THE FORGOTTEN FAITH: THE EXPERIENCES OF ENSLAVED MUSLIMS AND THE INFLUENCE OF ISLAM IN THE UNITED STATES FROM 1730-1864

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ABSTRACT

Muslims were present in North America before the establishment of the American/British colonies. The first Muslims in America were not citizens, but enslaved Africans forced into the slave trade in the eighteenth century. Muslim slaves in America were much more prevalent than anyone could have imagined and yet, the religion of these slaves was rarely ever brought to the surface. In this thesis, I argue that Muslim slaves not only existed in America but most of them were literate in multiple languages, well-educated, and were capable of holding on to a set of beliefs. History books and previous literature have overlooked the existence and lived experiences of Muslim slaves in the United States during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I explore the lives of numerous Muslims, predominantly enslaved Muslims, over the course of 130 years, and I analyze the writings of numerous Founding Fathers and their position within the debate of religious freedom for non-Christians. The individuals, events, and documents discussed in this thesis are just a few selected insights from a much larger, complex history that has yet to be fully explored. From these insights, historians can begin to draw a deeper and more complete understanding of this nation's history - a history that fully incorporates Muslims’ influence and presence in America.
DEDICATION

To my parents – who have sacrificed so much to get me where I am today

أوَلَّكَ عَلَى هَدًى مَّن رَّبِّهِمْ وَأَوَلَّكَ هُمْ أَلْمُتْلَحُونَ

They are on (true) guidance, from their Lord, and it is these who will prosper.

Surat Al-Baqarah 2:5
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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The religion of Islam has an extensive history in America, going back to the earliest days of the country’s founding. The first Muslims in America were not citizens, but enslaved Africans forced into the slave trade in the eighteenth century. Muslim slaves in America were much more prevalent than anyone could have imagined and yet, the religion of these slaves was rarely ever brought to the surface. The majority of slaves that were transported to the Americas during the early years of the Atlantic slave trade came from the Senegambian region because of its close proximity to Europe. The Senegambian region slowly became islamized, beginning in the fifteenth century, and eventually had a rather large population of Muslims. Tensions arose between African tribes, and African Muslims were taken as captives of war and sold into the Atlantic slave trade. Islam’s influence in West Africa slowly grew from the sixteenth century to the twentieth century, during which the transatlantic slave trade was ongoing. This gives us an idea of just how many African Muslims were being captured in West Africa, specifically the Senegambia region, and brought to the Americas.

Muslims were present in North America before the establishment of the American/British colonies. The Spanish and French both imported enslaved Africans to the continent, and Muslims were most certainly present. The Spanish in Florida had a

large Black population, with the Malinke Africans being one of the largest. The French in Louisiana also brought enslaved African Muslims from the Senegambia region.³

Runaway advertisements for enslaved individuals reveal substantial information about the ethnic and cultural makeup of the enslaved population in the continent, specifically in the Georgia and South Carolina regions. These advertisements provide names that are distinctly Muslim, such as “Bullaly (Bilali), Mustapha, Sambo, Bocarrey (Bukhari [...]”), and Mamado (Mamadu).”⁵ These names were regularly found in runaway advertisements, but that does not mean slaveholders clearly understood where these

⁴ Pearson, 2003, [https://wps.pearsoncustom.com/wps/media/objects/2428/2487068/atlas/atl_h1_m009.html](https://wps.pearsoncustom.com/wps/media/objects/2428/2487068/atlas/atl_h1_m009.html).
⁵ Gomez, *Black Crescent*, 146-147.
names originated from or even that these were Muslim names. The names on the advertisements do prove that there were enslaved African Muslims in North America well before the establishment of the United States.

Islam was a prominent religion in Africa, so it only seems logical that Muslim slaves would have been brought to the United States. It is important to recognize the religious diversity of the enslaved people, which has been overlooked until recently. The main reason why the history and experiences of Muslim slaves have been overlooked and not taken seriously are because of scarcity of documents and materials on the subject itself. This could be because observers during that time did not accurately record the various “cultural expressions of African slaves out of ignorance and arrogance, and they were just as ignorant of Islam.” 6 There is evidence to suggest that observers could distinguish between Muslim and non-Muslims slaves, but they simply could not be bothered to record any data on the matter. Another reason why there are so few materials on Muslim slaves is that the descendants of those slaves were reluctant to provide more information about Islam. Sources estimate that 15 to 30 percent of enslaved Africans over the course of slavery in colonial America and the United States were Muslim. 7 Although many Muslim slaves tried to maintain their Islamic identities and traditions once they came to America, they also needed to adapt to their new environment and form new communities, which ultimately led a large majority of them to convert to Christianity.

While the presence of enslaved Muslims in the United States is certain, the number related to their presence is not widely known. Nonetheless, scholars suggest that

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6 Gomez, Exchanging Our Country Marks, 60.
they were significant in number, and most likely reached up into the thousands.

Historians also believe that enslaved African Muslims “made genuine and persistent
efforts to observe their religion,” and they may have even converted other slaves along
the way. Numerous scholars have written on the impact that enslaved African Muslims
had on the shaping of America. A plethora of sources and records reveal just how
influential the religion and its people were in the early development of America.
Evidence of Muslims and Islamic presence can be specifically found in presidential
writings, personal papers, government documents, and historical newspapers.

In this thesis, I argue that Muslim slaves not only existed in America but most of
them were literate in multiple languages, well-educated, and were capable of holding on
to a set of beliefs. History books and previous literature have overlooked the existence
and lived experiences of Muslim slaves in the United States during the eighteenth and
nineteenth centuries. This is problematic because one cannot assume that all slaves had
the same experiences or that all slaves had the same religious make-up. By examining the
instances where individuals continued to practice their faith, historians can begin to trace
the presence and existence of Islam in early America.

In particular, I explore the lives of numerous Muslims, predominantly enslaved
Muslims, over the course of 130 years, and I analyze the writings of numerous Founding
Fathers and their position within the debate of religious freedom for non-Christians. I also
examine the influence that Muslims and Islamic practices and texts had on the Founding
Fathers, the United States Constitution, and debates about whether slavery should be

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allowed in the newly founded United States of America. The individuals, events, and documents discussed in this thesis are just a few selected insights from a much larger, complex history that has yet to be fully explored. From these insights, historians can begin to draw a deeper and more complete understanding of this nation's history - a history that fully incorporates Muslims’ influence and presence in America. The history of Muslims and Islam in America is a crucial part of America’s unique founding and history.

