



All About...

Olaudah Equiano

Who Was Olaudah Equiano?

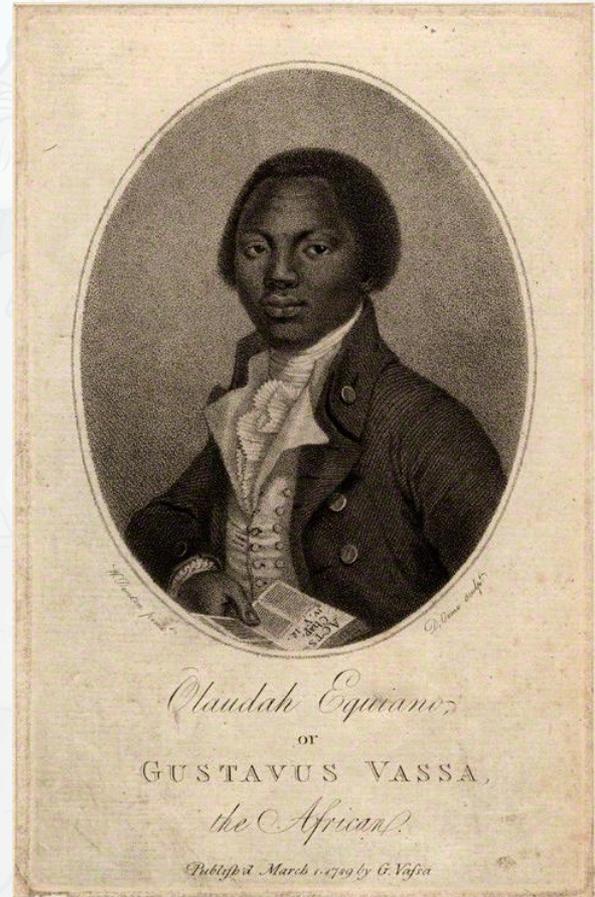
Olaudah Equiano was an African writer who, after being enslaved, wrote an autobiography about his ordeal and became an important campaigner for the abolition of slavery.

Did You Know...?

We don't have many first-hand accounts written by people who were enslaved, as many enslaved people did not have the opportunity to learn to read or write. This makes Olaudah's work very important.

abolition - The end of a system, practise or institution.

autobiography - An account of someone's life, written by themselves.



Early Life

Historians believe that Olaudah was born around 1745 but as there aren't any written records to show this, the exact date is unknown. In his autobiography, 'The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano; or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself', Olaudah wrote that he was born in Nigeria and kidnapped, along with his sister, when he was about 11 years old. He reported that he was then taken to the West Indies and after that, to the state of Virginia in the USA.

Some later documents about Olaudah say that he was born in the USA. Due to this, historians are unsure if his writing about traveling from Africa is based on his experience, reading or a mixture of both.

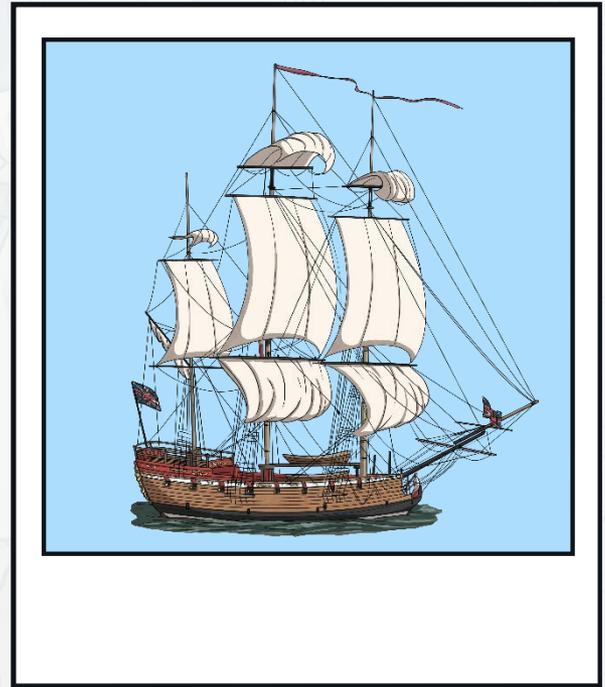


Talk About It

Talk to your partner about what you have learned about Olaudah so far.

