

Olaudah Equiano

Olaudah Equiano (16 October 1745 – 31 March 1797),^[5] known in his lifetime as **Gustavus Vassa** (/ˈvæsəθ/),^[6] was a writer and abolitionist from Ihiala, according to his memoir; it is in Igbo region of what is today southeastern Nigeria. Enslaved as a child, he was taken to the Anglo-Caribbean, British West Indies, and sold as a slave to a captain in the Royal Navy. Later he was sold to a Quaker trader. Eventually, he purchased his freedom in 1766 by intelligent trading and careful savings.

In London, Equiano (identifying as Gustavus Vassa during his lifetime) was part of the Sons of Africa, an abolitionist group composed of Africans living in Britain, and he was active among leaders of the anti-slave trade movement in the 1780s. He published his autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789), which depicted the horrors of slavery. It went through nine editions and helped gain passage of the British Slave Trade Act of 1807, which abolished the African slave trade.^[7]

As a freedman in London, he supported the British abolitionist movement. Equiano had a stressful life; he had suffered suicidal thoughts before he became a Protestant Christian and found peace in his faith. After settling in London, Equiano married an English woman named Susannah Cullen in 1792 and they had two daughters. He died in 1797 in Middlesex. Equiano's death was reported in American as well as British newspapers, as his autobiography had been widely read.^[8] Plaques commemorating his life have been placed at buildings where he lived in London. Since the late 20th century, when his autobiography was published in a new edition, he has been increasingly studied by a range of scholars, including many from his homeland, Igboland,^[1] in the eastern part of Nigeria.^[3]

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Olaudah Equiano



Born	16 October 1745 <div>Igboland, Nigeria (in present-day Ihiala LGA, Anambra State, Nigeria)^{[1][2]} or South Carolina, British North America^[3]^[Note 1]</div>
Died	31 March 1797 (aged 51) <div>Westminster, Middlesex, Great Britain^[4]</div>
Other names	Gustavus Vassa, Gustavus Weston, Jacob, Michael
Occupation	Explorer, writer, merchant, abolitionist
Known for	Influence over British abolitionists; his autobiography
Spouse(s)	Susannah Cullen (m. 1792; her death 1796)
Children	Joanna Vassa

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References

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Early life and enslavement

According to his memoir, Equiano recounted an incident of an attempted kidnapping of children in his Igbo village, Isseke (present-day Imo State), which was foiled by adults. The village was in the southeastern part of present-day Nigeria. When he was around the age of eleven, he and his sister were left alone to look after their family premises, as was common when adults went out of the house to work. They were both kidnapped and taken far from their hometown, separated and sold to slave traders. After his owners changed several times, Equiano happened to meet met his sister again, but they were separated once more. He recounted being taken across a large river to the coast, where he was held by European slave traders for export.^{[5][9]} He was transported with 244 other enslaved Africans across the Atlantic Ocean to Barbados in the British West Indies. He and a few other slaves were sent further away for sale in the British colony of Virginia.

Literary scholar Vincent Carretta argued in his 2005 biography of Equiano that the activist could have been born in colonial South Carolina rather than Africa, based on his discovery of a 1759 parish baptismal record that lists Equiano's place of birth as Carolina and a 1773 ship's muster that indicates South Carolina.^{[3][10]} Carretta's conclusion is disputed by other scholars who believe the weight of evidence supports Equiano's account of coming from Africa.^[11]

In Virginia, Equiano was bought in 1754 by Michael Pascal, a lieutenant in the Royal Navy. Pascal renamed the boy "Gustavus Vassa", after the Swedish noble who had become Gustav I of Sweden, king in the sixteenth century.^[5] Equiano had already been renamed twice: he was called Michael while on board the slave ship that brought him to the Americas; and Jacob, by his first owner. This time, Equiano refused and told his new owner that he would prefer to be called Jacob. His refusal, he says, "gained me many a cuff" – and eventually he submitted to the new name.^{:62} He used this name for the rest of his life, including on all official records. He only used Equiano in his autobiography.^[6]

Pascal took Equiano with him when he returned to England and had him accompany him as a valet during the Seven Years' War with France. Also trained in seamanship, Equiano was expected to assist the ship's crew in times of battle; his duty was to haul gunpowder to the gun decks. Pascal favoured Equiano and sent him to his sister-in-law in Great Britain so that he could attend school and learn to read and write.

