

# The Muslim Roots of American Slaves

## (part 1 of 2): From Africa to America



Most of the African slaves sent to North America came from West Africa. They were men, women and children captured and sold to slave traders, forced on to ships, and kept in appalling conditions for the long journey to the Americas. [1] It is thought by modern historians that at the height of the slave trade, the 18<sup>th</sup> century, up to 7 million Africans had undertaken this voyage. [2] It is also estimated that up to 30% of the enslaved in North America were Muslim. [3]

To understand the history of Muslim slaves in North America it is necessary to know something about slavery as it previously existed in Africa and the history of Islam in Africa, particularly in West Africa. Islam first reached West Africa by way of traders from North Africa and the Middle East. They settled in the area from as early as the tenth century BCE and thus began a slow and peaceful process brought about by trade. The journey from North Africa across the Sahara was done in stages. Goods passed through a chain of Muslim traders and were purchased finally by non-Muslims at the southern end of the route. Until the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century the kingdom of Ghana was a key trading partner with the Muslim North. Over the next five hundred years, assorted West African rulers and local merchants who wanted to do business with the Muslim traders adapted themselves to Islam and its customs. [4] Islam itself had a reputation of absorbing local customs thus the transition was smooth. However the majority of West African people did not convert to Islam until well into the 18th century [5], which just happened to be at the height of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Across Africa, prisoners of war were taken as slaves, and others were enslaved in payment for debt or as punishment for crime. This enslavement was usually on a small scale. Africans usually enslaved 'other' people, not their own particular ethnic, or cultural, group. [6] This small scale slave trade was enough to supply the demand for slaves within Africa, but not enough to supply the demand from outside particularly from Europeans thus warfare and

raids to get slaves and the kidnapping of individuals increased. Europeans wanted the slaves to work on the land they owned on the Caribbean islands and in the Americas. They were a more plentiful source of labor than indentured servants. It is possible that Muslims were amongst the 20 Africans brought to the settlement at Jamestown Virginia in 1619.

For the thousands of Muslims that were captured and eventually settled in North America maintaining their religion was difficult and often impossible. Many were forcibly converted to Christianity. Any effort to practice Islam or keep their traditional names or clothing was quashed and had to be done in secret.<sup>[7]</sup> However evidence of Muslim origins can be found throughout documented history. Handwritten verses from the Quran have been found and reveal the high levels of education attained by the authors in Africa prior to enslavement.<sup>[8]</sup> It is known that slave masters often placed Muslim slaves as supervisors over their fellow bondsmen. In addition to this Muslim names can be found in reports of runaway slaves and among the rosters of soldiers in the American war of Independence.

In 1984 the noted scholar of antebellum black writing and history Dr. Allan D. Austin published a book called *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook*. It explores, via portraits, documents, maps, and texts, the lives of 50 Muslim Africans caught in the slave trade between 1730 and 1860. This book was updated and republished in 1997 and entitled *African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles*. What follows are several brief biographies or snapshots of some of the Muslims captured and enslaved in the then fledgling nation of the USA.

Job Ben Solomon was born Ayyub ibn Sulayman ibn Ibrahim around 1702 in what is now Senegal. He was from a family of religious scholars, and by age 15 was a co-Imam with his father. While on a trading expedition, Job was captured in enemy territory and sold to the British. He was then sold on to work in the tobacco fields of Maryland. He did not convert to Christianity but prayed openly and adhered to Islamic dietary guidelines. Job ran away from his plantation only to be captured and put in jail and later returned to his master. Filled with sadness he wrote a letter to his father and this letter found its way into the hands of a British philanthropist named James Oglethorpe. This man helped free Job who then started his journey home via England. On the ship journey to England Job was taught to write English and whilst in England he wrote the Quran three times from memory, and is reported to have helped with the famous George Sale translation. He called people to Islam by refuting their claims of Jesus' divinity and was also elected to the Spalding Gentlemen's Society, which may have put him in the company of Sir Isaac Newton and Alexander Pope.

The story of Yarrow Mamout has been bequeathed to us via conversations he had with the artist painting his portrait. His life in Africa is unknown but due to his good and well-mannered behaviour he was freed after laying the

bricks for his master's home. As a free man he bought his own home in Georgetown and was known for praying in the streets and for his sobriety.

In December of 1807, a man known as S'Quash was brought to South Carolina. He was known to be an excellent horseman and literate in Arabic. Historians point to his marriage to a Muslim slave from Sudan to indicate that he was also a Muslim.

To be continued in Part 2.

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### Footnotes:

[1] Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Context of West African History. J. D. Fage. The Journal of African History

Vol. 10, No. 3 (1969), pp. 393-404 Published by: Cambridge University Press

[2] <http://www.history.com/topics/slavery>

[3] Tweed, Thomas A. "Islam in America: From African Slaves to Malcolm X". National Humanities Centre. & Curtis, Muslims in America.

[4] The Spread of Islam in West Africa. Margari Hill, Stanford University. January 2009

[5] Ibid

[6] <http://discoveringbristol.org.uk/slavery/people-involved/enslaved-people/enslaved-africans/africa-slavery/>

[7] <http://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/feature/islam-in-america/>

[8] Were My African American Ancestors Muslims? 2013 Nathan W. Murphy

## (part 2 of 2): Vestiges of Islam

Growing collections of documents written in Arabic are being discovered across the United States of America. The light of research reveals that these documents long ago buried in basements and attics, and shut away in archives and libraries, provide evidence of the presence of Muslims among the Africans shipped to the Americas as slaves.[1] The collections, unearthed in the late 20th century CE, contain biographical statements, verses from the Quran, personal letters and eloquent letters to Muslim leaders in their home territories. Sadly many of the letters pleading for help and manumission from their owners never reached their recipients but collected dust, in boxes, chests and filing cabinets for many decades. As interest in the origin of slaves in the Americas increases these letters provide clues to the slaves' homeland and background.

