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**Slave Resistance**

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Slave resistance began in British North America almost as soon as the first slaves arrived in the Chesapeake in the early seventeenth century. As one scholar has put it, “slaves ‘naturally’ resisted their enslavement because slavery was fundamentally unnatural.”1 Forms varied, but the common denominator in all acts of resistance was an attempt to claim some measure of freedom against an institution that defined people fundamentally as property. Perhaps the most common forms of resistance were those that took place in the work environment. After all, slavery was ultimately about coerced labor, and the enslaved struggled daily to define the terms of their work. Over the years, customary rights emerged in most fields of production. These customs dictated work routines, distribution of rations, general rules of comportment, and so on. If slave masters increased workloads, provided meager rations, or punished too severely, slaves registered their displeasure by slowing work, feigning illness, breaking tools, or sabotaging production. These everyday forms of resistance vexed slave masters, but there was little they could do to stop them without risking more widespread breaks in production. In this way, the enslaved often negotiated the basic terms of their daily routines. Of course, masters also stood to benefit from these negotiations, as contented slaves worked harder, increasing output and efficiency.

Another common form of slave resistance was theft. Slaves pilfered fruits, vegetables, livestock, tobacco, liquor, and money from their masters. The theft of foodstuffs was especially common and was justified on several grounds. First, slave rations were often woefully inadequate in providing the nutrition and calories necessary to support the daily exertions of plantation labor. Hungry slaves reasoned that the master’s abundance should be shared with those who produced it. Second, slaves recognized the inherent contradiction of the master’s “theft” accusations. How could slaves, who were themselves the master’s property, “steal” anything that the master owned? After all, the master’s ownership claims over the slave meant that he owned everything that the slave “owned.” When a slave staked claim to a master’s chicken, he merely transferred it to his stomach, or as Frederick Douglass put it, the slave was simply “taking [the master’s] meat out of one tub and putting it in another.”2

In addition to everyday forms of resistance, slaves sometimes staked more direct and overt claims to freedom. The most common form of overt resistance was flight. As early as 1640, slaves in Maryland and Virginia absconded from their enslavement, a trend that would grow into the thousands, and, eventually, tens of thousands by the time of the Civil War. During the early years of slavery, runaways tended to consist mostly of African-born males. Since African-born men were in the numerical majority through much of the eighteenth century, this should not surprise us. For the most part, these men did not speak English and were unfamiliar with the geographic terrain of North America. Their attempts to escape slavery, despite these handicaps, are a testament to the rejection of their servile condition. If caught, runaways faced certain punishment—whipping, branding, and even the severing of the Achilles tendon. Those lucky enough to evade detection sought sanctuary in a variety of safe havens—Native American communities, marshy lowlands like the Great Dismal Swamp along the Virginia/North Carolina coastal border, and, eventually, Canada and the free states of the American North. By the nineteenth century, the North was a particularly attractive destination for acculturated, American-born slaves. Networks of free blacks and sympathetic whites often helped ferry slaves to freedom via the so-called Underground Railroad, a chain of safe houses that stretched from the American South to free states in the North. Men continued to be predominant among runaways, although women, and even entire families were increasingly likely to test their chances in the flight for freedom. As the Civil War unfolded, many slaves abandoned their masters’ plantations, sometimes joining the Union army in what many perceived to be a war to end slavery forever.

The most spectacular, and perhaps best-known, forms of resistance were organized, armed rebellions. Between 1691 and 1865, at least nine slave revolts erupted in what would eventually become the United States. The most prominent of these occurred in New York City (1712), Stono, South Carolina (1739), New Orleans (1811), and Southampton, Virginia (Nat Turner’s 1831 rebellion). Numerous other conspiracies were thwarted before they could be fully realized, including Gabriel Prosser’s (Richmond, VA, 1800) and Denmark Vesey’s (Charleston, SC, 1822). Slaves commandeered weapons, burned and looted properties, and even killed their masters and other whites, but whites were quick to exact a brutal revenge. In the bloodiest American revolt, Nat Turner and several hundred comrades killed sixty whites. Over 100 enslaved were killed, either in the combat or as retribution for the uprising. Another thirteen slaves were hanged, along with three free blacks. If the measure of a revolt’s success was the overthrow of slavery, then none of these revolts succeeded. Ultimately, the only rebellion that succeeded in overthrowing slavery in the Americas was the Haitian Revolution. Slave rebellions in colonial America and the United States never achieved such widespread success; however, the importance of rebellion cannot be overstated. The constant specter of physical violence reminded whites that slavery would never go unchallenged; the possibility of “another Haiti” loomed large, especially in the nineteenth-century American South.

