



## **Avenues of Accomplishment: African American Women in Victorian America**

### **Materials:**

- PowerPoint: ***Avenues of Accomplishment: African American Women in Victorian America***
- Plan of instruction for PowerPoint
- Letter to George Washington from Phillis Wheatly
- Letter to Phillis Wheatly from George Washington
- Poem by Phillis Wheatly about George Washington
- List of 96 successful African-American women in Victorian America

### **Plan of Instruction:**

#### **1. Introduction:**

In 1893, more than one hundred African-American women of accomplishment were featured in the book, *Accomplished: African-American Women in Victorian America* by Monroe Alpheus Majors, M.D. These women were successful teachers, writers, abolitionists, activists, visual artists, singers, lawyers, performing artists, and physicians.

Some were former slaves, others were free, but all were advocates for racial justice and determined to end racial discrimination. Some were unschooled like Sojourner Truth, and many were college-educated like Anna Julia Haywood Cooper, a graduate of Oberlin College in Ohio. All of them greatly influenced black life and were determined to be something and be somebody.

They inspired and encouraged others to achieve great success regardless of adversity. Majors writes, "A wholesomeness of looking upwards is the fruition of a Mighty Power, actuating mankind, with the universal acknowledgment of mankind that no race is making more rapid progress under the circumstances than ours...We present this little volume to our race and friends of the race, with the hope that the many and varied avenues into which our women are crowding may give inspiration to the girls of present and future generations. They can 'make their lives sublime.'"

These varied avenues of accomplishment should give inspiration to young women and men of the present.

#### **2. Lecture Background Information:**

- a. **Slide 1: *Accomplished: African-American Women in Victorian America***



- b. **Slide 2: Accomplished: “A race no less than a nation, is prosperous in proportion to the intelligence of its women.”** Monroe Alpheus Majors, M.D., 1893

c. **Slide 3: Phillis Wheatly (1733-1784)**

The Victorian Era (1837-1901) was after the death of Phillis Wheatly, but her work and literary talent contributed to the success of the women featured in this lesson plan.

Phillis was brought from Western Africa on a slave ship to Boston, Massachusetts, and bought at a slave market by Mrs. Wheatly at the age of seven. Mrs. Wheatly thought she might rear Phillis to be a faithful nurse to her in her old age. Mrs. Wheatly’s daughter taught the child to read and write. Phillis’s progress was beautiful.

Her intellectual development continued, and she read books with great eagerness. She attracted the attention of men of learning. Phillis found expression through her pen, sometimes in prose, more often in poetry. She was a guest of the wealthy and learned in Boston.

In 1773, a collection of her poems was published. She was known as the “Poet Laureate” of the American Revolution. Wheatly was the first African-American author of a published book of poetry. She corresponded with General George Washington. He praised her poetical talents. (see the poem about George Washington and correspondence between Washington and Wheatly)

- d. **Slide 4: Other Writers of Importance** (Read Slide with Class Discussion)

e. **Slide 5: Anna Julia Haywood Cooper (1858 – 1964)**

Anna was born as a slave in Raleigh, North Carolina, in 1858. She was an activist who championed education for black and white women. Cooper graduated from Oberlin College in 1884 and earned a Ph.D. in history from Sorbonne in 1924. She was the fourth woman in America to earn a doctoral degree in the United States and one of the most prominent African-American scholars in American history.

She is the author of *A Voice from the South*, a monumental candid and earnest portrayal of black women in the South. Cooper claims that “the best hopes of the race rest upon the higher education of black women.”



**f. Slide 6: Sojourner Truth (1797 – 1883)**

Sojourner was born into slavery in Swartekill, New York, as Isabella “Belle” Baumfree. She escaped and changed her name to Sojourner Truth in 1843 when she became convinced that her calling was “testifying the hope that was in her.” She became one of the most robust abolitionist speakers and an advocate of women’s rights. She was an antislavery giantess.

Sojourner was not formally educated, but her extemporaneous speaking style proved formidable and convincing. Her “Ain’t I a Woman” speech was delivered in Akron, Ohio, at the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention.

