“I BEAR WITNESS”: AN AFRICAN’S QUEST FOR FAITH AND COMMUNITY IN THE ATLANTIC WORLD

By

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"Do not imagine that the negroes in any condition of servitude in these countries, are a happy and contented people: believe me, there is not a man stolen from his country, and carried into slavery, who does not feel more misery, and undergo more suffering, than I have the power or inclination to describe."

R. R. Madden, 1835.
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This dissertation examines the lived experience of slavery in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Atlantic world by following the life of an enslaved African Muslim man named Bilali from his home in West Africa through the Caribbean and to Georgia. In looking closely at the particular experiences of one enslaved individual, this project seeks to gain insights into the structures and functions of slavery in the Americas. This approach privileges individuals' responses to and negotiations within slavery, in contrast to studies that examine enslaved people in aggregate and that tend to obscure individual actions. Bilali wrote an Arabic manuscript during his enslavement in Georgia that describes the fundamentals of Muslim faith and practice. By examining his manuscript and the other sources on his life, this project situates Bilali both in the religious/cultural world of the Georgia lowcountry and among the cohort of other African Muslims in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America. Instead of allowing slavery to define his existence, Bilali used the social, cultural, and religious lessons of his African upbringing to shape his experiences in slavery.
On October 13, 1857, William Brown Hodgson spoke before the Ethnological Society of New York, where he addressed the group of curious scholars and benefactors about the presence of Muslims in America. “There have been several educated Mohamedan negroes imported into the United States as slaves,” he told the crowd.¹ Some he characterized as “grateful,” some “indignant;” many, he said, were possessed of “intellectual and physical superiority.”² This must have spurred some disbelief among the assembly. Hodgson urged his audience to recall some familiar cases. He reminded them of Job in Annapolis and “Prince Paul” in Mississippi—men who had become famous in their days. He mentioned Omar in North Carolina who “rejected advantageous offers to return to Africa” unlike the two other men.³ Offering an additional example, Hodgson told his audience about a man named Bilali, a Muslim who had been “the trust-worthy servant of Mr. Spalding, of Sapelo Island, Georgia.”⁴ This remarkable man, he said, produced “various written papers, supposed to be ritual.” With some regret, Hodgson told the curious assembly that Bilali had “died recently, at an advanced age” and had been lovingly buried “with the Koran resting on his breast.” He presented a fitting epitaph for Bilali; a brief remembrance of a long life ended. Hodgson celebrated Bilali because he “adhered to the creed, and to the precepts of the Koran,”


and throughout his years in slavery, Bilali “read his sacred book with constancy and reverence.”

Today we probably harbor no less shock and curiosity about the presence of enslaved Muslims in the plantations of America than did Hodgson’s audience a century and a half ago. Hodgson wished to keep alive the story of Bilali, but his recent death left him shrouded in mystery. Where had he come from? How did he end up in Georgia, in possession of a Qur’an? Both then and now, these questions inevitably lead to others regarding the numbers of enslaved Muslims and their roles within the larger story of American slavery.

Answering these kinds of questions is difficult. While we know that slavery did not divest Africans of their personal identities, the institution was very successful at making its captives appear anonymous to us today. Planters who handled humans as property seldom took interest in laying out the neat documentary trails that can help us to resuscitate the lives of the past. Were it possible, though, to select one enslaved African, one enslaved family, one thread out of the lacework of the past and follow that thread as it unraveled toward its end, we would make some important discoveries. That thread would lead us through different plantations, populations, and relationships. It could span oceans and bridge continents. The twists of that thread—that life—would illuminate one individual journey in great detail, but it would also highlight the turns of the other threads it ran over, under, or near. It is a sad fact that the lives and movements of most enslaved people remain hidden from us. Sources are missing or incomplete, if they existed at all. But what if the sources did exist?

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Hodgson told his audience in 1857 that he hoped Bilali’s written works “may be preserved.” Through a very fortunate chain of events initiated by Bilali himself, one of his writings still exists. A thirteen-page booklet of religious meditations written in Arabic by Bilali has survived the erosion of time. Beyond this very important document, a number of surprising and rich sources situate Bilali in different places and phases of his own life’s journey from West Africa through the Caribbean and in Georgia. Bilali appears as more than just a name in some of these accounts. Instead, he acted in ways that made him a part of the stories that other people wanted to tell about life in the Georgia lowcountry in the early nineteenth century. In short, for Bilali, the sources spin a thread strong enough to reach from Sapelo Island, Georgia to the highlands of Upper Guinea, and this project traces that thread from end to end in an effort to examine the lived experience of slavery in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Atlantic world.

The sub-title of this project should probably be “A Detective Story.” When I first learned about Bilali, I felt the same sense of curious incredulity that Hodgson’s audience did so long ago. That there were enslaved Muslims in the United States was foreign to me. That some of them were literate—in Arabic, nonetheless—was positively bewildering. I wanted to find out more about Bilali and so I attacked the library with the callow curiosity that fuels so many would-be historians. This project would see me through a methodology course, I thought, and might stretch into a senior project.

Before long, I grasped the bare outlines of Bilali’s story. He was by all accounts a devout Muslim who is most often remembered for the curious Arabic manuscript he penned while laboring on Sapelo Island, Georgia. He died a few years before the Civil

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War cracked the plantation system that he had lived in for more than fifty years, but not before passing his manuscript off to a local Presbyterian minister. He was born in a city called Timbo in West Africa, and lived in the Bahamas before coming to Georgia. His time in Georgia was spent under the ownership of Thomas Spalding, a man who balanced his time between politics and agricultural experiments. Bilali was his head driver, assuming control of most of the day-to-day workings of the long-staple cotton and sugar plantation. In that role he is credited with saving the Island and its residents on two occasions: first from British attack during the War of 1812, and later from a hurricane in 1824.

Bilali lived an eventful life, to say the least. I wanted to flesh out this sketch and fill in some of the blank spots in the portrait of his life. There were many holes, many questions, and seemingly few answers. As I swept away some of the detritus of the past, I was able to add specificity to the sometimes vague narrative of his life. His African hometown, Timbo, was the capital of an ethnic Fula Islamic state—its residents built a powerful commercial empire, heavily involved in the slave trade. The African chapter of Bilali’s life ended in the late 1780s as he was swept up as a captive and carried to the coast. After a slave ship deposited him in the Windward Islands, he lived on Carriacou before being shipped to Middle Caicos Island, then a part of the Bahamas. He worked there for a decade before Spalding brought him to Georgia.

Addressing one set of questions inevitably led to the discovery of more. To make sense of Bilali’s life and experiences, I had to focus a lot of attention on finding information about his two owners, John Bell and Thomas Spalding. Historian Terry Alford, who wrote a stunning biography of another enslaved Muslim, Abdul Rahman
Ibrahima, aptly described the process as “work[ing] two jobs for one paycheck.”\textsuperscript{7} These two men, both fairly powerful and wealthy, left few records about the Africans they held. John Bell, in particular, left a puzzling trail littered with red herrings and kin bearing the same name. I discovered that digging into these men’s lives proved both valuable and essential to answering questions about Bilali.

Despite all I have learned about Bilali and the different chapters of his life, the questions probably still outnumber the answers. One thing that I discovered—much to my surprise—was that Bilali’s days were punctuated by important relationships. From his teachers in Africa, to his different owners, to his wife, and to those individuals (free and enslaved) who remembered him, every stage of his life highlights a connection with others. Scholars sometimes describe slavery as a state of “natal alienation,” in which an individual “ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order.”\textsuperscript{8} Bilali’s story demonstrates how it was possible for enslaved Africans to avoid being severed from meaningful relationships of both the past and present.

From our vantage in the early twenty-first century, chattel slavery is a distant, abstract, and intangible thing, despite the labors of several generations of historians who have brought us closer to grasping both the highs and lows of enslaved peoples’ experiences. We acknowledge today that slaveholders and enslaved people both created worlds that, while built separately, were intricately intertwined.\textsuperscript{9} Still, it remains a


\textsuperscript{8} Orlando Patterson, \textit{Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 5.

difficult task to humanize slavery. As chattels, enslaved people held little claim to rights in person or property, which has come down to us today as a veil of anonymity. Indeed, this anonymity poses some practical and conceptual challenges. This is not to say that we do not know much about enslaved people in the Atlantic world, because we do. We can follow ship voyages; with their cargo sizes, gender ratios, ports of call, and more. We can examine the heights, ages, and punishments of enslaved people in different parts of the Americas. Yet, much of this privileges and relies upon information gleaned from rosters and registers made by and for whites, rather than from captives themselves. Too seldom do we hear from enslaved people in their own words, voicing their own concerns. When we do get to look into the world of slavery, we often must content ourselves with a snapshot—a slice of time seemingly frozen and static.

The study that follows is a life history of Bilali which reconstructs the contours of his experiences as a way to highlight Bilali, but also to examine the multiple social, cultural, religious, and economic spheres that people like Bilali traversed in the Atlantic world. While historians often write about the experiences of enslaved Africans as groups, whether large or small, this tends to mask the fact that the centuries-long trade in African bodies across the Atlantic was composed of many millions of individual journeys, each unique in origin and outcome. By focusing on individuals like Bilali, we can avoid some of the abstraction that accrues to historiographic debates about slavery and see, instead, the dynamism and contingency that confronted individuals as they negotiated their captivity.

This project proceeds chronologically through Bilali’s life, beginning in the last quarter of the eighteenth century and moving onward to the eve of the American Civil
War. Examining the course of Bilali’s days in this manner allows us to more easily track the multiple migrations that pushed and pulled him—and many others—across the Atlantic. Chronology is valuable, too, because of the complex string of cause-and-effect factors that steered Bilali’s voyage. Even so, this project takes some thematic detours to examine in greater detail several things that influenced Bilali’s life or our present understanding of it. Though he might not have known about the revolutions of industry and empire, the global cotton market, or the presence of other Muslims in the Americas, these all situate him in an Atlantic system that presented enslaved people with both opportunity and peril.

Chapter 2 examines Bilali’s African childhood in the highlands of Upper Guinea. Here we see the long rise of Islam among his ethnic Fula kinsmen and the Islamic state they built in the early eighteenth century. In his hometown of Timbo, Bilali received the education that both rooted him in faith and gave him a powerful sense of belonging. His schoolwork and his ethnic identity are detailed in this chapter. By the middle of the century, the militant and expansive Fula empire became more integrated into the slave trade as suppliers of human capital. As their fortunes wavered however, some Fulas, like Bilali, found themselves in captivity, pulled out to sea by the tides of the Atlantic economy.

Chapter 3 focuses on the first leg of Bilali’s journey which led him off of the shores of Africa and toward the ports of the Caribbean. An examination of the Upper Guinea and Sierra Leone slave trades shows how and where Bilali’s enslaved cohort would have met the middle passage. Patterns of trade toward Grenada contextualize Bilali’s arrival on the cotton plantations of John Bell. We see how cotton agriculture and
imperial policies on Grenada’s sister island, Carriacou, crafted an intertwined enslaved community at the same time they reinforced an international web of planters, slave holders, and capital. Finally, this chapter shows how the imperial opportunities of the British Atlantic acted to relocate Bilali from his brief tenure on Carriacou to Middle Caicos Island in the Bahamas.

