

NORTH CAROLINIANS *of* NOTE

George Moses Horton

An inspirational bard of the South

By Miranda Murray

George Moses Horton, the self-proclaimed “black bard of the South,” taught himself to read, was the first African-American to publish a book in the South and learned to write when he was 31 years old—all as a slave.

He wrote in his autobiography that he was born “the property of William Horton, senior, who also owned my mother” in Northampton County, N.C., around 1800, a few years before his owner decided to relocate to Chatham County. George Moses Horton, in the Southern tradition, was given the last name of his owners.

In Chatham County, the enslaved Horton grew up herding cows and teaching himself to read from a tattered, black spelling book and later from books of verse. “I began to wonder whether it was possible that I ever could be so fortunate as to compose in that manner,” he later wrote.

In 1814, after reaching an advanced age, William Horton, George Moses’ owner, distributed his property to his children and gave George Moses to son James Horton.

His new master allowed the enslaved Horton to take trips to Chapel Hill on the weekend as long as he went during his free time and promised to take along produce from the plantation.

Soon Horton began selling his orated love poems to UNC students along with the produce. He specialized in acrostic poems, which spell a word or name when the initial letter of each line is read vertically.

Because he could not write, Horton made up acrostics on the spot using the names of women the male college students had left back home. The students could write them down for 25, 50 or 75 cents each.

In 1828, novelist Caroline Lee Hentz befriended Horton when she moved to Chapel Hill with her husband. Hentz

pushed Horton’s poems in literary circles by transcribing and sending them to publications, which led in 1828 to his first publication in the *Gazette*, Hentz’s hometown newspaper in Lancaster, Mass. She also began to teach him how to write.

A year later, Horton published his first book of poetry, “*The Hope of Liberty*,” with the hope of earning enough profit to buy his freedom. But, the book never sold well, and though numerous patrons, including N.C. Gov. John Owen, offered to buy his freedom, Horton’s owner refused to sell him at any price.

In 1831, Mrs. Hentz left North Carolina, and four years later Gov. Owen, one of Horton’s most loyal patrons, died. Horton gave up his pursuit of freedom for the time being.

In 1843, the enslaved Horton was passed on as an inheritance to the son of his owner, who raised from 25 cents to 50 cents a day his hire-out fee, the price he paid his owner every time he went to Chapel Hill during the working week.

To pay his higher hire-out fee, Horton once more set out to publish a book. In 1845, he succeeded with his autobiography, “*The Poetical Works of George M. Horton, the Colored Bard of North-Carolina*.” But like his first book, the second did not sell well.

In 1852, Horton’s owner finally agreed to sell him his freedom at the steep cost of \$250. Horton wrote to several influential members of state government to ask for help. But it did not come.

Horton remained a slave until 1865, when Union troops entered Chatham County and freed the slaves. Horton quickly found a friend and patron in Capt. Will H.S. Banks, one of his liberators in the Union Army.

Horton followed the Union troops through the summer, when they were



Courtesy of N.C. Office of Archives & History

mustered out of service. Capt. Banks decided to remain in the South through the summer and help Horton publish his third, and final, book of poetry, “*Naked Genius*.” After publication, in 1866, Banks and Horton went their separate ways, with Horton going to Philadelphia to seek more literary recognition.

Soon after his arrival, Horton tried to convince the Banneker Institute, a “voluntary intellectual organization” of young black males, to publish his unprinted, now lost, manuscript “*The Museum*.” But he did not succeed.

No agreed-upon account tells what happened to Horton after 1866. But in 2007, UNC-CH decided Horton’s ability to overcome his circumstances made him an inspiration and renamed a dorm the George Moses Horton Residence Hall. Horton finally received the recognition he had sought for his literary works.

www.chathamarts.org/horton/

www.chathamjournal.com/weekly/news/local/george-m-horton-residence-hall-dedication-70210.shtml

Pitts, Reginald. ‘Let us Desert this Friendless Place’: George Moses Horton in Philadelphia—1866, <http://links.jstor.org/stable/2717439?seq=3>.

Sherman, Joan R., ed. *The Black Bard of North Carolina: George Moses Horton and His Poetry*.

Walser, Richard. *The Black Poet*.

Horton, George Moses. *The Poetical Works of George M. Horton, the Colored Bard of North-Carolina*.

Profile written by a student in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, UNC-CH. Provided by the N.C. Press Foundation, www.ncpress.com.