

# Who was Olaudah Equiano?

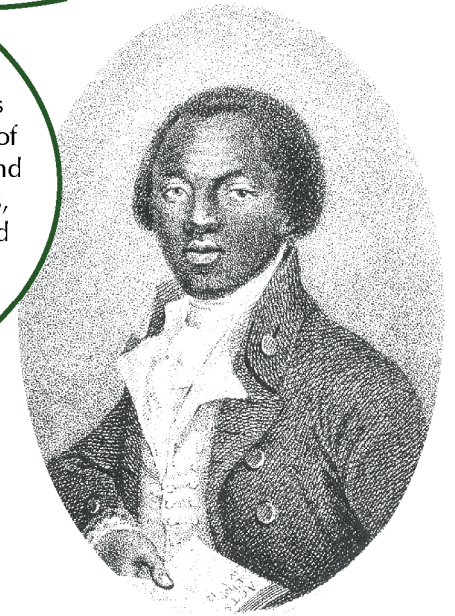
I was born, in the year 1745, in a charming fruitful vale, named Essaka. The distance of this province from the capital of Benin and the sea must be very considerable; for I had never heard of white men or Europeans, nor of the sea.

While I was on board this ship, my captain and master named me Gustavus Vasa. I at that time began to understand him a little, and refused to be called so, and told him as well as I could that I would be called Jacob; but he said I should not, and still called me Gustavus; and when I refused to answer to my new name, which at first I did, it gained me many a cuff; so at length I (gave in) and was (forced) to bear the present name, by which I have been known ever since.

My station during the (battle) was on the middle-deck, where I was (told) with another boy, to bring powder to the ... gun ...

Mr. King (his owner) soon asked me what I could do; and at the same time said he did not mean to treat me as a common slave. I told him I knew something of seamanship (being a sailor), and could shave and dress hair pretty well; and I could refine wines, which I had learned on shipboard, where I had often done it; and that I could write, and understood arithmetic tolerably well as far as the Rule of Three <sup>1</sup>.

...there was scarcely any part of his (master's) business or household affairs, in which I was not occasionally engaged. I often (did the work of a) clerk, in receiving and delivering cargoes to the ships, in tending stores, and delivering goods; and besides this, I used to shave and dress my master when convenient, and take care of his horse; and when it was necessary ... I worked on board of different vessels <sup>2</sup> of his. By these means I became very useful to my master.



Olaudah Equiano The African: Frontispiece to 'The Interesting Narrative', 1793  
© Local Studies: Birmingham Central Library

## Task

1. Make a list of all of the different jobs that Equiano mentions in the sources.
2. In no more than 10 words describe what kind of a person you think Equiano was.
3. Draw a mind-map about Olaudah Equiano's life from the information that you have in these sources, the title page of *The Interesting Narrative* and on the summary sheet. You should include his origins, his jobs, skills and characteristics and any other areas you can think of.
4. Using the sources design a front cover for a new copy of Equiano's autobiography. Try to show as many of the different activities that Equiano was involved in, using the information from your mind-map.

## GLOSSARY

<sup>1</sup> Rule of Three means Arithmetic

<sup>2</sup> Vessel means ship