

Olaudah Equiano: Life in Cambridgeshire & the abolition movement

Contributors name:

Carol Brown Lombardi

Alex: Good morning, everyone. My name is Alex from the STEM EDIA team. I'm pleased to welcome you all to this Open University Black History Month event for 2022. This event will be recorded. And so please can I ask that any questions or comments are placed in the chat? We will have an FAQ at the end. I will now hand over to Carol Brown Leonard, a social anthropologist at the Open University who has been conducting a research project on Olaudah Equiano and will be presenting today's session, Olaudah Equiano Life in Cambridgeshire and the Abolition Movement.

Carol Brown Lombardi: Thank you very much. Good morning, everyone. This session, we'll be looking at Olaudah Equiano's life in Cambridge in terms of what he was doing whilst he was living in England. And I think it's a very interesting focus because we do tend to really unpack his narrative. And so I hope that you will enjoy this exploration of his activities in Cambridge and London.

I'll just ask for the next slide. Thank you. So Olaudah Equiano was a celebrated author and abolitionist in the 18th century England. His narrative, the Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African was essential to the abolition movement, as it gave a first-hand literary testimony on the capture and enslavement of Africans.

This uniqueness of this scholarly account was its ability to capture the imagination of individuals from all levels of English society. Next slide, please. So Equiano's narrative challenged the English society. His letters, sermons, and autobiography challenged its culture, morals, and the Christian faith. It questioned English society, its wealth, and the power that was fuelled by the enslavement of African people.

His autobiography enlightened his readers about the barbaric, the anxiety and the violent reality of slavery. He not only highlighted some of the horrors of slavery, but he enlightened his readers of the Middle Passage, which was not very much known about. And more importantly, he made people understand that slavery was not only in the Caribbean and in America. And that these places were not so far away. That we were actually experiencing it in England.

So his narrative really illustrates the impact of slavery on the destruction of the African families, friendships, and the devastating impact of historical histories and the continuity of memories and histories passed on from one generation to the next. It really was like a vine that sort of strangled all of these things out. And it severed people from their culture, their cultural past, and everything that they knew.

So Equiano's narrative focused a lens on the system of slavery as a totally destructive force that severed personal and ancestral ties, as well as historical and cultural knowledge. And it severed generational ties forever. And it attacked the core of the human sense of self and one's sense of humanity. So these are in terms of what the story and what his speeches really aimed at. Next slide, please.

So Equiano's story of enslavement describes being kidnapped along with his sister as a child from his family home where he was born in Essaka, which is now in Nigeria. And he was purchased by Michael Henry Pascal, who was a member of the British Royal Navy. And obviously, I think it is common knowledge that we all know that slaves, when they are in bondage, the first thing that goes is their name.

And stripping a name is really stripping one's identity. So he was stripped of his identity and he was given the name Gustavus Vassa, which he used as his official name for the rest of his life. So even when he got married, he had to use that name. So what was the importance of having a different name?

So if we look at who Gustavus Vassa is, this is a Swedish King who is responsible for building the Swedish empire. And he's still known as one of the most powerful kings in that region. And he built the empire between the years of 1523 and 1560. So the system of giving slaves names of powerful European rulers emphasized the power between the slave owner and the enslaved master.

There was a kind of irony, if you like, that this person who was enslaved would have a powerful name. So naming slaves after powerful European rulers was a tool of disempowerment of the enslaved because it really made them understand that they had no power at all. And it solidified the power dynamics and the conditions of bondage in the relationship between the slave and the slave owner.

So, you know. So I think we kind think about slaves in a particular perspective of who slaves are and how they would look. And having done some research on Equiano and his cause in terms of the campaigns that he did, and the way that he spoke about his passion to end slavery in this time, I began to think about who were the people that he was concerned about.

And I think it's really important to actually represent these people in a way that they would look ordinarily if they had not been captured. So that people from tribes that were most commonly kidnapped and sent into slavery, there were a lot of them, I have to say. But I just thought it would be good to kind of showcase five of them.

