

Philadelphia and Boston. A handful of African Americans from that era have left us some of the richest stories imaginable—the stories of their own lives.

Kidnapped

Olaudah Equiano was born in eastern Nigeria in 1745. When he was just 10 years old he was captured by African traders and taken far from home down the Niger River, toward the western coast of Africa. He lived and worked briefly as a slave to an African family but was eventually sold to European traders and carried across the Atlantic aboard a slave ship. Later in life, Equiano gained his freedom, learned to read and write, and traveled widely in Europe, the Americas, and even the Arctic. Equiano led an exceptional life. His freedom and his subsequent adventures were made possible through the intervention of several masters, through his own acquisition of literacy, and through his training as a sailor, an occupation with more liberties than most for Africans. This passage is from his autobiography, first published in 1789.

Generally when the grown people in the neighborhood were gone far in the fields to labor, the children assembled together 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 the tree in our yard, I saw one of those people come into the yard of our next neighbor 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 in and secured him. But alas! ere long it was my fate to be thus attacked and carried off when none of the grown people were nigh. 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

Olaudah Equiano published his autobiography in 1789.



THE
 MOST INTERESTING NARRATIVE
 OF
 THE LIFE
 OF
 OLAUDAH EQUIANO,
 OR
 STAVUS VASSA,
 THE AFRICAN.
 WRITTEN BY HIMSELF.

*Salvation; I will trust, and not be
 red; Jehovah is my strength and my
 name my salvation.
 ps. lxxv. Praise the Lord, call upon his
 name among the people. lxxv. xii. 2. 4.*

EDITION ENLARGED.
 LONDON:
 SOLD BY THE AUTHOR.
 1794.
 FOUR SHILLINGS.
 (Solely sold for 7s.
 Stationers' Hall.)

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out or make resistance they stopped our mouths and ran off with us into the nearest wood. Here they tied our hands 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. We were then unbound but were unable to take any food, and being quite overpowered by fatigue and grief, our only relief was some sleep, which allayed our misfortune for a short time. . . . At length, after many days' traveling, during which I had often changed masters, I got into the hands of a chieftain in a very pleasant country. This man had two wives and some children, and they all used me extremely well and did all they could to comfort me, particularly the first wife, who was something like my mother. . . .

Equiano lived with this family for a brief time but was soon sold again. After a lengthy voyage he arrived at the coast, where he was taken to a slave ship.

I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life: so that with the loathsomeness of the stench and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste anything. I now wished for the last friend, death, to relieve me; but soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me eatables, and on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands and laid me across I think the windlass, and tied my feet while the other flogged me severely. I had never experienced anything of this kind before, and although, not being used to the water, I naturally feared that element the first time I saw it, yet nevertheless could I have got over the nettings I would have jumped over the side, but I could not, and besides, the crew used to watch us very closely who were not chained down to the decks, lest we should leap into the water. . . .

In a little time after, amongst the poor chained men I found some of my own nation, which in a small degree gave ease to my mind. I inquired to these what was to be done with us; they gave me to understand we were to be carried to these white people's country to work for them. I then was a little revived, and thought if it were no worse than working, my situation was not so desperate: but still I feared I should be put to death, the white people looked and acted, as I thought, in so savage a manner. . . . I could not help expressing my fears and apprehensions to some of my countrymen: I asked them if these people had no country but lived

I must own, to the shame of men, that I was first kidnapped by some of my own countrymen, the first cause of my exile; there were no buyers there. So far as I can remember, Africans in my country & they take in war, or for other reasons, they keep are well fed, clothed, and treated well. —Ottobah Cogoana, describing his capture near present-day Sierra Leone

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in this hollow place [the ship] they told me they did not, but came from a distant one. "Then," said I, "how comes it in all our country we never heard of them?" They told me because they lived so very far off.

Tips for Slave Traders

The European merchants who funded Atlantic slave-trade ventures watched over their investments carefully, especially since the possibility for great losses—or huge profits—was considerable. Any delay in crossing the Atlantic only heightened the risk that the enslaved people carried as cargo would die of disease or dehydration, and the longer the trip, the more numerous the deaths. Isaac Hobhouse, Noah Rud-dock, and William Baker, the owners of the ship the *Dispatch*, issued the following detailed instructions to the ship's captain, William Barry, before he set out on a voyage first to Africa, then to the West Indies or South Carolina, in 1725. Barry was to sail directly to Andoni, on the southeastern coast of Nigeria (about where Olaudah Equiano had first encountered Europeans) to purchase only Africans who were "healthy and strong and of a Convenient Age" and to take care that "the sailors dont abuse them." But, in case many of the slaves died anyway, Barry was also instructed to load his ship with "teeth," or ivory tusks, "seeing in that Commodity there's no Mortality to be feard." To Barry and the men who financed this voyage, the African men, women, and children on board were simply commodities to be bought and sold.