**g. Slide 7: Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825 – 1911)**

Frances left formal education at fourteen years of age and became a self-made woman. She was an abolitionist, suffragist, poet, teacher, public speaker, and writer. She was prominently connected with the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and considered the mother of African-American journalism.

Monroe Alpheus Majors, M.D. wrote, “Eloquent, fluent in speech, forcible in argument, versatile with the pen, rhythmical in poetry, logical in prose, and blessed with the rareness of congeniality, she becomes at once to those who have heard or read her thoughts a lover, a friend, yea! a disciple.”

**h. Slide 8: Additional Activists (read slide with class discussion)**

**i. Slide 9: Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield (1809 – 1876)**

Elizabeth was born into slavery in Natchez, Mississippi, but became the most celebrated black concert singer of her time. She was known as the “Black Swan” in America and Europe and the peer of Jenny Lind, the “Swedish Nightingale.”

At the age of one, she was brought to Philadelphia by a Quaker lady who reared her. When the lady died, Elizabeth took the name Greenfield in her honor.

With Philanthropic help and training, in October 1851, she sang before the Buffalo Musical Association, and her performance was a great success that established her talent. A maestro once said, ‘It takes a hundred things to make a complete singer, of which a good voice is a ninety-nine.’ “If this so, Miss Greenfield is on the verge of excellence, and it remains for the public to decide whether she shall have the means to pursue her studies.”

Elizabeth did continue her studies and reached perfection in the art of music and song.



**j. Slide 10: Ella F. Sheppard (1851 – 1914)**

Ella was an eminent teacher, soprano, pianist, and composer. She was born as a slave on Andrew Jackson's Hermitage plantation, but her freedom was later purchased, and she went to Ohio. Ella enrolled at Fisk University in 1868. She became a member of the famed Fisk Jubilee Singers, who traveled through the United States, Europe, and other foreign countries with enslaved people's spiritual songs.

Fisk University was a black university founded during Reconstruction. In 1871, Fisk was facing financial concerns, and it was decided by the music director and the treasurer of the university to have the choir tour to introduce the world to the songs of enslaved people. The tour profits made it possible for Fisk University to buy that land that the university sits on today.

<https://video.search.yahoo.com/search/video?fr=mcafee&p=fisk+jubilee+singers#id=4&vid=8fa3499f15f5745a37255f0c18ecaac7&action=click>

**k. Slide 11: More Performing Artists** (read slide with class discussion)

**l. Slide 12: Henrietta Vinton Davis (1860 – 1941)**

Henrietta was a dramatist, impersonator, and social leader. She was the most successful black performer on the dramatic stage of the nineteenth-century.

Davis had all the advantages of education and fondly read books and made rapid progress in her studies. At the age of fifteen, she passed the necessary examination for teaching and became a teacher in one of her state's public schools. Later she took a teaching position in Louisiana.

At the age of twenty-four, she started to study acting under Miss Marguerite E. Saxton, a very conscientious teacher. Under her guidance, she made her debut on April 25, 1883, in Washington. Frederick Douglass introduced her.

The Florida Sentinel remarked, "Miss Davis is the pioneer of her race in the legitimate drams, and by her success has been the means of stimulating and encouraging others to emulate her example."

**m. Slide 13: Early Educators** (read slide with class discussion)

**n. Slide 14: Elizabeth Keckley (1818 – 1907)**

Elizabeth Keckley was a former slave who became a successful seamstress, civil activist, and author of *Behind the Scenes*, which was a personal slave narrative and a narrative of her



four years serving Mary Todd Lincoln. The book was controversial because of the information shared about the Lincoln family.

Keckley was not only the seamstress for Mary Todd Lincoln, but she was also her confidant. After Lincoln's death, Mrs. Keckley became a teacher at sewing at Wilberforce University.

(Actress Gloria Reuben portrays Elizabeth Keckley in Steven Spielberg's 2012 film, *Lincoln*.)

