

Nobody Knows The Trouble I've Seen

Helen Fallon

Olaudah Equiano was born in 1745 into a closely knit community in Eboe in the eastern region of today's Nigeria. His father was a village chief and the community enjoyed, for the most part, a happy and orderly existence where the men farmed and where, in Equiano's words, "when our women are not employed with the men in tillage, their usual occupation is spinning and weaving cotton, which they afterwards dye and make into garments". In his inland home Equiano passed a peaceful childhood, the youngest of six brothers and one sister.

MASTERS AND SLAVES

"I had never heard of white men or Europeans nor of the sea," he recounts in *Equiano's Travels* (first published in 1789). All this was to change when he was twelve. "One day, when all our people were gone out to their work and only I and my dear sister were left to mind the house, two men and a woman got over the walls, and in a moment seized us both, and without giving us time to cry out or make resistance, stopped our mouths and ran off with us into the woods."

Equiano's childhood was over. The long journey to the coast and into slavery had begun.

The people of Eboe were aware of the slave trade. "Men from the south-west of us, we call them Oye Eboe, which term signifies red men living at a distance. They generally bring us firearms,

gunpowder, hats, beads and dried fish...They always carry slaves through our land."

But they were completely unaware that many of these slaves were en route to the cotton plantations of North America and the sugar plantations of a series of small islands which were called the West Indies by Christopher Columbus in 1492. In the years that followed Columbus' voyage, Spain, England, France, Portugal and Holland began their colonisation. Initially the planters had intended to use local labour. But later they looked to Africa. As their empires grew, so too did the slave trade.

JUST MERCHANDISE

Equiano was "carried to the left of sun's rising, through many different countries" and was sold a number of times. To his great distress he was parted from his beloved sister on the journey. After six or seven months they reached the coast and Equiano was put on board a slave ship.

"When I recovered a little I found some black people about me. I asked them if we were not to be eaten by these white men with horrible looks, red faces, and loose hair. I asked them how the vessel could go. They told me they could not tell, but there were cloths put upon the masts by the help of the ropes I saw, and then the vessel went on; and the white men had some spell or magic they put in the water when they liked to stop the vessel."

The journey that Equiano and over twelve million other Africans made is known as the Middle Passage; so called because it was the middle stage of a three-part voyage. The first part was the journey to Africa, the second or middle part was the transatlantic journey to the Americas. After the ship was unloaded a cargo of tobacco, sugar or some other product was loaded and the final part of the journey, back to Europe, began.

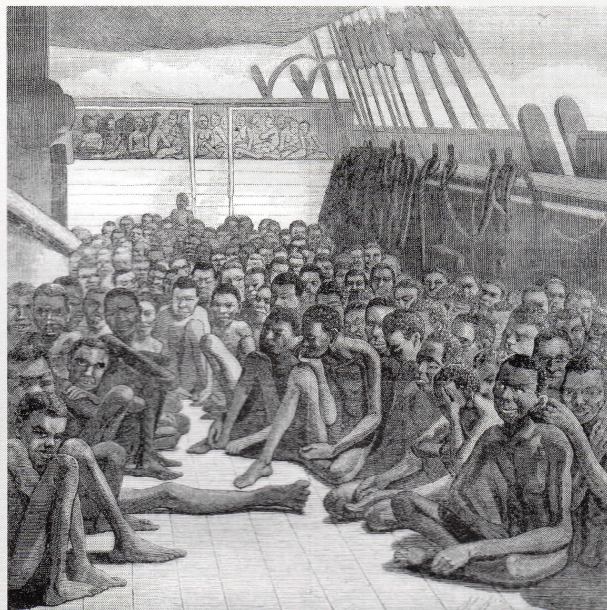
It is estimated that at least one of every four captives died during the Middle Passage. Between 1740 and 1810, sixty thousand slaves were delivered to the Americas every year, the largest recorded movement of people in history.

Initially Equiano was a house slave in Virginia. One day the house was visited by an English naval lieutenant, Michael Henry Pascal. He bought Equiano from his master and renamed him Gustavus Vassa. "And when I refused to answer to my new name, which at first I did, it gained me many a cuff."

Working on Pascal's ship, the young boy was popular with the crew. One of them, Richard Baker, began to teach him to read. "I had often seen my master and Dick employed in reading, and I had a great curiosity

A picture of the slave ship 'Wildfire' which appeared in Harper's Weekly in 1860.

(courtesy sonofthesouth.net)



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Extracts can be read on www.brycchancarey.com/equiano



Olaudah Equiano: slave, freeman and author of *Equiano's Travels*

to talk to the books as I thought they did. I have often taken up a book and have talked to it and then put my ear to it when alone, in hopes that it would answer me, and I have been very much concerned when it remained silent."

Equiano saw action in major naval battles and travelled to Canada and the Mediterranean. Having fought for Britain he felt he should be given his freedom. That was denied him and he was sold to another sea captain who took him to Monserrat, an island in the Caribbean.

His ability to read and write stood him in good stead and he worked as a clerk on a plantation, where he saw fellow slaves, field workers, treated with great cruelty. In Monserrat he began petty trading. In 1766, having saved £40, he was able to buy his freedom. "Like the apostle Peter (whose deliverance from prison was so sudden and extraordinary that he thought he was in a vision), I could scarcely believe I was awake. Heavens! Who could do justice to my feelings at this moment."

FREE, FREE AGAIN

Equiano went to England and became an influential advocate of the anti-slavery movement. Three years after the publication of his memoir, *Equiano's Travels*, which became a bestseller of the time, he married Susanna Cullen. They had two daughters. Equiano died in 1797. ■