



“Oh ye Americans”: The Autobiography of Omar ibn Said

an enslaved Muslim in the United States

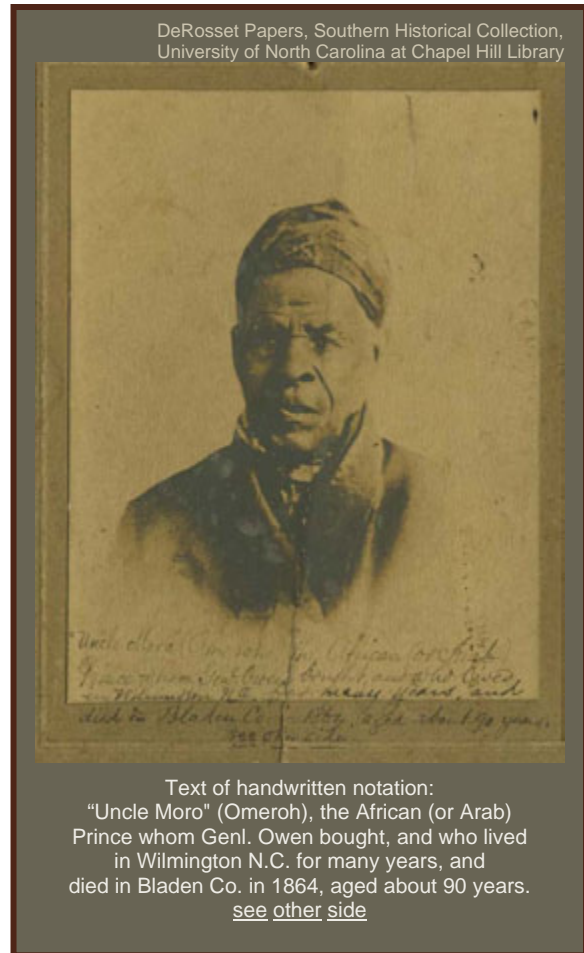
1831

Omar ibn Said was an educated Muslim African born about 1770 in Futa Toro (modern Senegal), captured at age 37 and brought to South Carolina to be sold. He remained enslaved until his death in 1864.

Perhaps ten percent of the enslaved Africans transported to the Americas were Muslim. Although Omar converted to Christianity in 1821, his Presbyterian pastor,¹ and later scholars, conclude that he maintained his Muslim faith throughout his life. For while he encouraged other Muslim Africans to convert, he also included Muslim prayers and texts in his writings, as in his 1831 autobiography, written in Arabic and translated into English, which begins with memorized passages from the Koran.

In the name of God, the merciful the gracious.² —
God grant his blessing upon our Prophet Mohammed.
Blessed be He in whose hands is the Kingdom and
who is Almighty; who created death and life that he
might test you; for he is exalted; he is the forgiver (of
sins), who created seven heavens one above the other.

Do you discern anything trifling in creation? Bring back your thoughts. Do you see anything worthless? Recall your vision in earnest. Turn your eye inward for it is diseased. God has adorned the heavens and the world with lamps, and has made us missiles for the devils, and given us for them a grievous punishment, and to those who have disbelieved their Lord, the punishment of hell and pains of body. Whoever associates with them shall hear a boiling caldron, and what is cast therein may fitly represent those who suffer under the anger of God. — Ask them if a prophet has not been sent unto them. They say, “Yes; a prophet has come to us, but we have lied to him.” We said, “God has not sent us down anything, and you are in grievous error.” They say, “If we had listened and been wise we should not now have been suffering the punishment of the Omniscient.” So they confess they have sinned in destroying the followers of the Omniscient. Those who fear their Lord and profess his name, they receive pardon and great honor. Guard your words, (ye wicked), make it known that God is all-wise in all his manifestations. Do you not know from the creation that God is full of skill? that He has made for you the way of error, and you have walked therein, and have chosen to live upon what your God Nasur has furnished you? Believe on Him who dwells in Heaven, who has fitted the earth to be your support and it shall give you food. Believe on Him who dwells in Heaven, who has sent you a prophet, and you shall understand what a teacher (He has sent you). Those that were before them deceived them (in regard to their prophet). And how came they to