At this time, Equiano converted to Christianity. He was baptised at St Margaret's, Westminster, on 9 February 1759, when he was described in the parish register as "a Black, born in Carolina, 12 years old".^[12] His godparents were Mary Guerin and her brother, Maynard, who were cousins of his master Pascal. They had taken an interest in him and helped him to learn English. Later, when Equiano's origins were questioned after his book was published, the Guerins testified to his lack of English when he first came to London.^[6]

Pascal sold Equiano to Captain James Doran of the *Charming Sally* at Gravesend, from where he was transported back to the Caribbean, to Montserrat, in the Leeward Islands. There, he was sold to Robert King, an American Quaker merchant from Philadelphia who traded in the Caribbean.^[13]

Release

Robert King set Equiano to work on his shipping routes and in his stores. In 1765, when Equiano was about 20 years old, King promised that for his purchase price of 40 pounds (equivalent to £5,400 in 2018) he could buy his freedom.^[14] King taught him to read and write more fluently, guided him along the path of religion, and allowed Equiano to engage in profitable trading for his own account, as well as on his owner's behalf. Equiano sold fruits, glass tumblers, and other items between Georgia and the Caribbean islands. King allowed Equiano to buy his freedom, which he achieved in 1766. The merchant urged Equiano to stay on as a business partner. However, Equiano found it dangerous and limiting to remain in the British colonies as a freedman. While loading a ship in Georgia, he was almost kidnapped back into enslavement.

Freedom

By about 1768, Equiano had gone to England. He continued to work at sea, travelling sometimes as a deckhand based in England. In 1773 on the Royal Navy ship *Racehorse*, he travelled to the Arctic in an expedition to find a northern route to India.^[15] On that voyage he worked with Dr. Charles Irving, who had developed a process to distill seawater and later made a fortune from it. Two years later, Irving recruited Equiano for a project on the Mosquito Coast in Central America, where he was to use his African background to help select slaves and manage them as labourers on sugar cane plantations. Irving and Equiano had a working relationship and friendship for more than a decade, but the plantation venture failed.^[16]

Pioneer of the abolitionist cause

Equiano settled in London, where in the 1780s he became involved in the abolitionist movement. The movement to end the slave trade had been particularly strong among Quakers, but the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade was founded in 1787 as a non-denominational group, with Anglican members, in an attempt to influence parliament directly. At the time, Quakers were prohibited from being elected as MPs. Equiano had become a Methodist, having been influenced by George Whitefield's evangelism in the New World.

As early as 1783, Equiano informed abolitionists such as Granville Sharp about the slave trade; that year he was the first to tell Sharp about the Zong massacre, which was being tried in London as litigation for insurance claims. (It became a *cause célèbre* for the abolitionist movement and contributed to its growth.)^[17]

Equiano was befriended and supported by abolitionists, many of whom encouraged him to write and publish his life story. He was supported financially in this effort by philanthropic abolitionists and religious benefactors. His lectures and preparation for the book were promoted by, among others, Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon.

Memoir

Entitled *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789), the book rapidly went through nine editions in his lifetime. It is one of the earliest-known examples of published writing by an African writer to be widely read in England. By 1792, it was a best seller: it has been published in Russia, Germany, Holland, and the United States. It was the first influential slave narrative of what became a large literary genre. But Equiano's experience in slavery was quite different from that of most slaves; he did not participate in field work, he served his owners personally and went to sea, was taught to read and write, and worked in trading.^[6]

Equiano's personal account of slavery, his journey of advancement, and his experiences as a black immigrant caused a sensation on publication. The book fueled a growing anti-slavery movement in Great Britain, Europe, and the New World.^[18] His account surprised many with the quality of its imagery, description, and literary style. Some readers felt shame at learning of the suffering he had endured.

In his account, Equiano gives details about his hometown Essaka and the laws and customs of the Eboe people. After being captured as a boy, he described communities he passed through as a captive on his way to the coast. His biography details his voyage on a slave ship, and the brutality of slavery in the colonies of West Indies, Virginia, and Georgia.

Equiano commented on the reduced rights that freed people of colour had in these same places, and they also faced risks of kidnapping and enslavement. Equiano had embraced Christianity at the age of 14 and its importance to him is a recurring theme in his autobiography; he identified as a Protestant of the Church of England. He was baptized while in London.

Several events in Equiano's life led him to question his faith. He was severely distressed in 1774 by the kidnapping of his friend, a black cook named John Annis, who was taken forcibly off the English ship *Anglicania* on which they were both serving. His friend's kidnapper, a Mr. Kirkpatrick, did not abide by the decision in the Somerset Case (1772), that slaves could not be taken from England without their permission, as common law did not support the institution. Kirkpatrick had Annis transported to Saint Kitts, where he was punished severely and worked as a plantation labourer until he died. With the aid of Granville Sharp, Equiano tried to get Annis released before he was shipped from England, but was unsuccessful. He heard that Annis was not free from suffering until he died in slavery.^[19] Despite his questioning, he affirms his faith in Christianity, as seen in the penultimate sentence of his work that quotes the prophet Micah: "After all, what makes any event important, unless by its observation we become better and wiser, and learn 'to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before God?'"