<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/1609-1865/essays/slaveresist.htm>

**Selections from Reminiscences of Levi Coffin**

*Conversion to Abolitionist*

 I date my conversion to Abolitionism from an incident which occurred when I was about seven years old. It made a deep and lasting impression on my mind, and created that horror of the cruelties of slavery which has been the motive of so many actions of my life. At the time of which I speak, Virginia and Maryland were the principal slave-rearing States, and to a great extent supplied the Southern market. Free negroes in Pennsylvania were frequently kidnapped or decoyed into these States, then hurried away to Georgia, Alabama, or Louisiana, and sold. The gangs were handcuffed and chained together, and driven by a man on horseback, who flourished a long whip, such as is used in driving cattle, and goaded the reluctant and weary when their feet lagged on the long journey. One day I was by the roadside where my father was chopping wood, when I saw such a gang approaching along the new Salisbury road. The coffle of slaves came first, chained in couples on each side of a long chain which extended between them; the driver was some distance behind, with the wagon of supplies. My father addressed the slaves pleasantly, and then asked: "Well, boys, why do they chain you?" One of the men, whose countenance betrayed unusual intelligence and whose expression denoted the deepest sadness, replied: "They have taken us away from our wives and children, and they chain us lest we should make our escape and go back to them." My childish sympathy and interest were aroused, and when the dejected procession had passed on, I turned to my father and asked many questions concerning them, why they were taken away from their families, etc. In simple words, suited to my comprehension, my father explained to me the meaning of slavery, and, as I listened, the thought arose in my mind--"How terribly we should feel if father were taken away from us."

 This was the first awakening of that sympathy with the oppressed, which, together with a strong hatred of oppression and injustice in every form, were the motives that influenced my whole after-life. Another incident of my boyhood is indelibly engraved on my mind. I accompanied my father one spring to the famous shad fishery at the narrows of the Yadkin River, a spot of wild and romantic scenery, where the stream breaks through a spur of the mountains and goes foaming and dashing down its rocky bed in a succession of rapids. Every spring, when the shad ascended the river, many people resorted to the place to obtain fish. They brought with them a variety of merchandise, saddlery, crockery-ware, etc., and remained in camp some time, buying and selling. The fishery was owned by two brothers named Crump. They were slaveholders, and sometimes allowed their slaves the privilege of fishing after night and disposing of the fish thus obtained, on their own account. A slave, who had availed himself of this privilege, disposed of the fish he caught to my father. Next morning he came to the place where we were preparing breakfast, and entered into conversation with my father, speaking of the fish he had sold him, and asking if he would take more on the same terms. Noticing this, and thinking it a piece of presuming familiarity and impertinence, on the part of the negro, a young man, nephew of the Crumps, seized a fagot from the fire and struck the negro a furious blow across the head, baring the skull, covering his back and breast with blood, and his head with fire; swearing at the same time that he would allow no such impudence from niggers. My father protested against the act, and I was so deeply moved that I left my breakfast untasted, and going off by myself gave vent to my feelings in sobs and tears.

        A few such instances of "man's inhumanity to man" intensified my hatred of slavery, and inspired me to devote myself to the cause of the helpless and oppressed, and enter upon that line of humane effort, which I pursued for more than fifty years. I would still be engaged in it had not Abraham Lincoln broken up the business by proclamation in 1863

**“Petition of an African slave, to the legislature of Massachusetts.”**

From The *American Museum, or Repository of Ancient and Modern Fugitive Pieces, Prose and Poetical.* For June, 1787. Volume 1. Number 6. Philadelphia: Mathew Cary, 1787.

To the hounorable the senate and house of representatives, in general court assembled: The petition of

Belinda, an African,

Humbly shews,

That seventy years have rolled away, since she, on the banks of the Rio de Valta,[[1]](#footnote-1) received her existence. The mountains, covered with spicy forests—vallies, loaded with the richest fruits spontaneously produced—joined to that happy temperature of air, which excludes excess, would have yielded her the most complete felicity, had not her mind received early impressions of the cruelty of men, whose faces were like the moon, and whose bows and arrows were like the thunder and lightning of the clouds. The idea of these, the most dreadful of all enemies, filled her infant slumber with horror, and her noon-tide moments with cruel apprehensions! But her affrighted imagination, in its most alarming extension, never represented distresses equal to what she has since really experienced: for before she had twelve years enjoyed the fragrance of her native groves, and ere she had realized that Europeans placed their happiness in the yellow dust,[[2]](#footnote-2) which she carelessly marked with her infant foot-steps—even when she, in a sacred grove, with each hand in that of a tender parent, was paying her devotion to the great Orisa, who made all things, and armed band of white men, driving many of her countrymen in chains, rushed into the hallowed shades! Could the tears, the sighs, the supplications, bursting from the tortured parental affection, have blunted the keen edge of avarice, she might have been rescued from agony, which many of her country’s children have felt, but which none have ever described. In vain she lifted her supplication voice to an insulted father, and her guiltless hands to a dishonoured deity! She was ravished from the bosom of her country, from the arms of her friends, while the advanced age of her parents rendering them unfit for servitude, cruelly separated them from her forever.

 Scenes which her imagination had never conceived of, a floating world, the sporting monsters of the deep, and the familiar meeting of billows and clouds, strove, but in vain, to divert her attention from three hundred Africans in chains, suffering the most excruciating torment; and some of them rejoicing that the pangs of death came like a balm to their wounds.

