

American Slavery from an African Perspective

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

To provide a glimpse of the broad international implications of the Atlantic slave trade during the 18th century, this tutorial relies on the autobiography of Olaudah Equiano. Equiano published his autobiography in 1789, several decades after he had been captured by slave traders, sold in the West Indies, traveled throughout the Atlantic World as a slave, and ultimately purchased his freedom (something most slaves were never able to do). Equiano's autobiography reveals the variety of actors who were involved in the Atlantic slave trade and shows how prosperity for some in the Atlantic World depended upon the exploitation of others.

This tutorial will consider slavery from an African perspective in four parts:

1. Capture

Scholars estimate that 7.7 million Africans were transported to the Americas between 1492 and 1820. Over half of them arrived on British ships during the 18th century, when the Atlantic slave trade was at its height. The majority of African slaves labored on plantations in the West Indies and in South America, but many were transported to Britain's North American colonies. The Atlantic slave trade encompassed a broad network of African traders, European ship captains and merchants, and American planters—all of whom profited from the enslavement of human beings.

According to his autobiography, **Olaudah Equiano** was the youngest son of a West African chief. Sometime during the 1750s, when Equiano was eleven years old, he was kidnapped by slave traders.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Olaudah Equiano

African captive sold into slavery in the mid-1700s. His autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, published in 1789, reveals the broad international implications of the Atlantic slave trade during the eighteenth century.

Read the selection of Equiano's autobiography (1837) provided below. It seems that by the 1750s, fear of attack from neighbors or slave traders had become a fact of life in West Africa:

Olaudah Equiano, from the frontispiece of his 1789 autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*

Autobiography of Olaudah Equiano, Slave

"Generally, when the grown people in the neighborhood were gone far in the fields to labour, the children assembled together in some of the neighbours' premises to play; and commonly some of us used to get up a tree to look out for any assailant, or kidnapper, that might come upon us; for they sometimes took those opportunities of our parents' absence, to attack and carry off as many as they could seize. One day, as I was watching at the top of a tree in our yard, I saw one of those people come into the yard of our next neighbour but one, to kidnap, there being many stout young people in it. Immediately, on this, I gave the alarm of the rogue, and he was surrounded by the stoutest of them, who entangled him with cords, so that he could not escape till some of the grown people came and secured him."



THINK ABOUT IT

According to Equiano, how did African villages attempt to protect themselves from potential slave traders?

Equiano went on to describe his own capture shortly thereafter:

"One day, when all our people were gone out to their works as usual, and only I and my dear sister were left to mind the house, two men and a woman got over our walls, and in a moment seized us both; and, without giving us time to cry out, or to make resistance, they stopped our mouths, tied our hands, and ran off with us into the nearest wood: and continued to carry us as far as they could, till night came on, when we reached a small house, where the robbers halted for refreshment, and spent the night."



BRAINSTORM

According to Equiano's accounts, it appears that young people were the primary targets for kidnappers.

Why was this?

Several months after his capture, Equiano arrived on the African coast to begin the next, and most horrific, part of his journey: transport across the Atlantic Ocean via the Middle Passage.

2. Transport

When Equiano reached the African coast, he observed "the sea, and a slave-ship, which was then riding at

anchor, and waiting for its cargo." Equiano's captors likely sold him to European traders, who brought him aboard a ship destined for the Americas. At this point Equiano's account from his autobiography (1837) provides a glimpse of the transatlantic nature of the slave trade, with Europeans as well as Africans involved in the sale and transport of people like himself:

Autobiography of Olaudah Equiano, Slave

"When I was carried on board I was immediately handled, and tossed up, to see if I were sound, by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me. Their complexions too differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke, which was very different from any I had ever heard, united to confirm me in this belief....When I looked round the ship too, and saw a large furnace of copper boiling, and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted my fate, and, quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted. When I recovered a little, I found some black people about me, who I believed were some of those who brought me on board and had been receiving their pay; they talked to me in order to cheer me, but all in vain."