Olaudah's Travels

Olaudah was then bought by a sea captain, Michael Henry Pascal. Pascal gave Olaudah a different name, Gustavus Vassa, after the 16th-century Swedish king who he admired. For about eight years, Olaudah travelled all over the world with Pascal. While travelling with him, Olaudah learnt to read and write and was baptised as a Christian. Olaudah was later sold to Robert King, where he was forced to work as both a barber and deckhand. Alongside his work for King, he was able to earn a little money by trading and, after three years, he had saved enough money to pay King to free him from his life of enslavement.



Think About It...

It was quite common for slave holders to change enslaved people's names. Why do you think they did this?

A Free Man

After Olaudah bought his freedom, he travelled to England and became involved in campaigning for the abolition of slavery. He was an active member of 'Sons of Africa'. This was a group of influential Black men, who shared the same goal of ending enslavement. They also campaigned for other issues affecting Black people, including improving the education of Black people living in London.

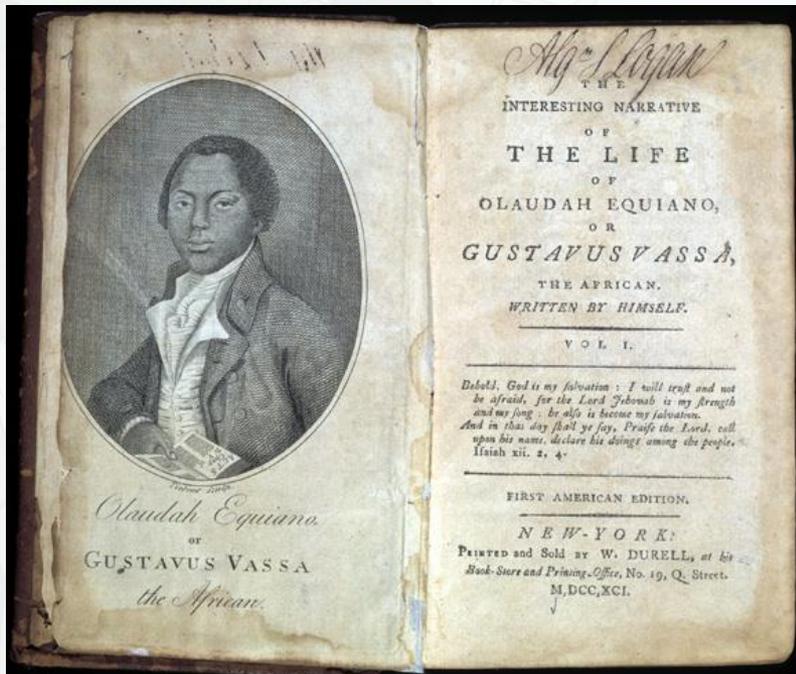


Ottobah Cugoano, a contemporary of Olaudah Equiano and member of the 'Sons of Africa'

Think About It...

Why do you think that groups, such as the 'Sons of Africa', played an important role in ending the enslavement of Black people?

Autobiography



Olaudah wrote and published his autobiography, called 'The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano; or, Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself' in 1789. It was one of the first books to be published in Europe by a Black African writer.



Olaudah travelled to many countries, talking about his book and his experiences as an enslaved person. He became very wealthy and well respected.

In 1792, Olaudah married an English woman, Susannah Cullen, and they had two daughters. Sadly, he died just five years later.

Portrait of an African

For a long time, this portrait, that is thought to have been painted by Allan Ramsay, was believed to be of Olaudah Equiano. Historians now believe that it is, in fact, a picture of Ignatius Sancho, another significant Black writer from the time.



Historians compared the facial features of the man in the painting to those of a painting known to be of Ignatius Sancho and found that they were almost identical. It was also known that Ignatius was friends with many influential people in London around the time that the portrait was painted, including several artists.

Talk About It

No one knows for sure who the man in the portrait is because the painting is named 'Portrait of an African'. Most portraits of important people from that time would have included their name in the title. What does this tell us about people's attitudes towards Black people at that time?

Legacy

Olaudah Equiano's work is still regarded as very important by historians today, as it is one of the only discovered accounts that was written by someone who was enslaved. Although enslaving people didn't become illegal in British colonies until the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833, Olaudah is seen as one of the people who laid the ground work to make this possible.

