ham.” By saying, “Let that be as it will Justise must Take Plase,” Greenwich countered that even if Africans were the descendents of Ham this ancestry did not make them slaves. The Bible, according to Greenwich, outlines clear rules for slavery, and taking individuals out of their home country is forbidden.

Greenwich next sought to demonstrate that the aboriginal peoples of Canaan—including Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, and others—were legitimately slaves since they had been conquered by the Israelites. In Gen. 15:18, God gave the land of Canaan, from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates River, to Abraham, but not until Joshua conquered the region centuries later would the people of Israel actually inhabit it. Greenwich then either purposefully or inadvertently overlooked the chronology, saying that the slaves of Abraham were “kanites.” Nothing in the Bible suggests such a claim, centuries before Joshua conquered Canaan, but in his desire to show that all slaves were Canaanites Greenwich stretched the available evidence to fit his case.

Greenwich’s second point was that God divided the earth into many nations and “non[e] shold impose upon another.” Reminiscent of a scriptural quotation, this statement was Greenwich’s own formulation. According to Gen. 10:10, the “sons of ham” were a nation and therefore should be respected. When Greenwich wrote of imposing upon another nation, he meant stealing individuals for slavery. He asked his fellow church members to imagine a situation in which they supplied ammunition to a nation enduring civil war. Taking advantage of the weakness caused by the war, they then stole people “to make slaves of them.”

Greenwich used this hypothetical example, which paralleled the well-known African slave trade, to demonstrate that the Bible forbade such a practice. He quoted Prov. 3:30 to show that such participation in stealing individuals for slavery amounted to “striving,” or contending with someone else with no just cause, since that person had done no harm. Greenwich

20 In Gen. 9:22, Ham saw the nakedness of his father, Noah. As a result, Noah cursed Ham’s son Canaan to be a slave to his brothers. Many slaveholders argued that Africans were descendents of Ham and therefore genealogically condemned to be slaves.

21 This term appears to be a conflation of the more particular “Kenites” with the more general “Canaanites.” In either case, the meaning remains the same: conquered non-Israelites.

22 Jonathan Edwards seems to have held a similar view. — Kenneth P. Minkema, “Jonathan Edwards on Slavery and the Slave Trade,” William and Mary Quarterly, 3d Ser., 54 (1997), 829.
then offered what appeared to be his strongest scriptural reference, from Exod. 21:16: “He that stealeth a man and seleth him... shall surely be put to death.” Again, Greenwich creatively misused the evidence, since this passage directly paralleled Deut. 24:7, which refers specifically to stealing “any of his brethren of the children of Israel.” Greenwich thus used a text intended to apply only to an Israelite’s kidnapping another Israelite in his argument that stealing individuals was never allowed.

Piling example upon example, Greenwich offered another instance of the enslavement of Canaanites. Solomon had made slaves out of the Canaanites he could not destroy, according to 1 Kings 9:15–22. Again, this enslavement was legitimate since they had been conquered in war, not stolen individually. The final scriptural quotation is harder to decipher, as Jer. 34:14 indicates that, when an Israelite enslaves another Israelite, the slave should be freed after seven years of service. The relevance of this passage is unclear, since the enslavement of Africans by Americans was not a parallel case of people enslaving members of their own nation. Greenwich’s statement breaks off at this point, with his declaration that “every nation that is taken by conquest you may make slaves...” The implication is that a nation not taken by conquest may not be made slaves. The nations of Africa had not been conquered; the people of Africa could not be stolen and enslaved.23

Greenwich’s masterful use of a wide range of obscure biblical references indicates that he must have been able to read. The passages he cited were, for the most part, not ones that pious New Englanders (at least white ones) ordinarily discussed or ministers generally made the texts of their sermons. Greenwich sought out the passages in the Bible relating to slavery, and, after an exhaustive process, he developed his unique antislavery doctrine. One wonders how Greenwich’s owner reacted to the reading of this document. Did Deacon Johnson’s face redden as his articulate slave made such an impressive argument against slavery? Blushing or not, Johnson decided not to manumit Greenwich. When Johnson died in 1765, he willed Greenwich—along with Peg, Greenwich’s wife of four years—to his son, Colonel Obadiah Johnson III.24