**o. Slide 15: Amanda Smith (1837 -1915)**

Amanda was born into slavery; she grew up in Pennsylvania after her father bought her freedom. She married James Smith in 1863, had three children within three years, her husband and children all died.

In 1870, she preached before a white audience at a holiness camp meeting to begin her evangelism as a minister. For the next eight years, she preached in England, India, and West Africa. She would later open an orphanage for African-American girls.

**p. Slide 16: Rosetta Douglass Sprague (1839 – 1906)**

Rosetta was the daughter of the great abolitionist Frederick Douglass. Frederick made sure that his gifted daughter had the best school possible for her matriculation. Rosetta was a teacher and activist and founding member of the National Association for Colored Women.

The NACW was a social-political activism group that developed positive images for African-American women.

**q. Slide 17: Ida B. Wells (1862 – 1931)**

Ida B. Bell Wells was a pioneer in many fields of activism, including the women's suffrage movement. She was foremost an investigative journalist who exposed numerous injustices for the black race and women. As a civil rights activist, she was one of the most vocal anti-lynching advocates in the United States. Wells was one of the founders of the NAACP.

Her civil rights activism began in 1884 after she bought a first-class train ticket of Nashville on the ladies' car and was forcibly ordered to move to a car for blacks. She sued the railroad and won a \$500 settlement in the circuit, but the Tennessee Supreme Court later overturned the decision.



**r. Slide 18: Edmonia Lewis (1844 – 1907)**

Edmonia Lewis was a sculptor who lived most of her life in Rome, Italy. Both parents died and left her to be raised among Chippewa Indians. Her brother managed to provide Edmonia with a few years of schooling.

Eventually, she made her way to Boston, penniless, and without support, she admired a statue of Benjamin Franklin and asked what it was made of. She would later find the studio of Mr. Brockett, who would give her rudimentary instruction on sculpting. She continued as a self-taught sculptor and moved to Rome, Italy.

By the age of twenty-five, her sculptures were selling for thousands of dollars to Europe's cultivated and wealthy.

**s. Slide 19: Susan Smith McKinney M.D., Ph.D. (1847 – 1918)**

Susan was a physician and author and a member of the Brooklyn College of Pharmacy. She was the third African-American to earn a medical degree in the United States, and the first in New York state (New York state Medical College for Women, 1870)

She was the most successful practitioner of medicine of her sex and race in the United States during her lifetime. She was able to “refute the doctrine of incapacity of old-time ideas of Negro unfitness.”

“Dr. McKinney, by the force of her genius, the calmness of her life and the beauty of her character, has set the seal of high accomplishments upon the pages of history, leading in a field of usefulness, where many of our young, capable women are sure to follow.”

(Dr. Monroe Alpheus Majors)

**t. Slide 20: More Early Physicians (read slide with class discussion)**

**u. Slide 21: Charlotte E. Ray (1850 – 1911)**

Charlotte's father, Reverend Charles Bennett Ray, was an important figure in the abolitionist movement and edited a vital newspaper called *The Colored American*.

Charlotte was admitted to the Howard School of Law in the District of Columbia in 1872. To get accepted to the law school, she only used her initials so as not to reveal her sex. Charlotte became the first black American female lawyer in the United States. She was also the first woman to practice and argue in the district of Columbia Supreme Court.



**v. Slide 22: Josephine A. Silone Yates (1859 – 1912)**

Josephine was a scientist, chemist, educator, and writer. She was an exceptional student and entered school at a higher level than her age; she enjoyed the studying physiology and physics at the age of nine and excelled in mathematics.

She studied at Rhode Island State Normal and, after graduation, was one of the first black professors hired at Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri. Josephine became the first black woman to head a college science department.

**w. Slide 23: Julia Ringwood Coston (1863 – 1931)**

Julia was a journalist from Cleveland, Ohio, who edited the *Ringwood's Afro-American Journal* that contained the latest fashions and interest stories for African-American women. The articles aroused public consciousness and revolt against the injustice of the oppression. This was the only illustrated color journal for black ladies in the world and extremely popular.