**Islamic Practices**

Before analyzing the experiences of Muslims, it is important to understand the basic beliefs and practices of Islam, in part because scholars can use these practices to identify the presence of Muslim individuals and the continuation of these traditions and practices. The main principles of Islam are essentially the framework of the Muslim life. There are five principles or pillars of faith in Islam: the Shahada, Salat, Zakat, Sawm, and Hajj. The Shahada or testimony of faith is a simple declaration or statement one must say to become Muslim and that statement is, “There is no God but God and Muhammad is the Prophet of God.” The Shahada is the most crucial pillar of Islam since one must say that phrase before moving onto the next practices.

Salat is the obligatory Muslim prayer which is performed five times a day, at a set time throughout the day. This is a universal Muslim ritual, that is over 1400 years old, and is observed by over 1.2 billion Muslims. Before being able to pray, one must perform wudu or ablution, which is a ritual washing with water. Muslims can pray anywhere, but they are encouraged to pray together in a Mosque when convenient. Just like there is
congregation on Sunday for Christians, Muslims congregate on Fridays and pray together in the Mosque.

Zakat is the giving of a set percentage (2.5%) of one’s wealth to charity. This is only obligatory to persons or families who can afford to give this amount of money without falling into poverty themselves. Zakat is a crucial principle to follow because it teaches self-discipline, honesty, and generosity. Zakat is not to be confused with charity in general, which is optional but encouraged.

Sawm is the required fasting or abstention from food, drink, smoking, and sexual activity during the hours of daylight for the month of Ramadan. Children, elders, women who are pregnant or breast-feeding, and adults who are unwell, physically or mentally, are excused from fasting. Those who are not able to fast are encouraged to make up the fast at a later date or make a donation to the poor instead. Sawm is beneficial to all Muslims because one becomes spiritually stronger, appreciates God’s gifts in life, and learns to be grateful in times of hardship and suffering.

Lastly, Hajj is a once in a lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca when Muslims gather together in front of the Ka’aba, no matter their race, culture, or social status. During Hajj, Muslims are obligated to wear simple white clothing so the display of wealth or higher status is not present during the pilgrimage.²

The five pillars are not the only practices that Muslims must follow. An important aspect of following Islam is the way men and women dress while in public. Prophet Muhammad (the final Messenger and Prophet in Islam) and the Quran (the Islamic holy

book) instructed that women should cover their bodies except for their face and hands. Most Muslims interpret this to require head coverings for women, although some Muslim women cover the entire body, including the face and hands. For men, the minimum amount to be covered on the body is between the navel and the knee. Another important aspect of following Islam is the dietary needs and restrictions for Muslims. By Islamic law, all foods are considered halal (permissible or lawful), except for pork and its by-products, animals improperly slaughtered or dead before slaughtering, blood, alcohol, and foods contaminated with any of these ingredients.

Methodology

There is ample evidence to suggest that there were many enslaved Muslims that were brought over from Africa and resided in colonial America. Indeed, numerous types of sources have confirmed the existence of Muslims in the United States: Muslim names in ledgers and advertisements for runaway slaves, interviews of former slaves and descendants of Muslims that reference Muslim ancestry, slaveholders’ preference for certain Africans, records of Islamic activity on plantations, and narratives or memoirs written by Muslims.10

Narratives from enslaved Muslims are particularly useful when it comes to examining the experiences of enslaved individuals before and after the founding of the United States. In this thesis, I use the narratives and experiences of three notable enslaved Muslims in the United States: Job Ben Solomon, Omar ibn Said, and Prince Abdul-Rahman. These three men’s experiences are unique to their own circumstances

10 Gomez, Exchanging Our Country Marks, 61.
and they are certainly not representative of what the majority of African Muslims went through while being enslaved in America. Nevertheless, the lives of these men give us some insight into what life could have been like for some enslaved Muslims, including the struggles they endured and obstacles they overcame during their lifetimes.

While there might not be many first-hand narratives by Muslim slaves, there is still documentation that restores their presence in the history of slavery in the United States. It is important to recognize that most of the slave narratives or memoirs are not written by the actual slave themselves, so these may not be fully accurate. Some narratives or memoirs are “linguistically and culturally filtered,” so it is crucial to read and interpret them in a way that speaks for the ones behind them, that did not necessarily have a voice. Nonetheless, these narratives “provide valuable insights into the lives of the enslaved, for example, their lives in Africa and their capture.”

**Historiography**

Scholars like Sylviane Diouf, Michael Gomez, Allan D. Austin, Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, and Denise A. Spellberg have all written extensively about the experiences of Muslims in early America, as well as the impact of their faith on the country’s foundation. For example, in *Servants of Alllah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas*, Sylviane Diouf discusses the five pillars of Islam, the Muslim community, literacy amongst Muslim slaves, and the Muslim legacy. This monograph is particularly useful because it discusses the lived experience of Muslim slaves within the United States.

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in great detail.\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identity in the Colonial and Antebellum South}, by Michael Gomez, examines Islam in early America.\textsuperscript{13} Similarly, in \textit{African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles}, Allan D. Austin explores the lives of numerous enslaved Muslims.\textsuperscript{14} Kambiz Ghanea Bassiri’s \textit{A History of Islam in America} (2010) also provides valuable context on the early history of Islamic belief and practice in America.\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Muslims in America: A Short History} (2009), also details the presence of Muslims in the larger American story by exploring how they have shaped and been a part of larger historical trends and movements within the United States.\textsuperscript{16} Finally, in \textit{Thomas Jefferson’s Qur’an: Islam and the Founders}, Denise A. Spellberg explores Thomas Jefferson’s and the Founding Fathers’ relationship with Muslims. All of these sources collectively create a concrete history of the presence and impact of Muslims in the United States that had been previously non-existent.\textsuperscript{17}

Historians do not necessarily know the extent to which enslaved Muslims had the opportunities to freely practice their faith in the United States. There were observers who noticed the practice of Islam among Muslim slaves, but they did not know enough about the religion to recognize what they actually saw. Through all of these obstacles, Muslim slaves still clung to their faith, as Diouf discusses in the passage below:

\textsuperscript{13} Gomez, \textit{Exchanging Our Country Marks}.
\textsuperscript{14} Allan Austin, \textit{African Muslims in Antebellum America} (New York: Routledge, 1997).
\textsuperscript{15} Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, \textit{A History of Islam in America} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
“The African Muslims clearly remained attached to their faith, and their enslavement was itself a good reason to be even more devout. Faith meant hope, moral comfort, and mental escape. It was also a link to the past, to a time when they were free, respected, and, for many, engaged in intellectual pursuits, not menial labor.”