Chapter 4 highlights cotton agriculture and enslaved life in the Bahamas during the 1790s. For nearly this whole decade, Bilali lived and labored on Middle Caicos at the far southern fringe of the Bahamas archipelago, still under the ownership of John Bell. In this relatively brief span, the Bahamas emerged as an important site in the British Empire after decades of insignificance. Reconceived as a haven for Loyalists fleeing the American Revolution, this territory soon became an important, occasionally vital, supplier of cotton to the booming mills of the British industrial revolution. The islands were valuable as both a production site and an import-export hub of raw cotton to the metropole. Moreover, Loyalist planters used their kin and commercial connections to help spur cotton production in parts of the United States by sharing specialized technology and labor. As an enslaved driver on one of the largest plantations in the Bahamas, Bilali occupied an important position in these processes, and as a consequence he, along with his family, was eventually sold to an upstart planter in coastal Georgia. In addition to its role in the rise of cotton, the Bahamian slave trade served to funnel captives from specific areas of West Africa which had large Muslim populations. In this way, the Bahamas became home to significant Muslim communities, some of which were relocated to the American South.
Chapter 5 follows Bilali to Sapelo Island, Georgia and examines his life there as head driver on one of the largest plantations in the Georgia lowcountry. Thomas Spalding’s Sapelo Island plantation was unlike many others in the region, and this chapter examines its rise, its trials, and the experiences of its enslaved residents. Engaged almost entirely in long staple cotton, also known as Sea Island cotton, Sapelo stood apart from its rice-growing neighbors, due in part to the knowledge and leadership offered by Bilali. Through their combined efforts, Bilali and Spalding defended Sapelo from British attack during the War of 1812; one of the only island plantations to have done so. An examination of both task labor and the relative stability of enslaved families helps round out our understanding of the day-to-day experiences of Sapelo’s residents.

Chapter 6 is focused the Arabic manuscript Bilali wrote during his time on Sapelo. With an interpretive reading of the text, this chapter contextualizes the document both within Bilali’s experience and within the larger corpus of enslaved Muslim writings in the Americas. While Bilali’s manuscript is one among several written by captive Muslims, its content and purpose distinguish it from the others. Most other authors appeared to have written for a particular audience, whether that audience was fellow Muslims or potential sponsors. Bilali’s purpose, instead, appears to have been more personal. There is little reason to suspect that any other residents on Sapelo were able to read his Arabic text, and the content of the manuscript appears to have been for his eyes only.

Chapter 7 examines the last part of Bilali’s life as he lived out his days on the mainland adjacent Sapelo. It was during this part of his life that Bilali gave his manuscript to a local Presbyterian minister, from whose hands the document eventually
passed to the State of Georgia. This chapter explores how Islam vanished as a religion within the enslaved communities of coastal Georgia, but how it might have influenced cultural forms and Christian practice. Finally, this chapter addresses Bilali’s literary afterlife and the manners in which authors of both fiction and nonfiction have employed his life story.

Compared with the millions of enslaved Africans for whom no documentary sources exist, records for Bilali are surprisingly rich. Still, some points of Bilali’s journey are better documented than others, and some periods have been interpolated from the experiences of people in similar positions. Nevertheless, the focus of this study remains on Bilali and on the sources that best illuminate his life. Among the varied sources that build this narrative, the Arabic manuscript naturally draws the most attention, since historians seldom have the opportunity to examine the thoughts of enslaved Africans in their own words, absent the intervention of an editor or amanuensis. If only for this reason, Bilali’s manuscript would be a rare and valuable historical document. But its value is increased by the fact that it was written in Arabic, hinting at a diversity of enslaved experience that is unexpected to us today and was increasingly unusual by the mid nineteenth century. After the Constitutional ban on slave importation in 1808, the cohort of African Muslims in the United States ceased to be replenished in great numbers. Lacking the texts and trained practitioners needed to expand their community, the number of Muslims in North America withered through the decades. In the late eighteenth century, however, African Muslims existed in greater numbers throughout the Americas; in places as near as Georgia and the Bahamas and as far away as Brazil, where they had some success in increasing their numbers.
Much of what we know about Bilali comes from people who interacted with him personally. Some of these individuals were his descendants, some lived on neighboring plantations, and others were interested visitors. Information about enslaved life in coastal Georgia generally—and Sapelo Island, specifically—is sometimes difficult to obtain, since many official state- and county-level documents no longer exist. Still, records of the area persist in interviews, travel journals, memoirs, and commercial transactions. Combined with interviews by the Works Projects Administration of formerly-enslaved people in McIntosh County, archaeological excavations of sites on and near Sapelo fill in much of our information about daily life there. Administrative records from the Bahamas and Carriacou speak to family connections within and across plantations. As with Georgia, archaeological evidence from the islands enhances our understanding of how enslaved Africans lived and labored in these corners of the British Empire. Information from the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database highlights the networks of exchange that converted humans into capital in the waters of the Atlantic. These records provide demonstrable connections between slave export sites near Bilali’s African home and ports in the British Atlantic. Information on Timbo and Futa Jallon—the communities where Bilali was raised—emerges primarily from accounts of European visitors who began arriving there in the late eighteenth century. Several other enslaved Muslims who lived in the Americas came from Futa Jallon, and their recollections also provide valuable information.

As described above, the aim of this project is to examine the lived experience of slavery in the late eighteenth- and early-nineteenth century Anglophone Atlantic through a microhistory of Bilali’s life. The goal of this approach is that by looking very closely at
one individual’s journey from African freedom to American slavery we can avoid some of the abstractions that accrue to discussions and depictions of slavery. I propose that we might benefit from the unusually rich information on Bilali to act, in a way, as a surrogate for other enslaved Africans who have been left out of our sources. Bilali never lived in isolation, and the currents that shaped his experience impacted many other enslaved people as well. Thus, in examining Bilali’s particular path, this project can shed light on the experiences of other enslaved Africans about whom we lack specific details. For example, Bilali was raised in a place where Islam held significant spiritual and political power. His early life gives us an opportunity to see how Islamic education functioned and how that education impacted the lives of generations of other students in one corner of West Africa. His multiple migrations from the barracoons of the African coast to the islands of the Caribbean and North America demonstrate the ways that many enslaved Africans were pushed by the shifting winds of the Atlantic economy. Bilali’s life shows the important differences between the experiences of enslaved people on plantations growing long-staple cotton and the experiences of those on Caribbean sugar or North American short-staple cotton plantations. Finally, we might see in Bilali’s story the ways that both he and other enslaved Africans and African Americans tried to build and sustain communities of faith under slavery.

This necessarily raises some concerns about the representativeness of Bilali’s case vis-à-vis those of others. To be sure, Bilali was unlike many other enslaved Africans. He read and wrote Arabic, held positions of trust and authority, tended a crop that was always secondary to the economic focus of the broader region where he lived, and his life was documented in ways that few others’ were. In his positions as driver and
head driver, he enjoyed a measure of autonomy that others did not. The questioning of Bilali’s representativeness can take us in several different directions, all of which ultimately affirm the value of a study such as this. On one hand, Bilali fits well within the cohort of other literate Africans in the Americas. Insofar as we are able to identify patterns among this group, all were men and most were Muslim.\textsuperscript{10} In Philip Curtin’s collection of West African narratives, \textit{Africa Remembered}, for example, more than half of the individuals included were Muslim.\textsuperscript{11} Allan Austin’s more recent work, \textit{African Muslims in Antebellum America}, identifies several other literate Muslim men, and Robin Law and Paul Lovejoy’s, \textit{Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua}, documents yet another.\textsuperscript{12} So, if we consider Bilali’s place within one segment of the enslaved African-born population—literate and male—then his example falls well within the bounds of what we might expect. If we shift our focus slightly toward ethnic and geographic origins, some stronger connections emerge within the larger group of Muslims in the Americas.

Several historians have noted that Bilali was among a cohort of enslaved people of the Fula ethnic group, but not much has been made of this observation. As several of the Muslims highlighted in the studies above, and in others listed below, were of the same ethnicity, I feel there is room to examine this fact more closely. Historians have most frequently attributed pride, self-respect, and self-consciousness to their subjects’

\textsuperscript{10} Robin Law and Paul E. Lovejoy, eds., \textit{The Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua: His Passage from Slavery to Freedom in African and America} (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2001), 82.

\textsuperscript{11} Philip D. Curtin, ed., \textit{Africa Remembered: Narratives of West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade} (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967).

\textsuperscript{12} Allan D. Austin, \textit{African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles} (New York: Routledge, 1997).
Islamic faith—which was, no doubt, an important factor. Often, though, Islam is treated almost like an ethnicity, as if it was the most important element of an individual's self-identification. Yet, planters and slaves were keenly aware of ethnic differences, and a focus on Islam alone glosses over some useful lessons that might be drawn from an examination of ethnicity. One of the characteristics (if not the most important characteristic) of Fula identity is a concept called *Pulaaku*. While this term eludes easy definition, it is essentially that which makes Fula people similar to each other and different from others. Included in this concept are honor, endurance, forethought, and an awareness of shame.\(^\text{13}\) It might also be equated with pride, especially in the ways it lends Fula people a sense of high self-esteem and makes them see non-Fulas as inferior.\(^\text{14}\) Historians of American slavery who have written about enslaved Fulas seem to be aware of pulaaku, as they occasionally mention the term, but they seldom do more than acknowledge it, if they do so at all. The sources on Bilali suggest that he endeavored not only to maintain his Muslim faith under slavery, but that he also strove to uphold his pulaaku in a way that would be identifiable to the African community into which he was born. Considering these hallmarks of his ethnicity, Bilali can offer an example of Fula identity in the diaspora.