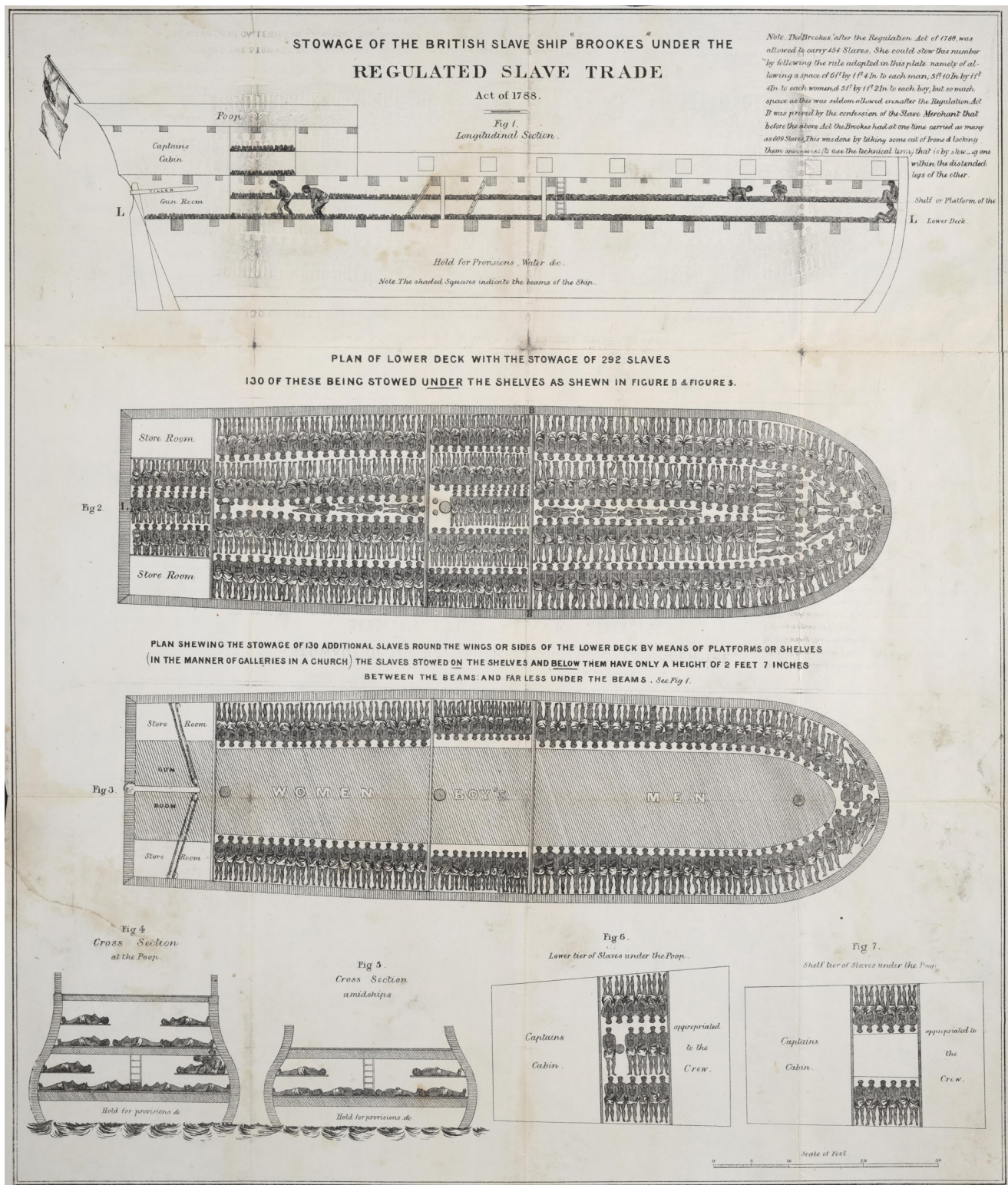
THINK ABOUT IT

According to Equiano's account, how much human diversity was present in the slave ports of West Africa?

Equiano went on to describe the horrific conditions of the slave ship as it prepared to cross the Atlantic Ocean:

"At last, when the ship we were in had got in all her cargo, they made ready with many fearful noises, and we were all put under deck, so that we could not see how they managed the vessel. But this disappointment was the least of my sorrow. The stench of the hold while we were on the coast was so intolerably loathsome, that it was dangerous to remain there for any time, and some of us had been permitted to stay on the deck for the fresh air; but now that the whole ship's cargo were confined together, it became absolutely pestilential. The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died, thus falling victims to the improvident avarice, as I may call it, of their purchasers. This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable."

Compare Equiano's account with the diagram of the British slave ship *Brookes* below. When doing so, remember the 5 Ws (i.e., who, what, when, where, and why) especially the questions related to "who" and "what".



THINK ABOUT IT

Who do you think created the diagram above?



BRAINSTORM

What is the purpose of Equiano's account of the slave ship? How and why is it different from the diagram of the slave ship *Brookes*? In what ways are these differences related to the documents' creators (i.e., their authors) and their respective audiences?

