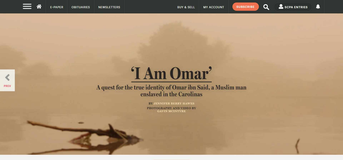

PREV

‘I Am Omar’

A quest for the true identity of Omar ibn Said, a Muslim man enslaved in the Carolinas

BY JENNIFER ROBY SAMUEL
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES MOORE

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This story was supported by the Pulitzer Center.

DAKAR — Dust rolling in from the Sahara Desert cloaks the horizon, shrouding the clay structures about and disorienting the band of strangers as they approach. Yet they come to this ancient village in search of clarity.

Imam Amadou Baldy 85, among the most learned men in the area, welcomes the unexpected guests into his home. Gathering around him on colorful mats and tapestries, they clutch two Arabic texts, each laden with a trans-Atlantic mystery.

The documents contain words written two centuries ago by a man captured somewhere out here in the sand-swept expanse of northern Senegal. The visitors, who include two *Post and Courier* journalists, explain the importance of the author.

Drops of fluids of royal purple, by leans over to grape the pocket.

He has never heard of this Omar ibn Said.

That’s not surprising. Omar wrote his most historically important text, a brief autobiography, say years ago, and it spent much of the last century forgotten in an old trunk in Virginia.

When he wrote it, Omar was 61 and more than two decades into a long enslavement in America, first in Charleston and then North Carolina. He lacked the freedom for candor, though he’d become a minor celebrity for his exotic script and born-again zeal for Jesus.

Or so they said.

Despite memorizing the Quran during his youth here in this region called Futa Toro, Omar apologized when he wrote. He had forgotten much of his people’s script and hoped they wouldn’t laugh at him should they somehow, miraculously, ever read it.

Now, the imam holds those words in his hands.

Perched on a high-back wooden chair, fly flips quickly through the pages, scanning them. At the last one, he pauses. From a 171-year-old photograph, Omar stares out wearing a headwrap and a gaze of wisdom.

fy smiles back.

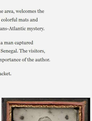
Then he returns to the start of Omar’s story. The room falls silent as he reads, save the sounds of tea pouring and children giggling and songbirds chattering as they fly in and out of his home.

fy is among the first people living in Futa Toro to read Omar’s autobiography in full. He can understand Omar’s meaning in a way only someone who lives here can.

Omar wrote that he was 37 years old when “infidels” attached his village. They slaughtered many people and dragged him away to a slave ship that hauled him across the Atlantic Ocean. The ship landed in Charleston, the nation’s busiest slave port.

During the 38 years of captivity that followed, Omar wrote at least 15 surviving texts in Arabic, although nobody around him could read them. They include letters, Muslim and Christian verses, and the only known surviving autobiography written in Arabic by someone still enslaved in America.

Given that perhaps one in five African captives brought to the U.S. was Muslim, the rarity of such texts speaks to a great loss of history.



Omar ibn Said wrote the only known surviving autobiography written in Arabic by an enslaved person in the U.S. Rawdolph Lively Simpson African-American Collection/Hale University Library

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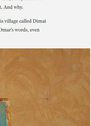
The Credit One Charleston Open is Back
The Credit One Charleston Open is the largest women-only tennis match held in North America.

Even today, despite its historical significance, relatively few Americans have read Omar’s autobiography. The Library of Congress bought it in 2007, **digitized its pages** and shared it with the world.



Enslaved African Muslims often overlooked by history

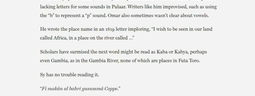
Omar’s story sprang from obscurity.

Opera about Omar ibn Said will debut at 2022’s Spoleto Festival USA
BY JENNIFER ROBY SAMUEL JRSAMUEL@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

Spoleto Festival USA, an international arts event held each year in Charleston, then commissioned Grammy

They all seek to answer the most basic question: Who was Omar, really? For two centuries, his story has morphed based on who was telling it. And why.

That question drove the group of guests sitting with fy, in his village called Dimat Walo, to embark on this quest. If *Post Americans* have read Omar’s words, even fewer Senegalese have — and fewer here in Futa Toro.



Imam Omar ibn Said (Saeed Gadiaire) holds a painting of his fellow Omar ibn Sayyid, at his home in Gadaba, Senegal. Omar is a familiar name throughout Senegal, where many people are descended from Muslim leaders. Gavin McIntyre/Staff

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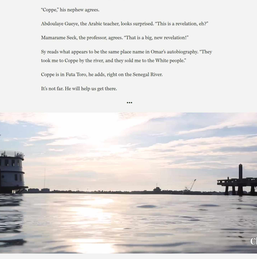


Seated around the imam are the two journalists from South Carolina, a professor of linguistics from the Senegalese capital, his French graduate assistant, two Senegalese drivers, and an Arabic teacher who hails from Futa and descends from one of its great intellectuals.

