



## Section 4

AMERICAN LIVES **Olaudah Equiano**  
*Freed Slave, Early Abolitionist*

*"I now offer this edition of my Narrative . . . hoping it may still be the means . . . [of ] strengthening the [movement] . . . to put a speedy end to a traffic both cruel and unjust."—Olaudah Equiano, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano (1792 edition)*

Olaudah Equiano, captured in Africa and sold into slavery, survived the deadly middle passage. He eventually bought his freedom and later wrote his autobiography, considered by writer Arna Bontemps as “the first truly notable book in the genre now known as slave narratives.”

Equiano was born in present-day Nigeria around 1745. He remembered much of his childhood and noted the customs and traditions of his village. He called the “manner of living” in his remote village “entirely plain,” describing his people’s hard work, modest manners, and lack of alcoholic beverages.

At age ten, Equiano and his sister were kidnapped by slavers. Placed on a ship bound for the Americas, he saw the horror of the middle passage. White sailors’ cruelty surprised him, as he had never seen such actions—and he was surprised even more when a sailor was flogged, for it shocked him that they would be cruel to each other. “This made me fear these people the more,” he remembered. After describing how two Africans jumped overboard rather than continue the voyage, he reminded his readers of how the middle passage violated Christian morality: “O, ye nominal Christians! might not an African ask you, learned you this from your God . . . ?”

Equiano was sold to a Virginia planter, on whose land he stayed for a brief time. Then a British naval officer, Michael Henry Pascal, bought him. The officer renamed him Gustavus Vassa after a Swedish noble who helped liberate Sweden from the Dutch. Equiano used the name for the remainder of his life in western society—but he put his real name on the title page of his autobiography.

Equiano served aboard ship with Pascal for many years, seeing action against the French in Canada and the Mediterranean. He learned to read and write and was baptized. Though Pascal had promised him freedom, he was sold again in 1762. Equiano felt betrayed, his “heart ready to burst with sorrow and anguish.”

For three years, Equiano worked for a ship captain who traded between the West Indies and British North America. In 1766, he used money he had saved to buy his freedom. “My feet scarcely touched the ground,” he recalled, “for they were winged with joy.” In his book, he recalled that he thought of the words of a Psalm: “I glorified God in my heart, in whom I trusted.”

Equiano became a skilled seaman. He captained one ship when the captain died and on another voyage saved the crew when the ship became wrecked. Rescued from this mishap, he ended up in Georgia, where he escaped being kidnapped and probably sold into slavery again.

Later Equiano joined a sea voyage seeking a Northeast Passage from Europe to Asia and tried to establish a plantation in Central America. He settled in England and married in 1792. Various accounts put his death between 1797 and 1801.

Equiano’s autobiography was first published in 1789 and was immediately popular. It ended with a long argument for abolishing the “inhuman traffic” of the slave trade. Like others of his time, Equiano hoped that this would be the first step toward abolishing slavery. In addition to making moral arguments against the slave trade, he offered economic reasons. He hoped to convince British leaders that their trade would grow if carried on with an Africa freed of the specter of slavery.

## Questions

1. What point was Equiano trying to make by including details about life in Africa?
2. What was Equiano’s purpose in describing the cruel treatment he witnessed on the middle passage?
3. Why do you think Equiano used both moral and economic arguments to urge ending the slave trade?