So the year Yoruba people are from the southwestern and central northern Nigeria. And they are one of the largest ethnic African groups. And they were heavily involved in palm oil. So they had that knowledge of how to manufacture palm oil. So obviously, they were very useful people for the Americas to capture and put into bondage because they had the knowledge of processing that, which would make the area in the Americas a lot richer.

The Fon people are the largest group of people in Benin. And they live in southern Nigeria. And they were famous for the Amazon female warriors. I think if we watch these films that have Wakanda Forever and the female African war films that we're seeing at the moment are based on the techniques and the lives of these Amazon female warriors. And you will find the descendants of these people are significantly populating islands, the islands of Haiti and Trinidad.

The Mende people, they live all over Western Africa or West Africa and were known as the Mandinka nation. And they were immortalized in history with the mutiny of the Amistad ship. And I'm sure if you look it up, you'll find that there are films about the mutiny of Amistad, and so on, and so forth.

And then we have the Igbo. And they live in present day south central and south-eastern Nigeria. And approximately 13% of these people were all taken to America and enslaved. And then we have the Abon. And they live on the coast of Ghana and really were at the centre of the Gold Coast slave region.

And because of the location, they fell victim to the slave trade just because of that and they were swept up in the intensity of enslavement of human beings and trafficking. So that kind of gives you some insight into in the people just living ordinarily and just being swept up into something which is really heinous and disastrous for their lives. The next slide, please. So millions of people got caught up in the system. And there was no escape for anyone, actually. We tend to think that people who were enslaved in this time were just poor people caught in villages, and so on, and so forth. But it wasn't the case. Nobody escaped. There was royalty. There was entrepreneurs, craftsmen, people in military, ordinary people. And it was like a vacuum.

And even the youngest babies, even new-borns, they got swept up into the vacuum and sold off into slavery. And it wasn't that the Europeans went into the heart of Africa and caught them. There were African slave catchers. And they kidnapped people. And they sold people. And they actually traded with different regions who were battling with each other and had prisoners of war, and criminals, people that they didn't really want to have in their societies. And they took these people, and they transported them by river and over land to the forts that were awaiting them. And Equiano's narrative describes the journey of crossing Africa with the African slave catchers until he reaches the slave ports, where he eventually is sold into chattel slavery. And there is a difference between chattel slavery and the slavery in Africa, which is called pawnship.

Slavery is something which is an old custom over there. And it is used in a way that if you owe somebody something, like money for instance, you can sell your labour. Or you can sell the labour of a relative to pay off that debt. And this is very different to chattel slavery, where you're actually put in chains. And you're kind of subject to all sorts of abuses and criminal acts. So thank you very much, next slide, please.

So chattel slavery, to my mind, really begins when you get to the forts, which are on the coast of Africa. And then there's this purchase, there's this focus on the purchase and exploitation of people. And we tend to think of slavery as really having human labour at the center of the system, which it is. But there's also physical and emotional abuse, as well as the risk of dying from heinous crimes or suffering from it by the enslaver, who really dominates the treatment that you're going to get, which will go largely unpunished.

But so you're at the mercy of another human being. And the European enslaver did not as I said, they didn't venture into the interior of Africa. But they carried out most of their business in the fortresses that were built. And they kind of still stand in Africa today. So how did these fortresses work?

So the fortresses, at the top of them, they had these sleeping quarters for the enslavers because obviously they would travel there. And there was also a church. If you look at the picture with this castle there. And right in front of you is this little building with and I think you can see those tiny little steps. And that is the church where they would actually go to meet each other, and pray, and so on, and so forth, and form business.

And then I think there at the very corner, at the left-hand corner, you will see the dungeons that people were filtered into. And they were categorized as men, women, and rebellious slaves. And they were gender divisions, but they also included children, and newborns, and toddlers. And all sorts of people were filtered into those categories.