Muslim slaves were thrown into a world they were not familiar with and one of the only things that pushed them to continue doing their work was their faith.

There are recorded instances of Muslims performing Salat, or prayer, individually, but in some cases, such prayer was conducted in a threatening environment. According to Diouf, Yarrow Mamout, a Muslim slave who resided in Maryland, would pray in public without fear of condemnation. But according to Curtis, others were not as fortunate as Mamout, and they suffered repercussions when they were found to be praying; however, that did not stop them from adhering to Islamic practices and beliefs. Curtis also details the life of Salih Bilali, who was a devout Muslim who fasted Ramadan, wore a fez and kaftan, and prayed daily. Gomez writes,

“that it is no surprise that Muslims continued to invoke the name of Allah in daily prayers upon prayer mats with prayer beads, both individually and collectively. Whether literate or limited to a few memorized suras these Africans observed the tenets of their religion and remained true to their faith. Islam would eventually recede, but not without leaving a legacy. In any event, the evidence is clear that the religion was practiced throughout both the colonial and antebellum periods.”

According to historians, enslaved Muslims also would have experienced pressure to modify or discontinue traditional religious practices in order to conform to what was acceptable in their new environment or they would have found the strength to remain faithful to their beliefs.

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18 Diouf, Servants of Allah, 59.
19 Ibid, 60.
20 Curtis, Muslims in America, 20.
21 Gomez, Exchanging Our Country Marks, 248.
Most slaves, Muslim and non-Muslim, were assumed to be illiterate upon their arrival to the colonies. Illiteracy is defined as not knowing how to read or write and also one can assume that it also means being uneducated. According to numerous historians, Muslim slaves were the exception to this general rule. Indeed, most of them knew how to read or write, just not in English. Many Muslim slaves had been educated in Africa and were literate in Arabic or another native language. According to Diouf, “the literacy rate was high in Muslim Africa, and because of a concentration of learned Muslims in America [...] the literacy rate among Muslims was in all probability higher than it was among slaveholders.”

In many ways literacy became enslaved Muslims’ greatest weapons, in that it set them apart from the vast majority of enslaved people (and most whites). Slave owners and overseers often learned that Muslim slaves were able to read, write, and speak a different language, but the majority of them did not know what that language was. However, literacy also could be dangerous. According to Diouf, slaveholders were not hostile towards literate Muslim slaves out of fear of trickery or escape, but because it proved that slaves were still human and civilized individuals, not property.

Overview of Chapters

The first chapter of this thesis will focus on the experience of three notable enslaved Muslims from Western Africa: Job Ben Solomon, “Prince” Ibrahima Abdulh Rahhahman, and Omar ibn Said. Each of these men were literate, well-educated, and highly influential. They were able to use their literacy in multiple languages to secure a

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23 Ibid, 161.
better life for themselves, whether it be finally returning back home to Africa or finding a safe space within a Christian family.

The second chapter of this thesis will focus on a small island community called Sapelo Island, just off the coast of Georgia, and how the enslaved Muslims formed a community in that region. It will also discuss the reasoning behind the sense of superiority that many enslaved African Muslims have over non-Muslims. I will also explain why literacy was such an integral part of many enslaved Muslims' lives.

The third chapter of this thesis will focus on the influence and impact that Islam had on the founding of the United States, as well as how the religion influenced the founding fathers’ writings and ideas about religious freedom and civil rights.
CHAPTER 1
AN IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF THREE NOTABLE ENSLAVED MUSLIMS

Introduction
Of the thousands of enslaved African Muslims that were brought to the North American continent, only a few of their stories are known to historians. The experiences of the enslaved African Muslims in this chapter are unique in that they were literate, well-educated, and/or came from an influential family in Africa. This was certainly not the case for the majority of African Muslims who were enslaved, but the narratives that these notable figures left behind, are our only insight into what life for enslaved African Muslims was like.

The Experience of Job Ben Solomon
The bulk of what is known about Ayuba Suleiman Diallo (1701-1773), more frequently referred to as Job Ben Solomon, comes from a single document written in 1734. Some Memoirs of the Life of Job, the Son of Solomon, the High Priest of Boonda in Africa; Who was a Slave About Two Years in Maryland; and Afterwards Being Brought to England, was Set Free, and Sent to His Native Land in the Year 1734 was written by Thomas Bluett, a close acquaintance of Job, and it discusses his life in Africa and his eventual kidnapping and arrival in the American colonies. Job’s account of his life is one of the earliest documentations of an enslaved Muslim in the North American continent.

Job Ben Solomon was the son of a wealthy and influential Muslim leader from the Kingdom of Futa, which is now Senegal. Until his capture by slave traders in 1730, Job
was well educated, fluent in multiple languages, and married with children. While working with his father, Job was sent off to the Gambia River to sell “to Negroes”, as well as to buy paper and other materials. After disagreeing with the price for the two slaves with the original trader, Job crossed into enemy territory to trade his captives with someone else. Having sold his captives, Job was resting when seven or eight men took him captive and shaved his head so he could be seen as a prisoner of war. After running out of time to raise the ransom money, Job was put on the Arabella slave ship that was leaving Gambia and sent to the Americas in 1731.

Once he arrived in the colonies, Job realized just how challenging practicing his faith would be on a plantation. Job was sold to a slaveholder in Kent Island, Maryland, and was put to work in making tobacco. His slaveholder soon realized that Job was not used to that kind of work, and instead put him to work taking care of the cattle and livestock. Job would sneak away from his work and go into the woods to pray, where “a white boy” would regularly watch him. During his worship, the boy would throw dirt in his face and mock him, knowing that Job would not be able to retaliate. Nevertheless, Job persisted in practicing his faith, regardless of the consequences.