Despite the fact that millions of Africans survived capture, transportation, and torturous labor, we have shockingly few individual accounts that reach the level of biography, life history, or personal narrative. Those lives that are well-documented and exceptional beg—perhaps demand—historians' attention for several reasons. First, they


help mark the boundaries of what was possible for individuals within the plantation system. American slavery accommodated various degrees of unfreedom for enslaved Africans, from brutal subjugation to nearly complete autonomy. Individuals caught within the system could opt for any number of responses from violent resistance to passive compliance to complicity. Examining the cases of slaves whose experiences were atypical helps us tease out richer details about the array of choices enslaved people made to face an imperfect world. Another benefit of studying these individuals lies in the ways that it focuses our attention on lived experience and helps make the world of slavery more tangible. To borrow from Paul Lovejoy: “By re-inserting individuals into the reality of slavery, biographies put flesh on the bones of the past.”\(^{15}\) As we probe the lives of people like Bilali, a kaleidoscope of details, both profound and mundane, emerges about plantation life and our understanding of American slavery is enriched in the process. Furthermore, surveying the life histories of these exceptional individuals strengthens our knowledge of their African homes and societies and helps us to better understand ethnic and geographic communities in the diaspora.\(^{16}\)

Historians’ interest in enslaved Muslims is not a recent phenomenon. The same could be said for Bilali. Several monographs have at their core, an examination of the presence, impact, or significance of Islam in the Americas prior to the twentieth century and, among these, a few rise to the top. For example, as early as the 1960s, some scholars had begun giving attention to the aggregate voices of enslaved Muslims. Philip


\(^{16}\) Lovejoy, “Biography as Source Material,” 122.
Curtin’s 1967 book, *Africa Remembered*, included essays that examined the narratives of several Muslims who were enslaved in the Americas. In the 1980s, Allan Austin undertook a similar project for Muslims in the United States in his collection, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook*, which was condensed a decade later into, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles*.\(^\text{17}\) Sylviane Diouf and Michael Gomez both authored monographs in the late 1990s that focused in whole or in part on Muslims in the Americas.\(^\text{18}\) Another example comes from João Reis, who examines the 1835 Malê Revolt in Brazil, an uprising led by a network of enslaved Muslims.\(^\text{19}\) All of these studies are valuable for the ways that they acknowledge the presence and broad collective experiences of enslaved Muslims in the Atlantic world. While these sometimes examine individual lives, they generally stop short of full biography. In contrast, several historians have attempted to craft biographies of individual enslaved Muslims. Douglas Grant offered a biography of Job Ben Solomon in his 1968 book, *The Fortunate Slave*.\(^\text{20}\) Terry Alford investigated the life of Abdul Rahman in *Prince Among Slaves*.\(^\text{21}\) Another example of a biography of an enslaved Muslim comes from Robin Law and Paul Lovejoy in their study of Mahommah


Law and Lovejoy argue, as I do about Bilali, that Baquaqua’s life was both “untypical” and “unique,” but that it “can be seen to fit into wider patterns, which enhances its value as a source beyond his individual biography.”

After Bilali’s manuscript followed a curious path into the possession of the State of Georgia in the early twentieth century—it was once offered for public sale, but found no willing buyers—several authors have studied either the document or its author. The earliest attempt at translation was by Africanist Joseph Greenberg in 1940. Greenberg made some headway in untangling parts of the text, but was unable to translate more than a few sections. Among the troubles he faced were uncooperative Nigerian Muslim scholars who refused to work with the text, believing it was the work of jinns, or spirits. Several decades passed before the next translation appeared in Ronald A. T. Judy’s, (Dis) Forming the American Canon: African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular. In 2000, Joseph Proglomer, published “An Interpretive Translation of the ‘Bilali Diary’,” which placed the manuscript within a larger Islamic context. Most recently, Muhammad Al-Ahadi published a translation in, Bilali Muhammad: Muslim

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23 Law and Lovejoy, Baquaqua, 82.


26 Yusuf Proglomer, “Reading Early American Islamica: An Interpretive Translation of the ‘Bilali Diary’,” Al-Tawhid 16 (Fall 2000): 5-43. This article is adapted from a chapter in his dissertation, “Encountering Islam: Essays in Cultural History and Representation,” SUNY Buffalo, 1996.
All of these authors faced great challenges in interpreting Bilali’s irregular spellings and difficult handwriting that was squeezed into aged and ink-stained pages. Nevertheless, the translations are in general agreement on the content of Bilali’s text. For this reason, I rely on their translations of the manuscript.

In this project I draw from several different, but complimentary, theoretical and historiographic wells. The deepest well is that of Atlantic history. The field or, perhaps, frame of Atlantic history makes a project like this possible in the way that it encourages us to see the peoples and places of Europe, Africa, and the Americas operating as a system joined by the waters between them. The concept of the Atlantic world is capacious and contested, both in terms of its limits and its focus. Among these different ideas, J.H. Elliott argues that we might see in it the history “of the creation, destruction, and re-creation of communities as a result of the movement, across and around the Atlantic basin, of people, commodities, cultural practices, and ideas.” In this way we find “change and continuity… in a multiplicity of different environments, a whole spectrum of responses.” In a similar vein, James Sweet argues that “it was this constant uprooting and crossing of borders that opens windows onto broader sets of

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27 Muhammad Al-Ahari, *Bilali Muhammad: Muslim Jurisprudist in Antebellum Georgia* (CreateSpace, 2010).


human experiences that defined the Atlantic world.”

With their emphasis on mobility, community, and contingency, these depictions of the Atlantic system reflect the kind of world in which Bilali lived.

In addition to looking at the geographic boundaries of the past, historians have also turned their attention toward examining the spectrum of possibilities that both embraced and limited enslaved people. Though slaveholders often strove to exercise absolute power over their chattels, they failed to control all aspects of plantation life. I find it useful to remember that, like other slaves, Bilali chose his actions and responses based on both what he brought with him and on what he faced in the Americas. To quote Sweet again, “it would be shortsighted to conclude that… [enslaved people were] completely circumscribed” by the institutions and efforts of planters. Africans practiced their own religions, delineated their own hierarchies, and crafted their own institutions within the boundaries of slavery. We see in Bilali’s life examples of these kinds of actions that make us consider the ways that Africans might be “powerfully conditioned by, though not reducible to, their slavery.”

In tracing Bilali’s path from the African interior to the coast of Georgia, I borrow from multiple and divers scholarly traditions. Clearly, Atlantic history gives a frame inside which I operate. The “biographical turn” in history, with its emphasis on studying “lives in dialectical relationship to the multiple social, political, and cultural worlds they

inhabit and give meaning to" makes a project like this possible.34 These theoretical foundations (and others) notwithstanding, my intellectual lodestone is a desire to understand the lived experience of slavery. This idea is neatly articulated by Kristin Mann, who urges historians to consider "not only who the slaves were and what they brought with them to the Americas, but also what they found there and how those things helped or hindered them."35

34 David Nasaw, “Introduction to AHR Roundtable: Historians and Biography,” American Historical Review 114, no. 3 (June 2009), 574.

CHAPTER 2

“ALMOST WITHIN THE PRECINCTS OF THE MOSQUE”: ISLAM IN UPPER GUINEA

During the late eighteenth century, life in the city of Timbo followed a rhythm that had been familiar for two or three generations. After their morning prayers, men and women pressed into the streets, alleys, and courtyards of the city to begin their labors. Peddlers fanned out across the city to sell food and goods door-to-door. Some people spun and wove cotton; others rode off to their fields.\(^2\) From many of the earthen-walled compounds that lined the city’s streets, the hum of the emerging day was punctuated by the cries of young people striving at their studies. Under the stern guidance of their instructors, these children struggled to memorize the words of the Qur’an and the lessons of the Prophet. They carried on a tradition of Muslim scholarship that stretched long into the West and North African past, and that by the mid-eighteenth century had won untold thousands of adherents across and around the Sahara. In many ways, Islam in Timbo was a product of the processes of both peaceful and forced expansion that pushed and pulled the faith into the region known in Arabic as the \textit{Bilad al-Sudan}, or the “land of the blacks.” Inspired by both the history of Islam’s spread and their own geopolitical situation, the Muslim faithful of Timbo carved a path in the eighteenth century that had profound impacts on faith, commerce, and slavery in the Upper Guinea region of West Africa. As this chapter shows, these processes of Islamic expansion in eighteenth-century Futa Jalon increased the reach of Islam as they integrated the region to the Atlantic slave trade.


\(^2\) Canot and Mayer, \textit{Captain Canot}, 180.
Timbo sits in the southwest corner of the region known as Futa Jalon in the modern Republic of Guinea.³ Resting in the rolling foothills of a nearby range, the city is surrounded by hills and mountains.⁴ With rainfall sufficient to support both agriculture and extended pasture, Futa Jalon connects the forests of Guinea and Sierra Leone to the south and west with the Sahel of Mali to the north and east. While Futa Jalon lacks any easily-defined borders, English visitors in the late eighteenth century reckoned the area to be “about 300 miles from east to west, and 160 miles from north to south.”⁵ In the early eighteenth century, a powerful state made up of Muslim Fulbe, (called ‘Fulas’ by European visitors) emerged in Futa Jalon and concentrated political power in the city of Timbo.⁶

The story of Islam in Timbo began in Saudi Arabia in the seventh century as the prophet Muhammad began to proselytize to the people of Mecca. It was in these early years that Islam gained its first black African convert, an enslaved man named Bilal, doubtless the inspiration for Bilali’s name, who became the earliest muezzin—the one who calls the faithful to prayer. In time, the faith laid roots in Egypt and began to spread farther into Africa. Within a century of Muhammad’s death, Muslims succeeded in

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³ This region in Guinea is subject to wide variation in spellings, including “Fouta Djalon,” “Fouta Diallon,” and “Futa Jalon.” For purposes of clarity, I have chosen to use the most common Anglophone variant, “Futa Jalon.”
⁴ Canot and Mayer, Captain Canot, 176.
⁵ Thomas Winterbottom, An Account of the Native Africans in the Neighborhood of Sierra Leone (London: Whittingham, 1803), 8.
⁶ The dominant people of this region are of the Fulbe or Fulani ethnic group, whose populations reach northward toward Senegal and eastward toward Nigeria and Chad. In literature on Futa Jalon, these people are usually identified as “Fula,” “Fulbe,” or “Peul,” as a group, and “Pullo” in the singular. I use “Fula” throughout both to mirror most of the primary sources about Futa Jalon and to minimize confusion with the literature on Nigeria, where they are often called “Fulani.”
expanding the community of believers—the *umma*—and the boundaries of their faith across North Africa to the Atlantic coast.

Islam came into North Africa through the combined vectors of warfare and trade. First, soldiers primarily interested in extending the territorial reach of Islam pressed their way across North Africa. Their focus was often on acquiring land and military control, with conversion and proselytization a secondary goal. Alongside or following the military expansion, however, came Muslim traders who sought to build favorable commercial connections. Eventually, Islamic scholars followed the same routes and settled in these commercial sites. It was this latter group that penetrated local communities and brought Islam to Tuaregs, Berbers, and others who came to be associated with the movement of the faith in and around the Sahara. Whether through conquest, assimilation, or a combination of both, many of the people who lived around the great desert sea created the webs of kin and commerce that pushed Islam from the northern to the southern edge of the Sahara. In fact, religion and commerce worked together symbiotically to spur the trans-Saharan trade.\(^7\)

The long story of Islam south of the Sahara necessarily begins with this trade across the desert. After the legendary caravans crept southward, they stopped in cities like Gao, Jenne, and Timbuktu to swap their salt for gold and slaves. In addition to bringing valuable commodities for exchange, these caravans also carried Muslim practitioners who eventually built stable communities in the south. Much of the early history of Islam in West Africa centered around towns where Muslim traders and clerics

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built small communities. Clerics and scholars who gained the trust and financial support of local rulers found cities to be prime sites to grow their faith, where they could focus on scholarship and missionary work. While Islam fared best in these cities, it was not exclusively an urban pursuit, as clerics and communities who used enslaved labor found themselves with ample time to place scholarly roots in rural soil.

