

## THE INTERESTING NARRATIVE – GERMAN EDITION 1792

This paper provides information on *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African*, a book written and first published by him in 1789. It highlights connections between Olaudah Equiano, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (scientist and anthropologist, 1752-1849) and Ignatius Sancho. Also, it includes details of how the *Narrative* was translated into German and held at the Gottingen University Library, Germany. The advice of Wolfgang Böker and Dr Heiko Weber of the Academy of Sciences and Humanities (Gottingen) and Steffen Hölscher of the University Library of Gottingen, is acknowledged.

Equiano's 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the book was sent to Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, a Professor at Gottingen University, by Alexander (later Sir Alexander) Crichton in 1790.<sup>1</sup> In that year, the director of the Gottingen Library, Christian Gottlob Heyne, recorded that the Library held two copies of the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. After almost 230 years, a single copy of the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the Interesting Narrative is still held in the Gottingen Library. However, it is unlikely that this copy comes from Blumenbach's private collection of books. He was in the habit of writing his name on the book plate and making notes in the books he read. Neither name nor notes appear in the version held in the Library.

It seems unlikely that the copy in the Library is the one sent to Blumenbach by Crichton. Mystery surrounds the history of the remaining copy. The original owners are unknown and there is nothing to suggest that Crichton sent two copies to Germany.

The Interesting Narrative was translated into English by Georg Friedrich Benecke and published by Johann Christian Dietrich in early 1792. The frontispiece of the German version is shown below. Benecke, in the Preface, says that his translation is based on the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. It is evident that the version (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) held by Blumenbach was not used for the German translation. The Gottingen Library does not have a copy of the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. There is no reason to suppose that the German version is anything other than a faithful translation of the text of the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of *The Interesting Narrative*.

Blumenbach never met or corresponded with Ignatius Sancho but was aware of him and had read his writings. A copy of *Sancho, Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, An African*, to which are prefixed *Memoirs of His Life* by Joseph Jekyll is preserved in the Gottingen Library. It bears Blumenbach's name as owner of the book and has a handwritten remark from him on the front page. Blumenbach wrote, 'more about the honest Sancho, see Nicholl's literary anecdotes vol IX, p682 and following.'<sup>2</sup>

Nicholl's Volume IX was published in 1815, 35 years after Blumenbach was first sent a copy of Sancho's *Letters*. Amongst the 800 pages of almost random pieces of

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<sup>1</sup> Johann Friedrich Blumenbach; *Beytrage zur Naturgeschichte* (Gottingen 1790) pages 84-118.

<sup>2</sup> *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth-Century* Volume IX by John Nicholls Cambridge Literary Collection – originally published 1815.

William Stevenson's 1814 letter about Sancho is reproduced in the Broadview 2015 Edition of *Sancho's Letters*, pp. 358-360.

correspondence contained within Volume IX, Blumenbach was able to recall Sancho and take time to transcribe his personal copy of Sancho's book accordingly. The anecdote in question appears at pages 682 to 683 of Volume IX and comprises a letter from a man called W Stevenson recollecting the humour, wisdom, good nature and corpulent build of his old friend Ignatius Sancho who had died in 1780.

Blumenbach met Equiano on one occasion<sup>3</sup> and he was already aware of the African's writings. Blumenbach's knowledge of African people was through observation, reading, correspondence and his remarkable collection of skulls.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Beytrage zur Naturgeschichte. Vol 1 (2. Ed. 1806) pages 89-90.

Olaudah Equiano's oder Gustav Vasa's, [sic] des Afrikaners merkwürdige Lebensgeschichte [of the African mercantiled life story] translated by Georg Friedrich Benecke. Göttingen: Bey Johann Christian Dietrich, 1792.

In terms of the timing of Blumenbach's visit we know he stayed with Crichton in London in the winter of 1791/92 and know that this was his final visit to England. He may have made one earlier visit in 1788.

During his visit to London in winter 1791/1792, Blumenbach seems to have stayed at Crichton's home. cf. Klatt, Norbert: "Blumenbach's Aufenthalt in England – Versuch einer Rekonstruktion" [Blumenbach's Stay in England – Attempt at Reconstruction]

in: Kleine Beiträge zur Blumenbach-Forschung. [in small contributions to Blumenbach research]. Volume 4. Göttingen: Klatt, 2010, pp. 7–105, here page 17.

