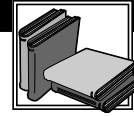


Chapter 16 Biography Activity

European contacts with the Americas and Africa eventually resulted in a dreadful bond between the two continents: the trade in slaves, captured in West Africa and taken to colonies in the West Indies or the Americas (textbook pages 406–408). One who survived to tell his story was Olaudah Equiano. ♦ *As you read, consider what groups might have objected to slavery. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

Olaudah Equiano (1750?–1797)

Much of what we know today about the horrors of the American slave trade comes from the vivid autobiography written by Olaudah Equiano. As a boy in the kingdom of Benin in West Africa, he learned the arts of a warrior and the traditions and culture of Benin. But when he was about eleven years old, traders kidnapped him and one of his sisters while their parents were working. The children were separated, and Equiano was enslaved in his own country. He was then taken to the coast, where he saw the sea for the first time, with a slave ship waiting. Terrible as his previous experience had been, the slave ship made him think he would willingly trade places with someone who was enslaved in Africa.

Years later, Equiano described this horrifying voyage across the Atlantic on the route known as the Middle Passage. He described the enslaved people's terror and the brutality of the crew as well as the suffocating heat and "loathsome smells" of the hold below decks where the captives were crowded, many of them in chains. "The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the

dying," he wrote, "rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable."

The ship sailed to the island of Barbados in the West Indies. The Africans were put up for sale at auction, and most were put to work on the sugar plantations that made the West Indies such profitable colonies for Britain and France. In 1766, an American bought Equiano, and he was taken to Virginia. A few years later, he was allowed to buy his freedom. Still later, he moved to Great Britain, where opposition to slavery was strong. Finding work as a barber and servant, he joined the antislavery movement as a speaker.

In 1789, he wrote his autobiography, which was published as *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*. Besides its graphic descriptions of the slave trade, it also told much about village life and culture in Benin. The book was widely read in England. While it attacked the slave trade wherever it existed, it also showed a generous spirit and little bitterness. Equiano also published a book of poetry.



ILLUSTRATION/PHOTO CREDIT: NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Questions to Think About

1. Where was Equiano's first experience with being enslaved? How did it come about?
2. What events led to Equiano's becoming a part of the antislavery movement?
3. **Identifying Central Issues** Why might there have been a stronger antislavery movement in Britain than in the United States in the 1790s?