These Muslim enclaves became important resources for the commercial and political structures of the cities in which they lived. Islam lubricated the mechanisms of long-distance trade through its literacy, numeracy, and common legal code of Sharia. These Muslim traders were not necessarily functionaries of the state, but their activities brought them into contact with rulers and elites. Clerics, however, could prove useful, as political regimes—whether officially Muslim or not—made use of Muslim practitioners to accrue both spiritual and temporal powers. Some rulers adopted Islam as a practical and political expedient, supplemental to their existing traditions. Even in places where rulers integrated Muslim clerics into their courts, rural residents often adhered to traditional religious practices. Some African rulers, whether scholarly or minimally-trained in the faith, found Islam to be a means to increase their prestige. In time, Islam’s influence bloomed in the political sphere, where, in the many generations between the seventh and seventeenth centuries, at least three large Muslim empires

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8 Ross, “Historical Geography,” 16.


waxed and waned in the southwestern sahel.\textsuperscript{11} These empires grew around and from the bend of the Niger River and extended the reach of Islam thousands of miles across the region.

One of the groups of people who lived within the spheres of the great empires was the Fulbe. These semi-nomadic pastoralists inhabited a broad swath of the western Sudan from what is now Senegal through Mali to Nigeria. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries they began to migrate into Futa Jalon in great numbers to raise their cattle on the fertile pasture there. Finding the region to be a hospitable haven, some Fulas made Futa Jalon their permanent home. While the desire for land attracted Fula migrants, they also sought economic rewards. Their cattle, meat, and hides were profitable commodities in the seaboard trade, and Futa Jalon’s access to the coast helped make them wealthy.\textsuperscript{12} Many Fulas practiced Islam, as they had before their migration, though there existed a large population of Fulas, called Pulli, who followed traditional non-Islamic practices.

In the early eighteenth century, the Fula people of the Guinea highlands found themselves in a stable, but relatively weak, position. Being fairly new to Futa Jalon, the Fula pastoralists and their Muslim kin lived amid, and somewhat subject to, the Jalonke people, from whom the region derives its name. The Fulas were not exactly vassals of their Jalonke landlords, but neither could they shake loose of their status as strangers in


the land, and for several decades the two groups lived peacefully as neighbors.¹³ As the first decades of the century passed by, however, some Fulas became displeased with the increasing restrictions and burdens placed on them. The fact that the Jalonke were ‘pagans’ or infidels in the eyes of the growing number of Muslim Fulas made this oppression seem even more unjust than it might have otherwise. By the beginning of the 1720s the situation was increasingly tense and unstable, and this tension reached its apex in 1725 when the Fulas, led by their Muslim clerical faction, rose up in revolt.

The Futa Jalon jihad of 1725 was the first in a series of militant Muslim actions led by Fulbe people in sub-Saharan West Africa. While the movements in Futa Toro and Sokoto (in Senegal and Nigeria, respectively) have drawn more scholarly attention, the jihad in Futa Jalon was an important inspiration for the others. If we understand jihad to mean "struggle in the cause of Allah," as suggested by the Qur’an, then the leadership in Futa Jalon certainly embraced a great share of struggle.¹⁴ On its face, the jihad was a bold move to make Futa Jalon a safe home for Islam. To clear a path for the establishment and free practice of Islam, a relatively small number of scholarly Muslim Fulas fought against an overwhelming Jalonke majority without immediate assurances of support from the non-Muslim Pulli community. The struggle they initiated was risky at best, but the Muslims eventually gained the upper hand, though it was unclear if they would be able to maintain any military advantage.¹⁵ Despite the optimism of its leaders,

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¹⁴ Qur’an, 4:76

¹⁵ Hopewell, “Muslim Penetration,” 61.
for a number of years following the launch of the jihad, instability defined the political and military landscape in Futa Jalon.\textsuperscript{16}

In time, the jihad could count among its successes suppression of the Jalonke, unification of the Fula, and the establishment of a Muslim theocracy—these three factors laid the foundations on which the people of Futa Jalon would eventually build a long-lived, successful, expansionist state. Nevertheless, the Fula state faced stern internal and external resistance in its path toward the future. The first head of state was a man called Karamoko Alfa who was given the title \textit{Almami}, which would be carried by his successors. Under his reign, Futa Jalon saw most of its enemies subdued or expelled, yet it still had to put down a strong internal slave rebellion in the mid-1750s.\textsuperscript{17} If we ignore the military successes and endeavors of the jihad and focus instead on its political and philosophical actions, we can see that the years following the campaigns of 1725 had important consequences for Fula identity. Some scholars argue that the jihad marked the “racial consolidation of the Fula, in which Islam served as the means of identifying the allies and justifying their purpose.”\textsuperscript{18} This seems to have been the case, but it is possible to argue more emphatically that the jihad made Islam the “raison d’être” of the state—a significant departure from Islam’s status as a minority religion before the jihad.\textsuperscript{19} With religious leaders in command of political and economic structures, Islam became a vector for power and prestige. As the state proved itself

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\textsuperscript{17}J. F. Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder, \textit{History of West Africa} (Essex: Longmann, 1985), 524.

\textsuperscript{18}Hopewell, “Muslim Penetration,” 60.

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permanent, early distinctions between Muslim and non-Muslim Fulas eventually shifted into distinctions between Fula and non-Fula and—perhaps more important—between those free and unfree.\textsuperscript{20} The rising importance of Islam to the state should not gloss over definite social hierarchies among Fulas in the eighteenth century. Not all Fulas in Futa Jalon adopted Islam after the jihad, and many remained attached to their pre-Islamic customs. Nevertheless, the calculus of membership changed as the state promoted a kind of Muslim Fula homology and began to focus its attention outward.

The Fula state envisaged and advanced a plan to make itself a dominant religious and economic force in the region. First under Karamoko Alfa, then under his cousin Ibrahima Sori, Futa Jalon stretched its hegemony over its immediate neighbors and down the trading routes to the coast. These men personified two different manners and philosophies of power, with Alfa emphasizing religion and Sori promoting force. In practice, the mosque and military were fully entwined, working both internally and externally throughout the course of the mid-eighteenth century. While military strikes might have quickly broadened the perimeters of the state and purged infidels, religious expansion demanded more focused and longer-term activities, beginning with education.

Islamic education was essential to the success of Futa Jalon, both before and after the state’s inception. The Muslim elite who launched the jihad were at the heart of a system of scholarship and education that was common through parts of the Muslim world. In Futa Jalon, and Timbo in particular, religious education justified the activities of the state and gave impetus to its ongoing efforts. Scholars and students like Bilali in

Futa Jalon were heirs to systems of training that had roots reaching a century or more in the West African past and that had spread knowledge of the faith across the Sahara and Sahel. Pioneered by groups like the Almoravids, education was demanding and intensive, while also flexible. The early schools of the Moors were, like the people themselves, adapted to a nomadic lifestyle. Initially, at least, permanent structures made specifically for holding instruction were not common. For these students, lack of school buildings meant that their instructor was their only library, and given the fact that paper was rare and valuable, much of the knowledge gained in these classes was transmitted orally. Even into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, paper remained “an article of great demand” in the region.21 In theory, instruction was available to any student who was interested in learning. However, the practical limitations of social difference, and the ability of only certain families to afford tuition, effectively shaped the composition of the student body. Girls seem not to have been actively discouraged from schooling, though the number of female students dwindled as one rose higher in the academic sphere. The Qur’anic schools were led by a schoolmaster whose primary qualification was to have received an ijaza, or license to teach, from his own instructor or mentor.22

For a sense of this process in action, we can imagine the clamor of a classroom in Timbo. Bilali, like other students who were in secondary school, was in his teenage years in the mid-1780s. By that point in his training, he had already passed through the

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Qur’anic school and had endured the tedious process of learning the Qur’an by rote by writing verses of the holy book on wooden boards with ink made of charcoal dust or boiled leaves.\textsuperscript{23} For Bilali and his colleagues, these earliest experiences taught as much about patience and fortitude as they did about faith. Beginning when he was about six or seven years old, Bilali’s parents would have initiated his relationship with a teacher. Perhaps it would be better to say that he became attached to a teacher, since students customarily “became virtual members of the teacher’s household” during their training.\textsuperscript{24} These children worked at their reading and writing before dawn and after dusk, huddled around the choking smoke of a communal fire, and, during their times away from the book, were expected to provide labor for the teacher.\textsuperscript{25} Those who learned quickly could see their way clear of the school in four years, while others had to stay for six years or more. The experience of learning to read, write, and memorize the Qur’an was difficult, to be sure, but most students emerged successfully with an understanding of their faith at least and, perhaps, a little Arabic. When Bilali finished the Qur’anic school, his parents would have paid his teacher the customary fee of a slave or its cash.


\textsuperscript{25} Winterbottom, \textit{An Account of the Native Africans}, 217; Bright, “Richard Bright Journal,” 48.
equivalent.\textsuperscript{26} Had his parents judged Bilali’s progress to be exemplary or had they the financial means, they might have paid his teacher even more.\textsuperscript{27}

In Timbo, as in many other African cities, the Qur’anic school was the highest level of formal education for most children. Some students, however, chose to continue their schooling.\textsuperscript{28} Whatever the motivation, secondary school gave students the opportunity both to expand the knowledge gained in Qur’anic school and to learn more specialized material. This phase of study would begin when the student was in early adolescence, perhaps twelve to fifteen years old, and might last more than eight years. Often these studies required students to travel abroad in search of suitable teachers, though advanced training was also available in Timbo.\textsuperscript{29} Students could choose from a variety of topics in secondary school, though throughout West Africa several areas of specialization were common. Some students reached into the realm of jurisprudence, or \textit{fiqh}, using one of the many available resources, like the \textit{Risala}, a popular text by the tenth-century legal scholar Ibn Abi Zayd al-Qayrawani.\textsuperscript{30} Other young scholars pursued Arabic literacy as an area of study.\textsuperscript{31} After that, they might have used their growing Arabic language skills to focus on book learning, often centered on \textit{tawhid}, or “the

\textsuperscript{26} Winterbottom, \textit{An Account of the Native Africans}, 217; Bright, “Richard Bright Journal,” 40.

\textsuperscript{27} Bright, “Richard Bright Journal,” 40.

\textsuperscript{28} Skinner, “Islam and Education,” 504.

\textsuperscript{29} Skinner, “Islam and Education,” 505.

\textsuperscript{30} Ross, “Historical Geography,” 16. The \textit{Risala} is relevant here as parts of Bilali’s manuscript appear to be taken from this text.