**x. Slide 24: Ida Gray (1867 – 1953)**

Ida Gray was from Cincinnati, Ohio; she graduated from the University of Michigan in 1890 as the first black dentist in the United States. Ida moved to Chicago in 1895, where she spent the rest of her life.

She built up an extensive dental practice and had an equal number of white and black patients. She retired in 1928. The University School of Dentistry offers the Ida Gray Award to qualifying students.

**y. Slide 24: Summary (read slide with class discussion)**



## Letter from Phyllis Wheatly to George Washington

Sir: I have taken the liberty to address your excellency in the enclosed poem, and entreat your acceptance, though I am not insensible to its inaccuracies. Your being appointed by the Grand Continental Congress to be Generalissimo of the armies of North America, together with the fame of your virtues excite sensations not easy to suppress. Your generosity, therefore, I presume, will pardon the attempt. Wishing your excellency all possible success in the great cause you are so generously engaged in, I am your excellency's most humble servant.

Phillis Wheatly,  
Providence, October 16, 1775

## Letter from George Washington to Phyllis Wheatly

Miss Phillis:

Your favor of the 26<sup>th</sup> of October did not reach my hands till the middle of December, time enough you will say to have given an answer ere this. Granted. But a variety of important occurrences continually interposing to distract the mind and withdraw the attention I hope will apologize for the delay and plead my excuse for the seeming, but not real, neglect. I thank you most sincerely for your polite notice of me in the elegant lines you enclosed and however undeserving I may be of such encomium and panegyric, the style and manner exhibit a striking proof of your poetical talents, in honor of which as a tribute justly due to you, I would have published the poem had I not been apprehensive that, while I only meant to give the world this new instance of your genius, I might have incurred the imputation of vanity. This, and nothing else, determined me not to give it a place in the public prints. If you should ever come to Cambridge, or near headquarters I shall be happy to see a person so favored by the muses, and to whom nature has been so liberal and beneficent in her dispensations.

I am, with great respect,

Your obedient, humble servant,

George Washington

February 28, 1776





### *His Excellency, General Washington*

Celestial choir! Enthroned in realms of light,  
Columbia's scenes of glorious tils I write,  
While freedom's cause her anxious breast alarms,  
She lashes dreadful in refulgent arms.  
See mother Earth her offspring's fate bemoan,  
And nations gaze at scenes before unknown;  
See the bright beams of heaven's revolving light  
Involved in sorrows and in veil of night!  
The goddess comes, she moves divinely fair,  
Olive and laurel bind her golden hair;  
Wherever shines this native of the skies,  
Unnumbered charms and recent graces rise.  
Muse! Bow propitious while my pen relates  
How pour her armies through a thousand gates;  
As when Eolus heaven's fair face deforms,  
Enwrapped in tempest and a night of storms;  
Astonished Ocean feels the wild uproar,  
The refluent surges beat the resounding shore;  
Or thick as leaves in Autumn's golden reign,  
Such, and so many moves the warrior's train  
In bright array they seek the work of war,  
Where high unfurled the ensign waves in air.  
Shall I to Washington their praise recite?  
Enough, though knowest them in the fields of fight  
Thee first in place and honor we demand,  
The grace and glory of thy mortal band,  
Famed for the valor,  
For thy virtue more,  
Hear every tongue thy guardian aid implore;  
One century scarce performed its destined round  
When Gallic powers Columbia's fury found;  
And, so may you whoever dares disgrace  
The land of freedom's heaven-defended race.  
Fixed are the eyes of nations on the scale,  
For in their hopes Columbia's arm prevails.  
Anon, Britannia droops the pensive head,  
While round increase the rising hills of dead.  
Ah cruel blindness to Columbia's state,  
Lament thy thirst of boundless power too late.  
Proceed, great chief, virtue on thy side;  
Thy every action let the goddess guide.  
A crown, a mansion, and a throne that shine  
With gold unfading, Washington, be thine.