Once more her eyes were blessed with a continent: but alas! how unlike the land where she received her being! Here all things appeared unpropitious. She learned to catch the ideas, marked by the sounds of language, only to know that her doom was slavery, from which death alone was to emancipate her. What did it avail her, that the walls of her lord were hung with splendor, and that the dust trodden under foot in her native country, crouded his gates with sordid worshippers! The laws rendered her incapable of receiving property: and though she was a free moral agent, accountable for her own actions, yet never had she a moment at her own disposal! Fifty years her faithful hands have been compelled to ignoble servitude for the benefit of an Isaac Royall,[[3]](#footnote-3) until, by the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture Volume LXIV, Number 1 Web Supplement for William and Mary Quarterly Roy E. Finkenbine, Belinda’s Petition: Reparations for Slavery in Revolutionary Massachusetts if nations must be agitated, and the world convulsed, for the preservation of that freedom, which the Almighty Father intended for all the human race, the present war commenced. The terrors of men, armed in the cause of freedom, compelled her master to fly, and to breathe away his life in a land, where lawless dominion sits enthroned, pouring blood and vengeance on all who dare to be free.

The face of your petitioner is now marked with the furrows of time, and her frame feebly bending under the oppression of years, while she, by the laws of the land, is denied the enjoyment of one morsel of that immense wealth, a part whereof hath been accumulated by her own industry, and the whole augmented by her servitude.

 Wherefore, casting herself at the feet of your honours, as to a body of men, formed for the extirpation of vassalage, for the reward of virtue, and the just returns of honest industry—she prays that such allowance may be made her, out of the estate of colonel Royall, as will prevent her, and her more infirm daughter, from misery in the greatest extreme, and scatter comfort over the short and downward path of their lives: and she will ever pray.

BELINDA.

Boston, February, 1782. (538–40).[[4]](#footnote-4)

<http://oieahc.wm.edu/wmq/Jan07/Finkbine.pdf>

**Olaudah Equiano: An Illustrated Biography**

Almost everything we know about the first ten years of Equiano's life we find from Equiano's own account in*The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, published in 1789. In this, Equiano tells us that he was born around the year 1745 in an area called 'Eboe' in Guinea. Ibo (or Igbo) is one of the main languages of present day Nigeria. Equiano tells us that he was the son of a chief, and that at about the age of eleven he and his sister were kidnapped while out playing, and were marched to the coast and put on board a slave ship. Equiano then endured the middle passage on a slave ship bound for the New World. Equiano's accounts of Africa and the middle passage have became famous. In recent years, however, it has been suggested by Vincent Carretta that Equiano may not have been born in Africa at all. According to Carretta, Equiano may have been born a slave in South Carolina - at that time one of the thirteen British colonies in North America. Indeed, if Carretta's evidence - Equiano's baptismal records, and a naval muster roll - is accurate, there is a possibility that Equiano never visited Africa. The early parts of his autobiography may reflect the oral history of other slaves, combined with information Equiano gleaned from books he had read about Africa.

While Carretta's research opens up a very important debate, we do need to be cautious. Carretta's research strongly suggests that the young Equiano told people that his birthplace was Carolina. However, as a slave and later a recently freed slave, Equiano might have had any number of reasons to disguise his true origins. Indeed, although we can be reasonably sure that Equiano sometimes told people he was from Carolina, there is no conclusive proof that his birthplace was actually there and, until such proof emerges (if it ever does), there is no real reason to doubt the essential truth of Equiano's account of his childhood in Africa. Even if it is ever proved that Equiano was born in Carolina, it is important to stress that it is unlikely that Equiano would have invented an African origin merely to deceive the reading public. Instead, he may have included the real experience of many other slaves in his effort to make the strongest possible case against slavery and the slave trade. The truth may never be known, but [click here](http://www.brycchancarey.com/equiano/nativity.htm) for a summary of the main arguments on both sides of the debate.

In the summer of 1754, Equiano was sold to an officer in the Royal Navy called Michael Pascal. This can be verified independently, and we can be reasonably sure that the rest of Equiano's autobiography is an accurate account of his life. Pascal gave the boy the name of Gustavus Vassa. This was a rather cruel joke on Pascal's part. The original Gustavus Vassa was a sixteenth-century Swedish nobleman who had led the Swedish people into a war of independence from the Danes and as a result had become the first Swedish king of the Swedish people. He was thus seen as the man who had led the Swedes out of a sort of slavery. Pascal's renaming of Equiano was a typical act of slaveowners. By taking away the identity of the slave the owner was able to demonstrate the total control he had over his 'possession'.

