



Omar ibn Sayid: An Arabic Scholar/Slave in Nineteenth-Century Carolina

by Patricia Gantt

For almost two centuries, despite considerable opposition, both colonial and Constitutional laws underwrote the African slave trade. Embedded in the United States Constitution, however, was a provision that importation of slaves be discontinued 20 years after the document's 1788 ratification. On 2 March 1807, Congress passed an act outlawing further importation. Although the slave trade went on clandestinely for several more decades, it no longer possessed the legal sanction it had claimed since its inception in 1619, when fewer than two dozen survivors of the first heinous Middle Passage were forced ashore near Jamestown, Virginia.

Even as members of Congress stood in that important 1807 session, a slave ship plowed through the Atlantic, heading for the market at Charleston, South Carolina. In that ship's hull, chained and compressed against others whose stories remain unknown to us, was Omar ibn Sayid, an Arabic scholar who speaks poignantly today through numerous documents located in the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Southern Historical and North Carolina collections.

Primary and secondary material on Sayid can be found in the Southern Historical Collection's extensive DeRosset Family Papers (SHC #214), which includes correspondence and manuscripts detailing the lives and concerns of that prominent Wilmington family and their many connections and friends. Sayid's level, penetrating gaze looks out from a daguerreotype bearing the following holographic inscription: "'Uncle Moro' (Omeroh), the African (or Arab) Prince whom Gen. Owen bought, and who lived in Wilmington for many years, and died in Bladen Co. in 1864, aged about 90 years" (Waddell). Further information on the verso, other documents in the Southern Historical and North Carolina collections, Sayid's own autobiographical fragment (reprinted in a 1925 *American Historical Review* article), and T. C. Parramore's biography of James Owen point to Sayid's story as one of the most complex, intriguing tales in North Carolina history. Sayid's autobiography, which J. Franklin Jameson says is the complete document, is surely one of the most unusual slave narratives yet uncovered.

Sayid appears to have been born about 1770 in the Fula state of Futa Toro in Senegal. Accounts depict him as a devout Moslem and an accomplished Arabic scholar, who had studied the Koran for 25 years in Senegal

before his capture and sale into slavery. William S. Plumer, who met Sayid in 1826, describes Sayid's father as a "man of considerable wealth," who was killed when Sayid was about five years old, "in one of those bloody wars that are almost constantly raging in Africa." Sayid later learned and taught Arabic, and as "a young man . . . became a dealer in . . . cotton cloths" (qtd. in Jameson 789-90). Various sources, including others who knew him personally, describe him as "a short, 'mustee'-colored man, polite and dignified in his manners [and] respected by everybody" (Waddell). According to Parramore, Sayid became "a regional celebrity as the result of his scholarly habits and dignified decorum" (412). By his own testimony, he was 37 years old when "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." Sayid appears to have been sold to a "small, weak, and wicked man, called Johnson, a complete infidel, who had no fear of God at all" and abused Sayid repeatedly. Of that experience, he says, "I was afraid to remain with a man so depraved and who committed so many crimes and I ran away." In 1810, he escaped from Johnson and traveled for a month without supplies through completely unknown territory until he at last came "to a place called Fayd-il [Fayetteville]." What a frail scholar – self-described as "a small man and feeble" and "unable to do hard work" (qtd. in Jameson 793-95) – endured during that month, we can only guess.

According to A. M. Waddell, who wrote the inscription on the daguerreotype, Sayid "wandered over the line into North Carolina, was found ill at a Negro cabin, arrested as a runaway slave, [and] put in jail in Fayetteville." Sayid's memory of his