

# Olaudah Equiano

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(Redirected from Equiano)

**Olaudah Equiano** (c. 1745 – 31 March 1797), also known as **Gustavus Vassa**, was one of the most prominent people of African heritage involved in the British debate for the abolition of the slave trade. He wrote an

autobiography that depicted the horrors of slavery and helped influence British lawmakers to abolish the slave trade in 1807. In addition to



being a slave as a young man, he was also a slaver, seaman, merchant, and explorer in South America, the Caribbean, the American colonies, Britain, and the North Pole.

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## Biography

### Early life and slavery

By his own

account,  
Olaudah  
Equiano's early  
life began in  
the region of  
"Essaka" (in his  
spelling; now  
called *Isseke*)  
near the River  
Niger, an Igbo-  
speaking region  
of Nigeria,  
West Africa,  
which is now in  
Anambra State.  
His father was  
an important  
elder in the  
village, who  
helped settle disputes. At an early age, he was  
kidnapped by kinsmen and forced into domestic  
slavery in another native village in a region  
where the African chieftain hierarchy was tied to  
slavery.<sup>[1][2]</sup>



Portrait in the Royal Albert  
Museum, Exeter

At the age of eleven, Equiano was sold to white

slave traders and taken to the New World. On arrival, he was bought by Michael Pascal, a lieutenant in the Royal Navy. Renaming being a common practice among slave owners, Pascal renamed him Gustavus Vassa. (This is the Latinised form of the name of King Gustav I of Sweden, known for having liberated his country from Danish rule in the 16th Century.)

Being the slave of a naval captain, Equiano was afforded naval training and was able to travel extensively. He was sent to school in England by Pascal to learn to read. This was during the Seven Years War with France. Equiano was Pascal's personal servant but was also expected to contribute in times of battle. His duty was to haul gunpowder to the gun decks. After the war, Equiano felt he had done his duty and deserved his share of the prize money awarded to the other sailors, along with his freedom, but Pascal refused to grant it.

Later, Olaudah Equiano was sold on the island of Montserrat in the Caribbean Leeward Islands. Equiano's literacy and seamanship skills made him too valuable for plantation labour. He was

acquired by Robert King, a Quaker merchant from Philadelphia who traded in the Caribbean. King set Equiano to work on his shipping routes and in his stores, promising him in 1765, that for forty pounds, the price King had paid for Equiano, he could buy his freedom. King taught him to read and write more fluently, educated him in the Christian faith, and allowed Equiano to engage in his own profitable trading as well as on his master's behalf, enabling Equiano to come by the forty pounds honestly. In his early twenties, Equiano succeeded in buying his freedom.

King urged Equiano to stay on as a business partner, but Equiano found it dangerous and limiting to remain in the British American colonies as a freed black. While loading a ship in Georgia, he was almost kidnapped back into slavery. Equiano returned to England, where after *Somerset's Case* of 1772 (although the details are unclear when analysed by lawyers) it was generally believed that no person could be a slave in England itself.

## **Pioneer of the abolitionist cause**

After several years of travels and trading, Equiano travelled to London and became involved in the abolitionist movement. The movement had been particularly strong amongst Quakers, but was by now non-denominational. Equiano himself was broadly Methodist, having been influenced by George Whitefield's evangelism in the New World.

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Equiano proved to be a popular speaker and was introduced to many senior and influential people, who encouraged him to write and publish his life story. Equiano was supported financially by philanthropic abolitionists and religious benefactors; his lectures and preparation for the book were promoted by, among others, Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon. His account surprised many with the quality of its imagery and description, literary style, as well as its narrative which was profoundly shaming towards those who had not joined the abolitionist cause. Entitled *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the*

THE  
INTERESTING NARRATIVE  
OF  
THE LIFE  
OF  
OLAUDAH EQUIANO,  
OR  
GUSTAVUS VASSA,  
THE AFRICAN.  
WRITTEN BY HIMSELF.  
VOL. I.

