

**Introduction** The horrors endured by slaves on the Middle Passage from Africa to the New World can be most keenly realized by hearing them described firsthand. One slave who eventually wrote an account of his experiences was Gustavus Vasa. Vasa was captured by white slave traders when he was only 11. Young Vasa was industrious, however. After several years he was able to buy his freedom and acquire an education. This selection is from his autobiography.

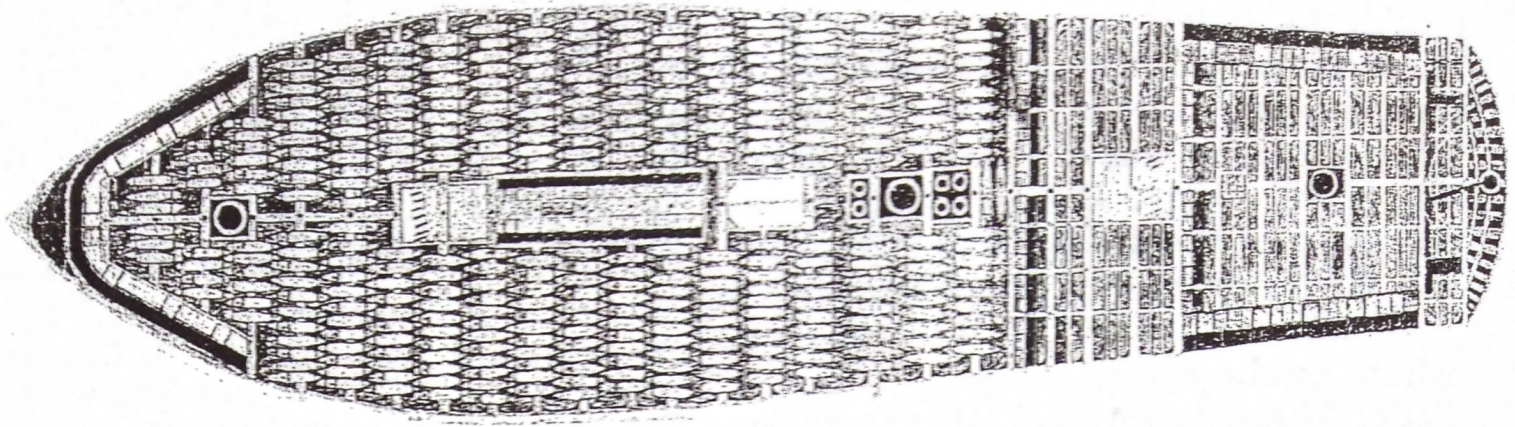
**Vocabulary** Before you read the selection, find the meaning of these words in a dictionary: indulge, flog, loathsome.

When I was carried on board I was immediately handled and tossed up, to

see if I were sound, by some of the crew. I was now persuaded that I had got into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me.

I was not long allowed to indulge my grief. I was soon put down under the decks. There, with the stench and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste anything. But soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me something to eat. On my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely.

I feared I should be put to death because the white people looked and acted, as I thought, in so savage a manner. I had never seen among any people such instances of brutal cruelty. And this was not only shown towards



This diagram of the inside of a slave ship shows a loading plan for squeezing as many chained men and women as possible into the available space. Such severe overcrowding was but one part of the inhuman treatment slaves received on the Middle Passage.

us blacks, but also to some of the whites themselves. One white man in particular I saw flogged so unmercifully with a large rope that he died because of it; and they tossed him over the side as they would have done a brute. This made me fear these people the more.

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. 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.

One day, when we had a smooth sea and moderate wind, two of my wearied countrymen, who were chained together, 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 allowed to be out of irons,

also followed their example. And I believe many more would very soon have done the same if they had not been stopped by the ship's crew, who were instantly alarmed. There was such a noise and confusion among the people of the ship to stop and get the boat to go after the slaves. Two of the wretches were drowned, but they got the other, and afterwards flogged him unmercifully for preferring death to slavery.

Adapted from Gustavus Vasa, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olandah Equiano or Gustavus Vasa, Written by Himself, 1793.*

#### READING REVIEW ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

1. What did the white traders do that especially aroused Vasa's fear?
2. Why did several of the slaves jump overboard?
3. **Drawing conclusions.** Why do you think the traders tried to keep the slaves alive, yet at the same time treated them so poorly?

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