And in the picture kind of running onto that, there was a trapdoor. So the trapdoor was in the bedroom of the enslaver. And they were able to go down into the dungeons of their choice. And they could choose a slave, and wash them off, because of course, it was full of filth, and urine, and all sorts of things. And they could abuse them at their leisure. And then the final door at the very top is the door of no return, where the slaves were exited onto the ship. And at that point, they would never see Africa again. The next slide, please.

So this is how they were positioned on the ship. This is the picture from the Brookes ship from Liverpool, which used to sail to the west coast of Africa and the Caribbean. And they were loaded in this way in the sleeping quarters. And of course, I think everybody's familiar with the layout of a slave ship. But I thought it would be interesting for you to see the positioning of how Africans had to cross over through the Middle Passage. I'll go into the next slide, please. So what happened? What was Equiano concerned about? So he was concerned about throwing people overboard. And we know from this massacre that 130 people plus were thrown overboard so that the enslavers could claim the goods that was damaged. And this was something that was successful.

And of course, I think Equiano not I think, I know he did, he drew attention to the massacre and brought the case to Granville Sharp, who tried to prosecute the crew for murder. But it was unsuccessful. But the song became a powerful symbol of the horrors of the Middle Passage.

And then of course, there was a separation of families. And in a Washington newspaper, Washington Post newspaper, there's a lady from 1938 called Susan Hamilton who recalls the fact that people used to die of heartbreak because mothers were separated from their babies. And she says that day and night, you could hear men and women screaming for the mothers, and their fathers, and their sisters, and their brothers as they were taken away.

The third one is the Peter, who shows his scars. And we know that there was, we won't go into it, but there was sexual, emotional, and physical abuse. And then there was the human experimentation. So these are some of the main reasons why slaves were brought. We know about James Sims, who carried out shocking experiments on enslaved women. And people were kind of sold with the interests of carrying out medical experiments without anaesthesia. And there was no sort of medical ethics involved because apparently Black people were not supposed to have any experience pain. And on top of that, we have Samuel Cartwright, who then had an hypothesis that enslaved Africans had a mental health issue called drapetomania, drapetomania, sorry.

And that they had this anxiety, which actually caused them to run away. And so this was an illness, the fact that they wanted to run out of slavery. So yeah, so next slide, please.

So having said that, it's important to know that people didn't take this lightly. So the 18th century Caribbean slave trade had frequent mutinies. And there was many slave uprisings which involved the burning of crops and taking up arms. So there was always lots of revolts. And some of the most memorable is King Takyi of Ghana, who was trading with slaves before he was caught himself. And he led a revolt in 1716 Jamaica. There's Samuel Sharpe, who led the Baptist War, which focused on labour and being paid for it. And of course, there was the Haitian Revolution as well, which lasted for a number of years and has made Haiti known as a place which is still dangerous and underfunded today, apparently, but not my words. Next slide, please.

So having said that, we have to kind of look at the time that Equiano was present in England. And England wasn't really a place of great stability either. So we had all this action going on in the Caribbean and Americas. But there was also a place of transition. There were enlightened people, who were of the upper and middle classes who were into poetry, and art, and so on, and so forth.

But on the ground, the working people were having a very different experience. So 18th century Britain was a time of major transformation. We had King George II, who really left the decision making up to the ministers in Parliament, mainly because he really didn't speak English. And Britain was engaged in wars over colonies in France, like Quebec. And of course, there was the Agricultural Revolution and the introduction of intensive farming, which changed the face of English countryside. There was the Industrial Revolution as well, which changed the infrastructure of Britain, introducing more roads and waterways in cities. And rural people lives had been changed. And they had been moved away from the countryside into industrial cities to participate in labour intensive work in the manufacturing industries.

And during this period, we also see rising prices, as we are seeing a bit now, and food shortages. So it was a very hard time for people who didn't have any money, really. And if you look at John Archer's work, which is 2000, in his book, *Social Unrest, Popular Protest in England 1780 to 1840*, kind of gives a clear picture of the different kinds of protests that was going on in and around in England.

