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Gustavus Vassa and the Abolition of the British Slave Trade

Paul E. Lovejoy FRSC CRC


Distinguished Research Professor, [York University](#)

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This project on Gustavus Vassa (Olaudah Equiano) focuses on the abolition movement. The subject of the project is the life of Olaudah Equiano, alias Gustavus Vassa, the African, whose *Interesting Narrative*, published in 1789, has been credited as influential in the [abolition of the British slave trade](#), implemented in 1807, and which is widely read in English literature and Black Studies courses, and remains in print in several popular editions. There are over 25,000 sites on the web relating to this most interesting African and black Briton. His story is a classic slave narrative, written in the richness of eighteenth-century literature, by someone who did not know any English until he was eleven. In the early 1790s, the heady days influenced by Revolutionary France on those interested in Parliamentary reform, the abolition of the slave trade, and the ending of slavery. Vassa was arguably the most influential black in London, at a

time when the black community numbered perhaps 20,000, making London one of the largest "African" cities, if not the largest, in the world at the time.

There has been a considerable body of information collected, much of it published in the various editions of the *Interesting Narrative*, and most fully in the edition by Vincent Carretta. Moreover, there is some very good [scholarly analysis of different aspects of Vassa/Equiano's life and significance](#). This project builds on that knowledge. Considerable historical work remains to be undertaken, particularly with regard to the relationship of Vassa to the black poor of London, his friendship with radical leader Thomas Hardy, who was tried for treason in 1794, his marriage to a white woman, and their children, his commercial activities and observations in the Caribbean, his involvement in the Mosquito Shore venture of Dr. Charles Irving and Vassa's fascination with the Muslim world of the Ottoman Empire. The papers of the leading abolitionists, intellectuals and political figures of the late eighteenth century and those who subscribed to the various editions of the *Interesting Narrative* are being searched. Moreover, research is being conducted on places and individuals that were important in Vassa's life.

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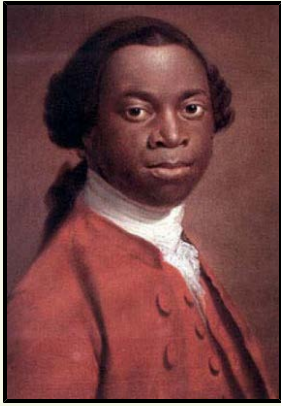


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This website makes accessible an extensive research program on the abolition movement and the role of Gustavus Vassa, who is often referred to by his birth name, Olaudah Equiano, in that movement. This site includes scholarly articles, conference presentations, and interactive links that can be used for educational and innovative purposes.

Gustavus Vassa, the African, published his *Interesting Narrative* in 1789. The *Narrative* has been credited as crucial in the campaign to abolish the British slave trade, implemented in 1807, although Vassa died in 1797 and did not witness this legal victory. His *Interesting Narrative* is widely read in English literature and Black Studies courses, and remains in print in several popular editions. There are over 25,000 sites on the web relating to this most interesting African and black Briton. His story is sometimes thought to represent the classic slave narrative, and certainly characterizes the richness of eighteenth-century English literature. Considering that Vassa did not learn English until

he was eleven, his achievements are all the more remarkable. By the late 1780s and early 1790s, he was arguably the most outspoken African in the Atlantic world, and it was the heady days of Revolutionary France, the demand for Parliamentary reform, the abolition of the slave trade, and the ending of slavery.

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The website intends to make accessible research and analysis to a wide audience.

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Gustavus Vassa (Olaudah Equiano), the African, was a key figure in the abolition movement. His *Interesting Narrative*, published in 1789, was a major influence in mobilizing public opinion in Britain against the slave trade, eventually resulting in the [abolition of the British slave trade](#) in 1807. Vassa's autobiography is widely read in English literature and Black Studies courses, and remains in print in several popular editions. Some of his achievements are referenced on the web, revealing the influence of this most interesting African and black Briton. His story is considered a classic "slave narrative" written in the richness of eighteenth-century literature, by someone who could not speak English until he was about twelve. In many ways, however, his autobiography was a "freedom narrative" because it recounted his personal enslavement in

Africa and his transition from a member of a family to a slave, who was sold repeatedly from shortly after his kidnapping in about 1753, experiencing the notorious "Middle Passage," until he became the slave of a British naval officer. For much of his slavery, he risked the hazards of naval action in the Seven Years War, before being sold to a merchant in the Caribbean. Through his own perseverance and fate, he regained his freedom in 1766. His remarkable career subsequently took him to the Mediterranean, the Arctic, and the Mosquito Shore of Central America. He became prominent in the movement to abolish the slave trade, initially through efforts to protect his friends and associates, then in providing information to prominent abolitionists, before emerging as the acknowledged spokesman for the black poor of London. His association with the first effort to found Sierra Leone as a Province of Freedom floundered, but with the publication of his autobiography in 1789, he achieved wide recognition as a leading abolitionist and orator. The popularity of *The Interesting Narrative* propelled Vassa into the vanguard of radical thinking in Britain. In the early 1790s, the heady days influenced by Revolutionary France on those interested in Parliamentary reform, the abolition of the slave trade, and the ending of slavery. Vassa was arguably the most influential black in London, at a time when the black community numbered perhaps 20,000, making London one of the largest "African" cities, if not the largest, in the world at the time.