E-mail from Wolfgang Boker dated 17 October 2019 stating categorically that they did meet. He said "I think, there is NO doubt, because they have definitely met."

An earlier e-mail of 26 July 2019 stated "Sadly we do not have any specific information about contacts between J. F. Blumenbach and Gustavus Vassa/Equiano, apart from the well-known statement in *Beyträge zur Naturgeschichte*, [Contribution on Natural History] Vol. 1 (2. ed., 1806), p. 89-90, where Blumenbach claims to have met him personally. There is a translation of this text in Thomas Bendyshe's volume of translations of Blumenbach-texts (*The anthropological treatises of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach ... with memoirs of him by Marx and Flourens, and an account of his anthropological museum by ... R. Wagner, and the inaugural dissertation of John Hunter ... on the varieties of man* / translated and edited from the Latin, German, and French originals, by Thomas Bendyshe ... – London : Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, & Green, 1865), on page 310.

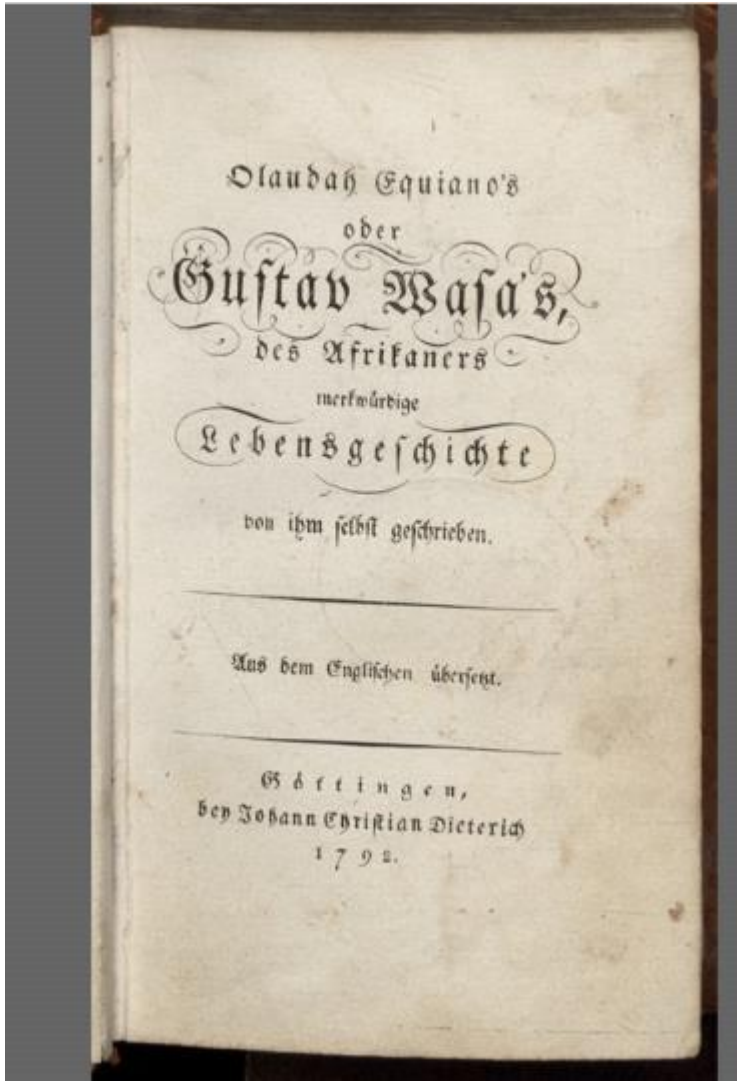
Wolfgang also said; If Blumenbach has met Gustavus Vassa/Equiano, this must have taken place during Blumenbach's visit to London in winter 1791/1792. There is a 2012 study about this visit, sadly only in German. Its title is: "Blumenbach's Aufenthalt in England – Versuch einer Rekonstruktion". [Blumenbach's Stay in England – Attempt at Reconstruction]

This study is available online here:

<http://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/ebook/mon/2012/ppn%20721147054.pdf>

On p. 40-45 the author talks about people from non-European ethnicity, whom Blumenbach met in London, and speculates that Gustavus Vassa/Equiano must have been among them.