And there were agricultural protests. There were industrial protests, and political protests, policing protests. There was a lot of happenings at this time. And I think that Equiano was really right in the middle of this and was really sort of looking at the abolishment of slavery in a time, which was sort of transforming for England. So this kind of gives you a good picture of what was happening, what was his society like. And next slide, please.

So in 1780, Equiano was a resident in London. And he was an active campaigner, trying to bring an end to the British slave trade and slavery itself. And he was one of the founders of a group against chattel slavery called the Sons of Africa. And he kind of teamed up with another founder, which is Ottobah. And I'm not going to say his second name, because I apologize, because I need to say these things right.

And they both connected. And this chap was connected to African royalty before he was kidnapped by African enslavers and also sold into chattel slavery. So both of these people were captured and sold. And they both had a relationship that they could really reflect on and find those similarities.

And the Sons of Africa society was considered to be the first Black political organization in Britain. Its members were freemen, who were former slaves, who were erudite, educated, and focused on bringing an end to slavery. And through this society, Equiano was able to discuss his experience, the barbaric costs, and the realities of slavery for his publications in newspapers and public speaking across Britain. Next slide, please.

So we know Equiano was involved in a movement. And this movement was sweeping across Britain in the 1780s and 1790s against chattel slavery. And it was to ensure the rights of slaves and former slaves and to bring an end to the trade. And the movement to end the trade had more emphasis when Britain lost its battle with the North American colonies.

And then on top of that, the religious elites in Scotland, England, Ireland, and Wales became more involved to end slavery because one of their agendas was to save the souls of the slave masters because they were fully aware of the crimes that were being committed against humanity in the system. So some sections of British society began to question, also, because we can understand how society was in Britain at the time now.

So they questioned slavery as a feature of empire. And they were shaken by the horrors of the Middle Passage as well. And Equiano was the most influential African writer of his time in Britain. And he also, again, he was an influential person of African descent in London, which was quite something really.

He was respected as a man of correspondence through his letters and publications. And he was an outspoken advocate of the abolition movement. And I do have to say that with the research that I've carried out this summer that Equiano wrote very, very many letters. And there was a lot to kind of wade through.

He provided the voice for enslaved people, who suffered the humiliation and violence of slavery and was an eloquent representative of the people who had been enslaved and were still engulfed in enslavement. Next slide, please.

So Equiano, as I said, he kind of moved between Cambridge and London, and obviously, all around England as well, doing his speeches, and so on, and so forth. And writing in newspapers, and many things, which I have to say, personally, it was an absolute pleasure to read.

He met with many influential people when he was a slave because we know that he was working on the ships on sea. And he met people of influence whilst he was doing that. And he also met them when he emancipated himself as a result of his own efforts. Which again, is something that is amazing because it was virtually impossible to emancipate yourself or even be emancipated as a slave in those days.

So he knew all of the leading abolitionists, William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson, Granville Sharpe, James Ramsay, Peter Peckard. So he knew all of these people. And he also lived with Thomas Hardy, the founder of the London Correspondence Society. And he was also well known by Queen Charlotte.

And if you look in his books, he has also dedicated his autobiography to her. So it was clear that he knew people in high office. And it's also revealed by the subscribers to his autobiography when one makes themselves acquainted with it. So next slide, please. Thank you.

Equiano's life and experiences of enslavement and his inner journey to becoming a devout Christian is documented in his autobiography. It is unclear whether his connection to Cambridge began on his book tour. However, there is written evidence that he made contact with Peter Peckard, the abolitionist.

I was very honoured to see his handwriting in the archives of Pembroke College, Cambridge, where he had written this letter to Peter Peckard to meet him. So that was a very moving moment for me. And the archive evidence shows also that he connected with Peckard, and also Thomas Clarkson, and other members of the clergy who were actively supported him in his work and contributed to sponsoring him and introducing them to people all over the country. So that he could actually go to tell people his story on his book tour and signings, really. Which actually, made him a celebrity in the end, if you like. Next slide, please.