As Pascal's slave Equiano was introduced to the naval way of life which gave him opportunities that he would almost certainly have been denied had he been a plantation slave. For a start, he was brought to England and saw not only Europe but ultimately many parts of the world. But of greatest importance, he was able to learn to read and write which he did at a school in London where he was sent by Pascal. This was in the late 1750s when Britain was fighting the Seven Years War with France. This was essentially an imperial war, fought for control of North America and the Caribbean, and it ended in 1763 with Britain having captured Canada and a number of Caribbean islands from the French. Equiano's schooling was thus interrupted by periods at sea. There, he would have spent much of his time as a personal servant to Pascal, but in battle his part was that of gunpowder carrier, or 'powder-monkey' as he would have been known on board ship. His job was to carry gunpowder from the magazine up to the gun decks.We can get an idea of the crowded and informal scenes on an eighteenth-century gun deck from Thomas Rowlandson's cartoon. No naval officer would allow scenes like this on board a battleship today, but the relaxed appearance does not mean that warfare was not taken seriously. Once in battle, the crew would be expected to behave like an efficient and disciplined fighting force.

During this war Equiano saw action in Canada and in the Mediterranean and, by now having fought for the British and having been baptised, Equiano quite reasonably felt that he was entitled both to his share of the prize money that was handed out to sailors on naval vessels, and to his freedom. However, he was cheated of his money and then suddenly sold to another sea-captain who took him to the island of Montserrat in the Caribbean, where he was sold again to a Quaker by the name of Robert King. Equiano's first fear was that he would be sent into the plantations, but by now he was a very well-educated slave and therefore much too valuable to be sent into the fields. King had him trained as a gauger - someone who gauges weights and measures - which was a very responsible position, something rather like a quality control manager today. While Equiano was in Montserrat he witnessed the worst tortures imaginable being inflicted on his fellow slaves and this experience, he tells us, gave him an added incentive to achieve his freedom. He was in the fortunate position that he could exploit his job to his own advantage and, after three years, in 1766, he saved up £40, the price of his own freedom. In his autobiography he writes movingly about his great joy at gaining his freedom. After a short while he went back to England.

On his arrival he was finally paid his wages from the navy. He had less luck with Captain Pascal who continued to refuse him his prize money. He worked for a while as a hairdresser, but this didn't pay very well, so he went back to sea, on most voyages either as a hairdresser or a steward. He took what were seemingly a couple of very pleasant cruises around the Mediterranean, and then a voyage back to the Caribbean, before in 1773 joining a voyage of exploration. This voyage took place under the command of John Phipps and the idea was to find a passage to India across the North Pole. This wasn't just a scientific project. The discovery of a north-west passage would save British ships a great deal of time and would thus considerably strengthen Britain's imperial claims on India. Equiano shipped aboard the *Racehorse*, and the expedition was soon joined by another ship: the *Carcass*. One of the crew on this ship was a young midshipman named Horatio Nelson. Nelson was later to become the great hero of the battle of the Nile and the battle of Trafalgar. On this journey he was almost killed in an encounter with a polar bear, here imagined by Richard Westall in his painting of 1809. Equiano isn't shown in the picture, but we get an idea of some of the dangers he faced on this voyage. Indeed, the *Racehorse* was almost lost, but the mission was a scientific success in that it was clearly proved that a north-west passage would not be found.

Equiano returned to London where two things of note occurred. First, he became involved in the political and legal efforts to outlaw slavery and the slave trade. This came about because a former slave and a friend of his, John Annis, was kidnapped by his former owner who wished to have him sent to the Caribbean. This was in 1773. In the preceding year this practice had been declared illegal by Lord Mansfield. Equiano went to [Granville Sharp](http://www.brycchancarey.com/abolition/sharp.htm), the first prominent British abolitionist, for help and between them they [tried to save Annis](http://www.brycchancarey.com/equiano/extract6.htm), but unfortunately their attempt was unsuccessful. However, Equiano was now in contact with the most important British campaigner against slavery. The other important thing which takes place at this time was Equiano's conversion to Christianity. He had been exploring the scriptures and examining his own faith for some time, but it was on a voyage to Spain that he tells us that he saw 'the bright beams of heavenly light' and was 'born again'. To many secular twentieth-century readers this has seemed like the least important part of his narrative, and in some editions of *The Interesting Narrative* the section describing Equiano's conversion is cut out entirely. But to many readers in the eighteenth century - and, of course, to Equiano himself - this really was the key moment of his life.

Equiano then went out to the Caribbean again, in 1775, and this time he became involved in a project to set up a new plantation - or colony - on the Caribbean coast of Central America, probably in present day Nicaragua. This 'adventure' seems somewhat problematic to us today as Equiano was involved in two projects which are specifically associated with European colonisation. First of all he appoints himself as a Christian missionary, hoping that he can bring Christianity to the native Americans in the area. Secondly, he and his associates buy slaves to work on the plantation and Equiano is clearly involved in this at a high level, although he is at some pains to point out that he did 'every thing I could to comfort the poor creatures, and render their condition easy'. We have to remember that in the mid 1770s there was as yet no organised anti-slavery movement and, indeed, there were very few individuals who thought that slavery should or even could be abolished outright. There were, however, a growing number of people who argued that just because people were slaves it didn't mean that they should be treated cruelly. These people sought to ameliorate the conditions of the slaves by stopping corporal punishment, and by making sure the slaves had access to decent housing, food and medical care. Equiano can be placed with the ameliorationists at this point, although clearly he is not yet an abolitionist.