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This website is divided into different sections that establish the context in which Vassa lived, explore the places where he traveled, and the people whom he knew. There is also a section that raises questions surrounding Vassa's life, including where he was born to his views on race and slavery, and hosts a forum for discussion and queries. Studying Equiano provides access to primary documents, published scholarly analysis and web links relevant to times and places of *Equiano's World*. Taken together, *Equiano's World* is an adventure into the history of abolition, accessible to scholars, students and the interested public.

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Establishing Context


Establishing context is important in understanding the significance of Equiano's World and the role that Gustavus Vassa played in the abolition movement. Vassa's autobiography does not always clearly establish context, and sometimes his own misunderstandings cloud an appreciation of his own evolution as an intellectual and political activist. Vassa's rendition of the notorious "Middle Passage" has to be understood in context, for example. Similarly, Vassa's exploration of different religions is worthy of reflection, while his role in the abolition movement has spawned an important scholarly literature. That Vassa's slavery overlapped with the Seven Years War requires an understanding of where he was and when, and the impact that his risky adventures had on him. His role in the first Sierra Leone colonization scheme and his importance in the abolition movement also require some discussion. Finally, Vassa's involvement in the radical politics of London in the early 1790s help to establish the context in which his autobiography was received.

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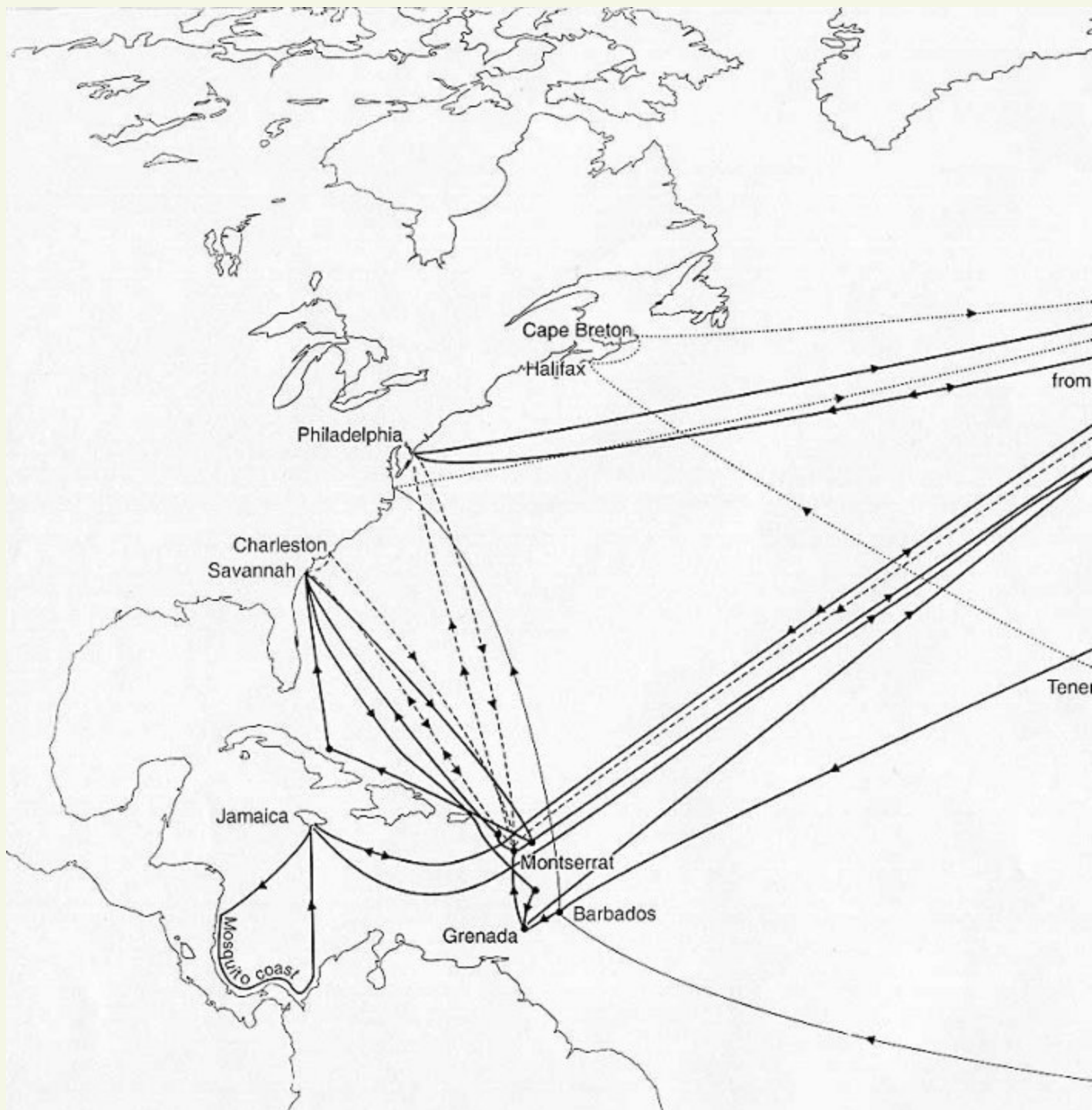
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Travels of Gustavus Vassa the African