Despite his enslaved status, Greenwich was a respected member of his church. In 1766, his fellow parishioners reached out when he stopped coming to meetings for a brief period. In response to the absence of Greenwich and a white woman, the church appointed two prominent brethren “to see thim & to know thair minds & to invite them to meete with us.” The following week this ad hoc committee reported that “they Had Visited Brother grinnuage & that he Determined to go forward With the Church in the Covenant.”25 With this signal that the parishioners cared for his presence,

23 This point anticipated the arguments of free black preacher Lemuel Haynes, who in 1776 described "affricans" as "a Nation"; see Haynes, "Liberty Further Extended," in Newman, ed., Black Preacher to White America, 20.
24 Peg, who was owned by Captain Johnson before she married Greenwich, was 9 years younger than her husband. When the couple was willed to the younger Johnson in 1765, they were valued at £65. See Will of Obadiah Johnson, Plainfield County Probate Estate Papers, reel 1193, docket 1204, 7, Connecticut State Library, Hartford.
25 Records of the Congregational Church, 24.
Greenwich decided to become a full member of the church. After that, Greenwich voted on church affairs like any other male full member. For example, in 1768 the congregation voted on whether to dismiss their pastor, Joseph Marshall (1731–1813), for a variety of perceived shortcomings. “Grinnage Negro” joined eight other men who voted to dismiss Marshall, in opposition to four who wanted Marshall to remain. Among his fellow evangelicals, Greenwich was entitled to all the rights of a full member of the church.

Nonetheless, Greenwich certainly chafed under his bondage and was probably bitterly disappointed that his original owner had not freed him at death. Greenwich remained a slave for another decade, as he and his wife Peg went from owner to owner. In 1771, Colonel Johnson sold the couple to his brother John Johnson for forty pounds. At some point, Joseph Eaton of nearby Plainfield acquired Greenwich and Peg, for Eaton sold both to Benjamin Bacon on the auspicious day of July 4, 1776. The day the world heard the stirring declaration that all men are created equal was perhaps the greatest in Greenwich’s life, for his purchase by Bacon ensured his liberty. Bacon, also a leading member of the Canterbury Separate Church, allowed Greenwich and Peg to buy their freedom for thirty pounds. Their freedom papers were finalized on July 25, 1776. Bacon rose to the rhetorical heights demanded by the times and declared that “Greenwich and Pegg shall from time to time and at all times forever hereafter enjoy the same privileges with the freeborn Subjects of any of the American Colonies.” Unfortunately, how long Greenwich and Peg enjoyed those privileges remains a mystery, as it is not known when they died.

Whereas Greenwich’s voice is singular, Phillis speaks in the more conventional fashion of the conversion narrative. Because this genre often included some details about the convert’s personal history, Phillis’s life is less murky than it might be. The narrative begins, “I was wro’t upon in the former Reformation.” In two other narratives from the same revival, “the former Reformation” refers to the Great Awakening. Thus, although Phillis’s date of birth is unknown, it may be surmised that she was born in the early 1720s, which would have put her in her late teens or early twenties during the Awakening. Like many others, Phillis apparently felt her religious

28 Phillis’s conversion narrative, which was written by Reverend John Cleaveland, may be found in box 1, folder 1b, John Cleaveland Papers. Because this document and Flora’s confession—and perhaps Greenwich’s statement—were written by amanuenses, unusual formulations might have been squeezed out by the conventions of the respective genres. Ministers introduced small but sometimes significant changes when transcribing conversion narratives; → Erik R. Seeman, “Lay Conversion Narratives: Investigating Ministerial Intervention,” New England Quarterly, 71 (1998), 629–34.
29 See relations of Mary Rust and Mary Story, box 1, folder 1b, John Cleaveland Papers. A total of 53 narratives survive, 40 by women and 13 by men.
zeal ebb in the years following the revival. After all, she did not feel inclined to join the church for more than two decades after she was first awakened.

