



Ignatius Sancho

Dates: 1729 - 1780

Occupation: Grocer, composer, writer, actor and abolitionist

Biography

Ignatius Sancho was born on a slave ship in 1729, en route from Guinea to the Spanish West Indies. When he was about two, he was taken to England to work for three sisters in a house in Greenwich.

An encounter with the 2nd Duke of Montagu led to a long friendship. The Duke was impressed by Sancho's intelligence and encouraged his education by providing access to his Library. When the living situation at the Greenwich house became too unbearable, Sancho ran away and convinced the widowed Duchess of Montagu to employ him as a butler. He later worked for the next Duke of Montagu as a valet. These were high status roles and therefore exposed him to many important members of society.



Thomas Gainsborough
Ignatius Sancho, 1768
oil on canvas, 73.7 x 62.2 cm
Purchased 1907
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

On 17th December 1758, he married Ann Osborne, who was of African descent, in St Margaret's Church, Westminster Abbey. They had eight children, all of whom were baptised in St Margaret's Church. Together they set up a grocery shop in Westminster. They received visitors of all social ranks, and it was a place where people would go to discuss politics, writing, and music with Sancho. Ann was also literate, and they discussed his writings and works together.

Sancho was a talented writer, composer and actor. He used his skill for writing to campaign for the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade by writing letters to newspapers and people of power and influence. He also published plays and musical compositions.

He was the first man of African descent thought to have voted in an election, and to have an obituary published in the national newspapers.

After his death, Sancho's letters were published in a book which became an instant best-seller. Five editions of the book were published, and his writing were used as evidence to support the abolition movement.

Primary Source: "In Africa, the poor wretched natives blessed with the most fertile and luxuriant soil- are rendered so much the more miserable for what Providence meant as a blessing: the Christians' abominable traffic for slaves and the horrid cruelty and treachery of the petty Kings encouraged by their Christian customers who carry them strong liquors to enflame their national madness – and powder – and bad fire-arms – to furnish them with the hellish means of killing and kidnapping."

Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, An African, 1784, p. 190