<sup>4</sup> <http://blumenbach-online.de/Einzelseiten/Sammlungsverzeichnisse-englisch.php>



*The German edition of the Interesting Narrative – 1792*

## **BLUMENBACH**

Johann Friedrich Blumenbach is an important figure among scientists and historians.<sup>5</sup> He was born in Gotha, Germany on 11 May 1752 and was a gifted naturalist, scientist and anthropologist. He spent most of his adult life in Göttingen, Germany, where he was an esteemed professor.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://blumenbach-online.de/Einzelseiten/WissHistKontext-englisch.php>



Blumenbach's home in Göttingen.  
It was demolished in 1971

## THE INTERESTING NARRATIVE

The book was sent to Blumenbach prior to 24 April 1790 as he refers to it in his *Beytrage zur Naturgeschichte* published on that date. We also know this because of correspondence from Blumenbach that the English version of *The Interesting Narrative* was sent to him by his friend Alexander Crichton.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Crichton also sent Blumenbach a copy of *Sancho, Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, An African*.

Alexander Crichton was born in Edinburgh in 1763. He travelled widely studying medicine at institutions in cities across Europe. It included a spell at Göttingen from 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1788 to 19<sup>th</sup> September 1788. He was introduced to Blumenbach and probably attended his lectures. They became friends and Blumenbach later stayed with Crichton when he visited London between November 1791 and April 1792.

In 1790, when he sent Sancho's and Equiano's books to Göttingen, Crichton had recently returned to England following his studies in Europe. Later, in 1803, he became the personal physician to Tsar Alexander I of Russia. Towards the end of his life he increasingly turned his attentions to geology, a passion he shared with Blumenbach.

It seemed that Crichton, aware of Blumenbach's interest in the study of human beings, felt the latter might be interested in the work of two black writers. He might even have known that Blumenbach was building a small library of books by black authors.<sup>7</sup> Equiano would not have been aware that his book was being shared with an eminent anthropologist in Germany.

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<sup>6</sup> Johann Friedrich Blumenbach; *Beytrage zur Naturgeschichte* (Göttingen 1790) pages 84-118.

<sup>7</sup> <http://blumenbach-online.de/Einzelseiten/PrivateBibliothek.php>

We do not know whether Equiano and Crichton ever met, unless their paths crossed while Blumenbach was in London. Equiano might not even have known of Crichton who was a slave owner, albeit not at the time he sent *The Interesting Narrative* to Gottingen. In the 1830s he received compensation of £4,184.01 penny in respect of 240 enslaved people on the Morant Estate in Jamaica.

The first time Equiano seemed to have known about the publication of his book in Germany was when he met Blumenbach in London in February 1792, shortly after the book had been published in Germany.<sup>8</sup> There were no international copyright laws in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and so Equiano's permission to publish his work abroad was not needed.

Crichton clearly had some professional contact with Blumenbach post-1790 as two years later he translated from the German into English, *An Essay on Generation* by Blumenbach, published in London and Edinburgh.<sup>9</sup>

Blumenbach read the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *The Interesting Narrative*. We know this because he reviewed it in 1790 and later referred to stories contained in the book. As was often the case, Blumenbach wandered in his Review.<sup>10</sup> He liked nothing better than telling or re-telling an interesting story. He barely touched on the iniquity of slavery other than to refer to the conditions Equiano described as 'an affront to all human feeling.' Parts of the book that seemed to have most attracted Blumenbach's interest are incidents such as the one where three live alligators were tied to a tree, then butchered and eaten. In the Review he mentioned 'a case in which a white planter on Barbados traded his white maidservant for his neighbour's fat cow by weight, calculating the former at 6 pence to the pound, the latter at 4.'

It was possible that Blumenbach might have been responsible for having *The Interesting Narrative* translated into German. He possessed the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the book but it is evident that the German version is a copy of the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition.

We don't know who took the initiative to produce the German version but are not ruling out that it was Blumenbach's. We do know, however, that the task of translating from English was given to Georg Friedrich Benecke.