*Bliss! God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid, for  
the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my sing; his wife is become  
my salvation.  
And in that day shall ye say, Praise the Lord, will upon his name,  
declare his doings among the people. Psalm cxi. 1, 4.*

LONDON:

Printed for and sold by the Author, No. 15, Union-  
Street, Middlesex Hospital;

Sold also by Mr. Johnson, St. Paul's Church-Yard; Mr.  
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Front page of Equiano's  
autobiography

*African*, it was first published in 1789 and rapidly went through several editions. It is one of the earliest known examples of published writing by an African writer. It was the first influential slave

autobiography, and its first-hand account of slavery and of the experiences of an 18th-century black immigrant caused a sensation when published in 1789, fuelling a growing anti-slavery movement in England.

Equiano's narrative begins in the West African village where he was kidnapped into slavery in 1756. He vividly recalls the pestilence and horror of the Middle Passage: "I now wished for the last friend, Death, to relieve me." As described in his book, the young Equiano was eventually shipped to a Virginia plantation where he witnessed slaves tortured with thumbscrews and the iron muzzle. Slavery, he explained, brutalizes everyone - the slaves, their overseers, plantation wives, and the whole of society.

The autobiography goes on to describe how Equiano's adventures brought him to London, where he married into English society and became a leading abolitionist. His exposé of the infamous slave-ship *Zong* - 133 slaves thrown overboard in mid-ocean for the insurance money - shook the nation. But it was Equiano's book that would prove his most lasting contribution to the abolitionist movement, a book which vividly demonstrated the humanity of Africans as much as the inhumanity of slavery.



The book not only furthered the abolitionist cause while providing an exemplary work of English literature by a new, African author, but also made Equiano's fortune. It gave him independence from his benefactors and enabled him to fully chart his own life and purpose, and develop his interest in working to improve economic, social and educational conditions in Africa, particularly in Sierra Leone.

### **Family in Britain**

At some point, after having travelled widely, Olaudah Equiano decided to settle in Britain and raise a family. Equiano is closely associated with Soham, Cambridgeshire, where, on the 7 April 1792, he married Susannah Cullen, a local girl, in St Andrew's Church. The original marriage register containing the entry for Equiano and Susannah is today held by Cambridgeshire Archives and Local Studies at the County Record Office in Cambridge. He announced his wedding in every edition of his autobiography from 1792 onwards, and it has been suggested his marriage mirrored his

anticipation of a commercial union between Africa and Great Britain. The couple settled in the area and had two daughters, Anna Maria , born October 16, 1793, and Joanna, born April 11, 1795.

Susannah died in February 1796 aged 34, and Equiano died a year after that on 31 March 1797, aged approximately 52. Soon after, the elder daughter died, aged four years old, leaving Joanna to inherit Equiano's estate, which was valued at £950: a considerable sum, worth approximately £1,000,000 today. Joanna married the Rev. Henry Bromley, and they ran a Congregational Chapel at Clavering near Saffron Walden in Essex, before moving to London in the middle of the nineteenth century - they are both buried at the Congregationalists' the non-denominational Abney Park Cemetery, in Stoke Newington.

## **Last days and will**

Although Equiano's death is recorded in London, 1797, the location of his burial is unknown. One of his last London addresses

appears to have been Plaisterer's Hall in the City of London (where he drew up his will on 28 May 1796).

Having drawn up his will, Olaudah Equiano moved to John Street, Tottenham Court Road, close to Whitefield's Methodist chapel (rebuilt for the Congregationalists in the 1950s and now the American Church in London, where there is a small, recent memorial); and lastly Paddington Street, Middlesex where he died. His death was reported in newspaper obituaries at the time, but seems not to have been widely known. He may have moved frequently and left an unclear trail to his burial place out of concerns for his safety and a desire to rest in peace. Factions of the political elite sought to suppress reformers and those linked to them in the 1790s, the time of the French Revolution and close on the heels of the American Revolution. Equiano had been an active member of the London Corresponding Society that campaigned to extend the vote to working men, and had seen his close friend Thomas Hardy, the Society's Secretary, prosecuted by the government (though without success) on the basis that this amounted to

treason. In December 1797, unaware that Equiano had died nine months earlier, the government-sponsored *Anti-Jacobin, or Weekly Examiner* presumed him to still be alive, for it satirised him at a fictional meeting of the *Friends of Freedom*.