The doctrine of the unity of God.\textsuperscript{32} The history of Muhammad and his sayings was also popular, as was the study of Sufism.\textsuperscript{33}

Schooling in eighteenth-century Timbo was a thriving business. European visitors to the region universally acknowledged the presence of students and teachers. Schoolmasters could be found in nearly every corner of the city, listening with strict attention to the groups of children who swarmed around them. These instructors lorded over their students with the ever-present threats of punishment in the spiritual world for failures of faith, and of a blow to the body for failures in the academic world.\textsuperscript{34} They corrected the written words and oral recitations of the students who appeared to have been all too eager to learn. One French visitor witnessed “truly studious” students engaged by their instructor in the process of learning and correcting their lessons about Muhammad and the Qur’an.\textsuperscript{35} Another wrote about a classroom with “a dozen or more” students from a caravan attending to a teacher with “a pile of old manuscripts.”\textsuperscript{36} It appears that schooling in Timbo thrived on the desires of students to find willing teachers. At least some of the scholars who worked in Timbo came to the city from elsewhere in the continent.\textsuperscript{37} Lured by the multitudes of eager students, these teachers


\textsuperscript{33} Hall and Stewart, “Core Curriculum,” 124, 139.

\textsuperscript{34} Ernest Noirot, \textit{A Travers Le Fouta-Diallon et le Bambouc (Soudan Occidental)} (Paris: Flammarion, 1885), 144.


\textsuperscript{36} Canot and Mayer, \textit{Captain Canot}, 132.

moved to Timbo to build careers at what must have been—or seemed like—the outer edge of the Muslim world. Though it may have been located at the fringe, Futa Jalon was no intellectual backwater. It enjoyed an influx of goods, people, and ideas that arrived from other parts of the Muslim world and kept the region in touch with the rest of the umma. But Futa Jalon also contributed to the marketplace of knowledge by cultivating scholars and ideas, both of which fanned outward to places like Timbuktu, Egypt, and Arabia. One scholar, for example, whose journey began in the classrooms of Timbo, finished his days as a notable intellectual in India, offering what one historian calls "testimony to the truly international character of Islamic scholarship and a reflection of the advanced state of the teaching of the Islamic sciences in eighteenth-century West Africa."38 Scholars in Futa Jalon sat in “the intellectual center of Islam in Southwest Guinea,” and because of a combination of their relative isolation and unique challenges they “accentuated a development of [Futa Jalon’s] own studies and commentaries.”39

The leaders of the jihad and the political system that grew out of it helped to encourage a robust intellectual culture which, while not officially a function of the state, reinforced the motives and logic of the jihad. The tradition of religious education among Muslim West Africans included a focus on learning a canon of knowledge, but more than that it pressed a student to bend himself to proper ways of thinking and living, laying a foundation for his entire life. But politics and education explain only part of civic life in Futa Jalon during the eighteenth century. Another important facet of Fula life was the logic of membership in the Fula community.


39 Hopewell, “Muslim Penetration,” 65
Fulas acknowledge a set of characteristics called *pulaaku* that they used to identify themselves as a unique ethnic group. The Fula peoples who stretch from Senegambia to Nigeria and beyond all share a general concept of pulaaku, though specific definitions seem to vary based on location and context. Despite the potential diverse (or ambiguous) definitions of the term, pulaaku has a few core concepts which can help us understand the behaviors and customs of Fulas both in Futa Jalon and in the diaspora. At the very simplest level, pulaaku can be defined as “the qualities appropriate to the Fulani.” This reflexive definition emerged in the context of Fula interactions with people of other ethnic groups. Pulaaku is capacious, encompassing physical, emotional, behavioral, and even environmental attributes that determine one’s membership in the Fula community. Physically, a Pullo of the ideal type should have “light skin, a pointed nose, thin lips, a tall and slender body structure, and soft and comparatively straight hair.” This arose from the desire, it appears, to mark differences between the nominally North African appearance of some Fulas against their black African neighbors. Beyond these physical characteristics, the core of pulaaku came from behavior. A Pullo should be “refined, subtle, responsible, cultivated, endowed with a sense of shame, and master of his needs and emotions.”

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42 Ver Eecke, “Pulaaku,” 25.

the conditions of being free, aware of oneself, and aware of shame, which are demonstrated through restraint, loyalty, patience, faith, and leadership.⁴⁴

Pulaaku is obviously complex and multifaceted, yet despite its nomadic pastoralist origins, Fulas found it to be compatible with Islam once the faith began to spread within the group. To be sure, pastoral and sedentary Fulas had different concepts of group membership: if only because of the fact that most sedentary Fulas were Muslim and many of the Pulli herdsmen were not. But the centrality of freedom to pulaaku remained. As the leaders of the jihad assumed political control of Futa Jalon, they thrust themselves into positions of power and prestige. While they might have looked with some disdain on the non-Muslim Fulas around them, they could not justifiably deny them their freedom, because being enslaved is fundamentally incompatible with being a Fula.⁴⁵ In short order, the Muslim leadership of Futa Jalon found great impetus to launch a series of jihads, establish a system of schooling, and embrace slavery. In fact, the state did all of these things with vigor and, in the process, wrought great changes on the people of the region. One example of this comes from Futa Jalon’s involvement in the slave trade.

The military and political leaders of 1725 successfully cast off the bonds of unfreedom in their struggle to establish a Muslim state in Futa Jalon. It is apparent, however, that their quest for freedom was not meant to be applied universally. In quick succession, the state set out to establish and maintain its internal divisions of power, external borders, and access to coastal markets—all of which helped to make Futa

⁴⁴ Ver Eecke, “Pulaaku,” 51.

Jalon a powerful commercial empire. Either as a cause or consequence of the 1725 jihad, the Fula state became involved in the Atlantic slave trade. This human commerce is essential to understanding the subsequent history of the Fula state and the conflicts that shook the region through the following decades. As the state expanded its religious and commercial reach, it benefitted from some “particularly favorable circumstances” with respect to the slave trade.  

In the century preceding the jihads, the general flow of trade entering and leaving Futa Jalon shifted from one focused in the direction of the Mediterranean to one aimed toward the Atlantic coast. This was a clear consequence of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Trade between Futa Jalon and the Atlantic coast was neither new nor unique by the eighteenth century, as accounts from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries described “large annual caravans” descending from the hinterland to trading posts on the Atlantic. Some of these caravans were specifically interested in salt; a commodity of special concern to Fula herdsmen. For salt the Fula traded “beef, cloth, and other manufactures,” and as trade relationships solidified, their markets expanded to include such items as “hides, ivory, wax, and slaves.” Increased warfare between the Fulas and their neighbors brought large numbers of captives from both sides into the coastal markets. The Royal African Company in Sierra Leone observed a “prodigious” slave

48 Rodney, A History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 226. Rodney argues that this manner of trade—with groups from the interior moving to the coast, rather than coastal peoples reaching toward the hinterland—distinguished commerce in Futa Jalon from other nearby regions.
trade in 1751. This was “coinciding suspiciously” with warfare beyond the core of Futa Jalon. In 1763 an ongoing war between Fulas and their Susu neighbors caused another period of increased traffic in captives to the coast.50

The trading caravans offered the state more than just an opportunity to trade war captives for goods—they also extended state hegemony toward the coast. As Fula power grew, they imposed a system of tributary alliance on the peoples along the paths to and at the riverine trading centers.51 Caravans thus became “an affair of the state.”52 Typically they were put under the charge of a member of the ruling class—in one example, the son of the Almami. The caravans were, of course, profitable for the traders with goods to sell, but the state also gained by keeping a portion of the proceeds. Furthermore, the state imposed its power on its coastwise subjects by restricting trade before launching a caravan. We see this in the recollections of a European visitor:

'[the caravan leader] squats himself and his party in one of the most frequented paths to the seaside, often sending small squads of his party to the different paths and blockading all passages to the beach. This blockade is sometimes kept up for a month or more, according to the quantity of traders they have detained, as the object of this blockade is instituted not only to collect a large caravan and give the Chief himself the more importance, but to sequester a certain tribute due to the Ali-mamy by small tribes which could never be collected otherwise.'53

The ability of the leader to block trade for an indefinite period of time could be enforced only with the backing of a strong state. This becomes even more evident by the fact that


52 Rodney, A History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 227-228.

each of these traders, as James Watt observed, “was armed either with a bow and quiver of arrows or a gun.”\textsuperscript{54} Whether defensive or offensive, the posture of a large armed caravan was hard to ignore. Sometimes the state tried to bend the marketplace to meet its desire for profit. A Fula ruler, for example, once closed off trade to European traders at the Rio Pongo in order to protest flagging slave prices. In other cases, state politics played out in the market, as when in November 1793, a British ship captain observed that there were “no slaves coming down” from Futa Jalon. Apparently one of the two men vying for rule had “stop’d the Path” in order to exert his political will on the tributary people at the coast.\textsuperscript{55}

At the midpoint of the eighteenth century, the Fula state began to focus its efforts outward. After successfully securing its borders around 1750, the regime moved from what one historian calls an “interior jihad” to an “exterior jihad.”\textsuperscript{56} The goal of the latter was primarily to fill internal and external demand for captives. This hints at the importance of the Atlantic slave trade to Futa Jalon. In 1794, James Watt traveled from Freetown, the newly-established haven for Africans liberated from the slave trade, to Timbo in an effort to negotiate trade in commodities other than slaves. He found that Timbo was guided by a strong spirit of both faithfulness and commerce, but that commerce was heavily focused on the slave trade. As a consequence, instability and warfare marred the landscape of Futa Jalon and the surrounding region.

\textsuperscript{54} Watt, \textit{Journal of James Watt}, 6, 9.

\textsuperscript{55} Mouser, “Trade, Coasters, and Conflict,” 56; Bruce L. Mouser, \textit{A Slaving Voyage to Africa and Jamaica: The Log of the Sandown, 1793-1794} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 83.

\textsuperscript{56} Botte, “Les Rapports Nord-Sud,” 1417.
When Watt spoke with one of the deputy chiefs about war and trade, the answer he received came with a “degree of openness which shocked” him.\(^{57}\) The chief told him “that the sole object of their wars was to get slaves, as they could not get any European articles they were in want of without slaves and they could not get slaves without fighting for them.”\(^{58}\) This begs the question whether the jihads that continued beyond the middle of the century were driven more by matters of faith or matters of wealth. Watt already knew that the leaders of the state were interested, perhaps obsessed, with fighting, as he reflected that “War and warlike instruments seem to be [the Almamy’s] chief delight.”\(^{59}\) The Almamy told Watt that “there was one thing he wished above all things to have. This was no less than a mortar and bomb shells.”\(^{60}\) The leader did not say if he wanted those pieces of artillery for offensive, defensive, or ceremonial purposes. What is clear, though, is that it was nearly impossible, in this time and place, to untangle commerce and warfare of most any kind from the slave trade. In fact, the Almamy nearly said as much. Watt asked him “if the Country would be hurt in case there were no white people to buy slaves,” to which the Almamy responded that “it would as they got many things from the white people for slaves which they could not well do without.”\(^{61}\)

Despite the omnipresence of market-driven fighting, the leaders of Timbo insisted on a religious frame for their actions. Watt’s informant said that “the people with whom

\(^{57}\) Watt, *Journal of James Watt*, 44. Spelling retained from original.