Benecke had been born in Gottingen in 1762, entering the University in 1780. He became employed by the University's library service in 1789 and was appointed Library Secretary in 1792. He went on to become a full professor in 1805. He became Head of Gottingen Library in 1838, six years before his death. He was a very talented man but it would be untrue to say that translating the Interesting Narrative was one of his greatest achievements. The translation was a low-profile task that Benecke carried out as a young man in a relatively lowly-paid position in

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<sup>8</sup> Oludah Equiano's oder Gustav Vasa's [sic] des Afrikaners merkwürdige Lebensgeschichte, translated by Georg Friedrich Benecke. Gottingen; Bey Johann Christian Dietrich, 1792.

<sup>9</sup> An Essay on Generation by J F Blumenbach, M. D. translated from the German by A Crichton. Printed for T Cadell; Faulder; Murray; and Creech, London and Edinburgh.

<sup>10</sup> Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's review of The Interesting Narrative in the Journal, Goettingische Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen, April 26<sup>th</sup> 1790, pp 674-678

the Gottingen Library. In later years he gained fame for his work with the Brothers Grimm on their German dictionary.

The German version of the Interesting Narrative was published in Gottingen by Johann Christian Dietrich in early 1792.

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Gottingen was most certainly blessed with a wide range of talented people as Dietrich too, was a memorable figure. He founded the Dietrich'schen Verlagsbuchhandlung publishing house which was carried on by his son Heinrich after Dietrich senior's death in 1800.

The Gottingen Library confirmed that there was no review of the German version of *The Interesting Narrative* in any German scholarly journal or newspaper. We can conclude therefore that the book was given little publicity. The Library has offered no view on the book's success or number of copies sold.

## RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BLUMENBACH AND EQUIANO

Within the collection of 4,500 items of correspondence between Blumenbach and his contemporaries between 1773-1840, none is to or from Olaudah Equiano or 'Gustavus Vassa, the African,' as Blumenbach knew him. Nor did he ever communicate with Ignatius Sancho who had died by the time Blumenbach became aware of his life in London.

Blumenbach rarely left Germany. The only records of his doing so those of visits to France, Switzerland and London.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, Equiano travelled the world.

Despite *The Interesting Narrative* telling us that Equiano was invited to visit Germany by 'a person of note' – whom we assume to be Blumenbach – Equiano never visited Germany at any stage of his life.

Blumenbach and Equiano did however, meet once. That meeting took place in London in February 1792.<sup>12</sup>

Although they had never met previously, Blumenbach was aware of Equiano having read *The Interesting Narrative*. Perhaps, Equiano had little or no idea who Blumenbach was, hence the remarks 'persons of note from Holland and Germany' rather than naming the men 'who requested of me to go there'.

The only impression Blumenbach could have gained of Equiano, apart from hearsay, would have been formed by his reading of *The Interesting Narrative*. Given that Blumenbach had written that he found Sancho's style much 'lighter' than Equiano's it is possible he was expecting a rather sombre guest, but then enslavement is not a subject that lent itself to 'lightness'.

It seems that the meeting took place in February 1792 after Equiano had returned from Scotland on 29 January 1792. It was a critical time in his life as the debate on

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<sup>11</sup> <http://blumenbach-online.de/Einzelseiten/Itinerar-englisch.php>

<sup>12</sup> *Beytrage zur Naturgeschichte*. Vol 1 (2. Ed. 1806) pages 89-90

the 'slave trade' was due in the House of Commons in early April and he planned to marry Susannah Cullen in Soham, Cambridgeshire on 7 April 1792.

There is no record of the purpose of the meeting, the venue, or details of who attended. There were people from Germany and Holland and, as the meeting took place towards the end of Blumenbach's visit to Britain.

The only first-hand account we have of the meeting is contained in *The Interesting Narrative* but it does allow us to make several assumptions.