Olaudah Equiano's will demonstrates the sincerity of his religious and social beliefs. Had his daughter Joanna died before reaching the age of inheritance (twenty-one), half his wealth would have passed to the *Sierra Leone Company* for the continued provision of assistance to West Africans, and half to the London Missionary Society, which promoted education overseas. This organisation had been formed the previous November at the Countess of Huntingdon's Spa Fields Chapel. By the early nineteenth century, *The Missionary Society* had become well known worldwide as non-denominational, though it was largely Congregational.

## **Modern views**

### **Controversy of origin**

Vincent Carretta, a professor of literature and author of *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (2005), points out that a major problem facing any biographer is how to deal with Equiano's account of his origins.

As Carretta explains: olaudaah

*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.*

This current doubt about his origins arises from records that suggest Equiano may have been born in South Carolina. Carretta has found baptismal records and a naval muster roll linking Equiano to South Carolina. Other academics have reported an oral history record of his upbringing, as he claimed, in Isske, Africa, principally based on Catherine Obianuju Acholonu's study: *The Igbo Roots Of Olaudah*

*Equiano: An Anthropological Research* (1989). A more recent paper (June 2005) that favours Olaudah Equiano's own account of his African birth, is the Canadian academic study by Paul Lovejoy, *Autobiography and Memory: Gustavus Vassa, alias Olaudah Equiano, the African*.

Historians have never discredited the accuracy of Equiano's narrative, nor the power it had to support the abolitionist cause, particularly in Britain during the 1790s. However, parts of Equiano's account of the Middle Passage may have been based on already published accounts or the experiences of those he knew.

### **Portrayal in mass media**

A BBC production in 2005 employed dramatic reconstruction, archival material and interviews with scholars such as Stuart Hall and Ian Duffield to provide the social and economic context of the 18th century slave trade.

Equiano was portrayed by the Senegalese singer and musician Youssou N'Dour in the 2007 film *Amazing Grace*.

*African Snow*, a play by Murray Watts, takes place in John Newton's mind. It was first produced at the York Theatre Royal as a co-production with Riding Lights Theatre Company in April 2007 before 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.

In 2007, Stone Publishing House published a book aimed at schoolchildren entitled *Equiano: the slave with the loud voice*. Illustrated by Cheryl Ives, it was written by Kent historian Dr Robert Hume, who had previously authored books about Dr. Joseph Bell, Christopher Columbus and Perkin Warbeck.

## References

1. ^ Other biographies claim Equiano was born in colonial South Carolina, not in Africa (see: [External links](#)).
2. ^ Equiano, Olaudah: *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African*. Gutenberg Project, 2005,

webpage: Gutenberg-15399.

## External links

- Works by Olaudah Equiano at Project Gutenberg
- Audio recording of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* at LibriVox
- Olaudah Equiano at the BBC
- Africans in America - Olaudah Equiano at PBS
- Equiano at Parliament and the British Slave Trade 1600-1807
- Olaudah Equiano: Black Britain's Political Founding Father at 100 Great Black Britons

## Dramatic recreations

- *African Snow* Riding Lights Theatre Company. 2007 play featuring Equiano's story
- *Amazing Grace* official US website
- *Amazing Grace* official UK website
- *A Son of Africa* 1998 short film from California Newsreel



## Birthplace dispute

- Autobiography and Memory: Gustavus Vassa, alias Olaudah Equiano, the African Paul E. Lovejoy. May-October 2005.
- "Where Was Olaudah Equiano Born?" [1] Brycchan Carey's list of Africanist/Americanist positions. (accessed 11 June 2007)
- Unraveling the Narrative Jennifer Howard. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 9, 2005.
- Olaudah Equiano: A Critical Biography Brycchan Carey. 13 December 2005.
- Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa at Soham On-Line; includes details of church records of Equiano's marriage and deaths in the family

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