National Humanities Center, 2007: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/. Original manuscript in Arabic by Omar ibn Said [Sayyid], 1831; as published in 1925 as “Autobiography of Omar ibn Said, Slave in North Carolina,” ed. John Franklin Jameson, *The American Historical Review*, 30:4 (July 1925), 787-795; reprinted in Allan D. Austin, ed., *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1984). Full text in Documenting the American South (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library) at docsouth.unc.edu/nc/omarsaid/menu.html. Images added by NHC. Complete image credits at www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/pds/maai/imagecredits.htm.

¹ As quoted in Allen D. Austin, ed., *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook* (Garland: 1984), p. 450.

² “The opening sermon is from the Quran [Koran], Surah 67, complete.” [Austin footnote, p. 517]

reject him? Did they not see in the heavens above them, how the fowls of the air receive with pleasure that which is sent them? God looks after all. Believe ye: it is He who supplies your wants, that you may take his gifts and enjoy them, and take great pleasure in them. And now will you go on in error, or walk in the path of righteousness. Say to them, "He who regards you with care, and has made for you the heavens and the earth and gives you prosperity, Him you think little of. This is He that planted you in the earth, and to whom you are soon to be gathered." But they say, "If you are men of truth, tell us when shall this promise be fulfilled?" Say to them, "Does not God know? and am not I an evident Prophet?" When those who disbelieve shall see the things draw near before their faces, it shall then be told them, "These are the things about which you made inquiry." Have you seen that God has destroyed me or those with me? or rather that He has shewn us mercy? And who will defend the unbeliever from a miserable punishment? Say, "Knowledge is from God." Say; "Have you not seen that your water has become impure? Who will bring you fresh water from the fountain?"

O Sheikh Hunter,³ I cannot write my life because I have forgotten much of my own language,⁴ as well as of the Arabic. Do not be hard upon me, my brother. — To God let many thanks be paid for his great mercy and goodness.

In the name of God, the Gracious, the Merciful. — Thanks be to God, supreme in goodness and kindness and grace, and who is worthy of all honor, who created all things for his service, even man's power of action and of speech.

From Omar to Sheikh Hunter.

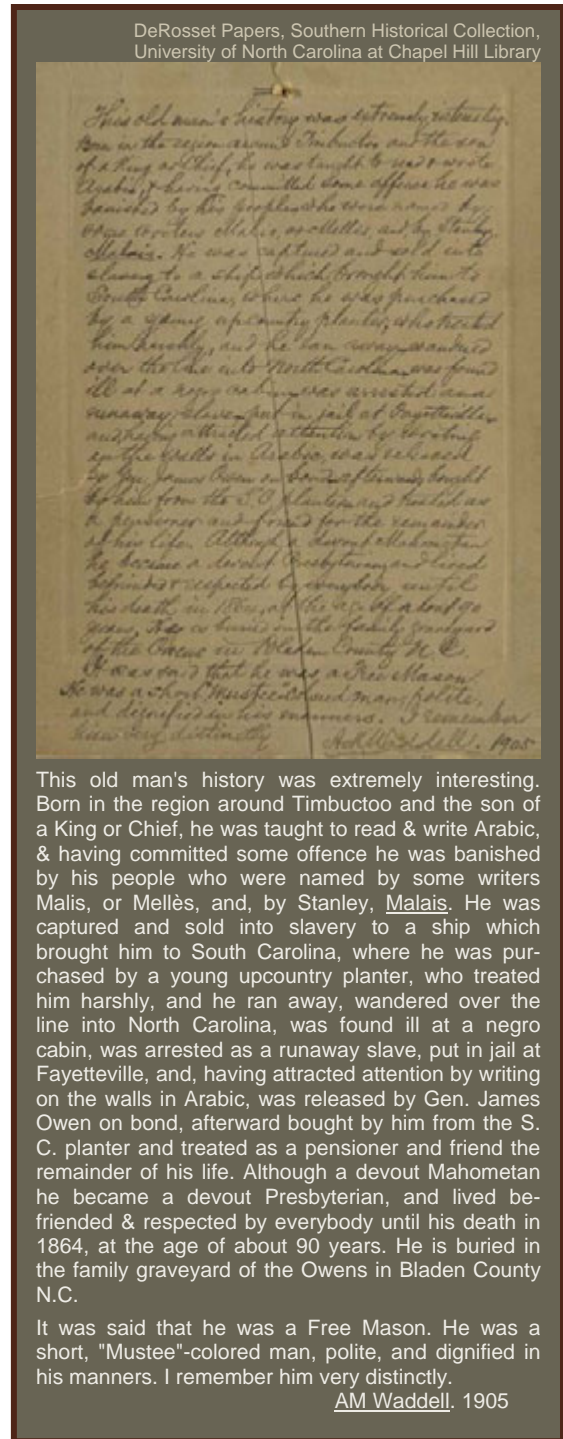
You asked me to write my life. I am not able to do this because I have much forgotten my own, as well as the Arabic language. Neither can I write very grammatically or according to the true idiom. And so, my brother, I beg you, in God's name, not to blame me, for I am a man of weak eyes, and of a weak body.