Equiano wrote:

*'I found the people extremely hospitable particularly in Belfast, where I took my passage on board of a vessel for Clyde, on the 29<sup>th</sup> of January, and arrived in Greenock on the 30<sup>th</sup>. Soon after I returned to London, where I found persons of note from Holland and Germany, who requested me to go there; and I was glad to hear that an edition of my Narrative had been printed in both places, also in New York. I remained in London till I heard the debate in the House of Commons on the Slave Trade, April the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>. I then went to Soham in Cambridgeshire, and was married on the 7<sup>th</sup> of April to Miss Cullen, daughter of James and Ann Cullen, late of Ely.'*

It is interesting that Equiano states that he was invited to meet those eminent people from Holland and Germany. It was evident he was known to them and, indeed, it could be said his fame went before him. Those distinguished people were clearly keen to make the acquaintance with the African author and anti-slavery campaigner, Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African.

It is almost certain that one of the 'persons of note' was Blumenbach and it was he who invited Equiano to Germany. It was an offer Equiano never took up. He died over five years later. His entry in *The Interesting Narrative* does not express a particular wish to take up the offer of trips to Germany or Holland. Equiano was in his 47<sup>th</sup> year and about to be married when he met those 'persons of note'. Perhaps, he was conscious that he and his bride-to-be would very quickly want to start a family (daughter Anna Maria was born in 1793 followed by Joanna in 1795) and foreign travel, of which he had already done more than most people, was not conducive to bringing up a young family.

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Equiano did in fact visit Holland but it was while he was still a young enslaved person. In his book, he said:

*'I remained in this ship a considerable time, during which we made several cruises, and visited a variety of places: among others we were twice in Holland, and brought over several persons of distinction from it, whose names I do not now remember. On the passage, one day, for the diversion of those gentlemen, all the boys were called on the quarter-deck, and were paired proportionably, and then made to fight, after which the gentleman gave the combatants from five to nine shillings each. This was the first time I fought with a white boy.'*

The fact that Equiano does not mention Blumenbach by name in the passage from *The Interesting Narrative* suggests that he was not fully aware of the German's position and importance. Blumenbach was very much a scientist and was not actively involved in the anti-slave trade movement even though he abhorred the practice.

Equiano records that he was 'glad to hear' that his Narrative had been published in Holland, Germany and New York. It indicated that up until then he had been unaware of the wider exposure his work had gained. Total strangers had taken his book and published it. They would also take all profits from sales in their country without acknowledging the author but Equiano expressed nothing but gladness.

Blumenbach clearly never forgot Equiano. After the African's death he recorded that he knew two negroes in London, 'Ignatius Sancho and Gustavus Vassa of whom the former, a great favourite both of Garrick and Sterne, was known to me by correspondence and the latter, whom I knew personally, has made himself a name by his interesting autobiography'.<sup>13</sup> Here Blumenbach is referring to Sancho's published letters, the two never corresponded directly with one another.

In an editor's footnote to a letter to Blumenbach written by Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, a fellow German scientist, on 5 May 1789,<sup>14</sup> we are told that one of the subjects of the letter, Charles Irving, was 'related to the black African Gustavus Vassa, in whom Blumenbach took a special interest.' In this context 'related' simply means connected. In his Review of *The Interesting Narrative*, Blumenbach describes the relationship more accurately when he stated, 'Among the good masters, of whom he [Equiano] had some, the most notable is the commendable Dr Irving, who is famous for his method of making sea water drinkable.'

The editor's footnote quotes from Blumenbach's comparison between the writing styles of Sancho and Equiano. Sancho's style was, Blumenbach argued, lighter than Equiano's, who bordered on gloominess with many references to religion and God.<sup>15</sup>