These collections tell us that among those who endured the horrific crossing of the Atlantic Ocean known as the Middle Passage were Muslims, many of them well educated. They included Quran scholars, religious and tribal leaders, commercial and building experts and some with vast military experience. It is no surprise then to discover that Muslims were often chosen to be leaders because of their valuable skills. They rose to the top of the slave

hierarchy more easily, were manumitted more often, and returned to Africa more frequently.<sup>[2]</sup>

In at least one case a slave kept his master's plantation records in Arabic.<sup>[3]</sup> The Arabic language itself holds clues suggesting the pivotal role played by Muslims in American slave history. From 1828 we find an interesting anecdote about a Christian teacher asking a Muslim slave to write the Lord's prayer in his native language, the Christian man then witnessed the document, inscribing underneath the few lines of Arabic 'foregoing copy of the Lord's Prayer'. Decades later when the document was examined by someone who read Arabic it was found that the slave had, instead of writing the Lord's Prayer, written the opening chapter of the Quran, Al-Fatihah.<sup>[4]</sup>

Many Muslim slaves went to great efforts to retain an Islamic way of life. As was suggested by African American scholar Eric Lincoln, their memory of Islam and their previous lifestyle was never completely lost.<sup>[5]</sup> Many resisted converting to Christianity or did so in a pseudo fashion clinging to the pillars of their faith, praying, fasting and giving charity while appearing to accept the new faith. Many slave owners and their ancestors recall practices and habits of the slaves that suggest they were Muslims. A plantation owner in Georgia noticed one of his slaves "bowing down" each morning at dawn.

On the island of Sapelo, off the coast of Georgia, certain Islamic practices remain even to this day. In the church, men and women sit on different sides of the aisle, separated as they usually are in a mosque. All shoes are removed and the women cover their hair for services. The churches are built facing Makkah and the bodies are buried also facing Makkah. The people living on Sapelo Island are descendants of Bilali Muhammad a Muslim who was enslaved on Sapelo in 1803. Bilal could read and write Arabic and was buried with a copy of the Quran. His wife, Phoebe, wore a veil, and her daughters had Islamic names, such as Medina and Fatima<sup>[6]</sup>. In 1829, Bilali authored a small book on Islamic beliefs and the rules for ablution, morning prayer, and the calls to prayer. It is known as the Bilali Document, currently housed at the University of Georgia.<sup>[7]</sup>

The descendants of Bilal Muhammad all have the surname Baily which is certainly a corruption of the name Bilal. Thus names also hold clues to slave identities and backgrounds. Slaves were routinely given new names, however many of the names were biblical contractions of their own Muslim names and on some occasions we find names that appear to be unchanged. Ayyub ibn Sulayman, whose story was told in Part 1 went by the name of Job Ben Solomon. Names also played a part in the well-known and documented Amistad case.

In August of 1839, the Amistad was seized off Long Island, New York. The captured slaves aboard the ship had risen up and killed the captain. They spared the lives of some of the crew on the condition they steered them towards the coast of Africa. The slaves were deceived and found themselves on trial in Connecticut. During the course of the trial it was revealed that the slaves were

Africans, Muslim Africans from present day Sierra Leone. They had been given Spanish names and designated as black ladinos<sup>[8]</sup> in order to circumvent laws and treaties against the international slave trade by Great Britain, Spain and the United States.

Ex-British government administrator Richard Robert Madden testified in the trial. He said, "...I have examined them and observed their language, appearance and manners; and I have no doubt of their having been, very recently, brought from Africa. To one of them I spoke, and repeated a Mohammedan<sup>[9]</sup> form of prayer, in the Arabic language; the man immediately recognized the language, and repeated the words 'Allah Akbar', or 'God is great'. The man who was beside this Negro, I also addressed in Arabic, saying 'salaam alaikum', or peace be on you; he immediately, in the customary oriental salutations, replied, 'alaikum salaam', or peace be on you..."<sup>[10]</sup>

From the amount of evidence that is being unearthed it is clear that not only were Muslims amongst those men and women enslaved in the Americas, but that they were influential in the making of the American nation.

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### Footnotes:

<sup>[1]</sup> African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles. Allan D. Austin. 1997. New York and London: Routledge.

<sup>[2]</sup> Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas Sylviane A. Diouf New York: New York University Press, 1998

<sup>[3]</sup> Ibid

<sup>[4]</sup> African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles. Allan D. Austin. 1997. New York and London: Routledge.

<sup>[5]</sup> Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas Sylviane A. Diouf New York: New York University Press, 1998.

<sup>[6]</sup> ([http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/witnesses/cornelia\\_bailey.html](http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/witnesses/cornelia_bailey.html))

<sup>[7]</sup> Sapelo Island's Arabic Document: The Bilali Diary in context. B. G. Martin. The Georgia Historical Quarterly

Vol. 78, No. 3 (Fall 1994), pp. 589-601

<sup>[8]</sup> A word indicating that the slaves had been in Cuba long enough to know the language and customs.

<sup>[9]</sup> IslamReligion.com: The word Mohammedan was formerly common in usage, but the terms Muslims and Islamic are more common today.

<sup>[10]</sup> (<https://bulk.resource.org/courts.gov/c/US/40/40.US.518.html>)