His experiences on leaving this colony might have helped him to change his mind about this. Once again he was cheated of money he was owed and - more dangerously - a slave-owner tried to re-enslave him. He was strung up for several hours and only managed to escape in canoe. Once again he decided to go back to London, where he worked for seven years as a servant (with a couple of cruises to America) before getting involved with the Sierra Leone resettlement project. This part of his narrative is dealt with in just a few pages, but historians of slavery view this project as being a very important one, not least because it took place at the same time as the very early period of the abolition campaign. Essentially, what happened was that in 1786 a number of people, particularly a rather eccentric amateur botanist by the name of Henry Smeathman, noticed that there were a great number of unemployed Africans begging on the streets of London. Smeathman reasoned that, since these people had been brought to England from Africa against their will in the first place, the kindest thing would be to round them all up and send them back again. The opinion of the Africans concerned was not asked for. While it is easy for us to be judgmental about this scheme now, we have to remember that, at the time, many of the most committed anti-slavery campaigners, such as Granville Sharp, were fully behind this because they genuinely believed it to be a work of charity. Sharp in particular was keen to make sure that the colony which was set up in Sierra Leone would be run along lines of equity and justice and that slavery would be outlawed there. Equiano believed in the project too, and he was given the job of Commissary of Provisions and Stores - it was his job to buy the food and equipment which the ships and the colony would need - a job which made him probably the first black civil servant in England. He soon found out, however, that corrupt officials were siphoning off the money to line their own pockets and that as a result there would not be enough provisions to keep the colony going until its first harvest. He drew attention to this in several places, but the enlightened attitude of the government in employing a black civil servant did not last and institutional racism quickly kicked in. The Navy Board stood up for him, but he was sacked nonetheless. And he was absolutely right about the Sierra Leone colony. Precisely because it was so badly provisioned only 60 of the 374 people shipped there survived the first four years.

His next project was to write the book on which his fame rests. When *The Interesting Narrative* appeared, in the spring of 1789, it was at the height of the popular campaign to abolish the slave trade and his was one of over a hundred books to appear that year on the subject of slavery. In the main it was given good reviews, but the reviewers were in no doubt that this was a book of the moment. *The Gentleman's Magazine*, for example, said that

Among other contrivances (and perhaps one of the most innocent) to interest the national humanity in favour of the Negro slaves, one of them here writes his own history, as formerly another of them published his own correspondence.

That other one was [Ignatius Sancho](http://www.brycchancarey.com/sancho/index.htm). So these reviewers saw the book as political propaganda. Is this a fair assessment? In a way it is. Right at the end of the book, Equiano lays out a number of religious and economic [arguments for the abolition of slavery](http://www.brycchancarey.com/equiano/extract5.htm), and the presence of these arguments has a strongly politicising effect on the book. Firstly, they make a straightforward political point - that the slave trade should be abolished - and back up that point of view with evidence. Secondly, their structural position in the narrative - last - ensures that these arguments are the ones which are uppermost in the mind of the reader when he or she lays down the book, and they also bring together many of the more local arguments against slavery which are made throughout the course of the book. We might remember, for example, the descriptions of the cruel treatment of slaves in Montserrat and Nicaragua. Yet one of the most important political aspects of the book is very similar to that of *The Letters of Ignatius Sancho*. Sancho's editor claimed that one of her motives for publishing his letters was 'the desire of shewing that an untutored African may possess abilities equal to an European'. We could argue that Equiano was doing the same when, right at the start of his book, he lays out his motives:

If it affords any satisfaction to my numerous friends, at whose request it has been written, or in the smallest degree promotes the interest of humanity, the ends for which it was undertaken will be fully attained, and every wish of my heart gratified.

When Equiano refers to 'humanity' he seems to have several things in mind. Firstly he of course means that slavery is inhumane in that it is a cruel business resulting in a great deal of human misery. He is calling for its abolition. But as well as the overt anti-slavery agenda there is a more subtle anti-racist project going on to dispel some of the racist myths current in eighteenth-century England. Amongst these was an increasingly widespread myth that Africans were either not fully human or were of a less developed branch of humanity. Part of Equiano's project is to dispel this myth entirely by showing the world that he, in common with all human beings, is quite capable of writing a fine book describing a life which would be considered extraordinary and full of talent and seized opportunity regardless of the racial origins of the person who had lived it.

In this respect, we can say that the project of writing autobiography is, in Equiano's case, a strongly political act. Indeed, the book is a rather special sort of autobiography: a black self-representation. In this period this is in itself somewhat unusual, but the work is also an account of the life of a former slave, a particular genre which is known as a 'slave narrative'. By 1789 a very small number of these had already appeared, mostly oral accounts spoken by a slave or former slave and taken down and published by white amanuenses (although a famous exception to this is the *Thoughts on Slavery* published in 1788 by Equiano's friend [Quobna Ottobah Cugoano](http://www.brycchancarey.com/cugoano/index.htm)). But Equiano's narrative was very different from most of those that had gone before. Not only had he written it himself, but he had also published it himself, by subscription, a method which involved getting people to put the money up front. He managed to convince many very important people to pay in advance for his book, a list which starts with the Prince of Wales and includes no less than eight dukes. Equiano's book is different in another way too. Equiano did not just publish the book and leave it to fend for itself. Instead, he vigorously promoted it by going on lecture tours around England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, and by promoting his book he was also promoting the idea of abolition of slavery. Indeed, it was local abolition committees who arranged the lectures and readings at which he was present. During the early 1790s, then, Equiano had not just turned his life story into a document opposing slavery, but had transformed his entire life into a sort of anti-slavery document.