Bristol, Oct. 7th, 1725.

Capt. Wm. Barry, As the wind is inclining to be fair you are ordered with your Men (which we allow to be 20 in Number your self included) to repair on board the *Dispatch* Briggtine [brigantine] of which you are Counted Commander and to loose no time but sail directly taking the pilott with you so far as the Holmes and at his return let us be advised whether all the hands are on board and what else may be Material.

You must make the best of your Way to the Coast of Africa that is to that part of it calld Andony (without touching or tarrying at any other place) w[h]ere you are to slave intirely, but as our Briggtine draws deep water, wee are not Inclinable you should proceed over the Barr, but rather than you Anchor as Usual in the bests and Convenients place for safety so well as slaving.

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The Cargo of goods are of your Own ordering, and as it's very good in kind and amounts to thirteen hundred and thirty pounds eight shillings and 2 1/4 [pence] we hope twill purchase you 240 Choice slaves, besides a Quantity of teeth the latter of which are always to embrace provided they are large, seeing in that Commodity there's no Mortality to be feard. As to the slaves let your endeavours be to buy none but whar's healthy and strong and of a Convenient Age—none to exceed the years of 25 or under 10 if possible, among which so many men, and stout men boys as can be had seeing such are most Valuable at the Plantations.

Let your Care be in preserving so well as in purchasing, in order to which let their provisions be well and Carefully look'd after and boild and that its given them in due season, to see the sailors dont abuse them which has often been done to the prejudice of the Voyage. So soon as you begin to slave let your knetting be fix'd breast high fore and aft and so keep 'em shackled and hand Bolted fearing their rising or leaping Overboard, to prevent which let always a constant and Carefull watch be appointed to which [you] must give the strictest Charge for the preservation of their Own Lives, so well as yours and on which the Voyage depends, which per sleeping in their Watch has often been fatall and many a good Voyage (which otherwise might have been made) entirely ruind. . . .

Be carefull of fire and in fine of all committed to your Charge, and keeping us advised by all Opportunitys of all materiall Occurrences is what imediatly offers but recommending you to the Good God Almighty's protection and wishing you a good Voyage we Remain

Your Affectionate Friends
Isaac Hobhouse
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After a European slave-trading ship arrived on the western coast of Africa, it might take several months to purchase slaves and stock up on provisions before setting off across the Atlantic. Buyers were particular—and ruthless—about what kinds of people would make the most suitable, and thus the most valuable, slaves. Typically, they bought more

men than women and, as seen in the previous document, favored young or middle-aged people over children and the elderly. George Kingston, captain of the English ship the *Arthur*, kept a record of the enslaved men, women, and children he bought in Guinea in 1678. His journal soon turned, however, into an "Acct of what Negroes Dyd [Died] every day," as the horrible conditions on board ship took the lives of more and more Africans. Kingston's accounting is full of numbers, but he offers little other information about the people dying on his ship—not their names, where they came from, or any other details to acknowledge his common humanity with them.

Wednesday 13 February 1677. The 12th day wee Bought 3 men 3 women as your hon'rs will finde one my Books of Acc'tt and this day we Bo[ought] 14 men and 18 women very good and young negroes with some provisions for them. . . .

Sunday 17th Feby. 1677. Bo't 10 men 5 women 1 Boy and 3 girles all very likely negroes nott one of them exceedinge 30 years nor one under 14 yeares.

Monday 18th Feby 1677. This day wee Bo't 4 men and 4 women havinge noe encouridgm't to By more by Reason of shore Remissniss in Bringing us provitions Doubtinge wee should have more Negroes then wee were Likely to have provitions and soe they to take advantage that did forbarre to Bye sendinge away again severall negroes and keepinge only such as we had minde to

Wednesday 20th Feb. 1677. This day we had Cannows [canoes] from Callabar and wee Bought 6 men 67 women and on Boye but had very Littell provitions from [for?] them. . . .

Friday 1st March 1677. This day wee Bought 13 men and 4 women very good negroes with some provitions; wee have some of our seamen sick and doubt we shall Loose some: Butt the Incouragement and hopes of not stayinge Long here is our greatest Comfortt and Trust shall bee Ready to goe from this place in three weeks tyme more our Businiss fully perfected as to our Negroes and provitions. . . .