The language barrier between Muslim slaves and those around them proved to be a much bigger problem than one would assume. Job was regularly mocked by white

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24 Thomas Bluett, *Some Memoirs of the Life of Job, the Son of Solomon, the High Priest of Boonda in Africa; Who was a Slave About Two Years in Maryland; and Afterwards Being Brought to England, was Set Free, and Sent to His Native Land in the Year 1734* (London, 1734), 13-15.
25 Ibid, 16.
26 Ibid, 17.
people, but his lack of knowledge about the English language prevented him from telling anyone about what was happening to him.\textsuperscript{29} Job eventually fled from his owner and left Maryland, seeking his freedom. He traveled to Delaware Bay, which had a strict law against African-Americans who were not known in the area, and was put in prison since he could not give an account of himself. Job was brought to a tavern by Thomas Bluett, a Christian missionary, and several other gentlemen, who soon discovered that Job could not speak a single word of English. They began speaking and making signs until he wrote down a few lines of a language that was not English. Job read the lines out loud and the men around him heard him pronounce the words “Allah” and “Mahommed”, after which they concluded that he was a “Mahometan.”\textsuperscript{30} Job was finally able to explain himself through the help of another enslaved African who spoke Wolof, one of the many languages spoken by Job.\textsuperscript{31} Job was eventually returned to his owner and he was offered a place to pray and a few other conveniences to make his transition into slavery easier.\textsuperscript{32}

Not only did Job have some effect on his master, it is also likely that he had an impact on General James Edward Oglethorpe, the founder of colonial Georgia. Job’s slaveholder gave him permission to write a letter to his father, who was in Africa. The letter, which was written in Arabic, never reached his father, but it led to Job’s eventual freedom from his owner and his return to his homeland. It reached Oglethorpe and he sent the letter to be translated at Oxford University.\textsuperscript{33} After learning of the contents of the

\textsuperscript{29} Bluett, \textit{Some Memoirs}, 20.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid, 21.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid, 22.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid, 19.
\textsuperscript{33} Thaddeus Mason Harris, \textit{Biographical memorials of James Oglethorpe, founder of the colony of Georgia in North America} (Boston: 1841), 26.
letter, Oglethorpe was so moved by Job’s writing that he paid all the expenses to help Job return to his homeland.  

Around the same time as reading Job’s letter, Oglethorpe’s ideas on slavery took a drastic turn. He became a “prominent abolitionist” and even proclaimed slavery as being “against the gospel.”

Before returning to his homeland, Oglethorpe helped arrange a bond to release Job from his owner so long as he was able to eventually pay the price for his freedom. After being freed from his owner in 1733, Job set sail to England with Thomas Bluett, and he learned the English language along the way. By the time they reached England, Job had learned so much that he was able to understand most of what was said in a regular conversation and in return, they were able to understand most of what he said.

While on the passage to England, Job wrote out the Quran by memory numerous times and prayed publicly five times a day.

While the dietary restrictions for Muslims are not very difficult to follow, most Muslim slaves were not able to refrain from not eating certain meats, such as pork. Job was fortunate enough to have been in the company of men who valued his observance of Islam. While sailing with Thomas Bluett from Maryland to England, he was permitted to kill the fresh stock so he could eat from it himself. The men on the boat knew of his dietary restrictions and what was allowed for him to eat. Other than this short documentation from Job’s memoirs, there are not a lot of materials that discuss how Muslim slaves dealt with their diet restrictions.

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34 Thaddeus Mason Harris, *Biographical memoirs of James Oglethorpe*, 27.
35 Henry Bruce, *Life of General Oglethorpe / by Henry Bruce* (1890), 99.
While traveling to England, those close to Job also realized that he would never waiver in his devotion to God. Job was so fixated on the notion that there was only one God, that it was not possible to convince him or even talk to him about the existence of the Holy Trinity. He was given a copy of the New Testament in his own language and he read it with care, but he was not persuaded by its words. Instead of forgetting his religion, Job, who memorized the Quran in his youth, wrote it out three times in Arabic.\textsuperscript{38}

After arriving in England with Bluett, Job was still property of the Royal African Company. Even though a high price had been set on securing Job’s freedom, the Company was paid by the funds raised from numerous powerful people whom Job had

\textsuperscript{38} Bluett, \textit{Some Memoirs}, 51.
\textsuperscript{39} Job was hesitant to have himself drawn for a portrait; in fear that he would be worshiped by others. He was finally convinced to sit for his portrait and was clothed in his traditional country dress. Job preferred to distinguish himself by the way he dressed, by wearing a white turban and robe. William Hoare, \textit{Ayuba Suleiman Diallo (Job ben Solomon)}, 1733, oil on canvas, 762 mm x 635 mm, Primary Collection, National Portrait Gallery, United Kingdom.
been introduced to in England and were sympathetic to his cause.\textsuperscript{40} Job returned to Gambia without having to pay a ransom and died in 1773.\textsuperscript{41}

**The Experience of Prince Abduhl Rahhahman**

Ibrahima Abdulh Rahhahman (1762-1829), more widely known as “Prince”, was from a royal family in the Futa Jallon region, which is now present-day Guinea. Just like many other wealthy African Muslims, Prince was educated and fluent in numerous languages, including Arabic. Prince was eventually captured by slave traders in 1788 and brought to the United States, where he was sold to Colonel Thomas Foster in Mississippi and remained on his cotton plantation for approximately 40 years.\textsuperscript{42}

While on the plantation, Prince married Isabella, an enslaved Baptist woman, and had numerous children with her. While Prince chose to keep his Islamic name, the couple gave their children Anglicized names.\textsuperscript{43} This is just one of many ways that enslaved individuals’ Muslim identity was erased in historical records. Oftentimes, even if enslaved individuals had Islamic names, slaveholders would ignore those names and give them English or Anglicized names that would be easier to pronounce. Regardless, Prince maintained his Islamic identity while enslaved, even using it to his advantage. He wrote out the *Fatiha*, the opening chapter of the Qur’an, in Arabic for white Christians at one point, and he allowed them to believe that it was the Lord’s prayer.\textsuperscript{44} Even though he was able to write in Arabic, he may not have felt safe displaying his Islamic practices to the same people he was trying to fool.

\textsuperscript{40} Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America*, 55.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid, 61.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, 55.
\textsuperscript{44} Alford, *Prince Among Slaves*, 56.
Just as he was in Africa, Prince was well known because of his elite Fula identity, which left an impression on the majority of people who he would meet. While selling sweet potatoes on behalf of his slaveholder, he was recognized by Dr. Cox, a man with whom he had met and spent a great deal of time in Africa. Dr. Cox offered Colonel Foster one thousand dollars for Prince’s freedom, but the Colonel refused. He claimed that Prince was too valuable of a slave and he would not find anyone who was capable of exerting his influence over all of the slaves on his plantation. Since many enslaved African Muslims were well-educated, they “displayed a certain sense of superiority.”

Many of the African Muslims that were enslaved in America came from literate and noble backgrounds, which white slaveholders understood and used to their advantage. Since many of them could read and/or write another language, usually Arabic, enslaved African Muslims most likely believed that they had some mental superiority over other enslaved Africans. Enslaved African Muslims held themselves much higher over other enslaved Africans, thus gaining some leniency or special treatment from their slaveholders. This was true for Prince when Colonel Foster entrusted him in overlooking the plantation and the other enslaved Africans.