In his account, Equiano also told of his settling in London. He married an English woman and lived with her in Soham, Cambridgeshire, where they had two daughters. He became a leading abolitionist in the 1780s, lecturing in numerous cities against the slave trade. Equiano records his and Granville Sharp's central roles in the anti-slave trade movement, and their effort to publicize the Zong massacre, which became known in 1783.

Reviewers have found that his book vividly demonstrated the full and complex humanity of Africans as much as the inhumanity of slavery. The book was considered an exemplary work of English literature by a new African author. Equiano did so well in sales that he achieved independence from his benefactors. He travelled extensively throughout England, Scotland, and Ireland promoting the book. He worked to improve economic, social and educational conditions in Africa. Specifically, he became involved in working in Sierra Leone, a colony founded in 1792 for freed slaves by Britain in West Africa.

Later years

During the American Revolutionary War, Britain had recruited blacks to fight with it by offering freedom to those who left rebel masters. In practice, it also freed women and children, and attracted thousands of slaves to its lines in New York City, which it occupied, and in the South, where its troops occupied Charleston. When British troops were evacuated at the end of the war, its officers also evacuated these American slaves. They were resettled in the Caribbean, in Nova Scotia, in Sierra Leone in Africa, and in London. Britain refused to return the slaves, which the United States sought in peace negotiations.

In the years following United States' gaining independence, in 1783 Equiano became involved in helping the Black Poor of London, who were mostly those African-American slaves freed during and after the American Revolution by the British. There were also some freed slaves from the Caribbean, and some who had been brought by their owners to England, and freed later after the decision that Britain had no basis in common law for slavery. The black community numbered about 20,000.^[20] After



Plaque at Riding House Street, London, noting the place where Equiano lived and published his narrative.

the Revolution some 3,000 former slaves had been transported from New York to Nova Scotia, where they became known as Black Loyalists, among other Loyalists also resettled there. Many of the freedmen found it difficult to make new lives in London and Canada.

Equiano was appointed to an expedition to resettle London's Black Poor in Freetown, a new British colony founded on the west coast of Africa, at present-day Sierra Leone. The blacks from London were joined by more than 1,200 Black Loyalists who chose to leave Nova Scotia. They were aided by John Clarkson, younger brother of abolitionist Thomas Clarkson. Jamaican maroons, as well as slaves liberated from illegal ships after Britain abolished the slave trade, also settled at Freetown in the early decades. Equiano was dismissed from the new settlement after protesting against financial mismanagement and he returned to London.^{[21][22]}

Equiano was a prominent figure in London and often served as a spokesman for the black community. He was one of the leading members of the Sons of Africa, a small abolitionist group composed of free Africans in London. They were closely allied with the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. Equiano's comments on issues were frequently published in newspapers such as the Public Advertiser and the Morning Chronicle. He had much more of a public voice than most Africans or Black Loyalists, and he seized various opportunities to use it.^[23] He was also a member of the radical working class group, the London Corresponding Society.

Marriage and family

After settling in England, Equiano decided to marry and have a family. On 7 April 1792, he married Susannah Cullen, a local woman, in St Andrew's Church in Soham, Cambridgeshire. The original marriage register containing the entry for Vassa and Cullen is held today by the Cambridgeshire Archives and Local Studies at the County Record Office in Cambridge. He included his marriage in every edition of his autobiography from 1792 onwards. Critics have suggested he believed that his marriage symbolised an expected commercial union between Africa and Great Britain. The couple settled in the area and had two daughters, Anna Maria (1793–1797) and Joanna (1795–1857).

Susannah died in February 1796, aged 34, and Equiano died a year after that on 31 March 1797,^[5] aged 51 (sources differ on his age.). Soon after, the elder daughter died at the age of four, leaving the younger child Joanna Vassa to inherit Equiano's estate, valued at the considerable sum of £950 (equivalent to £97,000 in 2018). A guardianship would have been established for her. Joanna Vassa married the Rev. Henry Bromley, and they ran a Congregational Chapel at Clavering near Saffron Walden in Essex. They moved to London in the middle of the 19th century. They are both buried at the Congregationalists' non-denominational Abney Park Cemetery, in Stoke Newington North London.