Equiano spent much of the 1790s campaigning against slavery, but he also managed to turn his book into a financial success as well. The 1790s brought personal changes too, and on 7 April 1792 he married an Englishwoman, Susanna Cullen, at Soham in Cambridgeshire. Olaudah and Susanna had two daughters, one of whom survived to inherit a substantial estate of £950 from her father (equivalent to about £100,000 or $160,000 today). Equiano died in March 1797, a full ten years before the slave trade was abolished in British ships, forty years before slavery was abolished in British colonies, and 68 years before slavery was ended in the United States. Although Equiano did not live to see these events, his narrative played an important part in bringing them about.

Text © Brycchan Carey 2000-2005

<http://www.brycchancarey.com/equiano/biog.htm>

**Angelina Grimké Weld's speech at Pennsylvania Hall**

Men, brethren and fathers -- mothers, daughters and sisters, what came ye out for to see? A reed shaken with the wind? Is it curiosity merely, or a deep sympathy with the perishing slave, that has brought this large audience together? [A yell from the mob without the building.] Those voices without ought to awaken and call out our warmest sympathies. Deluded beings! "they know not what they do." They know not that they are undermining their own rights and their own happiness, temporal and eternal. Do you ask, "what has the North to do with slavery?" Hear it -- hear it. Those voices without tell us that the spirit of slavery is *here*, and has been roused to wrath by our abolition speeches and conventions: for surely liberty would not foam and tear herself with rage, because her friends are multiplied daily, and meetings are held in quick succession to set forth her virtues and extend her peaceful kingdom. This opposition shows that slavery has done its deadliest work in the hearts of our citizens. Do you ask, then, "what has the North to do?" I answer, cast out first the spirit of slavery from your own hearts, and then lend your aid to convert the South. Each one present has a work to do, be his or her situation what it may, however limited their means, or insignificant their supposed influence. The great men of this country will not do this work; the church will never do it. A desire to please the world, to keep the favor of all parties and of all conditions, makes them dumb on this and every other unpopular subject. They have become worldly-wise, and therefore God, in his wisdom, employs them not to carry on his plans of reformation and salvation. He hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and the weak to overcome the mighty.

As a Southerner I feel tbrt it is my duty to stand up here to-night and bear testimony against slavery. I have seen it -- I have seen it. I know it has horrors that can never be described. I was brought up under its wing: I witnessed for many years its demoralizing influences, and its destructiveness to human happiness. It is admitted by some that the slave is not happy under the *worst* forms of slavery. But I have *never* seen a happy slave. I have seen him dance in his chains, it is true; but he was not happy. There is a wide difference between happiness and mirth. Man cannot enjoy the former while his manhood is destroyed, and that part of the being which is necessary to the making, and to the enjoyment of happiness, is completely blotted out. The slaves, however, may be, and sometimes are, mirthful. When hope is extinguished, they say, "let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." [Just then stones were thrown at the windows, -- a great noise without, and commotion within.] What is a mob? What would the breaking of every window be? What would the levelling of this Hall be? Any evidence that we are wrong, or that slavery is a good and wholesome institution ? What if the mob should now burst in upon us, break up our meeting and commit violence upon our persons -- would this be any thing compared with what the slaves endure? No, no: and we do not remember them "as bound with them," if we shrink in the time of peril, or feel unwilling to sacrifice ourselves, if need be, for their sake. [Great noise.] I thank the Lord that there is yet life left enough to feel the truth, even though it rages at it -- that conscience is not so completely seared as to be unmoved by the truth of the living God.

Many persons go to the South for a season, and are hospitably entertained in the parlor and at the table of the slave-holder. They never enter the huts of the slaves; they know nothing of the dark side of the picture, and they return home with praises on their lips of the generous character of those with whom they had tarried. Or if they have witnessed the cruelties of slavery, by remaining silent spectators they have naturally become callous -- an insensibility has ensued which prepares them to apologize even for barbarity. Nothing but the corrupting influence of slavery on the hearts of the Northern people can induce them to apologize for it; and much will have been done for the destruction of Southern slavery when we have so reformed the North that no one here will be willing to risk his reputation by advocating or even excusing the holding of men as property. The South know it, and acknowledge that as fast as our principles prevail, the hold of the master must be relaxed. [Another outbreak of mobocratic spirit, and some confusion in the house.]

