

## **George Moses Horton** <sup>[1]</sup>

The historic poet laureate of Chatham County, North Carolina, George Moses Horton, was the only person to publish a book while living in slavery. George was born into slavery about 1797 on William Horton's tobacco plantation in Northampton County in North Carolina. His enslaver moved to Chatham County in the Piedmont region of North Carolina, where he grew up as a cow-hand. Young George Moses Horton taught himself to read by using an old speller, the scriptures, and a copy of a Methodist hymnal. He composed poems in his head, but he was unable to write them down. Therefore, he recited his poems while others transcribed them.

In 1815, when George was 17, he became the property of William's son, James Horton. He plowed the farm with a horse-drawn plow and was often sent to Chapel Hill by his enslaver to sell produce. In Chapel Hill, his opportunities expanded by meeting students from the University of North Carolina. Recognizing his sophisticated vocabulary, the students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill encouraged Horton to recite his own verses. The literary reputation of George Moses Horton spread, and he began to sell poems for students to send to their sweethearts. Writing acrostic poems based on the names of the young men's sweethearts, Horton would compose many of the poems while plowing the fields. He would retain the poetry in his head until he could dictate the poems to one of the gentlemen for which he wrote. He received 25 cents for each of his poems. However, some gentlemen bestowed upon Horton 50 to 75 cents a poem in addition to giving him respectable suits of clothes and books. Horton's goal was to use the money he earned to buy his freedom.

Through his literary accomplishments, he earned the admiration and support of notable people such as Governor John Owen, Joseph Caldwell and David L. Swain, presidents of the university, and newspapermen, William Lloyd Garrison, and Horace Greeley. Caroline Lee Hentz, a professor's wife and novelist, befriended Horton and helped him publish some of his poems in local newspapers. *The Hope of Liberty*, a book of twenty-one poems, was published in 1829. The book did not sell enough copies to purchase his freedom. Using his income from selling his poems and from doing handyman work for the university, Horton paid his enslaver in lieu of service. In 1845, George published *Poetical Works*. However, the books failed to raise sufficient funds for Horton to buy his freedom.

He spent the Civil War on the farm of his enslaver. In April 1865, George Moses Horton walked to Raleigh to be with the liberating Union army who took him under their protection. *Naked Genius*, Horton's last volume of poetry, published in 1865, was written in the three months that he was with the northern army. In his sixties, when *Naked Genius* was published, Horton had written ninety poems for the book. After gaining his freedom, Horton spent his final years in Philadelphia writing Sunday school stories and working for North Carolina friends who had moved to the North. He did not attain the popularity in Philadelphia that he had in Chapel Hill, and the details of his death are unknown.

George Moses Horton was the first black American to publish a book and was considered a genius of his time. In June 1978, Governor Jim Hunt declared June 28 as George Moses Horton Day. In 1996, George Moses Horton was inducted into North Carolina's Literary Hall of Fame. In 1997, Chatham County Commissioners declared Horton "Historic Poet Laureate" of Chatham County and a national organization was created in his name, the George Moses Horton Society for the Study of African American Poetry. In 1999, the North Carolina Division of Archives and History approved placement of a historic marker, the first for a black American. The marker was placed on Highway 15-501 near Mt. Gilead Church Road in Pittsboro and reads:

GEORGE MOSES HORTON  
Ca. 1798-1883  
Slave poet. His *The Hope of Liberty* (1829) was the first book by a black author in the South.  
Lived on farm 2 mi. SE.

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**People:**

George Moses Horton <sup>[14]</sup>

**For Teachers:**

- George Moses Horton Lesson Plan <sup>[15]</sup> from the State Archives of North Carolina
- George Moses Horton "Myself" Lesson Plan <sup>[16]</sup> from Teaching Tolerance

**Related Topics:**

Titles by George Moses Horton available on Documenting the American South:

- The Hope of Liberty. Containing a Number of Poetical Pieces <sup>[17]</sup>
- Life of George M. Horton. The Colored Bard of North Carolina from "The Poetical Works of George M. Horton, the Colored Bard of North Carolina, to which is Prefixed the Life of the Author, written by himself." <sup>[18]</sup>
- Poems by a Slave <sup>[19]</sup>
- The Poetical Works of George M. Horton: The Colored Bard of North Carolina: To Which is Prefixed the Life of the Author, Written by Himself <sup>[20]</sup>

**Primary Sources:**

Letter from George Moses Horton to Horace Greeley <sup>[21]</sup>, September 11, 1853

**Artifacts:**

### Departing Love

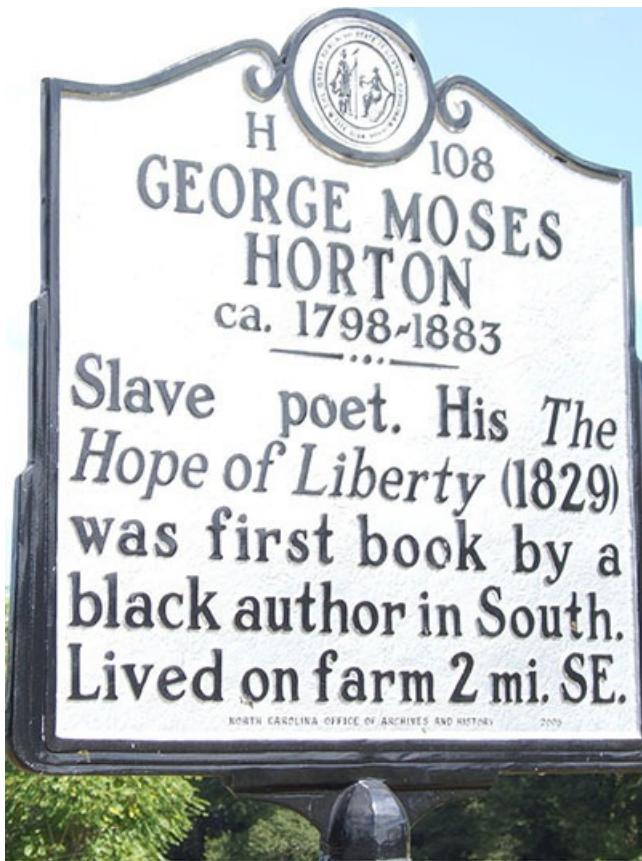
With much delight I think of thee,  
Hower far away;  
I come, no other than to see,  
And thus my love betray;  
I yet my early hopes retain,  
Farewell, till hence we meet again—

Ours, I never shall forget  
My pleasures heretofore;  
Thy beauties fly before me yet,  
And hence I love thee more;  
Sweeter is pleasures after pains  
Farewell, untill we meet again—

Lovers may languish when they part,  
But shortly after meet;  
'Tis pain to think, and death to part;  
Still love continues sweet;  
No flight shall break affection's chain,  
Farewell, till hence we meet again;—

I look back with a humid eye,  
And drop departure's tear;  
And from my bosom heave a sigh;  
For one beloved so dear;  
Greatest misery of thy train  
Farewell, till hence we meet again;—

by  
Langston, "The Colored Bard  
of N. Carolina"  
August 1<sup>st</sup> 1858  
Chapel Hill



[23]

Highway Marker for George Moses Horton.

3 January 2018

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