

# The Transatlantic Slave Trade

## The Middle Passage

### OLAUDAH EQUIANO

"The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave ship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror, which I am yet at a loss to describe, nor the then feelings of my mind. When I was carried on board I was immediately handled and tossed up, to see if I were sound, by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits and that they were going to kill me. Their complexions too differing so much from ours, their long hair and the language they spoke, which was very different from any I had ever heard, united to confirm me in this belief. Indeed, such were the horrors of my views and fears at the moment, that if ten thousand worlds had been my own, I would have freely parted with them all to have exchanged my condition with that of the meanest slave in my own country. When I looked round the ship too, and saw a large furnace of copper boiling, and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted of my fate, and quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted. When I recovered a little, I found some black people about me, who I believed were some of those who brought me on board, and had been receiving their pay; they talked to me in order to cheer me, but all in vain. I asked them if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces and long hair? They told me I was not; and one of the crew brought me a small portion of spirituous liquor in a wine glass; but being afraid of him, I would not take it out of his hand. One of the blacks therefore took it from him and gave it to me, and I took a little down my palate, which instead of reviving me, as they thought it would, threw me into the greatest consternation at the strange feeling it produced, having never tasted any such liquor before. Soon after this, the blacks who brought me on board went off, and left me abandoned to despair. I now saw myself deprived of all chance of returning to my native country, or even the least glimpse of hope of gaining the shore, which I now considered as friendly: and I even wished for my former slavery in preference to my present situation, which was filled with horrors of every kind, still heightened by my ignorance of what I was to undergo. I was not long suffered to indulge my grief; I was soon to be put down under the decks and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life; so that with the loathsomeness of the stench and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste anything. I now wished for the last friend, Death, to relieve me; but soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me eatables; and on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands, and laid me across, I think, the windlass, and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely. I had never experienced anything of this kind before; and although, not being used to the water, I naturally feared that element the first time I saw it; yet nevertheless, could I have got over the nettings, I would have jumped over the side, but I could not; and besides, the crew used to watch us very closely who were not chained down to the decks, lest we should leap into the water; and I have seen some of these poor African prisoners most severely cut for attempting to do so, and hourly whipped for not eating..'

taken from *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, London 1789

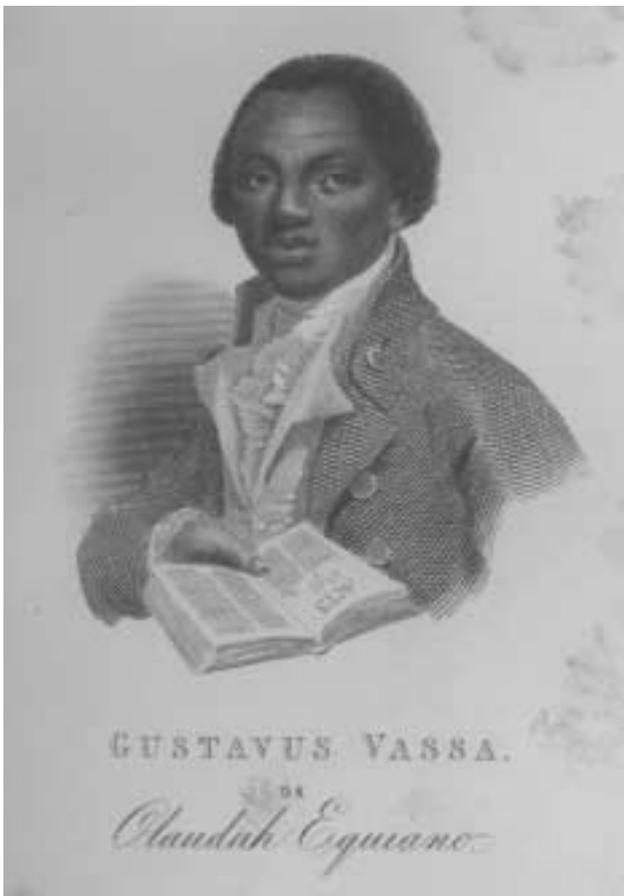
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### Case Study

**Olaudah Equiano** and his sister were kidnapped and taken from their home in what is now known as Nigeria, West Africa. They were separated, and at the age of ten, Equiano was sold into slavery. At first he worked for an African master but later he was sold to a European slave trader who shipped him first to the Caribbean, then to North America and England.

During the next ten years he was sold several times and given different names, as it was the custom for slave owners to rename their slaves. One of his masters, Lieutenant Pascal, was in Britain's Royal Navy and he gave Equiano the name Gustavus Vassa, after a Swedish King. For several years Equiano lived on board ships sailing between Canada, the Mediterranean and other places. He was forced to work for the British who were at war with France, carrying gunpowder to the guns on the ships. Pascal promised that Equiano would be granted freedom in return for his services to Britain and the King, but instead, he sold him to Robert King, a Captain from north America.



King treated Equiano quite differently from the way most slave owners treated their slaves. He encouraged him to study and soon Equiano could read and write in English. He worked for King as a seaman and a clerk, and Equiano was able to save some money from trading at some of the ports they visited. Although King was reluctant to let Equiano go, he was a Quaker and a man of his word, and he allowed Equiano to buy his freedom in 1766. He was 21 years old.

Equiano returned to sea as a free sailor and made many journeys to different parts of the world, including central America and the Arctic. Eventually he returned to England to live, where he took a very active role in the growing movement to end the slave trade.

In 1789 he wrote and published his life story, in the form of a narrative, and called it *'The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself'*. The book became an incredible success; it was produced in seventeen editions in thirty years and was translated into many different languages. From the time it was published until his death in 1797, Equiano toured the country, reading excerpts from his book and fighting for abolition. The book opened white readers eyes to the prejudice, injustice and brutality of the slave trade. It challenged the racist ideas of the time, by showing the humanity and equality of Africans and the inhumanity and inequality of the slave trade.

Equiano became the leader and spokesperson for the black community in London, taking part in debates on slavery and working with the white leaders of the abolitionist movement. He

helped escaped slaves and supported fellow abolitionist and MP Granville Sharp, who was probably the first man to bring the issue of slavery to the attention of the British public. Sharp challenged the legal system and brought many cases against slave owners for their gross injustices to African slaves. It was Equiano who encouraged Sharp to take up the case of the slave ship *Zong* (see page 11) and he played a major role in changing people's views on African people and the barbaric trade in slaves.

In 1792, he married Sarah Cullen, a white English woman, and they had two daughters. Sadly, five years later, in 1797, he died at the age of 52. He was a remarkable man, who had been a tireless campaigner and his contribution to the abolition of slavery was enormous. Unfortunately, he did not live to see the first Act to abolish the slave trade that was voted through Parliament in 1807.