A disputed portrait now thought to be Ignatius Sancho,^{[24][25]} previously identified as Equiano^[26] in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter

Last days and will

Equiano died on 31 March 1797 and was buried at Whitefield's Methodist chapel on 6 April.^{[27][28]} One of his last addresses appears to have been at the Plasterers' Hall in the City of London, where he drew up his will on 28 May 1796. He moved to John Street, Tottenham Court Road, close to Whitefield's Methodist chapel. (It was renovated in the 1950s for use by Congregationalists, now the site of the American International Church.) Lastly, he lived in Paddington Street, Middlesex, where he died.^[4] Equiano's death was reported in newspaper obituaries.

At this time, due to having lost the British colonies after long warfare and especially the violent excesses of the French Revolution, British society was tense because of fears of open revolution. Reformers were considered more suspect than in other periods. Equiano aged 51 had been an active member of the London Corresponding Society, which campaigned to extend the vote to working men.

Equiano's will provided for projects he considered important. In case of his surviving daughter's death before reaching the age of majority (21), he bequeathed half his wealth to the Sierra Leone Company for continued assistance to West Africans, and half to the London Missionary Society, which promoted education overseas. This organization had formed in November 1796 at the Spa Fields Chapel of the Countess of Huntingdon in north London. By the early 19th century, The Missionary Society had become well known worldwide as non-denominational; many of its members were Congregational.

Controversy related to memoir

Following publication in 1967 of a newly edited version of his memoir by Paul Edwards, interest in Equiano was revived; additional editions of his work have been published since then. Nigerian scholars have also begun studying him. He was especially valued as a pioneer in asserting "the dignity of African life in the white society of his time".^[29]

In researching his life, some scholars since the late 20th century have disputed Equiano's account of his origins. In 1999, Vincent Carretta, a professor of English editing a new version of Equiano's memoir, found two records that led him to question the former slave's account of being born in Africa. He first published his findings in the journal *Slavery and Abolition*.^{[10][30]} At a 2003 conference in England, Carretta defended himself against Nigerian academics, like Obiwu, who accused him of "pseudo-detective work" and indulging "in vast publicity gamesmanship".^[31] In his 2005 biography, Carretta suggested that Equiano may have been born in South Carolina rather than Africa, as he was twice recorded from there. Carretta wrote:

Equiano was certainly African by descent. The circumstantial evidence that Equiano was also African-American by birth and African-British by choice is compelling but not absolutely conclusive. Although the circumstantial evidence is not equivalent to proof, anyone dealing with Equiano's life and art must consider it.^[3]

According to Carretta, Vassa's baptismal record and a naval muster roll document him as from South Carolina.^[10] Carretta interpreted these anomalies as possible evidence that Equiano had made up the account of his African origins, and adopted material from others. But, Paul Lovejoy, Alexander X. Byrd, and Douglas Chambers note how many general and specific details Carretta can document from sources that related to the slave trade in the 1750s as described by Equiano, including the voyages from Africa to Virginia, sale to Captain Michael Henry Pascal in 1754, and others. They conclude he was more likely telling what he understood as fact than creating a fictional account; his work is shaped as an autobiography.^{[6][15][32]}

Lovejoy wrote that:

circumstantial evidence indicates that he was born where he said he was, and that, in fact, *The Interesting Narrative* is reasonably accurate in its details, although, of course, subject to the same criticisms of selectivity and self-interested distortion that characterize the genre of autobiography.

Lovejoy uses the name of Vassa in his article, since that was what the man used throughout his life, in "his baptism, his naval records, marriage certificate and will".^[6] He emphasizes that Vassa only used his African name in his autobiography.

Other historians also argue that the fact that many parts of Equiano's account can be proven lends weight to accepting his account of African birth. As historian Adam Hochschild has written:

In the long and fascinating history of autobiographies that distort or exaggerate the truth. ... Seldom is one crucial portion of a memoir totally fabricated and the remainder scrupulously accurate; among autobiographers ... both dissemblers and truth-tellers tend to be consistent.^[33]

He also noted that "since the 'rediscovery' of Vassa's account in the 1960s, scholars have valued it as the most extensive account of an eighteenth-century slave's life' and the difficult passage from slavery to freedom".^[6]