\(^{58}\) Watt, *Journal of James Watt*, 44.


\(^{60}\) Watt, *Journal of James Watt*, 42.

we go to war...do not pray to God. We never go to war with people who do God Almighty service."\(^{62}\) Watt wrote that "It is thus that they solve the matter and reconcile it to their consciences."\(^{63}\) Another European visitor noted a different way that the Fulas mobilized faith in defense of slavery. According to Theophilus Conneau, "I learned from my intelligent Fullah, that while the Mahometan courts of his country rescued by law the people of their own faith from slavery, they omitted no occasion to inflict it, as a penalty, upon the African 'unbelievers' who fell within their jurisdiction."\(^{64}\) If only to buttress what seemed abundantly clear, one Fula villager said that religion "was only the pretence for wars, the real object of which was to get slaves."\(^{65}\) Thus, it appears that the most important loci of religious, political, and commercial power in Futa Jalon supported and justified slave capture and trading (and their expansion) for the Atlantic market.

While the Fula state in Futa Jalon commanded a broad swath of the interior, it traded within only a limited part of the Upper Guinea coast. Though rulers in Timbo could claim tributary relationships with upwards of twenty smaller nations, their influence on the coast fell primarily between the Rio Nunez in the north and the Sierra Leone River in the south.\(^{66}\) This two-hundred-mile-long portion of the Upper Guinea coast contained a handful of important trading centers, including those in the Nunez, Pongo, and Sierra Leone rivers. Central to this region—in terms of both geography and

\(^{62}\) Watt, Journal of James Watt, 44.

\(^{63}\) Watt, Journal of James Watt, 44.

\(^{64}\) Canot and Mayer, Captain Canot, 92.

\(^{65}\) Watt, Journal of James Watt, 70.

importance—was Îles de Los, a major commercial entrepot that attracted both European and African traders. Îles de Los is a group of three small islands offshore of the modern city of Conakry which offered a favorable location to dock oceangoing ships.67 Several European factors established bases there and kept themselves busy supplying the Atlantic trade with provisions and slaves. Trading posts north of Îles de Los, like those in the Nunez and Pongo rivers, certainly received a share of this increased traffic from the interior, but in terms of export volume, factories at Îles de Los and Bance Island (in the Sierra Leone River) overshadowed their competitors. Slave traders in this part of the coast became particularly successful after the middle of the century when the warfare in Futa Jalon became more intense. For example, in the half-century before 1750, slave embarkations from the region averaged fewer than four hundred per year, while afterward that average rose to almost three thousand per year.68 These dramatic shifts in the volume of slave exports on the coast mirrored Fula conflicts in and around Futa Jalon. As long as their superior force and good fortunes prevailed, Fula raiders and merchants drove large caravans of non-Muslim or non-Fula enemy combatants and other unfortunate souls to the coast to be sold into the Atlantic system. Amid the instability of constant war and raiding, however, some Fulas—including Bilali—found themselves on the losing side.


Calculations of averages were based on a sum of embarkations divided by the number of years for which data exist.
Becoming a loser in one of the wars that punctuated life in eighteenth-century Upper Guinea was a frightful proposition. Those who survived the clash of arms almost certainly faced enslavement and exile at the hands of their foes. Some African captives were pressed into labor domestically, while many others found themselves forced by their captors into the putrid hulls of European slave ships. The machinery of commerce pulled thousands of men, women, and children from freedom in Africa to slavery in the Caribbean, and charted Bilali’s voyage across the Atlantic to the cotton fields of Carriacou.

Bilali grew up in an environment that was markedly different from that of his forebears. He and the people of Timbo and Futa Jalon experienced several important changes in the latter half of the century. First, they found themselves in a region that roiled with increasing conflict as rival states made annual campaigns against those they sought to subdue. The imperial perimeter they established in the 1750s gave a benchmark from which to focus their efforts outward. Using their own resources along with those of their allies, Fulas mobilized thousands of troops—perhaps upwards of ten thousand at a time—in the jihads that corralled neighboring infidels into either bonds of faith or bonds of servitude. These large campaigns, organized by leaders of the state,


2 Ernest Noirot, A Travers Le Fouta-Diallon et le Bambouc (Soudan Occidental) (Paris: Flammarion, 1885?), 153-154. Noirot’s informants recalled past armies of twenty or thirty thousand men, but he thought the number to be lower. James Watt personally observed cadres of Fula soldiers that he estimated to number a thousand or more. Watt, Journal of James Watt, 9.
were sent out to enrich the territory and human capital of the empire. Supplementing these ostensibly religious actions were smaller-scale offensives best characterized as slave raids. Lacking the religious veneer of the jihads, these strikes were carried out by local leaders and minor political figures against non-Muslim neighbors.³ A British slave ship captain described these raids: “They lie concealed in the Woods which surround the small Villages, and make their Attacks under Cover of the Night, and seize the People by Surprise.”⁴ As one scholar concluded, “though these wars failed to increase the numbers of believers, they certainly reduced the numbers of unbelievers.”⁵ One important consequence of these wars was a change in the composition of Futa Jalon’s population.

As Fula armies expanded their reach, Futa Jalon drew large numbers of enslaved captives into its midst. Military campaigns during the dry season might return with thousands of prisoners who were sent to slave villages in the interior of the country. There they labored for their Fula masters, tending crops of rice and cotton during the rainy season and providing other domestic services.⁶ The omnipresence of enslaved labor in Futa Jalon had a profound impact in that it gave Fula aristocracy the leisure they needed to follow their spiritual and educational pursuits. Thus it happened that the


schools that made Timbo a regional hub of education were built on the backs of its slaves. The vast pool of enslaved people also gave the kingdom a potentially significant reserve of wealth. As movable capital, slaves were readily convertible at European factories on the coast into luxury goods or tools of war—both of which Fula leaders readily sought.

We gain a sense of the scale of this commerce in slaves from James Watt’s visit in 1794. At that time he reckoned Timbo to be home to about seven or eight thousand Fulas.\(^7\) While there he asked the head of state about the number of slaves held in Futa Jalon, and concluded that “they exceed the free people in the proportion of five to one.”\(^8\) One slave trader believed that in the region, “Three Fourths of the Inhabitants are Slaves,” though he believed that “These domestic Slaves are never sold, except for Crimes.”\(^9\) Even if these men were mistaken about the exact figures, the fact remains that the enslaved population of Futa Jalon greatly outnumbered the free, hinting at the scale of the kingdom’s real and potential wealth. The influx of slaves absorbed into the towns and the economy of Futa Jalon was a signal of increasing prosperity, but it also highlighted the region’s instability in the late-eighteenth century.

Whatever the manner of conflict, the frequency and intensity of warfare tended to increase as the decades passed, greatly destabilizing the region. Futa Jalon was neither static nor peaceful, and its rise to power came at heavy cost and wrought troubling change. Internally, the state faced a series of power struggles that deposed


rulers and set provincial chiefs at odds with each other. Despite its ability to fight and win major offensives, the state suffered under “almost permanent internal anarchy.” \(^\text{10}\) Fula aristocrats might have vied among themselves for power and prestige, but they were united by the constant fear of slave insurrection. Some Europeans felt that “the Number of Slaves is so great…the Government would be afraid of committing any Act of Injustice for fear of a Revolt,” but the region was a powder keg, and it appears that the state was justified in its fears, for the second half of the century was punctuated by revolts. \(^\text{11}\) In the mid-1750s, mid-1780s, and mid-1790s, Futa Jalon faced several major uprisings (and probably many more in between) that flared up from within its slave villages. \(^\text{12}\) Fulas faced “a constant ferment of revolt” as they tried to manage a growing population of enslaved outsiders within their borders. \(^\text{13}\) Well aware of what was at stake, the leadership at Timbo punished the rebels with decisive alacrity.

These events show that Upper Guinea was a tumultuous place, beset with conflict and confusion. But they do little to explain how Fulas like Bilali came to be captives. Internal foment among slaves might prove deadly or destructive, but did not shackle their Fula masters in chains. And political infighting could—and sometimes did—end at the point of a sword, but scriptural prohibitions against enslaving fellow Muslims, and the close watch of their friends and neighbors limited the numbers of those who were sold off by from within the Fula community. External forces, however,

\(^\text{10}\) Ajayi and Crowder, _History of West Africa_, 526.
\(^\text{11}\) Lambert, _House of Lords_, testimony of James Penny.
\(^\text{12}\) Barry, _Senegambia_, 122; Ajayi and Crowder, _History of West Africa_, 524.
were less easily controlled. The Fula state often operated from a position of relative strength, but this power was tenuous. Though the military leadership hoped for victory and divine protection as they marched the jihads into the territory of their neighbors, they discovered that their own borders were far from impenetrable. The state relied on strategic alliances to bolster its own strength as it reached farther from Timbo, and these alliances were tested by their participants’ desires for victory and self-preservation. In 1762, for example, Fula warriors, steeled by earlier successes, attacked their neighbors but found themselves quickly overwhelmed. The king of the Jalonke, who had originally supported the Fula effort, turned on his former allies. This reversal of fortunes left Timbo literally and figuratively in ashes, fighting for freedom and survival.14

In the decade that followed, Timbo elected a new Almamy but lost untold men, women, and children in the steady stream of captives who soon appeared at the nearest coastal trading centers.15

Residents of Futa Jalon lived in the eye of the slave raiding storm, often enjoying some protection from the ravages of warfare. But the enemies of the state stood ready to exploit any weaknesses, as the example of 1762 shows. Several decades later Futa Jalon faced another series of challenges as nearby non-Muslim communities fought to gain power. In the long decade from 1780 to 1792, Fulas faced regular assaults that failed to dislodge their hegemony but sent innumerable captives from both sides to the

14 Ajayi and Crowder, History of West Africa, 524; Barry, Senegambia, 99.

15 According to the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade Database, 1764 recorded the second highest number of slave embarkations from the Sierra Leone region in the eighteenth century, and marked the beginning of several years of unusually high activity on the coast. http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?yearFrom=1700&yearTo=1810&mjbtypimp=60200
An example of the effects of these campaigns comes from one of Timbo’s exiles, a man named Abdul Rahman Ibrahima who was carried off to Mississippi.

