

Olaudah Equiano

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Olaudah Equiano was an astute campaigner who successfully won the support of the general public and decision makers and changed the view of what it meant to be a slave. He was born in 1745 in the Eboe region of what is today Nigeria. His father was a chief, who, being a man in a position of power, owned slaves. But when Equiano was 11, he was kidnapped and forced into slavery.

He was taken across Africa, put on a slave ship and transported to the West Indies. From there, he was sold to a plantation owner in Virginia, and then to a Royal Navy officer, Michael Henry Pascal, who changed Equiano's name to Gustavus Vassa.

Pascal took Equiano to London to serve under him in The Seven Years War. Apart from being used on warships, Pascal loaned him to friends and relatives, during which time he unusually was allowed to learn how to read and write, something most slaves were prohibited from doing. At the end of the war Pascal, unsure of the legality of keeping a slave in England, sold Equiano to Robert King in the West Indies in 1762.

King took advantage of Equiano's ability to read, write, and speak English and had him work as a clerk in his warehouses and as a crewman. Throughout his voyages, Equiano managed to buy and sell goods in his own right, and, in 1766, he was able to purchase his freedom.

In 1767 he returned to London and worked on commercial vessels sailing between the Mediterranean and West Indies. He joined a former employer, Dr Charles Irving, from 1775 to 1776, helping to establish a plantation in South America, during which time Equiano was a buyer and driver of slaves; but he soon left.

Recognising the destruction the slave trade caused Africa and Africans, Equiano returned to London and began working with abolitionists including Thomas Clarkson and Granville Sharp.

Equiano used public platforms and the press to draw attention to the injustices of slavery and to challenge the position of the pro-slavery lobby. He wrote articles for various London newspapers, and, in 1789, he wrote and published his autobiography *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. This was the first account of slavery written by a former slave. Its popularity is clear. The first edition of over 700 copies sold out and there were eight further reprints in Equiano's lifetime. It was also translated into Dutch, German and Russian and was the only book from England up to that point to be reprinted in the United States.

The book fundamentally challenged the lies about Africans promoted by the pro-slavery lobby, which claimed Africans led better lives as slaves and were happy. It was difficult for those who read Equiano's account not to associate themselves with the African hero who was courageous, resourceful, literate, cultured and Christian, qualities people admired and aspired to.

Through his public appearances across the country between 1789 and 1794, Equiano exposed the barbarity of the slave trade further dispelling many of the prejudices and assumptions about Africans that had helped justify the trade. His work made Britons see that Africans were people and inspired them to join the abolitionist campaign.

Equiano organised other black men to write joint letters against slavery, sometimes referring to themselves as the "Sons of Africa", and made sure his voice was heard by writing to Lord Hawkesbury of the Privy Council, and publishing a copy of the letter in a London newspaper. He regularly lobbied MPs and led a black delegation to the House of Commons to support Sir William Dolben's 1788 Bill, where they met the Prime Minister, Dolben and other MPs. The Bill, which called for regulating the number of slaves a ship could carry and required slave ships to have a doctor on board, passed and was the first piece of British legislation to regulate the slave trade.

As a former slave the risks for Equiano were great, but this did not deter him. In addition to his activities, he defended fellow abolitionists when they were attacked, even though this made him a target, and publicly supported radical causes including universal male suffrage and interracial marriage.

Equiano's impact was recognised by his contemporaries. One friend described him as "a principal instrument in bringing about the motion for the repeal of the Slave-Act," and, in one newspaper he was described as "well known in England as the champion and advocate for procuring a suppression of the Slave Trade." Equiano died on 31 March 1797.