My name is Omar ibn Seid. My birthplace was Fut Tûr, between the two rivers.⁵ I sought knowledge under the instruction of a Sheikh called Mohammed Seid, my own brother, and Sheikh Soleiman Kembeh, and Sheikh Gabriel Abdal. I continued my studies twenty-five years. Then there came to our place a large army, who killed many men, and took me, and brought me to the great sea, and sold me into the hands of the Christians, who bound me and sent me on board great ship and we sailed upon the great sea a month and a half, when we came to a place called

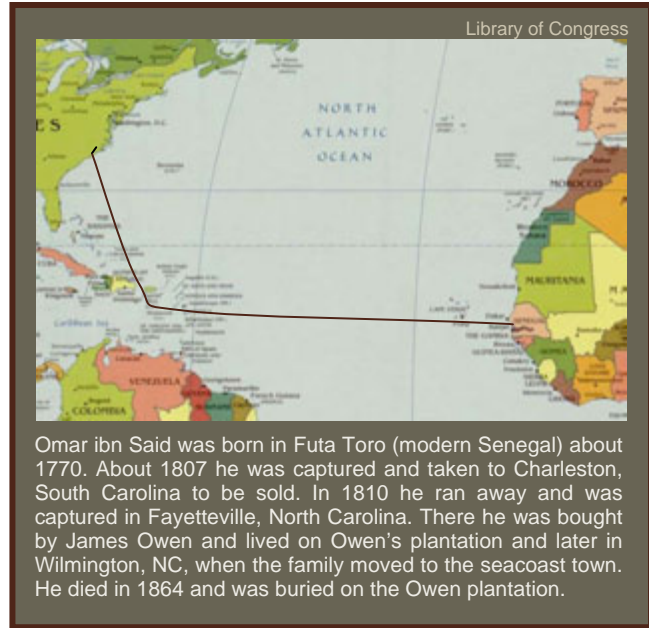
³ "Sheikh Hunter" may have been the man who brought him to jail and who apparently protected Omar." [Austin footnote, p. 517.]

⁴ I.e., his native African language spoken in Futa Toro. Omar apparently learned Arabic from Islamic scholars in Futa Toro.

⁵ Senegal River and Gambia River.