Given Omar was enslaved when he wrote, he wasn’t free to reveal his deepest self, his true faith or wishes. This team embarked on a quest to better understand him — and to bring his writings home.

But where exactly that home was remains a great part of Omar’s mystery.

He mostly wrote religious passages, not personal details. Although twice he wrote what looks like a specific place name. Knowing where the place is could reveal much about him: his home, his family, his people, where he was captured and from which Senegalese port a slave ship took him.

Omar likely spoke Pulaar, which fy also speaks. But he wrote in Arabic, an alphabet lacking letters for some sounds in Pulaar. Writers like him improvised, such as using the “b” to represent a “p” sound. Omar also sometimes wasn’t clear about vowels.

He wrote the place name in an *ofay* letter implying, “I wish to be seen in our land called Africa, in a place on the river called ...”

Scholars have surmised the next word might be *ngal* as Kaba or Kalya, perhaps even Gambia, as in the Gambia River, none of which are places in Futa Toro.

fy has no trouble reading it.

“*Fi madaba al Jadeet yuusamma Coppa.*”

He shows it to his nephew sitting nearby.

“Coppa,” his nephew agrees.

Abdoulaye Gueye, the Arabic teacher, looks surprised. “This is a revelation, eh?”

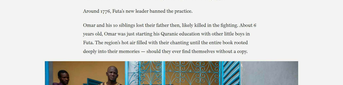
Mamarame Seck, the professor, agrees. “That is a big, new revelation!”

fy reads what appears to be the same place name in Omar’s autobiography: “They took me to Coppa by the river, and they sold me to the White people.”

Coppa is in Futa Toro, he adds, right on the Senegal River.

It’s not far. He will help us get there.

•••



The waters of the Cooper River slick and flow near the Fort Sumter Visitor Education Center. Over 300 years ago, these waters carried Omar toward Gadsden’s Wharf, a major port at the end of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Gavin McIntyre/Staff

Charleston
CHAPTER 1

The closing door

It’s hard to grasp why slave traders would buy a smallish man pushing 40, already older than the average life expectancy at the time, and think he’d draw a decent price at an American auction.

Unless you understand their desperation.

By 1807, South Carolina planters had pushed their luck. **Due to their gluttony** for slaves, Congress had passed a law that would ban the importing of new African

By 1807, South Carolina planters had pushed their luck. **Due to their gluttony** for slaves, Congress had passed a law that would ban the importing of new African captives. At year’s end, the door would slam shut.

That launched a frenzied race to fill the final slave voyages. Ships lined up along West Africa’s coast. Among the key ports was Saint-Louis at the mouth of the Senegal River, a liquid highway for commerce, including gold and slaves. That put villages like Omar’s at particular risk. Futa Toro lags the Senegal River for 250 miles, and raiders often plundered its banks.

Omar was born there at a time of upheaval.

Islamic revolutions spread across the region, led by religious men determined to stop the instability and violence that the slave trade was sowing. Given that Islam’s laws forbid one Muslim from enslaving another, it held strong appeal.

Around 1778, Futa’s new leader pledged the nation.

Omar and his so siblings lost their father then, likely killed in the fighting. About 6 years old, Omar was just starting his Quranic education with other little boys in Futa. The region’s best air filled with their chanting until the entire book rested deeply into their memories — should they ever find themselves without a copy.

Grandma Diallo (left, Bintou) Ba, Mamadou Ba, Abdoulaye Ba and Oumar Ba at second Diamaare Gow as he hains charcoal underneath a pot of rice. You may well recognize Oumar Ba from the Fedex ground service in Cordova. Senegal. Gavin McIntyre/Staff

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Omar proved a skilled student. As he grew up, he traveled to religious schools in Futa, then left on a quest for the mystical secrets of Sufi Islam. A master had to receive and initiate him, said Gueye, the Arabic teacher, whose grandfather embarked on a similar journey.

“The learner must be not only intellectually mature but also of impeccable moral integrity,” Gueye said. In time, Omar received the Ilm al-Asrar, or “knowledge of secrets,” learning to construct amulets and talismans that could seek from Allah blessings of health, good fortune and protection from others.

At 35, Omar returned to his village. For six years, he lived with his fellow Muslim faithful, heeding the call to prayer five times a day and giving alms of sheep, rice and gold.

Then, three key events took place.

On March 2, 1807, President Thomas Jefferson signed the law banning slave importation.

The next month, Futa’s leader was murdered.

And that year, “infidels” attacked Omar’s village.

The invaders likely put him onto a smaller boat and hauled him up the Senegal River to Saint-Louis. There, the waters slip around a long barrier peninsula to reach the Atlantic Ocean.

In the hungry waves, a ship waited.

Omar's captors sold him to "a Christian man who bought me and walked me to the big ship in the big sea," he wrote.

Of the more than 12 million people taken from Africa during the slave trade, roughly 400,000 were shipped to North American ports.

About 40 percent of those sailed into Charleston.

Omar was among the lost.

