

Equiano

Information taken from: The Abolition Project http://abolition.e2bn.org/people_25.html

Biographical information

Olaudah Equiano (c.1745-1797): Writer Seaman and former slave

Olaudah Equiano, was a former enslaved African, seaman and merchant who wrote an autobiography depicting the horrors of slavery and lobbied Parliament for its abolition.

In his biography, he records he was born in what is now Nigeria, kidnapped and sold into slavery as a child. He then endured the middle passage on a slave ship bound for the New World. After a short period of time in Barbados, Equiano was shipped to Virginia and put to work weeding grass and gathering stones.

In 1757, he was bought by a naval captain (Captain Pascal) for about £40, who named him Gustavas Vassa. Equiano was about 12 when he first arrived in England. For part of that time he stayed at Blackheath in London with the Guerin family (relatives of Pascal). It is here that Equiano learnt how to read and write and to do arithmetic. However, Equiano spent much of his time at sea, both on warships and trading vessels.

Equiano knew that one of the most powerful arguments against slavery was his own life story. He published his autobiography in 1789: *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*. It became a bestseller and was translated into many languages.

The book began with a petition addressed to Parliament and ended with his antislavery letter to the Queen. The tens of thousands of people who read Equiano's book, or heard him speak, started to see slavery through the eyes of a former enslaved African. It was a very important book that made a vital contribution to the abolitionists' cause.

Equiano died in March 1797. The Slave Trade in Britain was not to end until nearly a decade later. It would be forty years before slavery itself was abolished in the British Colonies.



Document

Extracts from his book: The interesting life of Olaudah Equiano

Capture

One day, when all our people were gone out to their works as usual, and only I and my dear sister were left to mind the house, two men and a woman got over our walls, and in a moment seized us both. My sister and I were separated and I ended up in the hands of a slave dealer who supplied the Atlantic slave ships. Six months later I found myself on board a slave ship.

The Middle Passage

The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. The air soon became unfit for breathing, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died. This wretched situation was made worse by the chains. The shrieks of women, and the groaning of the dying, created a scene of horror almost unbelievable. Three desperate slaves tried to kill themselves by jumping overboard. Two drowned, the other was captured and beaten unmercifully. When I refused to eat, I too was beaten.

Arrival in the West Indies

When we arrived in Barbados (in the West Indies) many merchants and planters came on board and examined us. We were then taken to the merchant's yard, where we were all pent up together like sheep in a fold. On a signal the buyers rushed forward and chose those slaves they liked best.

Life on the plantations

I have seen a slave beaten till some of his bones were broken, for only letting a pot boil over. I have seen slaves put into scales and weighed, and then sold from three pence to nine pence a pound.

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