Charleston in the Christian language. There they sold me to a small, weak, and wicked man, called Johnson, a complete infidel, who had no fear of God at all. Now I am a small man, and unable to do hard work so I fled from the hand of Johnson and after a month came to a place called Fayd-il.⁶ There I saw some great houses (churches). On the new moon I went into a church to pray. A lad saw me and rode off to the place of his father and informed him that he had seen a black man in the church. A man named Handah (Hunter?) and another man with him on horseback, came attended by a troop of dogs. They took me and made me go with them twelve miles to a place called Fayd-il, where they put me into a great house from which I could not go out. I continued in the great house (which, in the Christian language, they called *jail*) sixteen days and nights. One Friday the jailor came and opened the door of the house and I saw a great many men, all Christians, some of whom called out to me, “What is your name? Is it Omar or Seid?” I did not understand their Christian language. A man called Bob Mumford⁷ took me and led me out of the jail, and I was very well pleased to go with them to their place. I stayed at Mumford’s four days and nights, and then a man named Jim Owen, son-in-law of Mumford, having married his daughter Betsey, asked me if I was willing to go to a place called Bladen. I said, Yes, I was willing. I went with them and have remained in the place of Jim Owen until now.



Before [after?] I came into the hand of Gen. Owen a man by the name of Mitchell came to buy me. He asked me if I were willing to go to Charleston City. I said “*No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no*, I am not willing to go to Charleston. I stay in the hand of Jim Owen.”

O ye people of North Carolina, O ye people of S. Carolina, O ye people of America all of you; have you among you any two such men as Jim Owen and John Owen? These men are good men. What food they eat they give to me to eat. As they clothe themselves they clothe me. They permit me 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, not by constraint. According to power I open my heart, as to a great light, to receive the true way, the way of the Lord Jesus the Messiah.

Before I came to the Christian country, my religion was the religion of “Mohammed, the Apostle of God — may God have mercy upon him and give him peace.” I walked to mosque before day-break, washed my face and head and hands and feet. I prayed at noon, prayed in the afternoon, prayed at sunset, prayed in the evening. I gave alms every year, gold, silver, seeds, cattle, sheep, goats, rice, wheat, and barley. I gave tithes of all the above-named things. I went every year to the holy war against the infidels. I went on pilgrimage to Mecca, as all did who were able. — My father had six sons and five daughters, and my mother had three sons and one daughter. When I left my country I was thirty-seven years old; I have been in the country of the Christians twenty-four years. — Written A.D. 1831.

O ye people of North Carolina, O ye people of South Carolina, O all ye people of America —

The first son of Jim Owen is called Thomas, and his sister is called Masa-jein (Martha Jane?). This is an excellent family.

Tom Owen and Nell Owen have two sons and a daughter. The first son is called Jim and the second John. The daughter is named Melissa.

⁶ Fayetteville, North Carolina. [Austin footnote, p. 517]

⁷ Identified by 20th-century scholars as the county sheriff or the clerk of court. [Austin footnote, p. 518]

Seid Jim Owen and his wife Betsey have two sons and five daughters. Their names are Tom, and John, and Mercy, Miriam, Sophia, Margaret and Eliza. This family is a very nice family. The wife of John Owen is called Lucy and an excellent wife she is. She had five children. Three of them died and two are still living.

O ye Americans, ye people of North Carolina — have you, have you, have you, have you among you a family like this family, having so much love to God as they?