How wonderfully constituted is the human mind! How it resists, as long as it can, all efforts made to reclaim from error! I feel that all this disturbance is but an evidence that our efforts are the best that could have been adopted, or else the friends of slavery would not care for what we say and do. The South know what we do. I am thankful that they are reached by our efforts. Many times have I wept in the land of my birth, over the system of slavery. I knew of none who sympathized in my feelings -- I was unaware that any efforts were made to deliver the oppressed -- no voice in the wilderness was heard calling on the people to repent and do works meet for repentance -- and my heart sickened within me. Oh, how should I have rejoiced to know that such efforts as these were being made. I only wonder that I had such feelings. I wonder when I reflect under what influence I was brought up that my heart is not harder than the nether millstone. But in the midst of temptation I was preserved, and my sympathy grew warmer, and my hatred of slavery more inveterate, until at last I have exiled myself from my native land because I could no longer endure to hear the wailing of the slave. I fled to the land of Penn; for here, thought I, sympathy for the slave will surely be found. But I found it not. The people were kind and hospitable, but the slave had no place in their thoughts. Whenever questions were put to me as to his condition, I felt that they were dictated by an idle curiosity, rather than by that deep feeling which would lead to effort for his rescue. I therefore shut up my grief in my own heart. I remembered that I was a Carolinian, from a state which framed this iniquity by law. I knew that throughout her territory was continual suffering, on the one part, and continual brutality and sin on the other. Every Southern breeze wafted to me the discordant tones of weeping and wailing, shrieks and groans, mingled with prayers and blasphemous curses. I thought there was no hope; that the wicked would go on in his wickedness, until he had destroyed both himself and his country. My heart sunk within me at the abominations in the midst of which I had been born and educated. What will it avail, cried I in bitterness of spirit, to expose to the gaze of strangers the horrors and pollutions of slavery, when there is no ear to hear nor heart to feel and pray for the slave. The language of my soul was, "Oh tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Askelon." But how different do I feel now! Animated with hope, nay, with an assurance of the triumph of liberty and good will to man, I will lift up my voice like a trumpet, and show this people their transgression, their sins of omission towards the slave, and what they can do towards affecting Southern mind, and overthrowing Southern oppression.

We may talk of occupying neutral ground, but on this subject, in its present attitude, there is no such thing as neutral ground. He that is not for us is against us, and he that gathereth not with us, scattereth abroad. If you are on what you suppose to be neutral ground, the South look upon you as on the side of the oppressor. And is there one who loves his country willing to give his influence, even indirectly, in favor of slavery -- that curse of nations ? God swept Egypt with the besom of destruction, and punished Judea also with a sore punishment, because of slavery. And have we any reason to believe that he is less just now? -- or that he will be more favorable to us than to his own "peculiar people?" [Shoutings, stones thrown against the windows, &c.]

There is nothing to be feared from those who would stop our mouths, but they themselves should fear and tremble. The current is even now setting fast against them. If the arm of the North had not caused the Bastile of slavery to totter to its foundation, you would not hear those cries. A few years ago, and the South felt secure, and with a contemptuous sneer asked, "Who are the abolitionists? The abolitionists are nothing?" -- Ay, in one sense they were nothing, and they are nothing still. But in this we rejoice, that "God has chosen things that are not to bring to nought things that are." [Mob again disturbed the meeting.]

We often hear the question asked , What shall we do?" Here is an opportunity for doing something now. Every man and every woman present may do soinething by showing that we fear not a mob, and, in the midst of threatenings and revilings, by opening our mouths for the dumb and pleading the cause of those who are ready to perish.

To work as we should in this cause, we must know what Slavery is. Let me urge you then to buy the books which have been written on this subject and read them, and then lend them to your neighbors. Give your money no longer for things which pander to pride and lust, but aid in scattering "the living coals of truth" upon the naked heart of this nation, -- in circulating appeals to the sympathies of Christians in behalf of the outraged and suffering slave. But, it is said by some, our "books and papers do not speak the truth." Why, then, do they not contradict what we say? They cannot. Moreover the South has entreated, nay commanded us to be silent; and what greater evidence of the truth of our publications could be desired?

Women of Philadelphia! allow me as a Southern woman, with much attachment to the land of my birth, to entreat you to come up to this work. Especially let me urge you to petition. *Men* may settle this and other questions at the ballot-box, but you have no such right; it is only through petitions that you can reach the Legislature. It is therefore peculiarly *your* duty to petition. Do you say, "It does no good?" The South already turns pale at the number sent. They have read the reports of the proceedings of Congress, and there have seen that among other petitions were very many from the women of the North on the subject of slavery. This fact has called the attention of the South to the subject. How could we expect to have done more as yet? Men who hold the rod over slaves, rule in the councils of the nation: and they deny our right to petition and to remonstrate against abuses of our sex and of our kind. We have these rights, however, from our God. Only let us exercise them: and though often turned away unanswered, let us remember the influence of importunity upon the unjust judge, and act accordingly. The fact that the South look with jealousy upon our measures shows that they are effectual. There is, therefore, no cause for doubting or despair, but rather for rejoicing.

