

On the Water

Stories from Maritime America

The Middle Passage

Olaudah Equiano describes his sickness and terror as an 11-year-old captive aboard a slave ship from Africa to Barbados in 1756.

From Olaudah Equiano, “The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African,” in Henry Louis Gates, ed., *The Classic Slave Narratives* (New York: Mentor, 1987), pp. 32-37.

The first object that saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave ship...waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, that was soon converted into terror...I was immediately handled and tossed up to see if I was sound, by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had got into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me...

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 with my crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat...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...and laid me across, I think, the windlass, and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely...In a little time after, amongst the poor chained men, I found some of my own nation...I inquired of 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 was then a little revived...But still I feared that I should be put to death, the white people looked and acted, as I thought, in so savage a manner: for I had never seen such instances of brutal cruelty: and this is not only shown towards us blacks, but also to some of the whites themselves...I could not help expressing my fearful apprehensions to some of my countrymen...I asked them how the vessel could go. They told me they could not tell; but that there was cloth put upon the masts by the help of the ropes I saw, and then the vessel went on; and the white men had some spell or magic they put in the water, when they liked, in order to stop the vessel...

While we stayed on the coast I was mostly on deck; and one day...I saw one of these vessels coming in with the sails up...when the anchor was let go, I and my countrymen who saw it, were lost in astonishment to observe the vessel stop, and were now convinced it was done by magic...At last, when the ship...had got in all her cargo,... we were all put under deck...