During these years, William Cogswell, a prominent resident of Ipswich, owned Phillis. When Cogswell died in 1762, he willed Phillis (along with “Negro girl Jude”) to his son, Jonathan. At that time, Phillis was valued at £13 6s 8d, barely above 1 percent of the total value of her master’s £1,244 estate.30 Jonathan Cogswell was a member of the Old Light Second Church of Ipswich, so he might have been dismayed when his slave began to participate in the emotional revival meetings at the end of 1763. This Seacoast Revival, though smaller than the Great Awakening, still affected a large area. Participants lived within twenty miles of the seacoast from East Hampton, Long Island, to Newburyport, Massachusetts. Within this broad swath, two centers of revivalism existed: one in and around Newport and Providence, Rhode Island, and another in the vicinity of Ipswich.31 The revival appealed mostly to a generation too young to have experienced the Great Awakening but also to a handful of older converts in their forties, such as Phillis, who had been aroused during the Awakening but had since seen their piety diminish.

Phillis’s narrative does not clearly distinguish between her experience during the Great Awakening and the Seacoast Revival. Nevertheless, her account of the events of 1763 probably begins with her story about going to the meetinghouse “without receiving any Benefit.” Her disappointment occurred when other members of the congregation were responding to the revival. As during the Great Awakening, Phillis witnessed the conversions taking place around her and feared being left behind. She remembered the story from 1 Corinthians that Paul and Apollos labored for conversions but God alone “giveth the increase.” Phillis would need to submit herself to the will of God to be converted. As she fell asleep that night, she thought of Isaac Watts’s “Cradle Hymn,” which begins:

Hush, my dear, lay down and slumber,
Holy Angels guard thy Bed;
Heav’nly Blessings without Number,
Gently falling on thy Head.32

Throwing herself entirely on God’s mercy, Phillis assumed the position of a helpless child, with the lullaby helping her believe that sleep would bring heavenly blessings.

31 John Cleaveland, A Short and Plain Narrative of the Late Work of God’s Spirit at Chebacco in Ipswich, in the Years 1763 and 1764 . . . (Boston, 1767); Samuel Buell, A Faithful Narrative of the Remarkable Revival of Religion, in the Congregation of East-Hampton, on Long-Island, in the Year of Our Lord 1764; with Some Reflections (New York, 1766). See also Erik R. Seeman, Pious Persuasions: Laity and Clergy in Eighteenth-Century New England (Baltimore, forthcoming), chap. 5.
That night Phillis awoke with a clear sense of her sins. A week of joyous despair ensued, as she recognized her sinful nature while understanding that God alone saved her from hell. Phillis searched the Bible for comforting texts, focusing on two of the most positive passages in Isaiah; Flora had also found comfort in both of these verses. Though these were widely known passages, only one of the other fifty-two converts in Ipswich cited either one. It would be stretching the evidence to say that these two verses appealed to blacks more than whites, but it is easy to see why they would intrigue slaves. Both are optimistic about the chances of entering the kingdom of heaven. Perhaps even more to the point, Isa. 55:1 in part addresses the impecunious: "He that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." Though metaphorical in intent, these words resonated with those who toiled for no recompense.

During these emotional days of Bible reading, Phillis sometimes worried that her beliefs were mere delusions and that the "wicked one" would materialize. Satan did not appear, and instead Phillis received confirmation that she was saved. This moment occurred while she worked. As Phillis toiled for her master, without remuneration as usual, she recalled the words of Jesus in Matt. 11:28, when he asked all who "labour and are heavy laden" to come to him for rest. This verse appealed to a slave who probably felt overworked and underappreciated; it also attracted three white converts, who likewise knew what it meant to harden one's hands on a plow or in a washtub. Contemplating this biblical verse allowed Phillis finally to realize she was saved. In an arresting and unique image of spiritual freedom, Phillis declared: "I felt so light as if I could fly." Though her body remained shackled, her soul could now soar.