After Dr. Cox failed to free Prince from his owner in 1810, Prince gained another opportunity to secure his freedom in the 1820s. A local newspaper reported about his life in Africa, and Prince was able to send a letter in Arabic to the Embassy of Morocco through the Secretary of State, Henry Clay. After years of correspondence between the

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Moroccan Embassy, Henry Clay, and Prince’s owner, President John Quincy Adams joined the dispute and tried to convince Colonel Foster to grant Prince his freedom. After raising enough funds to free his wife and for the journey back to Africa, Prince was finally able to secure his freedom and left America in 1828.  

Although numerous sources have insisted that Prince remained a devout Muslim for his entire life, some sources claim that Prince converted to Christianity, and that he, his “wife, and eldest son” were “baptized” members of “the Baptist Church.”  

While petitioning for Prince’s release, Reverend Gallaudet emphasized Prince’s newfound conversion to Christianity. According to his statement, if Prince was allowed to return to Africa, he would help to introduce “civilization, and freedom, and intelligence, and Christianity, in to the heart of Africa--to his very birth-place, the famous Tombuctoo.” To make the case for Prince even stronger, the Reverend made his last appeal to the feelings of Christians. Prince would be able to spread Christianity to “poor,

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49 Alford, *Prince Among Slaves*, 111.
51 A portrait of Prince by Thomas Illman, with the phrase “My name Abdul Rahman” written in Arabic. Thomas Illman, *Abdul Rahhahman*, 1834, Print, 22.5 x 14 cm, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
benighted, oppressed Africa,” and introduce a religion that would right all of its wrongs. However, upon his return to Africa, sources say that Prince “immediately reaffirmed his Muslim beliefs.”

The Experience of Omar Ibn Said

Omar Ibn Said (ca. 1770-1864) is one of the most notable Muslim figures who was a slave in the United States at one point in his life. He was literate in Arabic and was a devout Muslim upon his arrival in Charleston, South Carolina. He eventually converted to Christianity and also had in his possession, an Arabic Bible, which was very rare for his time. *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar Ibn Said* (1831) is an autobiographical narrative written by Omar in Arabic. His narrative was lost for decades, until it was recently found and translated into English. He discusses his early life, his kidnapping from his African home, his arrival in the United States, his commitment to Islam, and his relationship with Christianity. It is one of the only surviving slave narratives that was written by a Muslim, but because it was translated from one language to another, some words or phrases could be inaccurate.

Just like Job and Prince, Omar Ibn Said was from the Fula people in West Africa. Omar was captured in his early thirties and sold into the transatlantic slave trade, which brought him to Charleston in 1807. Omar ibn Said did not have a pleasant interaction with Christians upon reaching Charleston, and his attitude towards Christians and slaveholders was not positive initially. He was sold “to a small, weak, and wicked man,

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53 Ibid, 7.
called Johnson, a complete infidel, who had no fear of God at all.” After being sold to Johnson, Omar ibn Said was not able to do much of the work that he was tasked with completing and he fled about a month after reaching Charleston. He stumbled upon a Church and went inside to pray, when a white boy saw him and ran off to inform his father. Omar was eventually taken and confined to a house where he “could not go out” for sixteen days. After Omar was jailed for praying in a Church, he was released into the care of Jim and John Owen in North Carolina. They took care of Omar, feeding him their food and clothing him with their clothes.

There is a stark contrast between the views that Omar held once entering the United States and after residing with a caring family in North Carolina. At one point, he was a religious and devout Muslim, who read the Quran and prayed five times a day. Upon his stay with the Owens family, he then began reading “the gospel of God”, and reciting the words with the Owens.

Omar ibn Said is a prime example of a devout Muslim slave, who eventually converted to Christianity after slowly forgetting his faith. When asked to write about his experiences in North Carolina, he claims to have forgotten not only his life, but the Arabic language as well. Before he arrived in the United States, Omar was a devout Muslim who went to the mosque, prayed during the day, gave zakat every year, and completed the pilgrimage to Mecca.

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56 Ibid, 89.
57 Ibid, 90.
58 Ibid, 91.
59 Ibid, 89.
Upon his arrival to North Carolina, however, he slowly began to lose parts of his faith. While under the care of Jim and John Owen, they allowed him “to read the gospel of God, our Lord, and Saviour, and King; who regulates all our circumstances, our health and wealth, and who bestows his mercies willingly.” It is interesting to see a man who was so devout to his faith convert to another religion with which he was not familiar.

There is not a definite timeline one can propose that would give the exact date in which Omar converted. One can assume that he converted within weeks or months after being in the home of the Owens. After facing hardships in Charleston, he was fortunate enough to have been taken in by a generous family who cared for him. The Owens family was a safe haven for Omar, where he felt safe enough to convert and practice a religion in which one “fears God” and “loves to

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do good.”  

There is a certain irony to Omar ibn Said’s claims that he forgot his faith and the Arabic language. The Owens family gifted Omar an Arabic copy of the Bible, which eventually led him to “convert” to Christianity. But was his conversion to Christianity actually real? In the bible that was gifted to Omar, he wrote out “Praise be to Allah, or God” and “All good is from Allah.” He wrote out verses from the Quran and told the Owens that it was the “Lord’s Prayer”.

Omar ibn Said’s ability to write in Arabic may have been the cover he needed to hide his true religious views. While everyone around Omar believed that he was in fact a devout Christian, his numerous writings reveal that he still had a connection to Islam, but he might not have felt safe enough to display his Islamic practices to those around him. Regardless of whether or not he truly converted to Christianity, it is obvious that both faiths were dear to Omar and were an

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integral part of his life while enslaved in the United States.

**Conclusion**

For both Job and Prince, their elite African Muslim status proved to be an asset that they could use to their advantage and to negotiate their freedom from their owners. Nevertheless, their influential upbringings did not deter their owners from withholding their freedom for years. The experiences of Job Ben Solomon, Prince, and Omar ibn Said represent a rich and diverse religious history before and after the United States was founded. The challenge of resisting and surviving slavery was a unsettling task for all enslaved Africans, including African Muslims. The three Muslims mentioned above are prime examples for how the enslaved African Muslim community looked to preserve their cultural and religious Islamic identity.
CHAPTER 2
COMMUNITY, LITERACY, AND SUPERIORITY AMONG ENSLAVED MUSLIMS

Introduction

While Job Ben Solomon, Prince, and Omar ibn Said were notable African Muslims in the Americas, their experiences were not representative of all of the enslaved African Muslims in the region. Nevertheless, their experiences overlapped with a few key themes that will be discussed in this chapter. The Muslim community, the literacy of numerous African Muslims, and the sense of superiority felt by those Muslims are all crucial components in understanding the experiences of enslaved African Muslims.