Vassa traveled extensively, having come from the interior of the Bight of Biafra, in the heart of Igboland, and taken the coast, probably leaving via the slave port of Bonny in 1754. By his own account, he was taken to Barbados and then to Virginia, where he was bought by British naval officer, Captain Pascal, and taken to England. His subsequent travels are located on this portal. A preliminary map of Vassa's itinerary has circulated widely, and is reproduced here. There are several prominent errors on this map, including the fact that Vassa went to New York in 1784, and that he was on the Mosquito Shore, as it was called, not the Mosquito Coast, and he did not travel as far as Cartagena, as indicated on the map. Despite these revisions, the map accurately depicts the extensive travels of Vassa. A more detailed map is required to trace Vassa's travels in Britain and Northern Ireland.



The map was prepared by Miles Ogborn, a historical geographer at Queen Mary, University of London. It was drawn by Edward

Oliver, a cartographer in the same department. The map is discussed in greater detail in Miles Ogborn, "Global historical geographies, 1500-1800," in B.J. Graham and C. Nash (eds), *Modern Historical Geographies* (Harlow: Longman, 2000). Published online by [Brycchan Carey](#)

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Associates of Gustavus Vassa


Vassa met many important and influential individuals during his career, some while he was a slave and others after he had earned his emancipation. Other individuals figure prominently in his life, although he had little or no contact with them. This portal is intended to identify many of the key individuals in his life.

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Questionning Equiano


Inevitably, there are questions about Vassa's life, including where he was born, the significance of his name, his attitudes towards race and culture, what he had to say about slavery, and the authenticity of certain documents. The portal also includes a Forum where key issues can be discussed and further questions raised.

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Studying Equiano


Studying Equiano requires access to the scholarly literature and key documents and other primary source materials. This portal has a comprehensive bibliography with links to published material that are permissible in terms of copyright restrictions. There are also links to relevant websites.

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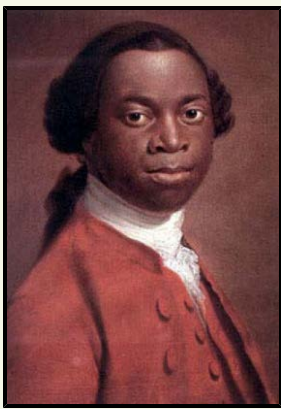
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79
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In the Name of God Amen. I Gustavus

Tassa of Little Street - Alder-mantary in the City of London of my former being deceased

in my natural body and in perfect health and form in my belief of a future state in the death
and Corruption of the Body and hopeful in the rise of the soul depending on the Mercy of
God my beaver for forgiveness of my sins Give I give and Bequeath
and my Friends John Dudley and Edward Dint both of Cambridge Esquires. All my
real and personal Estate of what Nature kind or sort whatsoever either in possession or
reversion or expectancy (and which Estate and property I have clearly earned by the sweat
of my brow in course of the most toilsome and assiduous Course of the which would be tedious
to describe behind me) To Hold to them the said John Dudley and Edward Dint - -
Executors Administrators and assigns In Trust that they the said John Dudley and
Edward Dint shall and do receive and take the produce and profits arising from my Estate
both real and personal and apply the same or a sufficient part thereof towards the Maintenance
and Education of my two infant Daughters Ann Maria and Johanna to wit
until they shall respectively attain their respective ages of Twenty one years Then Upon
this further Trust that from and after their Attaining their said ages of Twenty one
years equally to be divided between them Share and Share alike but if either of them shall
happen to die then I give and bequeath the share of her so dying to the Survivor of them
- - - - - the said share of the survivor of both my Children before Marriage at their said ages of Twenty



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