Like Flora, Phillis concluded her narrative by bringing the congregation back into her story, asking for their prayers and for their "acceptance of me." Seeking approval was a conventional way to end a conversion narrative, but Phillis might have offered this sentiment with more gravity than usual. Not often in the eighteenth century did an African American ask a group of whites for acceptance. An evangelical church during a revival was one of the few places in Anglo-America where this was possible.

After hearing her narrative, the congregation voted that Phillis could become a full member of the church. Consequently, on May 4, 1764, Phillis

33 Flora did not actually cite Isa. 55:1, but John 7:37. Both verses are nearly identical, however, and the former is conventionally understood by Christians to foretell the latter.
34 Susanna Low mentioned Isa. 55:1; no one but Phillis cited Isa. 11:18.
35 Jupiter Hammon twice used Isa. 55:1 to address fellow slaves in his published sermons; see O'Neale, Jupiter Hammon, 101, 164.
36 Several other new converts in Ipswich also mentioned fear of Satan in their narratives. For a similar concern in the conversion experience of a New York slave in the 1740s, see Thorp, ed., "Chattel with a Soul," 450.
37 Relations of ——— Haskell, Rachel Low, and Susanna Low. This verse appealed to slaves: Jupiter Hammon wrote an entire sermon, A Winter Piece, based on it, and several slave spirituals used the verse for inspiration; see O'Neale, Jupiter Hammon, 95, 97–113.
signed the church's articles of faith and the church covenant. In a large and untutored but clear hand, she twice wrote "Philesh Cogswell." The ability to write set Phillis apart not only from most other slaves but from many white women. When fifteen white women signed the articles of faith several weeks later on June 29, ten signed with a mark; only five could write their names.38

Soon Phillis was baptized: either in May or June 1764.39 Now that she was a full member, Phillis could have her offspring baptized; the ritual was performed on her son Cesar on August 26. The roughly three-month gap between Phillis's admission to the church and Cesar's baptism suggests that Cesar was not yet born in May and that Phillis was six months pregnant when she offered her conversion narrative. When people who already had children joined a church, they typically had their children baptized immediately, often the same day.

The following year, Phillis married Caesar, a slave of Francis Choate and probably the father of young Cesar. Caesar became free when Choate died in 1777.40 It is unclear when Phillis gained her liberty, though she was definitely free by 1785. In that year, presumably after Caesar's death, she married ex-slave Plato Whipple, and the records indicate that she was "formerly" the slave of Jonathan Cogswell. Plato and Phillis were still alive in 1790, and it seems they died before 1800.41 Phillis lived to be about seventy.

The uncertainty surrounding Phillis's death is a reminder of how faint a trace slaves typically left on the historical record. Were it not for these three documents, we would know next to nothing about Flora, Greenwich, and Phillis. The survival of these records suggests that these were not typical slaves. Phillis and perhaps Greenwich could write, and all three could read. Standing in the mainstream of evangelical belief and practice, these three slaves cannot tell us about the numerous black New Englanders who made money by practicing African forms of divination nor about those African Americans who remained unmoved by Christianity.42

Nevertheless, these slaves stood at the vanguard of a trend that would only intensify over the next century, as African Americans increasingly flocked to evangelical churches. Although the scholarly interest in this movement has centered on the search for the retention of African beliefs and practices, Flora, Greenwich, and Phillis remind us that the Euro-American roots