The Muslim Community on Sapelo Island

One of the only known enslaved African Muslim communities in the United States was in Sapelo Island. The number of enslaved Muslims in the Georgia and South Carolina region were significant, but not as significant as the rather large Muslim community on Sapelo Island, a chain of islands off the coast of Georgia. The data from this island reveals that there was a large number of enslaved Muslims in this area that practiced their faith “with diligence and purpose.”65 There are alleged accounts of non-Muslims converting to Islam in this area, as well as descendants of enslaved Muslims fully embracing their Islamic heritage and identity.66

Within the Muslim community on these islands, there is evidence of enslaved African Muslims fulfilling cultural practices that also align with West African Islamic

65 Gomez, Black Crescent, 153.
66 Ibid, 153.
societies. One of the pillars of Islam, zakat, was routinely fulfilled by many Muslim communities, by giving “charity” in the form of food. Enslaved Muslim women would make rice cakes, which they called “saraka”, and they would distribute them once a year to the children in the community. Saraka sounds very close to sadakha which is the voluntary giving of charity any time during the year or whenever a Muslim chooses.

“The Sea Islands saraka and the Brazilian saka are the exact transposition to the Americas of an African Muslim custom. The rice ball is the traditional charity given by West African women on Fridays. The testimonies from the Sea Islands refer to one distribution a month or a year, which indicates a lack of means in no way surprising. The Muslim women of Georgia had to accumulate, day after day, small quantities of rice and sugar — taken from their rations, gathered in the rice paddies, or bought with their limited savings.”67

“The confection of the rice cakes represents the only recorded example of Islamic behavior specifically expressed by women. As slaves, as women, as Africans, and as Muslims, Muslim women did not receive much attention during and after slavery, and very little has been reported about them.”68

Contact between Muslim slaves was prominent since there is documentation of interactions among Salih Bilali, an enslaved African Muslim who was captured in West Africa and brought to Sapelo Island, a Muslim companion, and Prince and a Muslim slave on the same farm. It is also more than likely that there were significant numbers of Muslim slaves on the same plantation or in the same area. There is also high possibility that Muslim slaves congregated together and held Friday prayer, or just completing the prayers throughout the day.69

Despite the persistence of the Muslim community in Sapelo Island, they also faced harsh challenges that would test the perseverance of their faith. While Muslims

67 Diouf, Servants of Allah, 65.
68 Ibid, 65.
69 Gomez, Exchanging Our Country Marks, 74.
could gather in small numbers to pray as a group, they could not have *madrasas*, Qur’anic schools, nor have access to Islamic texts. Just as Omar ibn Said claimed to have forgotten his faith, Muslims on this island slowly began to lose their Islamic knowledge and their familiarity with the Arabic language. Their faith also began to compete with various other African religions and Christianity, with numerous enslaved Muslims converting to Christianity by the early 1800s.  

With regards to the marriage of Muslim slaves, there were only a few examples that were highlighted in the sources. One of the only examples of marriage within a Muslim community is from Bilali, who was a close companion to Salih Bilali. Bilali “adhered to Islamic prescriptions on marriage” and may have been married to more than one woman. One of the only examples of a Muslim marrying out of the faith, is the marriage between Prince and a Baptist woman, in which they had multiple children together. Muslim slaves living in the United States were able to relate to another in many ways. Through congregation, prayer, and fulfilling the various aspects of their faith, brought them together, as one united people.

**Literacy**

As mentioned previously, the literacy of African Muslims became an asset while being enslaved in the Americas. While most African slaves came from oral cultures, African Muslims from West Africa were unique in that the majority of them knew how to read and write in Arabic and/or another language. This trait that they possess clearly sets

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70 Gomez, *Black Crescent*, 159-161.
72 Ibid, 86.
them apart from other enslaved individuals and even non-enslaved white people. Many colonists coming from Europe did not know how to read or write, and the literacy rates of Muslim slaves was more than likely higher than it was among slaveholders.  

While they could use their literacy to their advantage, some African Muslims were targeted because they knew how to read and write. Slaveholders were not afraid that the African Muslims would revolt against them or get access to important news.

“In the eyes of the slaveholders, the Muslims’ literacy was dangerous because it represented a threat to the whites’ intellectual domination and a refutation of the widely held belief that Africans were inherently inferior and incapable of intellectual pursuits. The Africans’ skills constituted a proof of humanity and civilization that did not owe anything to the Christians’ supposed civilizing influence. If these men and women could read and write, if they were not the blank slates or the primitive savages they had been portrayed to be in order to justify their enslavement, then the very foundation of the system had to be questioned. This issue was so potent that [...] North Americans felt compelled to deny the Africanness of the “outstanding” Muslims and to portray them as Arabs.”

The incredibly long years that a majority of African Muslims remained in slavery took a large toll on their literacy and Islamic knowledge. As mentioned previously, Omar ibn Said was conscious of the fact that he was possibly losing his ability to remember the Arabic language, thus also losing the ability to recite and/or write the Quran. Nevertheless, Omar wrote out numerous documents in Arabic, revisiting the Quranic verses that he had memorized back in Africa. Both images were taken from Omar ibn Said’s autobiography that he wrote in Arabic. Both passages include verses from the Quran, as well as the words Allah and Muhammad.

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73 Diouf, Servants of Allah, 108.
As mentioned in the previous chapter, Omar ibn Said would write verses from the Quran to appease to white people’s fascination with the Arabic language. Prince would also do the same thing when he was trying to raise funds to free his children from slavery so they could return back to their home in Africa.

“[He] used to write down a few lines in Arabic as a giveaway to the curious and to benefactors. He told them it was the Lord’s Prayer. It was, in reality, Al-Fatiha, the opening chapter of the Qur’an, which is

76 Ibid.
recited in every prayer and on many other occasions. Al-Fatiha is a description of the relation of man to Allah: *In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful* Praise be to Allah The Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds: Most Gracious, Most Merciful; Master of the Day of Judgment. *Thee do we worship, and Thine aid we seek. Show us the straight way, The way of those on whom thou has bestowed Thy Grace, Those whose (portion) is not wrath. And who go not astray.* Ibrahima was making use of his literacy in a very practical and constructive way. He was playing on the whites’ fascination with a slave who could write in a foreign language in order to free his children and grandchildren. It is certainly fitting that religious writings, and Al-Fatiha in particular, with its verse on the seeking of God’s help, enabled Ibrahima to raise some funds for the redemption of his family.”