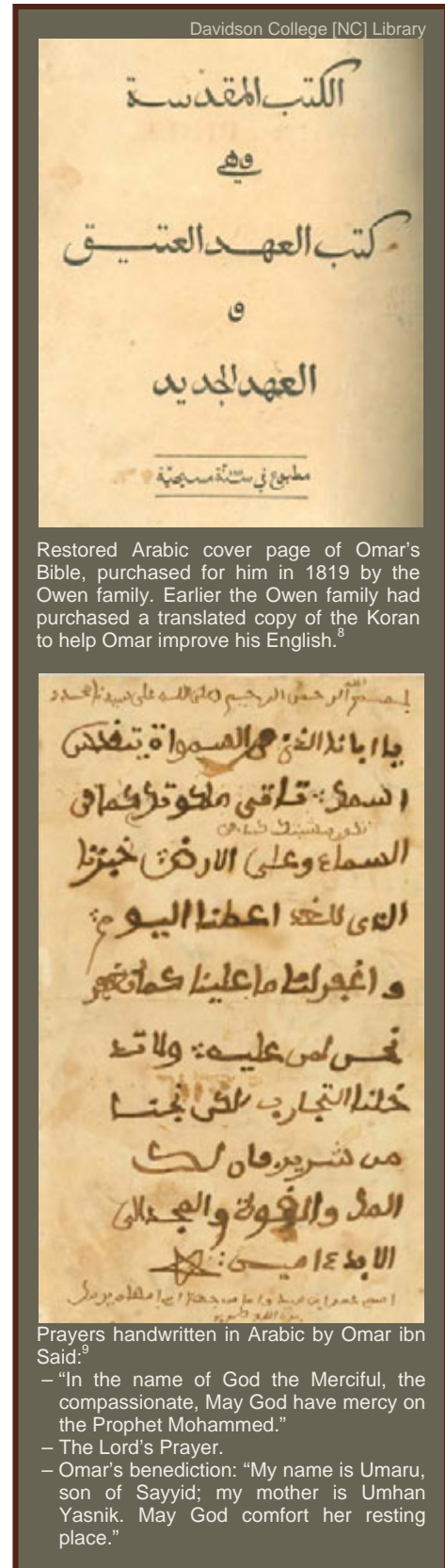
Formerly I, Omar, loved to read the book of the Koran the famous. General Jim Owen and his wife used to read the gospel, and they read it to me very much, — the gospel of God, our Lord, our Creator, our King, He that orders all our circumstances, health and wealth, willingly, not constrainedly according to his power. — Open thou my heart to the gospel, to the way of uprightness. — Thanks to the Lord of all worlds, thanks in abundance. He is plenteous in mercy and abundant in goodness.

For the law was given by Moses but grace and truth were by Jesus the Messiah.

When I was a Mohammedan I prayed thus: “Thanks be to God, Lord of all worlds, the merciful the gracious, Lord of the day of Judgment, thee we serve, on thee we call for help. Direct us in the right way, the way of those on whom thou has had mercy, with whom thou hast not been angry and who walk not in error. Amen.” — But now I pray “Our Father”, etc., in the words of our Lord Jesus the Messiah.

I reside in this our country by reason of great necessity. Wicked men took me by violence and sold me to the Christians. We sailed a month and a half on the great sea to the place called Charleston in the Christian land. I fell into the hands of a small, weak and wicked man, who feared not God at all, nor did he read (the gospel) at all nor pray. I was afraid to remain with a man so depraved and who committed so many crimes and I ran away. After a month our Lord God brought me forward to the hand of a good man, who fears God, and loves to do good, and whose name is Jim Owen and whose brother is called Col. John Owen. These are two excellent men — I am residing in Bladen County.

I continue in the hand of Jim Owen who never beats me, nor scolds me. I neither go hungry nor naked, and I have no hard work to do. I am not able to do hard work for I am a small man and feeble. During the last twenty years I have known no want in the hand of Jim Owen.



Restored Arabic cover page of Omar's Bible, purchased for him in 1819 by the Owen family. Earlier the Owen family had purchased a translated copy of the Koran to help Omar improve his English.⁸

Prayers handwritten in Arabic by Omar ibn Said.⁹

- “In the name of God the Merciful, the compassionate, May God have mercy on the Prophet Mohammed.”
- The Lord's Prayer.
- Omar's benediction: “My name is Umaru, son of Sayyid; my mother is Umhan Yasnik. May God comfort her resting place.”

⁸ See “Omar Ibn Sayyid,” entry in Davidson Encyclopedia, Davidson College Library, at library.davidson.edu/archives/ency/Omars.asp.
⁹ Austin footnote no. 37, p. 519.