

## Topic Page: [Equiano, Olaudah \(1745 - Apr 31, 1797\)](#)

Definition: **Equiano, Olaudah** from *Chambers Biographical Dictionary*

c.1750-97

Nigerian autobiographer

Captured by slave traders at the age of ten, he was sold in the West Indies. After buying his freedom, he worked as a merchant seaman and was active in the English anti-slavery movement. He wrote *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789).



Image from: [The best-selling 1789 autobiography of former... in Encyclopedia of Emancipation and Abolition in the Transatlantic World](#)

### Summary Article: **Equiano, Olaudah**

From *Cultural Sociology of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa*

Olaudah Equiano (1745-97) is one of the most memorable and studied diasporan Africans of the 18th century. His autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa The African: Written by Himself*, is one of the earliest slave narratives by a person of African descent. His autobiography has become something of a touchstone for slave narratives, eliciting both approval and controversy.

With its claim to narrating from firsthand experience the cruelty of the slave trade, it gave tremendous impetus to the abolitionist movement. His account, written 30 years after his capture from Africa, lent credence to the abolitionist ethical and moral opposition to slave trade. His powerful life narrative has, therefore, been seen as both an individual's life narrative and as an indictment of the inhumanity of the slave trade.

Most of what is known about Equiano is from his autobiography. He states that he was born in what is today southeastern Nigeria among the Igbo ethnic group. His father held an important position in the Igbo political hierarchy. At about the age of 11, two men and a woman kidnapped Equiano and his sister from their homeland. The slave trade at the time was vigorously orchestrated by British slave traders, and the Igbo became a sizeable portion of those captured in slave raids that sustained the trade. Thus began Equiano's life as a slave shipped across the Atlantic Ocean to the West Indies and the United States. He was first sold to a planter in Virginia before being sold again to Michael Henry Pascal, who served in the British Royal Navy. Pascal as slave master gave him the name Gustavus Vassa, which remained his official name. While serving Pascal, Equiano witnessed fighting during the Seven Year War (1756-63), which pitted Britain and Hanover against France and Spain, affecting North and Central America, Europe, the west African coast, India, and the Philippines.

Equiano had anticipated that upon the end of the war, Pascal would free him. But much to his chagrin, his slave master sold him again to another master in the West Indies. While there, Equiano was able to save enough money to purchase his freedom. As a freed slave, he was ironically able to serve as a slave supervisor on sugar plantations. His seafaring skills and his writing were his two most abiding legacies. He learned to navigate the high seas while serving Pascal and other masters as a slave. He taught himself how to read and write, a skill he used to great effect in drafting a life narrative of pervasive influence. He made commercial voyages to North America, the North Pole, and the

Mediterranean. While voyaging in the Arctic, he experienced seafaring hazards that made him mull over his mortality and sinfulness. As a consequence of this crisis in confidence, he embraced Christianity in 1774, joining the Methodist Church while still a slave.

Upon gaining his freedom, he continued seafaring. He decided to settle in England, becoming a British national and marrying Susan Cullen, an English woman with whom he had two daughters. At the time of his death in 1791, he was the wealthiest and most famous person of African descent in Britain. It is his Christianized self that informs the worldview of his narrative. For example, he condemned the slave trade as unchristian and inhuman.

Some of Equiano's claims in his autobiography have been questioned, with some scholars alleging that they were mere fabrications. For example, his claim that he was born in west Africa has been disputed based on where he was captured and brought to North America. Notably Vincent Carretta has charged that although Equiano was of African descent, he was actually born in South Carolina. Detractors also find fault with Equiano's stamp of approval upon slavery as practiced among his own Igbo people, while at the same time condemning European enslavement of Africans. They also charge that his acceptance of the role of slave supervisor after having been freed was somewhat inconsistent with his claim that slavery was evil. Nevertheless, Equiano remains an iconic figure in the collective memory of the African diaspora.

### See Also:

Christianity , Trade, Trans-Saharan , Triangular and Slave Trade

### Further Readings

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- Korieh, Chima J. *Olaudah Equiano and the Igbo World*. Trenton, NJ: AWP, 2009.
- Walvin, James. *An African' Life: The Life and Times of Olaudah Equiano*. London: Cassell, 1998.

Waliaula, Ken Walibora

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