

# THE LIFE OF OLAUDAH EQUIANO



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Black Britain's political founding father. Olaudah Equiano, the first political leader of Britain's black community was born in Essaka, an Igbo village in the kingdom of Benin, in 1745. His father was one of the province's elders who decided disputes. When he was about eleven, Equiano was kidnapped along with his sister, and after six months of captivity he was brought to the coast where he encountered white men for the first time.

Sold to slave-traders, Equiano was transported to Barbados. After a two-week stay in the West Indies Equiano was sent to the English colony of Virginia. He was later purchased by Captain Henry Pascal, a British naval officer. He was renamed Gustavas Vassa, and was beaten until he answered to his new name. He stayed in London with two relatives of his master, two women who taught him to read and sent him to school. He was sold without warning to a Captain James Doran, who took him to Montserrat, and sold him to a merchant called Robert King. Equiano saved whatever money he could, and in 1766 purchased his freedom. In 1767 he went back to London, and worked closely with Granville Sharpe and Thomas Clarkson in the Society for the

Abolition of the Slave Trade. Equiano spoke at a large number of public meetings where he described the cruelty of the slave trade.

Equiano was also a close friend of Thomas Hardy, secretary of the London Corresponding Society. Equiano became an active member of this political society that campaigned in favour of universal suffrage.

In 1787 Equiano helped his friend, Ottobah Cugoano, to publish an account of his experiences, Narrative of the Enslavement of a Native of America. Copies of his book were sent to George III and leading politicians. He failed to persuade the king to change his opinions and like other members of the royal family remained against abolition of the slave trade.

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