U.S. boundaries as of 1803 provided by PORO NASS. Enslaved peoples disembarkment data provided by slavetrade.yale.org. Bryan Brannon/Staff.

The din of Babel

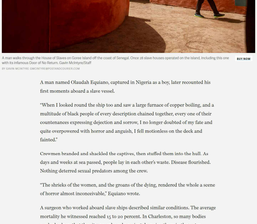
The fabric of Charleston, of any place really, gets conveyed on the coarse wood pulp of the day's newspaper pages.

In 1807, the city's news filled, as usual, with ads touting "Prime Negroes" for sale in hutches large and small. Runaway slave notices run alongside ads for Black wet nurses, the latest theater shows, fine silver, horse saddles, and merchants hocking brandy and rum.

A feature called Ship News announced the day's vessels. And their cargo.

Those ships docked in a city teeming with White merchants and the enslaved laborers who comprised its majority. Carriage horse plodded along narrow lanes past fine antebellum homes and shops. Church steeples sprouted all around the thin peninsula, which was laced with wharves.

Omar didn't write details about the Middle Passage he endured. But others described their journeys.



A trade winds through the facade of Gorée, on Gorée island off the coast of Senegal. Once at slave houses operated on the island, including this one with its ominous Door of No Return. Zalan Mohyla/Staff

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DY DAVIA NEWTON | DAVIANEWTON@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

A man named Olaudah Equiano, captured in Nigeria as a boy, later recounted his first moments aboard a slave vessel.

"When I looked round the ship too and saw a large furnace of copper boiling, and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted of my fate and quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted."

Crewmen bounded and shackled the captives, then stuffed them into the hull. As days and weeks at sea passed, people lay in each other's waste. Disease flourished. Nothing deterred sexual predators among the crew.

"The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable," Equiano wrote.

A surgeon who worked aboard slave ships described similar conditions. The average mortality he witnessed reached 15 to 20 percent. In Charleston, so many bodies washed ashore that the city passed a rule against dumping them in the water.

Into this world, a ship carrying Omar lumbered up the glittering currents of the Cooper River. It steered toward Gadsden's Wharf, already crowded with slave vessels.

Around that time, with the new year's arrival, the Charleston Courier published a notice: "The importation of Slaves from Africa, ceases this day, according to act of Congress."

It listed the total captives sold in town by year.

In 1804, the number was 3,386.

By 1807, it soared to 15,976.

In all, arrivals averaged about 10,000 a year, or roughly half of the entire population of Charleston at the time, itself one of America's largest cities.

In all, arrivals averaged about 10,000 a year, or roughly half of the entire population of Charleston at the time, itself one of America's largest cities.

Others put the number much higher.

Omar didn't write the ship's name that carried him or precisely when it arrived. But he did provide two critical clues that help pinpoint a few possibilities. Given he was in Fata Toro, he likely was taken from the Senegal River. And he wrote that he spent "a month and a half" at sea, or about 45 days.

Slave traders kept almost no records of captives' names or family ties. But international researchers have been piecing together the scant clues that survive to build a database called **Slave Voyages**.

A search of it shows three possibilities in 1807. The last one to arrive, the Carolina, slipped in just nine days before the deadline. It had spent 42 days at sea, then landed with 130 captives on board — two dozen fewer than it took from the Senegal River.

The schooner Pride sails through Charleston Harbor past The Battery. The ship is a reminder of Charleston's commercial waterfront business during the 1800s, when it was a bustling destination for people kidnapped from Africa. It was a ship carrying Omar ibn Said sailed into the harbor toward the city's large church steeples. Zalan Mohyla/Staff

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The ship docked at Gadsden's Wharf a few days before Christmas, then began advertising sales of its cargo starting Jan. 11. That day, nine ships advertised loads of enslaved Africans for sale at the wharf, crammed with thousands of captives.

A British visitor described the scene: "The din raised by slaves, sailors, sellers, and buyers was akin to the Old Testament Babel."

Omar stood before the probing eyes of potential buyers.

"In a Christian language," he wrote, "they sold me."

Flight for freedom

As he stepped off the ship, inhaling the humid air of this new world, Omar surely was naked and chained. He carried only the Quran stored in his mind's eye.

"Then a pure, weak, wicked little man named Johnson bought me. He was a big disbeliever and did not fear Allah at all," Omar wrote, as Gaeve translated it.

Omar didn't include Johnson's first name or describe the plantation he owned. But coastal South Carolina was notorious for its rice operations, where enslaved laborers often died young.

About four years after disembarking in Charleston, Omar fled. Given the risks, most people who attempted escape were men in their prime. But fear drove him.

"I was afraid to stay with such a wicked little man who committed a lot of sins," he wrote. "So, I escaped."

If he fled on foot from the Lowcountry, Omar traversed hundreds of miles of forest and plantation country — not to mention several major rivers — across the state's vast Pee Dee region. Or he slipped up the coast, navigating bays, rivers, swamps and the White man's maritime traffic.

