

Activity 2: Auctions of enslaved Africans Document Exercise

On arrival in America or the Caribbean the enslaved Africans would be auctioned and put to work on the various plantations. All of the historical quotes below describe auctions of enslaved Africans. Read them and consider the discussion points at the end.

Quote 1

"Every auction day many were sold away to Georgia, or some other of the far off Southern States, and often could be seen in companies, handcuffed, and on their way to the Southern markets, doomed, doomed to perpetual slavery. So absolutely were the slaves in the power of their masters that they were pledged, leased, exchanged, taken for debt or gambled off at the gambling table; and men, women, and children were sold by auction at the public auction block - husbands and wives separated, never to meet again, and little children torn from their parents' loving arms, and sold into slavery, and into the hands of strangers from distant parts."

Quote from "Twenty-Eight Years a Slave" written by Thomas Johnson, 1909.

Johnson was born into slavery at Rock Raymon in Virginia in 1836. His father had been brought to America from Guinea in Africa. When he was born, his father was a freeman and his mother was enslaved. In 1839, his father tried to buy his wife and son's freedom but they were sold and sent to Alexandria, Virginia. When Johnson was 12 years old he was separated from his mother and sent to work in Fredericksburg, Virginia. In 1852 he was sold to a family in Richmond, Virginia, which led to a reunion with his mother who had been sold to another man

in Richmond. He was eventually freed and moved to Denver where he became a church minister. In 1876 he became a missionary in Africa and published his book in 1909.

Quote 2

"We were not many days in the merchant's custody, before we were sold after their usual manner, which is this: On a signal given, (as the beat of a drum) the buyers rush at once into the yard where the slaves are confined, and make choice of that parcel they like best."

Quote from chapter two in "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African" written by Olaudah Equiano in 1789.

In this book, Equiano describes his experiences on board a slave ship in the Middle Passage between Africa and America. This was a strongly abolitionist autobiography which became a best seller as well as furthering the anti-slavery cause. Equiano was born in Essaka, an Igbo village in the kingdom of Benin, what is now Nigeria. When he was 11 years old he was kidnapped and sold into slavery. He was transported to Barbados, and then to the English colony of Virginia. He was later purchased by a British navy officer called Henry Pascal. He eventually earned the price of his own freedom

through careful trading and saving. After travelling the world as a seaman he came to London where he became involved in the movement to abolish the slave trade. As well as writing, he spoke at a large number of public meetings about the cruelty of the trade.

TO BE SOLD, on board the
Ship *Bance-Yland*, on tuesday the 6th
of May next, at *Ashley-Ferry*; a choice
cargo of about 250 fine healthy
NEGROES,
just arrived from the
Windward & Rice Coast.
—The utmost care has
already been taken, and
shall be continued, to keep them free from
the least danger of being infected with the
SMALL-POX, no boat having been on
board, and all other communication with
people from *Charles-Town* prevented.
Austin, Laurens, & Appleby.
N. B. Full one Half of the above Negroes have had the
SMALL-POX in their own Country..

South Carolina Gazette advertisement from the 1760s for the sale of enslaved Africans at Ashley Ferry outside of Charleston, South Carolina. The use of the term 'negroes' is specific to the historical period.

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Quote 3

"A slave may be bought and sold in the market like an ox. He is liable to be sold off to a distant land from his family. He is bound in chains hand and foot; and his sufferings are aggravated a hundred fold, by the terrible thought, that he is not allowed to struggle against misfortune, corporal punishment, insults and outrages committed upon himself and family; and he is not allowed to help himself, to resist or escape the blow, which he sees impending over him. I was a slave, a prisoner for life; I could possess nothing, nor acquire anything but what must belong to my keeper. No one can imagine my feelings in my reflecting moments, but he who has himself been a slave."

Quote from "The Life and Adventures of an American Slave", written by Henry Bibb, 1849.

Bibb was born in Shelby, Kentucky, in 1815. His father was state senator James Bibb. His mother, Mildred Jackson, was an enslaved worker on a plantation and had seven children. As a child, Bibb was hired out to different slave holders and saw all his brothers and sisters sold to different owners. When he married, his wife's 'owner' forced her to become a prostitute. He managed to escape and came back to rescue his family but they were all caught and sold to work on a plantation in Ohio.

His family attempted to escape again but failed after being attacked by wolves. Bibb was then sold to a group of Native Americans. After successfully escaping he started a long and unsuccessful attempt to rescue his family again. In 1842, he began lecturing on slavery and became one of the best known African American activists against the slave trade. He established the Refugees' Home Colony in Canada for escaped enslaved workers and started Canada's first African American newspaper, the 'Voice of the Fugitive'.

Activity 2

Auctions of enslaved Africans: Documents

Introductory Activity

- Mix up the quotes and the annotations and get the class to match the sources with who said or wrote them.
- Encourage the class to read the extracts together in pairs. They should record as much detail as possible about the process of a sale being described, separation of families, the enslaved person's treatment by the slavers, the emotions and attitudes described by those involved (you may wish to provide a frame for students to record their notes in table form).

The notes can then be developed into a piece of reconstructive writing, perhaps in the form of a diary or letter – or a piece of creative writing such as a poem. Pupils may wish to write from the perspective of a child separated from his or her family.

- Why were enslaved people sold?
- How were they sold?
- Were they able to stay with their friends and family?
- Why were they given new names?

Points to consider:

How accurate do you think these descriptions are?

Do you think they are more accurate because all the quotes are from people who were enslaved?

What effect do you think reading these quotes had on people at the time?