The plan for the *Brookes* shows enslaved Africans chained tightly together in rows, which indicates the European perception of slaves as commodities. On ships like the *Brookes*, most slaves were allotted spaces

no larger than 6 feet by 1 foot. The slaves were packed tightly together so slave traders could maximize both space and profits. Equiano's account provides an important description of this process from the perspective of enslaved Africans, revealing that their transport across the Atlantic was traumatic, dangerous, and, above all, degrading in ways that could not be expressed in the diagram of a slave ship.



DID YOU KNOW

At one point during Equiano's account of his transport across the Atlantic, two individuals escaped their chains and jumped into the ocean, preferring to drown rather than to suffer any longer. Another slave attempted to follow them but was recaptured and whipped "unmercifully" for "attempting to prefer death to slavery."

3. Sale

Like many others in the Middle Passage, Equiano's ship disembarked at Barbados in the West Indies. The island was home to a thriving slave market by the middle of the 18th century, as the selection from his autobiography (1837) below shows.

Autobiography of Olaudah Equiano, Slave

"Many merchants and planters now came on board....They put us in separate parcels, and examined us attentively. They also made us jump, and pointed to the land, signifying we were to go there.... [S]oon after we were landed, there came to us Africans of all languages. We were conducted immediately to the merchant's yard, where we were all pent up together like so many sheep in a fold, without regard to sex or age....

We were not many days in the merchant's custody before we were sold after their usual manner, which is this: — On a signal given, (as the beat of a drum), the buyers rush at once into the yard where the slaves are confined, and make choice of the parcel they like best. The noise and clamour with which this is attended, and the eagerness visible in the countenances of the buyers, serve not a little to increase the apprehensions of the terrified Africans, who may well be supposed to consider them as the ministers of that destruction to which they think themselves devoted. In this manner, without scruple, are relations and friends separated, most of them never to see each other again."



THINK ABOUT IT

What similarities do you notice between slaves' experiences on a slave ship and in a merchant's yard? Equiano was ultimately sold to a planter from Virginia. Shortly thereafter, a British sea captain purchased Equiano and renamed him Gustavus Vassa. Over the next decades, Equiano led a remarkable life. He accompanied his owner on numerous voyages across the Atlantic. While enslaved, he enrolled in an English school and learned to read and write. He even fought for the British during the French and Indian War before he was sold again and returned to the Caribbean. In 1766, Equiano purchased his freedom and ultimately settled in London. In 1789, he published *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*.

4. The Atlantic Slave Trade

The selections above, along with the rest of Equiano's account, provide a valuable glimpse into the transatlantic dimensions of the African slave trade, one in which Great Britain and its American colonies played an integral role. Only a small portion of African slaves (between 400,000 and 600,000 out of 7.7 million) traveled directly to Britain's North American colonies, but the colonies participated in the slave trade in other ways. For example, foodstuffs from New England supplied plantations in the West Indies. In return, crops that African slaves produced were shipped to New England. Rather than a barrier, the Atlantic Ocean was a conduit through which colonists and others exchanged goods, ideas, and, in Equiano's case, slaves.

Equiano was quick to point out that Africans were often deprived of experiencing such opportunities under their own free will. At one point in his autobiography (1837), he appealed to Christianity and English understandings of liberty to challenge the British Empire's reliance upon unfree Africans:

Autobiography of Olaudah Equiano, Slave

"O, ye nominal Christians! Might not an African ask you, learned you this from your God? Who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you? Is it not enough that we are torn from our country and friends to toil for your luxury and lust for gain?.... Surely this is a new refinement of cruelty, which, while it has no advantage to atone for it, thus aggravates distress, and adds fresh horrors even to the wretchedness of slavery."



BRAINSTORM

Why does Equiano refer to the Atlantic slave trade as "a new refinement in cruelty" that has added "fresh horrors...to the wretchedness of slavery"?



SUMMARY

This tutorial examined slavery in the Americas from the perspective of Olaudah Equiano. His autobiography shows that American slavery during the colonial period must be understood within the context of the Atlantic World. The Atlantic slave trade involved a number of historical actors, including traders, captains, and merchants, as well as colonial planters in North America. Equiano's account shows how a number of Africans entered the Atlantic World and were changed by their experiences there, even though many of these changes occurred against their will. Fortunately, Equiano gained his freedom. Unfortunately, many other slaves did not, and colonial planters went to great lengths to control enslaved Africans.

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PEOPLE TO KNOW

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