## List: Successful African-American Women in Victorian America

Lucinda Bragg Adams (1870 – 1932) Musician, Writer  
Octavia Victoria Rodgers Albert (1853 – 1889) Teacher, Writer, Author of *The House of Bondage*  
Amelia Allen (1865 -?) Educator, Graduate of Huston-Tillotson University  
Naomi Anderson (1843 – 1899) Lecturer, Poetess, Advocate of Woman’s Suffrage  
Flora Batson (1864 – 1906) Actress/Singer  
Maria Becraft (1805 – 1833) Nun  
Rosa D. Bowser (1859 – 1941) Teacher  
Mary E. Britton (1855 – 1925) Physician  
Blanch Brooks (1849 -?) Teacher  
Hallie Quinn Brown (1849 – 1949) Educator, Writer, Lecturer, Activist  
Mary Frances Sheldon Buckner (1836 – 1888) Advocate for the Poor  
Cora L. Moore Burgan (1859 – 1946) Pianist, Teacher  
Mary A. Campbell (1818 – 1910) Philanthropist  
Consuello Clark (1865 – 1910) Physician  
Lucretia Newman Coleman (1856 – 1948) Writer  
Essie Fry Cooke (1868 – 1950) Musician, Contralto Singer  
Ada A. Cooper (1861 – 1899) 1861 – 1899 Lecturer, Teacher, Poetess  
Anna Julia Haywood Cooper (1858 – 1964) Writer, Author of *A Voice From the South*  
Fannie Jackson Coppin (1837 – 1913) Founder of a College, Teacher, Lecturer, Writer, Scholar  
Julia Ringwood Coston (1863 – 1931) Journalist  
Henrietta Vinton Davis (1860 - 1941) Artist/Actor  
Georgia M. Debabtiste (1857 – 1951) Language Teacher, Writer  
Valetta Linden Winslow Dresden (1871 – 1937) Lecturer  
Sarah Jane Woodson Early (1825 – 1907) Teacher  
Emma J. Fisher (1856 -?) Singer  
Sarah Forten (1814 – 1893) Abolitionist  
Mamie Eloise Fox (1871 – 1928) Poetess  
Georgina H. Smith Grant (1849 – 1891) Pianist, Vocalist  
Ida Gray (1867 – 1953) Physician  
Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield (1809 – 1876) Concert Singer  
Mary Louise Gordon (1838 – 1917)  
Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825 – 1911) Abolitionist  
Neale Gertrude Hawkins (1870 -?) Eminent Singer  
Della Irving Hayden (1851 – 1924) Teacher  
Josie D. Henderson Heard (1864 – 1924) Poetess  
Mattie Allison Henderson (1868 – 1901) Teacher, Editor  
J. Imogene Howard (1848 – 1937) Educator, Appointed to the World’s Fair Board of Lady Managers



