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Unraveling the Narrative

By Jennifer Howard

September 9, 2005

The following is an excerpt of Ms. Howard's article, the complete version of which is available online from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*:

<http://chronicle.com/free/v52/i03/03a01101.htm>

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A scholar raises questions, and hackles, with evidence that the ex-slave who wrote the definitive first-person account of the Middle Passage may not have made that infamous journey

What if you were told that Meriwether Lewis and William Clark never made it past St. Louis in 1803? And that Lewis's famous diary of the Louisiana Purchase expedition was an embroidery of reports from trappers and American Indians?

Imagine that, and you begin to understand why some people are upset with Vincent Carretta, a professor of English at the University of Maryland at College Park.

Mr. Carretta has uncovered evidence that an equally important text in American and British Atlantic history -- a description of the Middle Passage written by an ex-slave, Olaudah Equiano -- might not be a firsthand account of the harrowing journey endured by slaves transported across the ocean.

Equiano's account of the Middle Passage in his 1789 autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, is considered definitive. "The closeness of the place and the heat of the climate," he wrote, "added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. . . . The wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable. . . . The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable."

Equiano says he was born in 1745 in "a charming fruitful vale, named Essaka," in an Igbo-speaking region on the west coast of Africa in what is now southeastern Nigeria. But in a forthcoming biography of Equiano, Mr. Carretta presents evidence he found in public records that Equiano was born in South Carolina.

Mr. Carretta's conclusions threaten a pillar of scholarship on slave narratives and the African diaspora. Questioning Equiano's origins calls into doubt some fundamental assumptions made in departments of African-American studies and among historians and

literary critics who study the British Atlantic world. Scholars have also relied on Equiano for his account of 18th-century life in West Africa. . . . [\[view full article\]](#)