He crossed about 220 miles, then approached Fayetteville, N.C. He spotted some Americans.

"I went in there to pray," he wrote.

Did he enter a vacant house? A church?

Or was it a safe house along a precursor to the Underground Railroad? Quakers lived and worked in the area. And when Omar wrote about this moment later, he didn't describe himself alone, the way he did when he escaped Johnson. Instead, he referred to "us."

Whatever the building was he entered, someone kept an eye on it. A young person riding horseback spotted Omar.

More men came with "a pack of dogs."

Omar's flight for freedom ended. The slave patrol walked him for 12 miles to Fayetteville.

"They put me in a big house," Omar wrote. "I couldn't get out. So I stayed in the big house, called 'jail' in the language of Christians, for 10 days and one night."

What happened in that jail would launch the myth-making of Omar's life.

Mystery remains about 'evil' man named Johnson who enslaved Omar ibn Said

The identity of Omar ibn Said's cruel Charleston enslaver remains a great mystery.

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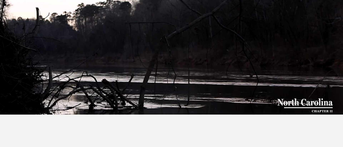


The Cape Fear River flows through Fayetteville, N.C., and past the Milton and Owen Hill plantations farther south. Omar remained enslaved near these waters until his death in 1863. Zalan Mohyla/Staff.

No more hiding

In the Deep South, captured runaways got thrown into the local jail, then waited for their enslavers to arrive and dole out whatever punishment they chose.

It might take time for Johnson to come.

But there was no more hiding.

News of runaways and captures seeped into every pocket of the White man's world. It filled newspaper pages. Broadsheets hung at ports. Steamboat captains carried word up and down the waterways.

And Fayetteville was a major stop on the Cape Fear River, busy with commerce and travel.

Charleston's newspapers filled with notices of enslaved Africans for sale and runaways. Omar was a runaway from Jim Owen's farm. Omar's first name was the reason he was assigned from an "out" man named Johnson.

He was born just Moro.

He became Uncle Moro.

And Uncle Moro lived in his own little private cabin near the big house, not the slave cabins — an in-between world.

Later, people would describe Omar as everything from a healer to an overseer. One Owen family descendant said he served as majordomo, or head of a household staff. Another wrote that "he was waited on by a little colored boy and his food carried to him from the Owen kitchen."

Omar clearly recognized his unique lot.

"I continue in the hands of Jim Owen who does not beat me, nor calls me bad names, nor subjects me to hunger, nakedness, or hard work."

The hidden plea

Five years after Omar arrived at Milton, a group of prominent White men who foresaw slavery's eventual end formed the American Colonization Society.

Early members ranged from abolitionists who outright opposed slavery to enslavers fearful of the growing numbers of free Black people. Supporters included slave-owning presidents Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe and James Madison.

Directly "Africa (meaning all sub-Saharan Africa) was seen as the place to send free Black people, who were considered a threat to the institution of slavery, and to the white supremacy on which it was based," wrote Eric Burin, a professor of sociology at Kennesaw State University and author of "Slavery and the Peculiar Solution: A History of the Colonization Movement."

Its circuit of prominent adherents would alter Omar's life.

Evangelical Christians in the group, including the Owens, saw a potential side benefit to the relocation idea: Black Christian converts could help spread the gospel to Africa's unsaved pagans and "Mohammedans."

The Owens looked at Uncle Moro. They could start at home.

James Owen had become a leader at Fayetteville's First Presbyterian Church. Clergy from around the country came to visit. And evangelize.

In 1839, with pressure mounting to convert, Omar sat down to **write a letter**.

In Arabic, he addressed it to James' brother, then-state Sen. John Owen, and his church community in Raleigh. Men there were forming a new chapter of the Colonization Society.

In 1839, Omar Ibn Said wrote a letter to John Owen, the brother of his enslaver, that included a large calligraphy and a plea to return to Africa. Yale University Library/Provided

YALE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Perhaps Omar hoped that John would send the letter through the Society's channels to get it translated. Maybe someone would be sympathetic to his plea.

When he began to write, Omar quoted passages of Muslim texts. Then he drew a large Sufi talisman, a geometrical shape with its interlocking arabesques on each side.

In the middle of the design, he wrote "Jim Owen," the name of his enslaver.

He also wrote another name that has confounded translators. Setting people's names in the center of this type of talisman can aim to bring them together. Or pull them apart.

Omar continued on then, quoting more Muslim passages onto the second page. Halfway down, he drew a small pentacle, a five-point star, used in Sufism to seek protection, said Ousey, the Arabic teacher.

Then, he wrote his plea: "I wish to be seen in our land called Africa, in a place on the river ..."

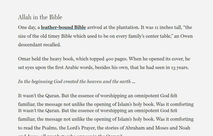
And then the word Kaba or Kabya.

