A Black Poet's View On Christmas 1760
AN EVENING THOUGHT.
SALVATION by CHRIST, WITH
PENETENTIAL CRIES:


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BY JONATHAN OXEN

N Christmas Day, 1760, Jupier Hammon, a Low Island slave-poet, published his broadside "A Black Poet's View On Christmas 1760." This accomplishment, like all of Hammon's work, marked the first time a black American had had a poem published in a newspaper.

His pre-eminent status upon the publication of four poems that represent a significant cultural achievement was due in part to the underground community of intellectuals, the arts, and the literary and cultural activities of the black popular presses.

Little is known about Hammon's actual life and death. One of eight slaves owned by a merchant, head of the family, the head of which was named to be freed as the property upon the conversion of all the seaboard and land slaves. There is no record of slavery, not a slave's declaration. Although he was a slave, he was treated well, according to his own testimony. He had the right to read and write, educated along with Lindley's children, in a small school built on the estate. In 1760, he wrote a book, a Bible with psalms, for slaves' singing. He was an intellectual and priviledged slave, a rare and special man. It is believed that at one time he may have handled business matters for the lord of the manor.

Much of the early literature written by black Americans was merely imitation of popular 18th-century literature, its racial facet being the attempt to exhibit the author's efforts as sufficient evidence of the belief of the black American that inferior creature unble to develop a unique and distinctive culture. Often early works were pious tracts written to assure the masters that the slaves were not capable of anything more than to serve in religious humility, as with the Quakers and the blacks. To these, however, there was a long succession of autobiographical narratives by ex-slaves who had managed to escape to an existing system in an attempt to force white America to look into the human face of black America.

The earliest authors were a few highly favored slaves, like Hammon, whose masters allowed or even took interest in their education. A fellowship to the masters, and at the same time, a white America sometimes respected, for the bystander regarded such slaves as anomalies, prodigies, and anomalies.

According to Ruth Miller, professor of English at the State University Center at Stony Brook, and editor of "Blackamerican Literature 1780-1920" (1973), Hammon's ideas were "the concern of all decent American in colonial times and in the revolutionary period, when great controversy raged over the state of a nation's soul. How may we be sure of our salvation?" Whose soul is in a state of Grace?"
America's First Black Poet

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man envisaged? Is enslavement compatible with a state of grace and salvation?—Jupiter Hammon thought the answer to the latter question was "yes," and he counseled patience, assuring his listeners that liberty, if nothing else, had been conferred on them by the fact of their slavery.

Yet one must realize the spoken art of the original composition. Like the spirituals, the poems were intended to be heard, not seen and read. Modern readers cannot hear how the poet intended it to sound. The "saw" in the word "song"—the "ss" sound used over and over in order, it seems, to cast a spell with it. By shifting tonic ac-
cents and even dropping syllables in the poetic lines to syncopate the rhythms, his preacher's voice would bring the verses to the music of the palms.

In later years, Hammon apparently was able to combine service to the Lponds with some itinerant preaching in what is now the metropolitan New York area. In his "Address to the Neerose in the State of New York," first published in 1786, and reprinted in 1787 by the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the American Life and History, he depicted in some mentions sent of ending slavery. "As a foreigner," he says, "we may know nothing about our country, and we may likewise judge so both from the conduct of the white people in the late war. How much money has been spent, and how many lives have been lost, and how many women. I hope that I have thought that God would open their eyes, when they were so much en-
gaged, the blind eye, a pink of the state of the poor blacks. . . ."

All of his published works—the four poems and the surviving three of four prose pieces—with a number of essays about the man and his writings and a bibliography that he was a member of "America's First Negro Poet: Jupiter Hammon and Long Island" (Kenilworth Press, 1970.) The book was edited by Stanley Ransom Jr., former director of the Huntington Library, who is now trying to get more recognition for Hammon by having Black Poetry Day celebr-
ed in his memory.

In 1973, the Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities acquired the 1715 house in which was once Jupiter Hammon's home. Last June, the first official national recognition was given to Hammon, Dr. J. Rupert Picott, executive director of the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History, presented a model of his National Historic Marker to the Lloyd Harbor Historical Society. The ebony plaque, which will be kept temporarily by a trustee of the Histori-
cal Society until Lloyd Manor House has been fully restored as a colonial mu-

In recognition of Jupiter Hammon Antiquities, the Society for the Preservation Published "An Evening Thought"

Born Here Oct. 17, 1711
Died circa 1806.