Olaudah Equiano: Abolitionist And Autobiographer

Olaudah Equiano, also known as Gustavus Vassa, was born in 1745 in Essaka (modern-day Nigeria). As an eleven year old, he and his sister were kidnapped, separated, and sold into slavery. Under several different owners, Equiano was able to gain invaluable naval training, learned how to be a clerk, and was even able to attend school, thus learning English and how to read and write. In 1766, after several years of working and trading goods, he was able to buy his freedom for £40, the same price for which he had been bought. Soon after, Equiano became an abolitionist in Britain, especially committed after a ship's captain threatened to sell him back into slavery. He worked with other famous abolitionists, wrote letters to prominent figures in politics, and led a delegation to the House of Commons to support a bill that sought to improve slave ship conditions.

Europeans widely viewed Africans as inferior, some even going as far as to say that slavery was a gift, saving Africans from a life of bestiality. When Europeans explorers "discovered" the New World, a high demand for labor quickly developed. While indentured servants were initially used, but plantation owners wanted a more steady, low-cost workforce. With many indigenous people dying from disease and many Europeans not interested in working in the tropical climate, African slave labor was justified by the falsehood that Africans were accustomed to harsh environmental and labor conditions. The influx of commodities such as sugar and tobacco further encouraged many Europeans to look past the brutal labor that was being used to produce these goods. As a free black in England, Equiano aimed to give a voice to the millions still enslaved and bring attention to the abolitionist cause. Equiano became the first black civil servant in history in 1786 when he was appointed as the Commissary of Provisions and Stores of a project that aimed to help resettle poor black Londoners in Sierra Leone (West Africa). He also formed the Sons of Africa in order to speak publicly in support of the antislavery movement. In 1789, he wrote a work called "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano," which combined the genres of autobiography, voyage and religious conversion narrative, and political treatise. It was one of the first books written by an African and was a best-seller as it was read by tens of thousands. The vivid account of his journey as a slave provided direct evidence of the horrors of slavery. Additionally, his work also helped forge a connection between Africa and the Americas, especially for those whose family/ancestors had been enslaved. While Equiano did not live to see it, Parliament passed the Slave Trade Act of 1807, which banned all slave trade in empire and eventually in all colonies. Even today, his work is still frequently cited when discussing the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the Middle Passage.