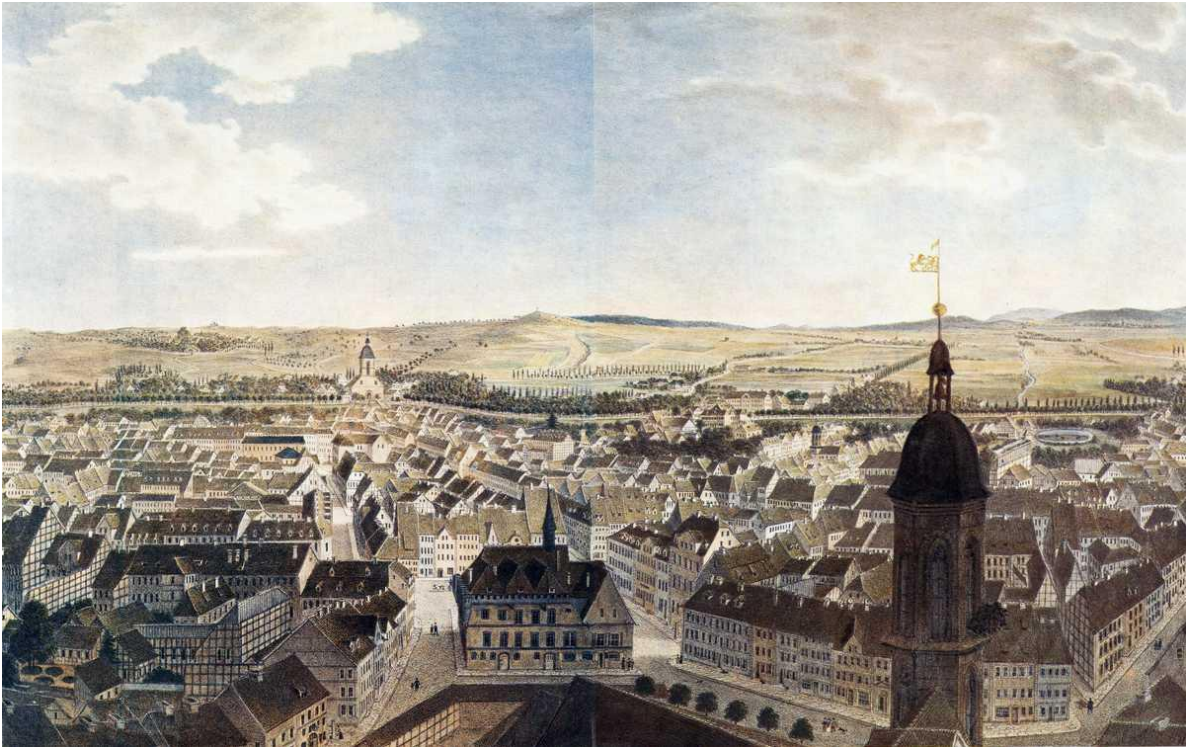
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<sup>13</sup> Beytrage zur Naturgeschichte, Vol 1 (2. Ed. 1806) pages 89-90.

<sup>14</sup> The correspondence of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach. Band 3, Gottingen: Klatt, 2010, 219-222 Nr. 0547. Beytrage zur Naturgeschichte 1 Edition (1790) page 107-108.

<sup>15</sup> Beytrage zur Naturgeschichte. 1 Edition (1790) pages 107-108.





Göttingen circa 1830

Blumenbach met many non-white people. We are grateful to Wolfgang Böker for the following examples:

Caroline Jacobine Christin was hired as a wet nurse by Blumenbach's brother-in-law, Christian Gottlob Heyne. Blumenbach refers to her in *Beytrage zur Naturgeschichte* as an 'honest negress.'

Blumenbach employed a woman from Bombay as a servant in his household.

In *Beytrage zur Naturgeschichte*, Blumenbach refers to a female creole from St Domingo, whose parents were from the Congo. He had conversed with this lady, who was a skilled midwife, in Yverdun. Blumenbach wrote that negresses were 'as well formed as our European ladies' and that the midwife from St Domingo and other negroes had a good disposition and kindness of heart. He summed up by saying, 'they can scarcely be considered inferior to any other race of mankind taken altogether.'

Blumenbach goes on to describe the negroes' talent for music quoting the success of Freidig a violinist in Vienna. Mathematics, he held, was another area where negroes excelled. In this respect, the 'negro Lislet, of the Isle of France' is mentioned as is 'the negro Fuller, in Maryland.' The former was the son of a free black slave from Guinea and became a botanist, cartographer and astronomer.

Blumenbach also had a small library comprising solely of black authors. The Interesting Narrative was included along with Sancho's Letters but there were many other black writers from Europe and America. The library also included works by:

Phillis Wheatley - America

Anthony Wilhelm Amo – Germany/Africa

Jacobus Elisa Johannes Capitein – Holland/Africa

Absalom Jones and Richard Allen – America

Benjamin Banneker – Maryland, America

Peter Williams junior – America

Russell Parrott – America.