Sattday 2 March 1677. This day wee Brought 2 men and 2 women havinge nott many Cannows one Board of us did Forbare to Buy too many expectinge to have as wee did Resolve our Choice of negroes; wee have made Choice of negroes to the Best of our skill and Judgm'tt and as likely negroes as a man should see

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yett wee finde that some of them doe decay and grow Leane and some are sick they want for no thinge havinge dealy as much provition as they cann make kuse of neither doe th[ey] want for any Comfortt not suffering any man one Board to strike them.

Acct of what Negroes Dyd every day

Sunday 3 March 1677. This day wee Bought 5 men and 5 women and some provitions: aboutt 2 in the morning died one of our seamen after 5 days sickness and about 4 in the afternoon died one negro man: have 5 others sick. . . .

Fryday 8. This day wee Bought 2 men and 1 woman. . . . The 7 day aboutt four in the afternoon died one woman. This day as will appeare y're accompt wee did not purchase any Negroes Butt some provitions for negroes: wee have many sick Captives Butt take the greatest Care wee can to preserve [them].

Sattiday 9, March 1677/8. This day wee Bought 8 men and 6 women very Likely Negroes with some provitions—wee had died this day one man and severall others that are sick notwithstandinge our Care with the Docktors phisick there is nothinge wantinge to them. . . .

Tuesday 12, March 1677/8. This day wee purchased 1 man 4 women and 1 Boy with some provitions as will appeare pr Accountt and att 10 in the forenoon died one man which to our knolidge had nott been sick 12 houres.

Acc't of the Slaves mortality rec'd out of the "John Alexand"

June 15th 1676	Day	Men	Women	Boys	Girls	} both very thin and } when rec'd. } very thin when rec'd
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For Sale

After arriving in the Americas, enslaved Africans were sold either at a public auction in a port town or through advertisements in local newspapers. Those who were born into slavery on plantations were not necessarily spared the experience of being brought to auction, however, since many were resold later in life. Mary Prince was born into slavery in Bermuda in the last years of the 18th century. Until she was 12 years old, she lived on a plantation there with her mother and younger siblings, but when her owner died Mary and her family were taken to town to be sold. The following passage, from Mary's own account—the first slave narrative written by a woman—describes how she and her mother and sister were brought to an auction, where they were inspected like “dumb beasts” and ultimately sold to different buyers. Here, Mary eloquently describes the horror of the auction, the terror of being separated from her family, and, most of all, her sense of helplessness in the face of a wholly brutalizing process.

Our mother, weeping as she went, called me away with the children Hannah and Dinah, and we took the road that led to Hamble Town, which we reached about four o'clock in the afternoon. We

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followed my mother to the market-place, where she placed us in a row against a large house, with our backs to the wall and our arms folded across our breasts. I, as the eldest, stood first, Hannah next to me, then Dinah; and our mother stood beside, crying over us. My heart throbbed with grief and terror so violently, that I pressed my hands quite tightly across my breast, but I could not keep it still, and it continued to leap as though it would burst out of my body. But who cared for that? Did one of the many bystanders, who were looking at us so carelessly, think of the pain that wrung the hearts of the negro woman and her young ones? No, no! . . . At length the vendue master, who was to offer us for sale like sheep or cattle, arrived, and asked my mother which was the eldest. She said nothing, but pointed to me. He took me by the hand, and led me out to the middle of the street, and, turning

Men for Sale.
very fine stout Men and good order and fit for services, just imported inward Coast of Africa—hip Two Brothers.—or Produce, the other try next, giving Bond

me slowly round, exposed me to the view of those who attended the vendue. I was soon surrounded by strange men, who examined and handled me in the same manner that a butcher would a calf or a lamb he was about to purchase, and who talked about my shape and size in like words—as if I could no more understand their meaning than the dumb beasts. I was then put up to sale. The bidding commenced at a few pounds, and gradually rose to fifty-seven, when I was knocked down

to the highest bidder; and the people who stood by said that I had fetched a great sum for so young a slave.

I then saw my sisters led forth, and sold to different owners; so that we had not the sad satisfaction of being partners in bondage. When the sale was over, my mother hugged and kissed us, and mourned over us, begging of us to keep up a good heart, and do our duty to our new masters. It was a sad parting; one went one way, one another, and our poor mammy went home with nothing.

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