Both Omar ibn Said and Prince would use their ability to write in another language to their advantage.

**Superiority**

The belief that African Muslims were more superior compared to their non-Muslim counterparts was a view that was held not only by slaveholders, but also by enslaved African Muslims as well. There are numerous reasons as to why enslaved African Muslims held themselves higher than enslaved non-Muslims. Based on the few narratives and autobiographies that we have in our possession, the only enslaved African Muslims we know of, came from wealthy and influential West African families. The probability that these Muslims were also slaveholders themselves and sold and bought slaves while in Africa is very high. Their views of slavery and slaves could have been skewed by their own experiences of trading captives and prisoners of war.

Another factor of why there were superior attitudes against non-Muslims has to do with Islam itself. These African Muslims grew up in societies where Islam was slowly

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77 Diouf, *Servants of Allah*, 123.
becoming the dominant religion all around them in West Africa and they began to “live in an increasingly intolerant society.” These Muslims learned to stay away from anything that goes against Islam it seems logical that once these Muslims were brought to the Americas, they would be uncomfortable around their non-Muslim fellow slaves.

As mentioned above, several of these Muslim slaves came from influential and prominent families in West Africa. Several of them had powerful fathers, were well educated, literate, and had an extensive Islamic education. While this might have been rare for a slave to be literate in multiple languages in the Americas, it was very common in West Africa.

“most Muslim villages and towns maintained madrasas (Qur'anic schools), to which children from ages seven to fourteen went for instruction, boys and girls. At madrasa, the Qur'an was memorized by heart and Arabic grammar was introduced. From madrasa, young men (and occasionally young women) of sufficient means moved on to more advanced studies, often requiring travel from one town to another in order to study under the appropriate shaykh, or master teacher of a specific curriculum. The most advanced students went on to reputable towns such as Pir and Jenne, where there were concentrations of scholars. Thus the educational process was well established, with a tradition reaching back to at least the fourteenth century. Reducing such an educated elite to the status of slaves—a status shared with those of humble birth—was especially demeaning.”

Due to their “pastoral background”, many African Muslims were better suited to care for the cattle and work in domestic service, compared to working on the plantation and completing agricultural work. In the mind of the slaveholder, African Muslims would be better suited for domestic or supervisory roles, thus overlooking their non-Muslim peers. Salih Bilali, became the head driver at his owner’s plantation. His

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80 Ibid, 85.
81 Ibid, 85-86.
managerial skills and his reliability gave his owner the opportunity to leave Salih in charge of the plantation for months at a time, without any other supervision.\textsuperscript{82} 

\textbf{Conclusion}

Enslaved African Muslims certainly had an advantage over non-Muslims when it came to being able to read and write, especially in a language other than English. Their education and higher status set them apart from other slaves and even their owners. The community in Sapelo Island was relatively small compared to Christian communities, but powerful nonetheless. Numerous African Muslims used their literacy and superiority to gain a higher status as a slave on a plantation and/or write their way out of slavery.

African Muslims were unique in that a majority of enslaved Africans would never have gotten the chance to raise their status or write their way to freedom since most of them were illiterate.

\textsuperscript{82} Gomez, \textit{Black Crescent}, 154.
CHAPTER 3
THE INFLUENCE OF ISLAM ON THE UNITED STATES

Introduction

Muslims played a key role in helping the Founding Fathers determine the full extent of religious liberty during the creation of the United States. While the founders did not necessarily know any Muslims personally, they still thought of the inclusion of other religions besides Christianity. Even while trying to include the rights of Muslims, as a way of including all faiths, the fear of Muslims never went away. One of the biggest obstacles while doing research for this specific topic was the various names/terms that historians, scholars, and founding fathers would call Muslims and Islam. Two of the most commonly used terms for Muslims are “Turk” and “Mahometan”, both of which became synonyms for Muslim.

“The term ‘Turk’ was often used a synonym for ‘Muslim,’ even though Turks were a small portion of an enormous variety of ethnic and linguistic identities in the Islamic world, and it was not a neutral designation. Reflecting fears of Ottoman conquests, a ‘Turk’ in English-language usage since the sixteenth century signified ‘a cruel, rigorous, or tyrannical man’ capable of barbaric behavior.”83

This fear of Muslims and anti-Muslim rhetoric continued through the founding era and even to the present day.

Benjamin Franklin and Islam

Benjamin Franklin was one of the first staunch supporters of Islam and Muslims in America. Franklin can be found mentioning Islam, Muslims, and the Prophet Muhammad in his writings on numerous occasions. He consistently expressed his respect

and admiration for Islam and its teachings, as well as advocating for the religious freedom of Muslims in America. In one of Franklin’s writings about the famous preacher, George Whitefield, he expresses his attitude towards having a religious space that is open and welcoming to all religions, not just Christianity:

“Both House and Ground were vested in Trustees, expressly for the Use of any Preacher of any religious Persuasion who might desire to say something to the People of Philadelphia, the Design [purpose] in building not being to accommodate any particular Sect, but the Inhabitants in general, so that even if the Mufti of Constantinople were to send a Missionary to preach Mahometanism [Islam] to us, he would find a Pulpit at his Service.”84

Franklin was advocating for a preaching-house that would be a meeting place open to people of all faiths, including Muslims.

It is not difficult to ascertain that Franklin was knowledgeable about Islam, especially the teachings of Prophet Muhammad. In his writing, A Narrative of the Late Massacres, which was published in 1764, Franklin invokes the mercifulness of Prophet Muhammad during times of war by writing:

“As for the Turks, it is recorded in the Life of Mahomet, the Founder of their Religion, That Khaled, one of his Captains, having divided a Number of Prisoners between himself and those that were with him, he commanded the Hands of his own Prisoners to be tied behind them, and then, in a most cruel and brutal Manner, put them to the Sword; but he could not prevail on his Men to massacre their Captives, because in Fight they had laid down their Arms, submitted, and demanded Protection. Mahomet, when the Account was brought to him, applauded the Men for their Humanity”85

“One Article I cannot omit concerning their Laws of Hospitality, which is, if their greatest Enemy comes under their Roof for Protection, the Landlord, of what Condition soever, is obliged to keep him safe, from all Manner of Harm or Violence, during his Abode with him, and even to conduct him safely through his Territories to a Place of Security.”86

86 Ibid.
Both of these passages illustrate Franklin’s familiarity with Islam and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad. They also reveal his views of Islamic values and moral virtues as being models for the advocacy of the humane treatment of Native Americans.