A son of the ruler of Futa Jalon, Abdul Rahman in 1788 led an army of more than two thousand foot soldiers and cavalry to wage war against an enemy who interrupted Timbo’s coastal trade. At the first assault, the enemy quickly fled from the superior numbers and skill of the Fula soldiers. Believing the battle to have been won, Abdul Rahman sent the infantry back toward Timbo while he and the cavalry followed behind. A hundred miles into his return journey, Abdul Rahman and the three hundred mounted soldiers found themselves trapped in an ambush. “They fired upon us…[and] we saw the people drop down,” he recalled. Caught in a failing retreat, Abdul Rahman and a small cadre of troops fought unsuccessfully to gain the upper hand. They put up a final defiant stand that ended in defeat, with Abdul Rahman bound and barefoot, trudging toward the coast. He was sold “with fifty others, to an English ship” on the Gambia River. This is but one example of the fate that could befall African soldiers in the ceaseless wars at the end of the century. Victorious Fulas often sold their captives downriver—vanquished Fulas frequently suffered the same misfortune.

Many of the Fulas who—like Bilali and Abdul Rahman—began their lives in or near Futa Jalon and toiled in the Americas have been lost to the anonymity of slavery. But those whose identities remain give us insight into the multiple paths that ultimately

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ended at Africa’s Atlantic shore. Military failure, of course, was one path. Commerce proved to be another. Job Ben Solomon, a Fula from north of Futa Jalon was captured in 1730 while on a trip to sell some slaves and to buy paper on the Gambia. On the homeward leg of his journey, he was captured by slave raiders and sold to a ship bound for North America. He negotiated with the captain of the ship for the chance to ransom himself. The captain agreed, but before Job’s father, who was a powerful cleric, could arrange his rescue, he was carried off as a slave.

In a similar case, James Watt met a man in Timbo who pleaded for help in recovering his son who was captured with a group of six other Fula traders in 1790. After completing some exchange at the Rio Pongo, they were waylaid by slave traders and sold to a factor at Iles de Los. The head of Timbo successfully redeemed one of the men, but the other six were “shipped off to the West Indies.” Though is it left unsaid in the original source, in all likelihood these men had set out to sell slaves when they were captured.

Both of these cases show how quickly the tables could turn on those who sold African bodies. It seems that the tidewater was teeming with bands of raiders who snared those who were far from the security of home. Though they might have been able to receive aid from the hinterland, delays in travel and communication doomed them to suffer the fate of common captives before help could arrive. Even in the heart of their own homelands, many Fulas could not count on security. Salih Bilali—friend and neighbor to Bilali of Sapelo—was a Fula from Massina, to the northeast of Futa Jalon.

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Like the others we have seen, he came from an elite background and was trained in Islam and Arabic. His freedom was cut short, however, by “a predatory party” as he traveled from one town to another when he was only twelve years old. After a long journey to the coast in the possession of several different owners, Salih Bilali entered the Atlantic at Anamabo around 1780.

A final example comes from another Fula of Futa Jalon named Muhammad Kaba who was enslaved in Jamaica. Kaba was born “near the country of the Foulahs, the capital of which is Timbo,” around 1758. The son of a “substantial yeoman,” Kaba trained to become a jurist in Futa Jalon until he was captured in 1778 “by a party of robbers” while walking through the countryside.

The small sample of cases above shows some of the different ways that free Fula men were made captives, eventually carried off to the Americas. From them we see that commerce was a treacherous affair and those traders who were captured knew the perils of human trafficking first-hand, as they themselves were selling slaves. Traveling far afield was dangerous, but staying close to home was no guarantee of security, either. In all these cases the captured men were educated, literate (which explains how they later managed to rescue themselves from anonymity), and were sons

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22 The exact dates of Salih Bilali’s journey are difficult to reconstruct. According to his owner James Hamilton Couper’s letter to Hodgson, Salih Bilali was 73 years old in 1839. Thus he was probably born around 1766 and captured in 1778 before heading toward the coast. Couper’s letter mentions Anamabo specifically.

23 Richard R. Madden, *A Twelvemonth’s Residence in the West Indies*, Vol 2 (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea, and Blanchard: 1835), 134. Madden quotes a letter written in 1834 in which Kaba is said to be 76 years old.

or kin of rulers or powerful political figures, although their elite status offered them little protection. Their stories also give us some insight into the geography of slave traffic from Futa Jalon.

![Map of Upper Guinea and Futa Jalon](image)

Figure 3-1 Map of Upper Guinea and Futa Jalon, showing routes of trade from the interior.\(^{25}\)

Timbo was geographically well situated for all sorts of Atlantic trade. The city lies almost due east of the mouths of the Rio Nunez and Rio Pongo, a little over two hundred miles from the coast. It is nearly equidistant from those two ports as well as the

Sierra Leone River and Iles de Los, and a series of different footpaths and river routes connected Timbo with the Atlantic (see Figure 2.1). Fula traders could head northward from Timbo and reach the Gambia River or connect with the rivers of present-day Guinea-Bissau, but this route was both long and strayed far from Futa Jalon’s borders. Heading to the west and south, however, footpaths made passage to Iles de Los and the Sierra Leone River relatively easy, though sometimes insecure. Even if these southern routes carried more risk, slave traders at their ends enjoyed great benefits from their proximity to Timbo and the western edge of Futa Jalon. During the second half of the eighteenth century, when Futa Jalon began to engage enemies outside its borders, European buyers loaded a little more than 143,000 Africans on ships bound for the Americas in the ports west of the region. Of that number, many left the continent at one of two places: either Iles de Los or Bance Island in the Sierra Leone River. More than 54,500 individuals, or thirty-eight percent of the whole, met a slave ship at one of these spots. This percentage is significant, but we can see the trade out of Futa Jalon in even greater relief if we include other embarkations from the Sierra Leone estuary. This large river system offered other points of lading for slavers in addition to Bance Island, which is made clear from the 74,000 Africans who were purchased in the river. Although some portion of this number must include sales at Bance, this figure nevertheless

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26 Watt, Journal of James Watt, xiii. Mouser cites slave rebellions as part of the reason for lack of security. The case of the men captured in 1790 also shows some of the perils of the western and southern routes.

27 These figures and those that follow come from the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade Database, hereafter TASTD (http://www.slavevoyages.org) published by Emory University. They are drawn from the region identified as Sierra Leone; defined as Rio Pongo (in modern Guinea) to Cape Mount (in modern Liberia). The exact total cited for the region from 1750 to 1800 is 143,120 embarkations. http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?yearFrom=1750&yearTo=1800&mjbyptimp=60200
accounts for almost fifty-two percent of the total for the region.²⁸ In short, the numbers from Iles de Los and the Sierra Leone River (including Bance Island) represent ninety percent of the slave purchases made in the region between 1750 and 1800.²⁹ These figures include the area from the Rio Pongo southward, where Futa Jalon did much of its trading. But we know that Fula traders also worked in the region to the north, like the Rio Nunez and the Gambia River. Even including slave embarkations from both the northern and southern regions, Iles de Los and the Sierra Leone River account for thirty-nine percent of the total, still a great percentage of the whole.³⁰

By themselves, these numbers are lifeless—they say nothing about individuals or their origins—but it is possible to tease some more information from them in context. We know that, in general, the Africans who boarded slave ships were captives, convicts, or pawns. Given the state of unrest and the ongoing campaigns in the region, we can assume that most of those who departed Futa Jalon were not pawns but captives; either victims of kidnapping or prisoners of war. Sources are silent about the circumstances of Bilali’s capture, but based on the range of dates when Bilali could have first arrived in

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²⁸ Preliminary examinations of the voyages listing only the Sierra Leone River (and not Bance Island) as points of embarkation suggest that Bance Island may have been a source of their captives. This remains a work in progress, but it seems safe to assume that the percentage of these cargoes with a connection to Bance Island is greater than what appears in the TASTD.

²⁹ Raw figures from the source above are: Iles de Los: 42,165 or 29.5%; Bance Island: 12,366 or 8.6%; Sierra Leone Estuary: 74,266 or 51.9%.

³⁰ These figures include TASTD data for Senegambia, which is defined as areas north of the Rio Pongo. Total embarkations for both regions: 329,346; Iles de Los, Bance Island, and Sierra Leone Estuary: 128,797 or 39.1%. [http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?yearFrom=1750&yearTo=1800&mjbyptimp=60100.60200](http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?yearFrom=1750&yearTo=1800&mjbyptimp=60100.60200)
the Bahamas, he most likely entered the Atlantic between 1787 and 1790. The limited window for his enslavement in Africa effectively narrows the events of his capture to one of three equally plausible scenarios.

One likelihood is that Bilali was ambushed while on a commercial venture to the coast. Like the group of men caught on their return from Rio Pongo, Bilali might have met his captors while engaged in peaceful transit to or from Timbo. In such a case, he would have been far from the protective umbrella of Timbo’s power, unable to send for help that could arrive in time to ransom him. To coastal or riverine marauders, a small and poorly defended group of traders presented a prime opportunity to turn a quick profit.

Another possibility is that Bilali was taken in the vicinity of Timbo. The city’s wavering situation at that time made it vulnerable to the predations of its enemies. In a time of war, Bilali could have joined the ranks of the army and could have been caught off guard while protecting the city and taken as a prisoner. Even in a moment of relative peace, Bilali could have been snatched outside of the city’s protective walls as was Muhammad Kaba.

Finally, it is possible that Bilali was captured while fighting in a military campaign far from Timbo. Around the time Bilali fell into enemy hands, Abdul Rahman led a large faction northward out of Futa Jalon. Bilali was of the right age to join the army in its

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31 These dates come from an analysis of births on John Bell’s Caicos plantations, taken from the inventory of 1801 included here as Appendix A and B. The earliest births in the population occurred in 1788. Allowing time for pregnancy, this suggests 1787 as a potential starting point for the plantation. Bilali’s eldest child was born in 1790, which makes that the last possible year of his arrival in the Americas, though 1789 is more likely as it allows more time for pregnancy. As this and the following chapter show, Bilali probably arrived and seasoned in Grenada before going to Caicos. Based on this assumption, the probable years of his arrival are likely to be earlier within the allowable range.
mission to protect Timbo’s trade and interests. It is entirely possible that Bilali was among the scores of cavalry and foot soldiers who were ambushed, enslaved, and sold into the Gambia at Abdul Rahman’s defeat in 1788.\textsuperscript{32} Were he not among Abdul Rahman’s force, Bilali might well have been a member of the army sent to retaliate against Abdul Rahman’s captors. While any one of these capture scenarios is reasonable, it is impossible to offer much more than informed conjecture. His journey to the coast, however, ended in one of only a few places.

Once taken captive, Bilali began the miserable march toward the tidewater. Stripped of his weapons, possessions, and most of his clothing, Bilali’s hands were bound behind his back. To prevent his escape and to make him and the others more tractable, his captors would have tethered the prisoners together in a line, each secured to the other by a large stick tied at the neck. Escape from the coffle was nearly impossible at this point, and Bilali could only try to avoid more punishment and humiliation and hope that the coast was near. He would have been fed scarce provisions, merely enough to ensure that his new masters could deliver him alive and saleable. Were he fortunate, his coffle might have reached the coast in a week or two—if not, the journey could have lasted a month or more.\textsuperscript{33}

Bilali’s final destination in Africa depended in part on the location of his capture. If he was kidnapped near Timbo or while trading along the coast, he would have been delivered southward to the bustling slave markets at Iles de Los or the Sierra Leone

\textsuperscript{32} Bilali’s willingness to take up arms and his skill in mobilizing others in defense of Sapelo in 1813 suggests that he had military training, which lends some weight to the idea that he was a soldier and, ultimately, prisoner-of-war.

