Introduction: African Muslims Enslaved in the US

Main illustration: “Senegambia” map showing that this is the same as present-day Senegal, Gambia, Mail, Guinea

“Between the seventeenth and the mid-nineteenth century, numerous West African Muslims mostly from Senegambia (Senegal, Gambia, Mali, and Guinea,) were deported to the United States. They were overwhelmingly young men; most often prisoners of war but also victims of kidnapping. It is difficult to estimate their numbers among the close to 400,000 people who survived the Middle Passage to the United States. But nowhere else in the Americas was the proportion of Senegambians – 24% – as high as in this country. Senegambia was the area of West Africa that had been Islamized the longest, beginning as early as 1010.”

“If most Muslims maintained their faith in secret in the barbaric environment of servitude, others succeeded in living their religion openly. Reports of their religious activities appear in court and police records, plantation logs, newspapers, books, and runaway notices. Their portraits were captured in paintings, prints, daguerreotypes, and photographs; and they have left a few manuscripts written in Arabic.”

What the lives and struggles of most Muslims were like as they confronted the dreadful reality of enslavement remain unknown, but the successes of a number of them in remaining true to their faith and its rites has been documented. Some fasted during Ramadan, abstain from liquor and pork, gave Muslim names to their children, prayed as many times a day as they could, and had prayer mats and prayer beads. Despite their efforts, West African Muslims in general were not able to pass on their religion to the next generations. Few men could find Muslim spouses, a factor that played a significant role in the demise of the religion since enslaved children were often cut off from their fathers through sales or residence on other plantations. When close-knit Muslim families existed, as was the case on the Sea Islands, it is often in the third generation that Islam disappeared especially when churches started to proselytize massively after emancipation in 1865.

Still the West African Muslims have left an inspiring legacy: dignity, pride in themselves and their culture, strong-will, strong faith, a thirst for knowledge and religious and intellectual pursuit even in the most repressive environment.