It was remarked in England that women did much to abolish Slavery in her colonies. Nor are they now idle. Numerous petitions from them have recently been presented to the Queen, to abolish the apprenticeship with its cruelties nearly equal to those of the system whose place it supplies. One petition two miles and a quarter long has been presented. And do you think these labors will be in vain ? Let the history of the past answer. When the women of these States send up to Congress such a petition, our legislators will arise as did those of England, and say, "When all the maids and matrons of the land are knocking at our doors we must legislate." Let the zeal and love, the faith and works of our English sisters quicken ours -- that while the slaves continue to suffer, and when they shout deliverance, we may feel the satisfaction of *having done what we could.*

Credit: *History of Pennsylvania Hall which was Destroyed by a Mob on the 17th of May*, 1838
Negro Universities Press, A Division of Greenwood Publishing Corp,
New York, 1969

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2939t.html>

**The Emancipation Proclamation**

January 1, 1863

A Transcription

By the President of the United States of America:

A Proclamation.

Whereas, on the twenty-second day of September, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-two, a proclamation was issued by the President of the United States, containing, among other things, the following, to wit:

"That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.

"That the Executive will, on the first day of January aforesaid, by proclamation, designate the States and parts of States, if any, in which the people thereof, respectively, shall then be in rebellion against the United States; and the fact that any State, or the people thereof, shall on that day be, in good faith, represented in the Congress of the United States by members chosen thereto at elections wherein a majority of the qualified voters of such State shall have participated, shall, in the absence of strong countervailing testimony, be deemed conclusive evidence that such State, and the people thereof, are not then in rebellion against the United States."

Now, therefore I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, by virtue of the power in me vested as Commander-in-Chief, of the Army and Navy of the United States in time of actual armed rebellion against the authority and government of the United States, and as a fit and necessary war measure for suppressing said rebellion, do, on this first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and in accordance with my purpose so to do publicly proclaimed for the full period of one hundred days, from the day first above mentioned, order and designate as the States and parts of States wherein the people thereof respectively, are this day in rebellion against the United States, the following, to wit:

Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, (except the Parishes of St. Bernard, Plaquemines, Jefferson, St. John, St. Charles, St. James Ascension, Assumption, Terrebonne, Lafourche, St. Mary, St. Martin, and Orleans, including the City of New Orleans) Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia, (except the forty-eight counties designated as West Virginia, and also the counties of Berkley, Accomac, Northampton, Elizabeth City, York, Princess Ann, and Norfolk, including the cities of Norfolk and Portsmouth[)], and which excepted parts, are for the present, left precisely as if this proclamation were not issued.

And by virtue of the power, and for the purpose aforesaid, I do order and declare that all persons held as slaves within said designated States, and parts of States, are, and henceforward shall be free; and that the Executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authorities thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of said persons.

And I hereby enjoin upon the people so declared to be free to abstain from all violence, unless in necessary self-defence; and I recommend to them that, in all cases when allowed, they labor faithfully for reasonable wages.

And I further declare and make known, that such persons of suitable condition, will be received into the armed service of the United States to garrison forts, positions, stations, and other places, and to man vessels of all sorts in said service.

And upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of Almighty God.

In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the City of Washington, this first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty three, and of the Independence of the United States of America the eighty-seventh.

By the President: ABRAHAM LINCOLN

WILLIAM H. SEWARD, Secretary of State.

<http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured_documents/emancipation_proclamation/transcript.html>

1. The Volta River flows through present-day Ghana, known in the eighteenth century as the Gold Coast [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Yellow dust: gold. Belinda remembers the type of African paradise—fruitful, temperate, and where minerals precious to Europeans have no real value—often described in abolitionist literature [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Isaac Royall (1719?–1781) was one of the wealthiest and most prominent Loyalists in Massachusetts. He and his brother Jacob, both born in the West Indian colony of Antigua, were slave dealers as well as major slave owners in Massachusetts. Isaac Royall fled from Medford, Massachusetts, to Boston just days before the battle of Lexington in April 1775. After the battle, he sought refuge in England, where he died. Like many colonial soldiers, he had two military ranks, one in the colonial service, in which he was Brigadier-General of the Artillery Company of Boston, and the other in the Royal Army, in which he was a colonel. Significantly, in Belinda’s petition he is later called Colonel Royall, to emphasize his Loyalist position. After he fled, his property was declared forfeited and confiscated by the state, which did not sell the Royall estate until 1805. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The American Museum frequently published antislavery pieces. For example, the essay that immediately follows Belinda’s petition is entitled “Address to the Heart, on the Subject of African Slavery.” In 1787 the magazine printed Belinda’s original petition of 1783 because she had repetitioned the legislature in spring 1787 for the resumption of payment of the pension of £15 per year she had been awarded out of the rents and profits from her former master’s expropriated estate but which had ceased to be paid her after the first year. In November 1787, Belinda was granted her pension for another year, in response to “The Memorial of Belinda, an African, formerly a Servant to the late Isaac Royall Esq an Absentee.” We do not what became of Belinda, her daughter, or the pension. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)