38 Chebacco Parish Records, 1745–1814, box 4, 16, 57, Peabody Essex Museum. This ratio is roughly representative for the female converts in the revival.
39 Ibid., 304. The date is unclear: sometime between May 4 and June 29.
of evangelicalism had much to offer blacks in colonial New England. With its commitment to the spiritual equality of all believers, evangelicalism provided marginalized people an unequaled path to power and respect. Once introduced to Christianity, moreover, some blacks used the Bible in ways not envisioned by the slaveowners and ministers who long had worked to Christianize them. In addition, all bondspeople found their interpretation and experience of Christianity shaped by their enslaved status. Greenwich explicitly—and Flora and Phillis more subtly—drew on their experience as slaves as they gave voice to their deepest religious concerns in front of their fellow worshipers. “Justise must Take Plase,” Greenwich demanded. If justice was not forthcoming, perhaps something akin to respect was.

In rendering these documents for publication, I have inserted editorial additions in square brackets, with one exception: the thorn y has been silently changed to th. Question marks indicate additions of which I am not
The Confession of Flora Negro  
To the New-Gathered Congregational Chh in Chebacco—  
Rev’d Hon’d and Beloveds

I freely Confess and acknowledge unto you as in the Presence of the great God and his Elect Angels, as also what I expect to answer to, before the Judge of the quick and Dead, at the Tribunal Seat of Jesus Christ; that I have been made truly sensible, that my conduct of late has been such as Justly to cool your charity for, and be matter of just offence against me—I have sinned against Heaven and in your sight and am not worthy to be reckoned among the Sons and Daughters of God; As to my Sin it is not hid from you, God has bro’t it to light by his providence[.] Oh the great God is my witness how I have seen it to be of a Crimson Colour & of a Scarlet Die⁴³ attended with grievous aggressions indeed[,] I do therefore beg leave for your Satisfaction my own Humiliation & Abasement & the warning of others: to Confess and Lay open before you, what were the provocations I gave the Lord to leave me to fall into Temptation and Sin, what apprehensions I have had and Tryals respecting my Fall, and the Satisfaction I have received that the Lord hath covered my sin with a mantle of his pardoning Love.

As to my provocations they were indeed great for God does not afflict willingly, nor leave his pardoned ones without a Just Cause, the Provocations, I gave, that have Especially been made plain to my view; [were?] spirituall Pride, Ingratitude, Unwatchfulness and Levity or Lightness; spiritual [illeg.] rise up after manifestations of God’s smiles, & great Freedom to utter [the] same before men, & also after freedom in persuading sinners to repent [sins?] and live, Ingratitude, also that Beastlike Satanical & God provoking Sin to be Unmindful of the God that made me, and lightly to esteem the Rock of my salvation⁴⁴ would frequently creep in upon me—and Unwatchfulness and Levity also, especially when I did not feel much bowed down by the Majesty of Heaven, & hereby a wide Door was hath been opened, I have seen for Satan to spread his Temptations and Snares to beguile souls and stir them up to wantonness and concupiscence; Yea! To provoke God to leave them as it were to Satan and their own Lusts [illeg.]: And what can poor souls do? when God is thus provoked? Thus I provoked God; oh, pray for & take learning by such an Instance as I am.

As to the apprehensions I have had & tryals respecting my Fall they are many, I have had Temptations to seek ways, to hide my Iniquity from Men, but the Lord in Mercy frustrated them all, and gave me to see that it was against him I had sinned, and done wickedly in his sight, And also gave me