So Equiano was influential in shaping public opinion on the problems of slavery. And he was an accomplished English-speaking writer of his age and the most accomplished author of African descent. And I think this is really important to acknowledge. Next slide, please.

So I just thought I'd put some of my evidence here, of some of the things that I found. So his letters, sorry, and powerful sermons were consistent with the sermons and poems of academics and clergies of the Cambridge community. And I've put some entries here to also show that there were slaves in England, actually, in Cambridge.

Because the first excerpt shows runaway slaves in Cambridgeshire, two boys, in fact, if you can see. I don't think you can see it closely. But if you could. And then of course, there is Equiano's evidence in terms of his writing in the Cambridge chronicles. And sometimes, these things were strategic. So the abolitionists would really come together. And they would strategize how they would maybe put the information out there in terms of sermons, and speeches, and how this would marry up with what was happening in Parliament as well.

And then there were also people who felt very enlightened. And they would publish poems in the newspaper. And at the end, there is an example. And it is a Cambridge academic because they have signatures at the end, which reveal who they are to themselves, but not to the public at large, about slavery. So this is a lovely example of the different forms of communication that was going out on the abolition of slavery at that time. Next slide, please.

So as for Equiano's personal life, he met his future wife, which was Susan Cullen. We believe that Susan Cullen's family was in Ely, which is not very far from Cambridge. We believe, it's not written in stone, that Peter Peckard introduced Equiano to this lady. And it may well have been on Equiano's first sort of visit to Cambridge on book signing.

And then after he meets her, her name appears as a subscriber. And I think that's on the second and third edition of his autobiography. And then it disappears after they get married because, obviously, she becomes a recipient of any profits or monies that are made from that. The wedding took place in a Cambridgeshire village in Soham, which is not very far from where I live. And he had to marry under the slave name, which was Gustavus Vassa. And they had two daughters, Anna Maria, who was born in 1792. And then there's Joanna, who was born in 1795. And they live in Soham.

And whilst they are living in Soham village, Equiano is still going on and having book meetings with the Sons of Africa, and so on, and so forth whilst his wife is at home. And she does live near her relatives because relatives live in the next village, which is Fordham. Her mother and her sister lived there. So she's obviously near family. But next slide, please, sorry. And then Susan Cullen unfortunately dies. She has gynaecological problems. And she dies in 1790. And this is followed by Equiano, who sadly dies a year later in 1797. And unfortunately, Equiano's grave is in London. But it has been lost. And his two little girls are orphaned. And they are fostered by friends of the family.

The eldest daughter dies also in 1797. And she is buried in a church in Chesterton in Cambridge city. And she's supposed to be buried in the churchyard there. But there is a commemorative epitaph poem for this little girl who died at four years old, apparently of measles.

And it's called of "A Colour Not of Thine Own." And it's on the outer wall of the church. And this poem was supposed to have been written by Edward Ind of Cambridge, who was a local poet. And it is also published in his book of poems. And it seems it's not been proven but it was found, if you like, in this work that we were doing, that the two girls went to live with his brother John Ind.

And it was thought that the Ind family looked after the two children after Equiano and his wife had died. And this is not proven. But again, I'd have to find some evidence of this. But it is a story, a local story that is commonly told.

So I would like to finish here. And the next slide actually has a poster on it because I would like to stress really, that everybody is welcome to join the opening of the Equiano Bridge, which is what part of this research was about this summer, which is opened on the 31st of this month. And I would like to thank you for listening. Are there any questions?

So thank you. So here is the poster. And once again, I would like to invite you to this historical moment, which I am one of the key speakers on the opening of the bridge. And it is the first bridge that is named after a person of colour in Cambridge. It was a very exciting journey this summer. And we are opening this bridge on the 31st of October. And everybody is welcome. And I think we've even managed to get the mayor to cut the ribbon. So, thank you very much for listening.