Or, maybe, Coppa.

It was a bold move. If the Owens learned that he had asked to leave them, he could lose what privileges he enjoyed. Or worse.

He then quoted Surah Al-Mulk, a chapter in the Quran that describes God's sovereignty over creation. Omar ended the page with its phrase: "Speak secretly or openly: God knows what is in your hearts."

The search for Omar



In 1839, Omar Ibn Said, a Muslim scholar from the Futa Toro region in Senegal, wrote the only surviving autobiography by a Black person enslaved in the U.S. Today, his story has allowed communities throughout the world to have a window displayed by Hassey Saint Mohammed/Staff

CONTINUED BELOW

Breaking the code

Nobody around Omar could read his letter.

But they wanted to.

Upon receiving it, John Owen promptly gave it to John Louis Taylor, a friend from Fayetteville and chief justice of the state Supreme Court.

Taylor, who was active in the Colonization Society, in turn forwarded it to a far more influential member: Francis Scott Key, lawyer and poet who had written the words of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

John Owen was Jamie Owen's brother and a governor of North Carolina. State Archives of North Carolina/Provided

Taylor explained his purpose, using a new take on Moro's name. "The man, whose adoptral name is Moroan, is believed to have been powerfully connected in his own country, and to have received a very uncommon education."

Moroan, he added, didn't want to go back to Africa. He so appreciated his enslavers' great "unbounded confidence and indulgence" that he couldn't leave them. Despite the plea Omar tucked in the letter, Taylor declared: "He is unwilling to return to his native country."

If they could read the man's script, they would learn the reason.

"Many persons were desirous of procuring a translation of the inclosed (sic) letter, which I hope to obtain by your assistance."

Taylor also asked for another favor.

They needed to get an Arabic Bible for Moroan. With it, they could prove to him the Christian Scriptures' clear "authenticity and divine origin."

Yes, books were expensive. Finding this one would be difficult. But if Moroan could read the Bible for himself, he'd have no excuse for clinging to his Muslim faith.

Allah in the Bible

One day, a **leather-bound Bible** arrived at the estate. It was 1 inches tall, "the size of the old timey Bible which used to be on every family's center table," an Owen descendant recalled.

Omar held the heavy book, which topped 400 pages. When he opened its cover, he not eyes upon the first Arabic words, besides his own, that he had seen in 13 years.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth ...

It wasn't the Quran. But the essence of worshipping an omnipotent God felt familiar, the message not unlike the opening of Islam's holy book. Was it comforting it wasn't the Quran. But the essence of worshipping an omnipotent God felt familiar, the message not unlike the opening of Islam's holy book. Was it comforting to read the Psalms, the Lord's Prayer, the stories of Abraham and Moses and Noah and Jesus, all prophets who appear in the Quran?

Joining the Christian church would give Omar a spiritual home — a place to pray and sing and study with other people again.

It also would please the Owens.

Omar made a soft leather bag for the Bible and hang it on a chair when he wasn't reading it.

Later that year, a few weeks before Christmas in 1840, he traveled upriver into town with the Owens to attend the worship service at First Presbyterian Church. He stood before the congregation — Black people in the balcony, White people in the sanctuary pews — as the minister baptized him.

The church's membership rolls officially recorded him, under People of Colour, as "Moros-Property of Geo. Owen."

Though deemed property, he "never considered himself a negro and never mingled with the negro slaves on the two plantations, nor would he sit with the slaves in the church balcony," an Owen descendant later wrote. He had his own chair, which he placed in the aisle.

Muslims in Jamie Foxx the archive of or deadline/ending. a Black across the Salaga Moor Omar Ibn Said was alive. Alison Hall Mauritania crossed the river to cast villages along the banks and capture people. Gavin McIntyre/Staff

BY GAVIN MCINTYRE, GMCINTYRE@CHRONICLE.COM

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After the 1850 legislation, Omar Ibn Said was listed on First Presbyterian Church's membership rolls under People of Colour as "Moses Property of Gen. Owens." Many of the conversions garnered attention from around the country as clergymen flocked to secure evangelism in Africa. Gavin McIntyre/Staff

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BY DAVIN MCINTYRE, DAVIDMCINTYREPHOTOGRAPHY@GMAIL.COM

Omar became a fixture at the church. And a symbol of successful evangelism.

The following year, the Colonization Society secured a patch of land in Africa, the seed of what would become Liberia. Soon, the first free Black people from America landed there.

Becoming Prince Moro

Five years after Omar's baptism, in the summer of 1834, a Philadelphia-based publication called the Christian Advocate published an article written by an anonymous Fayetteville doctor.

[illegible] anonymous Fayetteville doctor.

It was titled "**Prince Moro**."

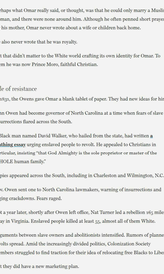
The editors promised "a faithful statement of facts" that would "give pleasure to our Christian readers."