⁴³ Based on Isa. 1:18.
⁴⁴ Compare to Deut. 32:15.
FIGURE II

to Behold my sin in some measure in a true Light; as it was attended with most heinous Aggrevations indeed; as being against a pardoning God,—after pardon received—and wonderful endearing Manifestations of his Love and Favour to me, Tending not only, to make such settle down in their opposition (as being in the right) that have all along appeared against the work of God: but also to Occasion the holy name of God, to be blasphemed, especially by such as I have heretofore endeavoured to persuade and beseech to Embrace a precious Christ—but Time and your Patience would fail me to relate particularly, what Darkness has been spread over my Mind and cast in my way, by reason of this my Fall. What shame has covered me before Men and Confusion of Face before God; how God frown'd upon me and hid his Face from me, how Just it appeared to me, for God to cast me below [p. 2] Sodomites, yea, below Devils in Torment—now my soul sunk down into the Deep Mire where there was no standing; and now the bellows [?] and floods overflowd me. But while I was in this Condition God gave me a Spirit of Prayer, out of the Deep I cry'd to him [illeg.] God, out of the Depths of Confusion Shame Sin Impotency and Unworthiness, and the Lord heard, to my Surprize & Astonishment, he ran to my Relief, he kissed me with the Kisses of his mouth and I found his Love to be better than wine.

The way that God Took with me, to pluck my Feet out of the Miery Clay and horrible Pitt, was by bringing home to my soul some Texts of holy Scripture. The first were those blessed words of our Saviour, John 7.37—that great Day of the Feast Jesus stood and Cryed, if any man Thirst Let him come unto me and Drink; at first I was not sensible of much Spiritual Thirsting, but soon after they were bro't with power to my mind, I found some thirsting, but Unbelief immediatly step'd in, and argued, that the Call could not be to me, my sin was so great: which caused me to Question whither it was bro't to my Mind by the holy Ghost, but These workings were soon silenced by those words in Isai: 63.1.—It is I that speak in Righteousness, mighty to save: Which came with such Evidence & Demonstration that I was not only satisfyed that Christ called me before to Drink of his pardoning and healing Love but also that altho' my Sin was of a Crimson Colour and Scarlet Die attended with greivous aggravations; yet there was enough in Christ to pardon—O them words: mighty to Save silenced unbelief & reviv'd my shattered and disconsolate Soul[,] now the pardoning Love of God again flowed into my Soul & caused my Heart to melt & flow with penetential streams; I could then have wished my head a Fountain & my Eyes Rivers of water to weep over my Sins; never did I before, find my heart so Resolved, never to harbour Sin or to be reconciled again to it as now I found it. No Tongue of Men or Angels can fully Express (it seems) what an Indignation & Revenge boiled in my Heart against

45 Based on Dan. 9:7–8.
46 Ps. 69:2.
47 Song of Sol. 1:2.
48 Ps. 40:2.
49 Based on Jer. 9:1, but with the objects of the metaphor transposed.
myself, and the Sin that I had been besett with & overtaken by: O I beg your Prayers for me that I may bring forth much Fruit, meet of Repentance and be made to Discover to all in my futer Life Conversation Conduct and Behaviour, the Truth of what I have now been Declaring unto you. I beg your Forgiveness. I pray you to Restore me to your Charity and Fellowship and the Privileges that I have forfeitted, by my Fall, I beg Desire your Prayers for me, that in Every Relation I might walk becoming one professing Godliness, & adorn the Doctrine of God my Saviour in all Things[,] yea that I may be made more circumspect than ever heretofore in my Walk, so as to declare God's Glory abroad; And Let all that have named the Name of Christ, take warning by me, not to let down your Watch for such will Certainly fall into Temptation as I Do.