Legacy

- The Equiano Society was formed in London in November 1996. Its main objective is to publicise and celebrate the life and work of Olaudah Equiano.^[34]
- Equiano lived at 13 Tottenham Street, London, in 1788; in 1789 he moved to what was then 10 Union Street and is now 73 Riding House Street. A City of Westminster commemorative green plaque was unveiled there on 11 October 2000 as part of Black History Month celebrations. Student musicians from Trinity College of Music played a fanfare specially composed by Professor Ian Hall for the unveiling.^[35]
- Equiano is honoured as a holy man in the Anglican Church, and honoured annually in a lesser festival on 30 July, along with Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce, who all worked for abolition of the slave trade and slavery.^[36]
- In 2007, the year of the celebration in Britain of the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade, Equiano's life and achievements were included in the National Curriculum, together with William Wilberforce. In December 2012 it was reported, by The Daily Mail newspaper, that both would be dropped from the curriculum, along with other social reformers, in favour of a "back to basics" curriculum.^[37] In January 2013 Operation Black Vote launched a petition to request Education Secretary Michael Gove to keep both Equiano and Mary Seacole in the National Curriculum.^[38] American Rev. Jesse Jackson and others wrote a letter to The Times protesting against the mooted removal of both figures from the National Curriculum.^{[39][40]}
- A statue of Equiano, made by pupils of Edmund Waller School, was erected in telegraph Hill Lower Park, New Cross, London, in 2008.^[41]
- The head of Equiano is included in Martin Bond's 1997 the sculpture *Wall of the Ancestors* in Deptford, London
- U.S. author Ann Cameron adapted Equiano's autobiography for children, leaving most of the text in Equiano's own words; the book was published in 1995 the U.S. by Random House as *The Kidnapped Prince: The Life of Olaudah Equiano*, with an introduction by the U.S. historian, Henry Louis Gates.
- On 16 October 2017, Google Doodle honoured Equiano by celebrating the 272nd year since his birth.^[42]

Representation in other media

- A 28-minute documentary, *Son of Africa: The Slave Narrative of Olaudah Equiano* (1996), produced by the BBC and directed by Alrick Riley, uses dramatic reconstruction, archival material and interviews to provide the social and economic context for his life and the slave trade.^[43]

Numerous works about Equiano have been produced for and since the 2007 bicentenary of Britain's abolition of the slave trade:

- Equiano was portrayed by the Senegalese singer and musician Yousou N'Dour in the film *Amazing Grace* (2006).
- *African Snow* (2007), a play by Murray Watts, takes place in the mind of John Newton, a captain in the slave trade who later became an Anglican cleric and hymnwriter. It was first produced at the York Theatre Royal as a co-production with Riding Lights Theatre Company, transferring to the Trafalgar Studios in London's West End and a National Tour. Newton was played by Roger Alborough and Equiano by Israel Oyelumade.
- Kent historian Dr. Robert Hume wrote a children's book, *Equiano: The Slave with the Loud Voice* (2007), illustrated by Cheryl Ives.^[44]
- David and Jessica Oyelowo appeared as Olaudah and his wife in *Grace Unshackled – The Olaudah Equiano Story* (2007), a BBC 7 radio adaptation of Equiano's autobiography.^[45]
- The British jazz artist Soweto Kinch's first album, *Conversations with the Unseen* (2003), contains a track entitled *Equiano's Tears*.
- Equiano was portrayed by Jeffery Kissoon in Margaret Busby's 2007 play *An African Cargo*, staged at the Greenwich Theatre.^[46]

- Equiano is portrayed by Danny Sapani in the BBC series Garrow's Law (2010).
- The Nigerian writer Chika Unigwe has written a fictional memoir of Equiano: *The Black Messiah*, originally published in Dutch: *De zwarte messias* (2013).^[47]

See also

- Ottobah Cugoano, an African abolitionist active in Britain in the late 18th century
- Phillis Wheatley, recognized in the eighteenth century as the first African-American poet; first African-American woman to publish a book
- List of slaves

Notes

1. His birthplace is still disputed today

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Further reading

- [The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African](#) at Wikisource.

- For the history of the Narrative's publication, see James Green, "The Publishing History of Olaudah Equiano's Interesting Narrative", *Slavery and Abolition* 16, no. 3 (1995): 362–375.
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External links

- Frederick Quinn, "Olaudah Equiano" (http://www.dacb.org/stories/nigeria/equiano_olaudah.html), *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*, article reproduced with permission from *African Saints: Saints, Martyrs, and Holy People from the Continent of Africa*, copyright © 2002 by Frederick Quinn, New York: Crossroads Publishing Company
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 - The Equiano Project (<http://www.equiano.org/>), The Equiano Society and Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery
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 - Works by Olaudah Equiano (<https://librivox.org/author/4357>) at LibriVox (public domain audiobooks) 
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