Those readers learned about an enslaved man who'd escaped from a South Carolina rice plantor, been captured and then thrown into jail. There, he displeased writing in a "masterly hand."

"It would seem that he was a prince in his own country, which must have been far in the interior of Africa — perhaps Timbuktoo or its neighbourhood."

Never mind that Timbuktu, a city in present-day Mali, is about 700 miles away from Fula Toro.

The same love of royalty grew within the Owen family. When they offered Omar "the privilege of choosing a wife from among the house slaves," he declined, a descendant wrote. "A Fulah Prince could not condescend to marry less than royalty."



Mies gather inside the home of the descendant of the Alexander Sephina Navarro Sali in Dakar, Senegal. With a tribal prayer service approaching, they chant and pour libations to honor Ibrahima Sall. Gavin McIntyre/Staff

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BY DAVIN MCINTYRE, DAVIDMCINTYREPHOTOGRAPHY@GMAIL.COM

Perhaps what Omar really said, or thought, was that he could only marry a Muslim woman, and there were none around him. Although he often penned short prayers for his mother, Omar never wrote about a wife or children back home.

He also never wrote that he was royalty.

But that didn't matter to Ibn White world crafting its own identity for Omar. To them he was now Prince Moro, faithful Christian.

Tale of resistance

In 1835, the Owens gave Omar a blank tablet of paper. They had new ideas for him.

John Owen had become governor of North Carolina at a time when fears of slave insurrections flared across the South.

A Black man named David Walker, who hailed from the state, had written **a scathing essay** urging enslaved people to revolt. He appealed to Christians in particular, insisting "that God Almighty is the sole proprietor or master of the WHOLE human family."

Copies appeared across the South, including in Charleston and Wilmington, N.C.

Gov. Owen sent one to North Carolina lawmakers, warning of insurrections and urging crackdowns. Fears raged.

Not a year later, shortly after Owen left office, Nat Turner led a rebellion 165 miles away in Virginia. Enslaved people killed at least 55, almost all of them White.

Arguments between slave owners and abolitionists intensified. Rumors of planned revolts spread. Amid the increasingly divided politics, Colonization Society members struggled to find traction for their idea of relocating free Blacks to Liberia.

But they did have a new marketing plan.

Members began gathering stories from enslaved people. They wanted to demonstrate that at least some weren't savages, that "there is something exceptional about this person that makes him worth saving," said Hussein Rashid, a lecturer in religion at Columbia University who studies Muslims in America.

The Owens handed Omar the tablet of paper.

It's unclear if his 1819 letter, with the plea to return to Africa, had been translated yet. But in the 12 years since, Omar had stuck to quoting religious verses.

Now 65 years old, he looked at the tablet of quarto paper, its cream-colored pages blank, and faced expectations to write about his life. Given the broader tensions over slavery, he could not let the Owens get any whiff that he might be open to even the faintest seditious thought.

He must appear as they wanted.

Grateful servant.

Trusted worker.

Faithful Christian.

Yet he began writing what Sylviane Diouf, a prominent historian of enslaved Muslims, would later call "a document of resistance."

Dipping a pen into iron gall ink, Omar filled the first page by quoting the familiar lines of Surah 55 Allah.

In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate. May God bless our Lord Muhammad:

Blessed be He in whose hand is the mulk (sovereignty) and who has power over all things.

Omar included the surah's promise of a fiery hell for those who tried to usurp Allah's command over all things. The argument sounded a lot like what Walker had written a year earlier in his "Appeal" — that Christian slave "owners" were acting as if they were lords of man.

Unlike Walker, Omar didn't specifically mention enslavers or insurrection.

But he would be clear about one thing:

He was not Uncle Moro.

Or Prince Moro.

Or Moreau.

"**I am Omar**," he wrote.

And he loved to read the "Great Quran."

Yet Omar added that he had tried to open his heart to the Bible "because the law was to Moses given, but grace and truth were with Jesus Christ," Gueye translated.

Omar praised Muhammad but also said the Lord's Prayer.

The words "Uncle Moro" were written on this photograph of Omar Ibn Said. Dallamah Rogers, the Southern Historical Collection/UNC at Chapel Hill

Then, he added the basic personal details that give us what little we know about him in his own words. After filling 15 pages, Omar concluded with praise.

"I stayed in the hands of Jim Owen who did not beat me, insult me, deprive me of food or clothing, or force me to do hard labor. I cannot do heavy labor. I am a sick little man. Over the past 20 years, I have never had a problem with Jim Owen."

The leaning tree

Omar knew of a fellow enslaved Muslim who performed a similar tightrope act. Lamine Kebe had been a Quranic teacher in modern-day Guinea when he was kidnapped while buying paper for his school.

Now, he was feigning conversion to Christianity and cooperating with the Colonization Society so they would transport him to Liberia. A few years after Omar wrote his autobiography, someone sent it to Kebe in New York. The man was about Now, he was feigning conversion to Christianity and cooperating with the Colonization Society so they would transport him to Liberia. A few years after Omar wrote his autobiography, someone sent it to Kebe in New York. The man was about to board a ship.