Anna Mada (1855 – 1929) Emma Louise Hyers (1857 – 1901) Vocalists, Pianists, Actresses  
Mary Bell Jackson (1864 – 1929) Singer  
Fredricka F. Jones (1860 – 1905) Teacher of Greek and Latin, College Administrator  
Madam Sissieretta Jones (1869 – 1833) Famous Soprano, Sang for Presidents in White House  
Sarah Garland Jones (1866 – 1905) Virginia’s First Woman Physician  
Elizabeth Keckley (1818 – 1907) Dressmaker Confidant to Mary Todd Lincoln  
Mary E. Ashe Lee (1850 – 1932) Educator  
Sarah Lee (1818 – 1905) Philanthropist  
Nellie A. Ramsey Leslie (1840s – 1920s) Teacher in Indian Territory, Opened Music School in Texas  
Edmonia Lewis (1844 – 1907) Artist  
Lillian Alberta Lewis (1861 -?) Writer  
Abbie Wright Lyon (1862-?) Gifted Pianist and Singer  
Victoria Earle Smith Matthews (1861 – 1907) Eminent Writer  
Alice E. McEwen (1870 -?) Essayist, Editor of *The Baptist Leader*  
Susan McKinney (1847 – 1918) Physician  
Nellie E. Brown Mitchell (1845 – 1924) Concert Singer, Musical Singer, Music Educator  
Serena Letitia Suggs Moore (1865 – 1930) Artist  
Louise De Mortie (1833 – 1867) Christian Martyr, Lecturer  
Gertrude Emily Bustill Hicks Mossell (1855 – 1948) Writer  
Edora Nahar (1870s -?) Lecturer, Actress, Singer  
Earnestine Clark Nesbitt (1855 – 1928) Writer, Musician  
Zelia R. Page (1850 – 1937) Teacher of Natural Science, Friend of the Poor  
Mary Virginia Cook Parish (1862 – 1945) Professor, Writer on Christian Education, Journalist  
Georgia A. Lee Patton (1864 – 1900) Physician  
Mary S. Peake (1823 – 1862) Teacher, Abolitionist, Christian Worker  
Anna Belle Rhodes Penn (1865 – 1930) Poetess, Essayist  
Sarah Dudley Pettey (1868 – 1906) Musician, Teacher. Christian Temperance Advocate  
Pauline Powell (1872 – 1912) Eminent Pianist, Artist  
Madame Frances E. Preston (1844 – 1929) Lecturer  
Mary Prout (1800 -?) Eminent Pioneer Teacher  
Charlotte E. Ray (1850 – 1911) D.C. Lawyer  
May C. Heyers nee Reynolds (1859 – 1920) Actress/Singer  
Martha Ann Ricks (1817 – 1901) Born into Slavery, Immigrated to Liberia, a Philanthropist  
Celia E. Dial Saxon (1857 – 1935) Teacher  
Madam Marie Selika (1849 – 1937) Soprano, First Black Performed at White House (Rutherford B. Hayes)  
Mary A. Shadd (1823 – 1893) Lecturer  
Ella F. Shephard (1851 – 1914) Actress/Singer  
Susie Isabella Lankford Shorter (1859 – 1912) Teacher  
Rosetta Douglas-Sprague (1839 – 1906) Activist, Author  
Amanda Berry Smith (1837 – 1915) Activist, Missionary, Author, Minister



Lucy Wilmot Smith (1861-1889) Teacher, Writer, Journalist, Editor Suffragist, Historian  
Lavinia B. Sneed (1867 – 1932) Writer  
Rosetta Douglas Sprague (1839 -1906) Activist  
T. Elizabeth Penman Stumm (1857 -?) Teacher, Journalist  
Lilian Parker Thomas (1854 – 1917) Journalist, lecturer, Activist  
Clarissa M. Thompson (1859 – 1941) Teacher  
Amelia Louise Tilghman (1856 – 1931) Actress/Singer  
Sojourner Truth (1797 – 1883) Abolitionist  
Rachel L. Walker (1869 -?) Vocalist, Teacher  
Jane Rose Waring (1820 – 1911) Lecturer, Educator, Philanthropist  
Olivia Davidson Washington (1854 – 1889) Educator, second wife of Booker T. Washington  
Josephine Turpin Washington (1861 – 1949) Writer, Teacher  
Frankie E. Harris Wasson (1850 – 1933) Teacher  
Ida B. Wells (1862 – 1931) Activist  
Laura A. Moore Westbrook (1859 – 1894) Teacher, Lecturer  
Phillis Wheatly (1753 – 1784) Poet  
Ione E. Wood (1871 – 1923) Educator, Writer, VP for National Association of Colored Women  
Josephine A. Silone Yates (1859 – 1912) Scientist

**Sources:**

*Accomplished: African American Women in Victorian America*, M. A. Majors, M.D., Published 1893

Fisk Jubilee Singers

<https://video.search.yahoo.com/search/video?fr=mcafee&p=fisk+jubilee+singers#id=4&vid=8fa3499f15f5745a37255f0c18ecaac7&action=click>

*Behind the Scenes*, by Elizabeth Keckley, Published 1868

*A Voice from the South*, Anna J. Cooper