Your's &c,
Flora Negro
Her F Mark

[on verso: “Negrow Grinnig of Canterbury”]
this the 29 day of March 1754
As I have ben Instructed by the Lord so I think it is Nesseary to Indite fue things which I have brought Into the church[,] brotherin some say that we are the seed of Canaan and some say that we are the Tribe of Ham but Let that be as it will Justise must Take Plase therefore I will I shou you how Abraham came by his servents in the 15 Chapt of Geneseis 18 when the Lord Covenant with Abraham saying unto thy seed have I given this Land from the river of eupherates and the kenites and the kenizites and the kadmonites and also in the 17 Chap of Genesies and 8 vers and I will give unto the[es] and to thy seed after the Land wherein thou art a stranger all the Land of Canaan for an everlasting possession and I will be the[es] God and In the 12 vers and he that is eight days old shall be circumsized among you every man child In your Generation he that is born In thy house or bought with mony of any strangers which Is not of thy seed and now brotherin thes strangers that Abraham bought with mony were of kanites now brotherin cast your eyes upon the fase of the earth how god hath set the bounds to the nation and that non[es] shold impose upon another nation io Chapter of Genesis these are the sons of ham after there families after there Tongues In their Contries and in their nation and now brotherin suppose any nation shold have a continual war amongst themselves and any of you should supply them of ammonition and when you have don this you will steel as many of them and bring them over Into your Contry to make slaves of them their soul and body as much as in thereby [?] 3 Chap of proverbs and 30 vers strive not with a man without Cause if he hath don the[es] no harm and now in the 21 first Chapter of Exodus 16 vers and he that steel A man and selleth him or if he be found in his hands he shall surely be put to death the first of kings and 9 Chapter 16 verse and 20 vers their you will se[es] how pharaoh king of Egypt had gon yup [ie, up] and taken gezer and given as a present unto his dafter Solomon wife theis were of Cannaan and so to the 21 vers and their Children that were left after them in their Land whome the Children of Israel were not able utterly to
JUSTISE MUST TAKE PLASE

destroy upon thoes did Solomon levy a tribute of bonds service unto this day and they were Cannanits Jeremiah 34 Chapter and 14 verse at the end of seventh year let you go every man his brother in hebrew which hath ben sold unto the[e] and when he hath served the six year thou shall let him go free from the[e] and now bretherin you may se[e] for your selves th[r]ou[gh]out the Scriptures that every nation that is taken by conquest you may make slaves

[P]hillis Cogswell, Negro

[I] was wro’t upon in the former Reformation, going to [the?] meetings and seeing others under concern, bro’t me under concern fearing I should be left while others were saved; but my concern seemed to be for awhile from an apprehension that I had no convictions; but one night when I came out of the Meeting-House, I sat down and tho’t how sad it was that I must leave the Meeting without receiving any Benefit, but those words coming to my mind, Paul may plant and Apollos water, but it is God that giveth the increase,50 I went home and went to bed, and the last I tho’t of before I fell asleep was a couple of verses in the cradle-hymn;51 but in the night I awaked up and all my sins seem’d to be set in order before my Eyes, and they appeared as numerous as the Sands on the Sea Shore,52 and I cried out good Lord what must I do to be saved53—Jesus thou son of David have Mercy on me; and for about a week after together I kept crying for Mercy, and it seem’d wonderful that I was out of hell, wonderful sparing Mercy.—I was made sensible my heart was nothing but Sin, and that I had never done any Thing but sin against God and it would have been just with God to cast me into hell: I took to reading the Bible, and those words in Isaiah, Ho every one that thirsteth let him come to the waters, and he that hath no money let him come, &c,54 and that, come now and let us reason together saith the Lord tho’ your sins be as scarlet,55 seemed to be comforting Texts, they came into my mind often and yet I could not get hold on them: and sometimes while I was reading the Bible I sho’d be worried with a tho’t that the wicked one would appear to me:—but one Day while I was about my work those words came to my Mind, come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest,56 I tho’t with myself, I am weary and heavy-laden, I have a burden of guilt lying on me[,] Christ is all-sufficient to give rest—I may come; I will come to Christ for Rest, and my Burden was immediately taken away and I felt so light as if I could fly: Christ appeared lovely to my soul.—Sin appeared odious to me, and I tho’t I should never sin any more; but I find when I would do good, evil is present with me and expect it will while in this Life, tho’ I desire to be made perfect:—and don’t allow myself in any known Sins; I desire your prayers for me and your acceptance of me:—I bless God he has given me to rejoice with those that do rejoice in this blessed Time of the outpouring of God’s Spirit.

propounded April 22, 1764

50 1 Cor. 3:6.
51 Written by Isaac Watts.
52 Compare Judg. 7:12, Josh. 11:4.
54 Isa. 55:1.
55 Isa. 1:18.
Figure V