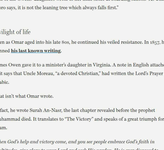
What if Kebe had taken the text to Africa, to anywhere even close to Fula Toro?

Instead, he gave it to Theodore Dwight, a White abolitionist and scholar with an interest in West Africa and Islam. Dwight didn't, or couldn't, get it translated until 17 years after Omar wrote it.

A White New Yorker finally wrote a rudimentary translation. Even then, Dwight didn't **publish it** *until the year after Omar's death.*

Mbaye Lo, a Duke University professor with roots in Senegal, studies Islam in Africa and is co-authoring a book about Omar's writings. Given the Owens' connections, he finds certain they saw the translation while Omar was alive.

But the family was busy.



Several years after writing his autobiography in 1831, Omar Ibn Said moved with James Owen and his family to Wilmington, N.C. Omar often entertained their guests as the mythology of his life and faith grew. Gavin McIntyre/Staff

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BY DAVIN MCINTYRE, DAVIDMCINTYREPHOTOGRAPHY@GMAIL.COM

A few years after Omar wrote his autobiography, James Owen sold Milton and moved his family downriver to the bustling port city of Wilmington. Fireplaces, chandeliers and gifts from around the world adorned the rooms of their new three-story house on leafy Front Street.

The family often entertained them, with Omar as a centerpiece.

One guest, a prominent doctor and planter, described Omar as "a fine looking man, copper colored, though an African" in a black coat that reached below his knees. When summoned, Omar announced he would read the 4,298 Psalm.

The visitor also asked him to write the verse in Arabic, which he did.

The Owens' new minister, the Rev. Matthew Grier, also **recalled seeing Omar** recite the 4,298 Psalm and how he would never forget "the earnestness and fervor which shone in the old man's countenance as he read the going down into the dark valley."

"Me too fear, master's with me there," he recalled Omar saying.

The Owens' church, First Presbyterian, listed family members who joined after their move, including "Morrow, the servant to James Owen, an Indian Prince."

Meanwhile, Gov. Owen continued his political rise. He had just declined an offer to run as the Whig Party's vice presidential candidate when he died of a liver disease.

By then, Omar was 71.

One of the Owens' daughters wrote to her little sister at boarding school: "As Uncle Moro says, it is not the leaning tree which always falls first."

Twilight of life

Even as Omar aged into his late 80s, he continued his veiled resistance. In 1853, he penned **his best known writing**.

James Owen gave it to a minister's daughter in Virginia. A note in English attached to it says that Uncle Moreau, "a devoted Christian," had written the Lord's Prayer in Arabic.

That isn't what Omar wrote.

In fact, he wrote Surah An-Nasr, the last chapter revealed before the prophet Muhammad died. It translates to "The Victory" and speaks of a great triumph for Islam.

When God's help and victory come, and you see people embrace God's faith in multitudes, give glory to God and ask His pardon. He is ever disposed to mercy.

He signed it, "My name is Omar."

But he also read his Bible often. Over the years, he fashioned six cloth covers for it, wrapping each new one around the old fabric, worn from use. Ayla Amon, who is writing a book translating all of Omar's writings, noticed that at both the beginning and end of the Bible, he wrote: "Praise be to Allah," a common phrase in Muslim discourse.

The Whites around him continued to identify him here they chose.

The 1860 census recorded Omar as a 90-year-old "African Prince called 'Morrow.'" Not long after, the Civil War exploded when a 10-inch mortar round blasted across Charleston Harbor.

Its declining health, and war upon him, James Owen moved back inland to Owen Hill. He brought Omar with him, two old men in the twilight of life.

Omar died there in summer 1863, before the war's end would have freed him. He was 93 years old.

Owen buried him in the family graveyard, then died himself two years later.

James Owen and his wife, Eliza, are buried beside their children in the Oakdale Cemetery in Wilmington, N.C. James Owen died at the family's plantation downriver from Wilmington, where Omar Ibn Said lived for about 20 years. Gavin McIntyre/Staff

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plantation Owens Hill two years after Omar Ibn Said died there in 1863. Gavin McIntyre/Staff

BY DAVIN MCINTYRE, DAVIDMCINTYREPHOTOGRAPHY@GMAIL.COM

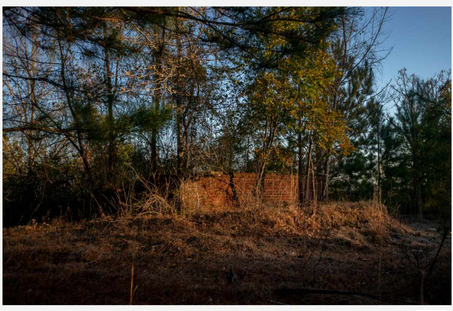
Seasons passed. Years passed. The war ended. Reconstruction ended. The plantation house burned down one Sunday morning in 1870.

