

## The Middle Passage

This extract, taken from Chapter Two of the *Interesting Narrative*, describes some of the young Equiano's experiences on board a slave ship in the 'Middle Passage': the journey between Africa and the New World. Equiano passage is between West Africa and the Caribbean island of Barbados, at that time a common voyage as the British plantation island was among the most easterly of the Caribbean islands.

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At last, when the ship we were in had got in all her cargo, they made ready with many fearful noises, and we were all put under deck, so that we could not see how they managed the vessel. But this disappointment was the least of my sorrow. The stench of the hold while we were on the coast was so intolerably loathsome, that it was dangerous to remain there for any time, and some of us had been permitted to stay on the deck for the fresh air; but now that the whole ship's cargo were confined together, it became absolutely pestilential. The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died, thus falling victims to the improvident avarice, as I may call it, of their purchasers. This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable. Happily perhaps for myself I was soon reduced so low here that it was thought necessary to keep me almost always on deck; and from my extreme youth I was not put in fetters. In this situation I expected every hour to share the fate of my companions, some of whom were almost daily brought upon deck at the point of death, which I began to hope would soon put an end to my miseries. Often did I think many of the inhabitants of the deep much more happy than myself; I envied them the freedom they enjoyed, and as often wished I could change my condition for theirs. Every circumstance I met with served only to render my state more painful, and heighten my apprehensions, and my opinion of the cruelty of the whites. One day they had taken a number of fishes; and when they had killed and satisfied themselves with as many as they thought fit, to our astonishment who were on the deck, rather than give any of them to us to eat, as we expected, they tossed the remaining fish into the sea again, although we begged and prayed for some as well we could, but in vain; and some of my countrymen, being pressed by hunger, took an opportunity, when they thought no one saw them, of trying to get a little privately; but they were discovered, and the attempt procured them some very severe floggings.

One day, when we had a smooth sea, and a moderate wind, two of my wearied countrymen, who were chained together (I was near them at the time), preferring death to such a life of misery, somehow made through the nettings, and jumped into the sea: immediately another quite dejected fellow, who, on account of his illness, was suffered to be out of irons, also followed their example; and I believe many more would soon have done the same, if they had not been prevented by the ship's crew, who were instantly alarmed. Those of us that were the most active were, in a moment, put down under the deck; and there was such a noise and confusion amongst the people of the ship as I never heard before, to stop her, and get the boat to go out after the slaves. However, two of the wretches were drowned, but they got the other, and afterwards flogged him unmercifully, for thus attempting to prefer death to slavery. In this manner we continued to undergo more hardships than I can now relate; hardships which are inseparable from this accursed trade. - Many a time we were near suffocation, from the want of fresh air, which we were often without for whole days together. This, and the stench of the necessary tubs, carried off many. During our passage I first saw flying fishes, which surprised me very much: they used frequently to fly across the ship, and many of them fell on the deck. I also now first saw the use of the quadrant. I had often with astonishment seen the mariners make observations with it, and I could not think what it meant. They at last took notice of my surprise; and one of them, willing to increase it, as well as to gratify my curiosity, made me one day look through it. The clouds appeared to me to be land, which disappeared as they passed along. This heightened my wonder: and I was now more persuaded than ever that I was in another world, and that every thing about me was magic. At last we came in sight of the island of Barbadoes, at which the whites on board gave a great shout, and made many signs of joy to us.

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## Enslaved People's Experiences 1—Phillis Wheatley

*Introduction:* Phillis Wheatley was stolen from her home in West Africa and taken to Boston in 1761, where she was purchased by John Wheatley. Mr. Wheatley had originally bought Phillis Wheatley with the idea that she would become a servant for his wife, Susannah, but that never happened.

As it turned out, Phillis learned English quickly and began right away to read the Bible. The Wheatleys recognized her intelligence and because she was also of very poor health, they never trained her as a servant. Instead, the couple encouraged Phillis to take up academic subjects, such as religion and literature.