Thomas Jefferson and his Complicated Relationship with Islam

Despite his personal dislike for Islam, or any religion for that matter, Thomas Jefferson worked tirelessly to protect the rights of and give rights to Muslims and non-Protestants to practice the religion of their choosing without discrimination. While the only Muslims in the colonies at this time were enslaved African Muslims, Jefferson still imagined Muslims to be part of the new nation he had a hand in creating.

Thomas Jefferson purchased a copy of the Quran in 1765 and began teaching himself Arabic while studying law.  


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States became the principal author of the Declaration of Independence. In that document, Jefferson penned the words, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” That same year, Jefferson echoed John Locke’s opinion that “neither Pagan nor Mahomedan nor Jew ought to be excluded from the civil rights of the Commonwealth because of this religion.”

Jefferson’s possession of the Quran reveals two critical ideas about America’s relationship with Muslims and Islam. It shows that the Founding Fathers were aware of the existence of Islam and the existence of Muslims in the newly founded nation. It also reveals that Islam was part of America’s story before it was even founded.

In 1777, Jefferson drafted the Virginia bill for establishing religious freedom, which scholars have agreed that the bill played a crucial part in guaranteeing the free exercise of religion, as is protected by the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights.

During the bill’s debate, legislators wanted to add the term “Jesus Christ” into the bill. While it was ultimately rejected, Jefferson wrote about the term in 1821, stating:

“The bill for establishing religious freedom, the principles of which had, to a certain degree, been enacted before, I had drawn in all the latitude of reason and right. It still met with opposition; but, with some mutilations in the preamble, it was finally passed; and a singular proposition proved that its protection of opinion was meant to be universal. Where the preamble declares, that coercion is a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion, an amendment was proposed, by inserting the word “Jesus Christ,” so that it should read, “a departure from the plan of Jesus Christ, the holy author of our religion;” the insertion was rejected by a great majority, in proof that they meant to comprehend, within the mantle of its protection, the Jew

and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan, the Hindoo, and Infidel of every denomination.”

The very notion of including a term that is only used by one particular faith, negates the entire purpose of the bill that Jefferson was advocating to pass.

Jefferson’s fight for religious equality took place against the widespread prejudice existing among Protestants for any faith other than their own. They thought that Islam, Judaism, and Catholicism were wrong religions. But as Jefferson’s understanding of the Qu’ran deepened, he saw the value in Islam’s teachings, especially with its recognition of Jews and Christians as people of divine revelation or people of the book. In fact, Islam honors the prophets of the Old and New Testaments, and Islam does not deny any group the right to worship in their own way. One of Islam’s core teachings proclaims that there is no compulsion in religion, so it is Islam’s toleration for the beliefs of others that influenced Jefferson’s theories on government. It can be argued that the teaching of Islam shaped Jefferson’s vision for absolute religious freedom and civil rights for all groups.

Jefferson’s defense of religious liberty made him a target of criticism, and accusations claimed that he was a Muslim. For Jefferson, the hypocrisy of these allegations made by Christians just proved their intolerance for others. As a scholar of history and philosophy, he knew that trying to establish a nation under the Christian faith would result in the persecution of anyone who does not wish to convert to Christianity. Jefferson also knew that requiring citizens to subscribe to a specific faith made no sense in order for them to receive protection as citizens under the law.

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92 Spellberg, Thomas Jefferson's Qur'an, 115-117.
93 Ibid, 117-123.
Conclusion

The presence of Islam has been in the United States well before Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson began their contributions to the founding of the new nation. The existence of Islam in early America reveals that the religious diversity of this nation has a deeper and much more complex history than many people care to think about.
CONCLUSION

Over time, the story and even the presence of enslaved African Muslims in the United States faded from memory and history. However, the legacy of Muslim slaves lives on through the contributions that they made to the social, religious, and cultural fabric of this country. The erasure of the Black Muslim identity among enslaved people in the United States was part of a strategy to strip enslaved Africans of their individual identities and reduce them to property. Enslaved Muslims who left behind a written record challenged the idea that enslaved men and women were only capable of physical labor because they lacked the intellectual capacity that would make them deserving of independence or freedom. While the existence of a sizable number of African Muslim slaves might not be well known to most Americans, they left their mark on American culture. Perhaps the most lasting legacy of Muslim slaves is the modern movement among some African Americans to embrace what they believe to be the original religion of their people. From the beginning of American slavery until today, Black Muslims continue to make up the largest part of the Muslim community in the United States, and based off of the evidence above, this is surely not a coincidence.

Physical signs of a Muslim presence in America

Enslaved Muslims left a lasting legacy in the United States, whether people realize it or not. Numerous cities and towns around America are named after or for enslaved African Muslims, and there are also a few landmarks that commemorate these individuals. Yarrowsburg, home to a white community in Maryland, was named after Yarrow Mamout’s daughter-in-law. Yarrow, being the family name of Yarrow Mamout, is
now memorialized in the name of a town and will carry the family name of a formerly enslaved devout African Muslim.94 Other typical Islamic words such as “Allah,” “Muhammad,” “Mecca,” and “Medina” can be found as names of cities and towns across the United States.

On the dome of the Main Reading Room of the Thomas Jefferson Building in the Library of Congress, there is a mural called “The Evolution of Civilization”. The mural depicts “the twelve countries, or epoch, which have contributed most to the development of present-day civilization in this country.”95 In the same library, Thomas Jefferson’s Quran can also be found among other books that were sold to the institution by the former president.

The presence of Muslim slaves in the United States is a crucial component in understanding the broader scope of slavery and the history of slavery. Muslims were a part of American history from the beginning of its existence, so it is only right for their voices to no longer be silent. Despite the numerous obstacles that Muslim slaves were faced with, they used their faith and their languages to build communities, practice their faith, and pursue freedom. They left various written accounts of their experiences in the United States, in the form of autobiographies and memoirs. While Muslim slaves brought Islam with them from Africa, it slowly disappeared and there are only a few traces of African Muslims in the United States today. While they struggled to uphold their religious faith and beliefs, they succeeded in retaining their identities, despite the odds. Muslim slave experiences have essentially been wiped out of American history and it is important at this moment in time, to restore their presence in the history of slavery.


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