

Equiano, Olaudah (1745–1797)

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The publication of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* in 1789 created an instant sensation in London and contributed significantly to the movement to abolish the British slave trade. Though not the first of its kind, the narrative of Equiano's experiences of being captured and sold into slavery, along with the eloquence of the expression, provided definitive proof of the intellectual capacity of the African. Equiano embarked on an extensive book tour throughout the British Isles that both established his personal fortune and brought awareness of the movement to abolish the slave trade to the remote parts of the kingdom.

According to his narrative, Equiano spent the early part of his life in Guinea in an area he called the "Eboe." At the age of 11, he and his sister were captured and sold into slavery. The harrowing description of the march to the coast and the middle passage aimed "to excite . . . a sense of compassion for the miseries which the slave trade has entailed" (Equiano 2003) and may or may not have been true. Recent scholarship has called into question the validity of Equiano's recounting of his African childhood based on a baptismal record and a naval roll muster that state his place of birth as Carolina (Carretta 2005). The details he recounts could have been garnered from his own participation in the slave trade and from conversations he would have had with other slaves coming from Africa.

Regardless of this early uncertainty, readers in the eighteenth century and today cannot contest the validity of his experience with slavery. Equiano's horror at plantation slavery and the cruel instruments used to "muzzle" slaves provides a strong counterpoint to the idyllic childhood he describes. He was sold to a Lieutenant Michael Pascal who renamed him Gustavus Vassa, a tongue-in-cheek moniker first belonging to a Swedish king who liberated his people from the oppression of the Danes. During the seven years of service to Pascal, Equiano witnessed many naval engagements in the Seven Years' War, learned to read and write, and converted to Christianity, which he thought the only positive



This 2007 British postage stamp attests to the importance of Olaudah Equiano to the history of antislavery protest. Thanks to the efforts of men like Equiano, Anthony Benezet, Thomas Clarkson, and William Wilberforce, the slave trade was abolished in Britain in 1807. Stamp designs © Royal Mail Group Ltd. Reproduced by kind permission of Royal Mail Group Ltd. All rights reserved.

event in his experience with slavery. He believed his loyal service to Pascal would be rewarded with manumission; instead, he was seized and put on a West India trader and eventually sold to the Quaker merchant Robert King. Through his own canny business sense, Equiano was able to parley his trading voyages for King into a profitable side venture that netted him enough money to buy his own freedom. In 1766, as a free-man, Equiano journeyed to London to try and establish himself in a trade. Over the next 20 years he had several positions in London and continually returned to the sea, which enabled him to make important contacts with abolitionists in England and the United States. Equiano's experiences with slaving made him acutely conscious of the position of both the enslaved and the black poor in London. He made the acquaintance of Granville Sharp and became involved in the Sierra Leone scheme intended to repatriate London's poor blacks to territory in Africa.

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Unfortunately, poor management and unscrupulous investors doomed the scheme to failure and Equiano became one of its most vocal critics. Next, he focused his energies on critiquing the slave trade, calling on his past experience as a slave and as a sailor on a slaving vessel. His autobiography became a staple of abolitionist propaganda in England and the United States and remains an important exemplar of the African slave narrative.

SEE ALSO: Anti-Slavery Movement, Britain; Anti-Slavery Movement, British, and the Black Response to Colonization; Anti-Slavery Movement, British, and

the Founding of Sierra Leone; Sharp, Granville (1735–1813)

References and Suggested Readings

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