Today, almost 160 years after Omar's death, nothing at Owen Hill speaks to his legacy, or anyone else's. No marker points to the spot.

At the end of a rural side street lined with houses and mobile homes, in a field of thorny vines and trash, only a brick wall remains. It rises about 3 feet from the ground and forms a rectangle roughly 10 feet by 12 feet.

Inside, a spindly tree grows through the heart of patriarch Thomas Owen's grave. An empty Smucker's jelly jar lies in repose. His wife and three young grandchildren are buried here with them, their tombstones somewhere in the jumble of broken parts.

Nothing marks where Omar is buried, though a gravestone once did. Legends blame vandals and thieves for its disappearance.



Sunrise slowly turns the brick wall surrounding the Owen family graveyard golden among overgrown trees. Omar ibn Said was buried somewhere in the vicinity after he died in 1863. Although legend says Omar had a tombstone, no marker remains today. Gavin McIntyre/Staff

BY GAVIN MCINTYRE GMCINTYRE@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

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A few years ago, a handful of men from a Fayetteville mosque named for Omar came to the spot seeking to honor him. They too had become fascinated by the man. They too stood in the brambles, shocked at the neglect.

The Quran had taught them what to do, as it taught Omar. They prayed.

In the name of God, the infinitely compassionate and merciful.

Praise be to God, Lord of all the worlds.

It dawned on the imam, Adam Beyah, as they spoke those words. This surely was the first time that a Muslim verse had seeped through the air and settled on the earth of this place since Omar's final prayer.

Imam Bobby Abdul Hameed Thomas leads the Friday prayer service outside the Masjid Omar Ibn Sayyid in Fayetteville, N.C. Gavin McIntyre/Staff

BY GAVIN MCINTYRE GMCINTYRE@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

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Omar as criminal

Like many Black Muslims in America, Beyah came to his faith through the Nation of Islam. He converted as a young man in 1972, back when he knew a lot more about civil rights than the enslaved Africans who brought Islam here.

Beyah, an accountant, moved to Fayetteville and joined the mosque named for Omar. He felt an instant connection to the man and led an effort to place a state historical marker for him — but not one that claimed Omar was Christian, as some wanted.

Through his work, he met another man with a keen interest in Omar: Thomas Parramore, a prominent North Carolina historian.

Parramore had devoted immense effort to learning about Omar and clarifying the myriad rumors that framed him, namely the title of African prince.

He was a White man working in the mid-1970s. The first African American student had just graduated from Meredith College, where he worked. U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms had been elected after mocking civil rights protestors and admonishing "negro hoodlums."

In this milieu, Parramore considered Omar's reluctance to divulge personal stories, combined with his supposed aversion to returning to Africa, as evidence:

Omar was hiding something.

Parramore wrote that Omar "occasionally exhibited what some may have perceived as a strong sense of guilt, suggesting that he may, indeed, have committed such a wrong."

At the time, Parramore was the premier researcher of Omar in North Carolina. Yet, in the 1980s, when he co-authored a state history textbook, he wrote for school children to read: "Apparently, Omar was sold into slavery by his own people as punishment for a crime he had committed."

Historian thought he found Omar's home village. The truth isn't so clear.

BY JENNIFER BERRY HAWES JHAWES@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

Parramore amplified the idea, but he didn't invent it.

The notion had emerged in 1856 with the Rev. John Leighton Wilson, a South Carolina native and missionary in Africa. In a book about his travels, he wrote that the Fulani people had not participated in the slave trade except a few times to rid themselves of criminals.

"There is another still living in Wilmington, North Carolina, by the name of Moro, now eighty-five years of age," he wrote. "He has had the opportunity to return to his country, but has always been averse to returning. He was expelled from his own country for crime, but found the Saviour here, and loves the country where he has found so inestimable a treasure."

Wilson gave no reason why he connected a long-enslaved man in North Carolina with someone in Africa booted for committing a crime.

As with so many things written about Omar, it's hard to separate truth from fiction. But we don't have to rely on the words of other people to explore his true identity.

Omar left us his own clues.

•••

Two boys cast a fishing net on the Senegal River near the village of Coppe. Gavin McIntyre/Staff.

The authentic story

An ocean away from the Carolinas, Africa is reclaiming its story in the gleaming halls of a new 830 million museum in Senegal's capital city.

The Museum of Black Civilizations opened in downtown Dakar in late 2018 after a long and fitful effort begun by the country's first president after French colonization ended. He wanted the continent to reclaim its narrative.

Spanning 150,000 square feet across four stories, it is among the largest museums of its kind in Africa.

Yet even the concept of a museum is a Western one, museum Director Hamady Bocoum explains. In the past, Europeans told the African story in their museums as one of ethnography, the study of other cultures.

"Africans weren't interested," Bocoum says.

Mamarame Seck, a linguistics professor, knows Bocoum well. He works at nearby