In 1767, Phillis Wheatley published her first poem. Six years later, Wheatley became the first African American, the first enslaved person, and the third woman in the United States to publish her own poetry book. She titled it *Poems on Various Subjects*.

The same year that her book was released, Wheatley was released from slavery by her owners. With her emancipation, she immediately began to travel in order to promote her book and even went as far as London. She drew international attention and world leaders and writers recognized her work.

In 1778, Wheatley married a free black Boston man, John Peters. She was not able to find a publisher for her second book, and died in poverty in 1784.

Read the poem below and answer the questions that follow. Be prepared to share your group's findings with the class.

### On Being Brought from Africa to America

'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,  
Taught my benighted soul to understand  
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:  
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.  
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,  
"Their colour is a diabolic die"  
Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,  
May be resin'd and join th' angelic train.



This portrait of Phillis Wheatley appeared in Paris in the early nineteenth century.

Courtesy New York Public Library. Used with permission.

### Questions:

1. What do you notice about the picture? Does it tell you anything about Phillis Wheatley?
2. What do you think the first line of the poem means? To what "Pagan land" is she referring? Why do you think she says mercy brought her from that land?
3. What do you think the line, "Their colour is a diabolic die" means? Who are the people who say this?
4. What do you think the point of this poem is? Who or what might have encouraged her to think this way?

## Enslaved People's Experiences 3—Renaming

**Introduction:** Throughout the eighteenth century, most owners renamed the slaves they brought to the New World. This practice was a way for masters to assert control over their slaves and attempt to erase their previous identities. Even when slaves were bought and sold within the colonies, new masters would often give slaves new names in order to demonstrate how little the slaves' previous lives mattered. There were various types of names slave owners often used, including the following:

**Classical names,** such as Jupiter, Caesar, Pharaoh: Masters used these types of names in order to display their social status. By renaming slaves after classical heroes, they demonstrated their own level of education—only the well-educated were familiar with classical names.

**Place names:** Slaves were occasionally named after the place they resided in the colonies, such as Newport, Bristol, or Boston.

Both place names and classical names were also commonly used for naming cattle. This shows how masters purposefully de-humanized slaves by putting them at the same level as their livestock.

**Occupational names:** Masters also named slaves after whatever work they were involved in, such as Handsaw, which demonstrates that masters associated their slaves with their economic purposes rather than their personality.

**Nicknames,** such as Joe, Tom, Jenny, Peg: In eighteenth century society, using proper names showed respect, while shortened names, or nicknames, were used for children. The fact that slaves were often called by nicknames showed how little respect masters had for their slaves—of any age.

Many enslaved people rebelled against this renaming. Some slaves took ownership over their given names by naming their children the same thing, therefore attempting to take the power out of the master's hand. Others used two first names—one African name in private and their given name only in their master's presence. And still others refused to answer to their master's assigned name. These enslaved people kept their original African names, such as Cudjo, Cuff, and Mingo.

The chart below shows the percentage of enslaved people in Narragansett, Rhode Island who were given each type of name described above. Using the information above and the chart below, discuss the questions in your group. Be prepared to share your conclusions with the class.

Enslaved People's Names in Narragansett, Rhode Island

	1692-1724	1725-1749	1750-1774	1775-1799	Total
Classical names	13%	9%	9%	13%	10%
Place names	—	4%	6%	7%	5%
Occupational names	—	1%	—	2%	1%
Nicknames	31%	32%	23%	18%	25%

data from Fitts, Robert K. *Inventing New England's Slave Paradise: Master/Slave Relations in Eighteenth Century Narragansett, Rhode Island.*

### Questions

1. Why are names important to a person's identity? What do names symbolize?
2. Why would masters rename slaves?
3. How did enslaved people rebel against their masters' forced names?
4. Why would rebellion have been risky?
5. Why might it have been worth the risk?