\textsuperscript{33} James Watt’s journey from the coast to Timbo took more than four weeks in each direction.
River. Slave raiders and enemies of the state would have sought the quickest and most secure route to the Atlantic with their captives, and any other paths would have driven them deeper into Futa Jalon. Heading south and west all but guaranteed a ready market. In contrast, if Bilali was captured as part of a failed military assault, his journey would most likely have ended in the Gambia River or another point to the north. Since the military campaigns moved Fula soldiers outside of the limits of Futa Jalon, there was little impetus for their captors to pursue a path that led back into the Fula heartland. As was the case with the ports to the south, the Gambia offered numerous outlets for Europeans to purchase captive Africans, a fact that Bilali’s captors would have used to their advantage.

The voyage to the water’s edge ended at a slave factory where buyers and sellers met to swap captives for commodities. These factories might be imposing castle-like structures, as in the case of Bance Island, or little more than small barracoons along tidal creeks. No matter their size or location, these sites were the human stockyards where purchasers bid and bartered over the men, women, and children they eventually packed into ships. Slave ship captains and European or mixed-race dealers arriving on the coast first had to secure the protection and blessings of the local African regime in order to conduct their business.\textsuperscript{34} In the same manner, slave sellers coming down from the interior to sell their prisoners sought permission from the local authorities. From both sides of these transactions, the landlord might expect to be wooed with bribes or gifts to lubricate the wheels of trade above and beyond the tax he collected from the exchanges.

\textsuperscript{34} John Matthews, \textit{A Voyage to the River Sierra-Leone, on the Coast of Africa} (London: White and Son: 1788), 143.
that followed. Once the marketplace was opened, buyers poked and prodded those individuals they hoped to buy. They were “carefully examined, to see that there is no blemish or defect,” a process that was, at best, humiliating to the African captives. The buyer searched each individual body with ardor, checking his or her teeth, eyes, and limbs; counting fingers and toes; listening for pulse and breathing. When the buyer found a slave or parcel fit for his cargo, he and the seller negotiated a “price at so many bars,” a standard unit of exchange on the coast. When it came time for Bilali’s purchaser to hand over payment, his bar value was converted into real commodities that suited the tastes of the seller—most often luxury goods and manufactures—things like cloth, guns and powder, pots and pans, paper, liquor, and tobacco.

The ordeal was painful and perplexing to the African prisoners. Some grew lethargic after their sale; others refused to eat. Some viewed white traders with curious amazement. Many rightfully feared what was to become of them in the hands of Europeans, fearing they would be eaten or sacrificed to an unknown God. When the bartering was complete and a cargo selected for loading, the men, women, and children were stripped and shaved. Some might be branded to mark them as property of specific owners.

35 Matthews, A Voyage to the River Sierra-Leone, 144.
37 Matthews, A Voyage to the River Sierra-Leone, 144.
38 Matthews, A Voyage to the River Sierra-Leone, 152.
39 Canot and Mayer, Captain Canot, 102.
Naked and confused, Bilali and the others were then packed into the hold of a waiting ship to be transported into an uncertain life on the other side of the Atlantic. The horrors of the middle passage are well-known and amply documented. Until the ship reached land, the voyage was fraught with contingency. Unfavorable winds might leave a vessel bobbing in the doldrums as supplies of food and water dwindled. An undetected case of smallpox could decimate a cargo. Lack of sanitation and the constant rocking and roiling of the ship could slowly—and literally—wear down the numbers of unfortunate captives. The best that both the crew and cargo could hope for was a quick and uneventful journey.

It is probably impossible to determine which particular ship ferried Bilali from Africa’s coast to Carriacou, but the narrow window of his disembarkation reduces the number of potential ships to a fairly small figure. Carriacou does not appear to have received slave ship traffic directly from Africa. Instead, two markets stand out as the reasonable sources of Carriacou’s enslaved laborers. The small island might have received imported Africans from St. Vincent, to the north, but it was best connected both politically and commercially to its neighbor Grenada, to the south. Between 1787 and 1790, Grenada accepted 85 slave ships directly from all parts of Africa, which disembarked almost 23,000 individuals. Of that number, however, only thirteen ships originated in Senegambia or Sierra Leone, where Bilali was loaded. These ships deposited 3,529 new Africans in Grenada. The scale of the trade in St. Vincent was significantly smaller—during the same span, St Vincent brought in 8,598 Africans on 33

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40 http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?yearFrom=1787&yearTo=1790&mjslptimp=34400. The total disembarked for these years was 22,939.
ships, but only two ships carrying a total of 375 people hailed from Upper Guinea. Out of all the slaving voyages that crossed the Atlantic between 1787 and 1790, one of these fifteen ships probably secured Bilali in its hold.
### Table 3-1. Ships arriving in Grenada and St. Vincent from Senegambia and Sierra Leone, 1787-1790.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Ship</th>
<th>Year Arrived</th>
<th>Place of Arrival</th>
<th>Place of Embarkation</th>
<th>Slaves Embarked</th>
<th>Slaves Disembarked</th>
<th>Mortality ¹</th>
<th>Mortality Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eliza</td>
<td>1787</td>
<td>St. Vincent</td>
<td>Iles de Los</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliza</td>
<td>1787</td>
<td>Grenada</td>
<td>Iles de Los</td>
<td>442</td>
<td>405</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>8.37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Ann</td>
<td>1787</td>
<td>Grenada</td>
<td>Iles de Los</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>390</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concord</td>
<td>1788</td>
<td>Grenada</td>
<td>Sierra Leone River &amp; Bance Island</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliza</td>
<td>1788</td>
<td>St. Vincent</td>
<td>Sierra Leone River &amp; Bance Island</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fanny</td>
<td>1788</td>
<td>Grenada</td>
<td>Iles de Los</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.08%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fisher</td>
<td>1788</td>
<td>Grenada</td>
<td>Sierra Leone River &amp; Cape Mount</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>412</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>8.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisa</td>
<td>1788</td>
<td>Grenada</td>
<td>Gambia</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brothers</td>
<td>1789</td>
<td>Grenada</td>
<td>Sierra Leone River</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8.29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crescent</td>
<td>1789</td>
<td>Grenada</td>
<td>Sierra Leone River</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8.51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duke of Buccleugh</td>
<td>1789</td>
<td>Grenada</td>
<td>Sierra Leone River &amp; Bance Island</td>
<td>373</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fanny</td>
<td>1789</td>
<td>Grenada</td>
<td>Sierra Leone River</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret</td>
<td>1789</td>
<td>Grenada</td>
<td>Sierra Leone River</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8.59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martha</td>
<td>1789</td>
<td>Grenada</td>
<td>Sierra Leone River</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7.35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliza</td>
<td>1790</td>
<td>Grenada</td>
<td>Iles de Los</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4157</td>
<td>3904</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>6.14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ Mortality is calculated based on the difference between the number of slaves embarked and disembarked, which is recorded for each voyage in the sample. Mortality percentage is based on the number of deaths divided by the total number embarked.
Each of these ships offers a snapshot of unimaginable suffering—each also provides some insight into the frightful passage Bilali endured across the Atlantic. During his time in the smothering hold, Bilali was surrounded by others who, like him, did not know where they were going or how long the passage would last. One small measure of good fortune for the captives was that the journey from Upper Guinea to Grenada was relatively quick, and ships could traverse the 3,400 mile distance in about five to seven weeks.¹ The captives aboard these ships struggled to find room for themselves in the dark hold. Most of these fifteen ships departed England before the passage of the Dolben Act, which was intended to reduce the number of individuals that slavers could pack into a ship based on its registered capacity. In the final years of the British slave trade ships averaged one slave per ton of burden, but Bilali and his shipmates probably found themselves packed in at double that ratio, if not higher.² On average, the ships in question carried 1.97 slaves per ton—but none carried less than 1.4 and one held as many as 2.7 slaves per ton. These figures give some sense of how the trauma of individual Africans grew into a shared ordeal. If Bilali were among the cargo of the smallest and least packed of these voyages, he would have left the African coast with 174 other captives. Were he part of the largest cargo, but still not the most crowded, he would have been one of 450 who struggled to survive their transportation.

¹ Four of the voyages indicate the duration of the middle passage. The shortest was the Fanny in 1788 at 35 days and the longest was the Martha at 46 days. The other two were a repeat voyage by the Fanny and the Margaret, at 44 and 42 days respectively.

² Herbert Klein, The Atlantic Slave Trade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2010), 151. Klein calculates an average of 2.6 slaves per ton prior to Dolben’s Act of 1788 and a ratio of 1.0 slave per ton after the Act’s 1799 revision.
Bilali was fortunate to have survived amid the death and suffering of the middle passage. A multitude of factors contributed to mortality aboard slave ships leaving Africa. Beyond the inadequate provisions and disease, the ever-present likelihood of African resistance could lead to additional deaths for the captives and crew. This was especially true for voyages that departed from Upper Guinea. Compared with other places on the African coast, it appears that for ships leaving Senegambia and Sierra Leone, “shipboard revolts were three to five times more frequent than one might expect.”³ This might be attributed to several factors, including the numbers of captives who were soldiers or the political instability that led to the sale of groups of people who felt their sale to Europeans was unjust.⁴ Had Bilali been on the Eliza in 1790, the only revolt recorded in this sample, he would have experienced this first-hand as the crew put down an insurrection, which might have contributed to that voyage’s higher-than-average mortality. Whatever the cause, Bilali saw the number of his African shipmates slowly decrease as his ship pushed slowly westward. Owing, perhaps, to a dose of good fortune or uncommon cleanliness, several voyages witnessed only a few deaths. On most of the ships, however, slave mortality hovered around eight percent. Though it difficult to see this withering of human life in a positive light, the African cargoes of these


⁴ Richardson, “Shipboard Revolts,” 88.
ships were a little more fortunate than many leaving the region at the same time, among which slave mortality averaged about ten percent.⁵

In the end, it is possible that Bilali was aboard any of these ships. For those voyages marked as having departed the Sierra Leone River or Iles de Los, too little is known about their lading to venture a more specific guess about the likelihood of him being on one ship or another. Had Bilali left the African coast at the Gambia River, though, he could have reached Grenada on only one vessel, the *Louisa* in 1788, which adds an intriguing, if unverifiable, level of specificity to Bilali’s travels. Of course, it is possible that Bilali’s voyage is not recorded in the Slave Trade Database. Some ships that left Upper Guinea sailed to other ports in the Windward Islands, and there is a chance that he might have arrived in Grenada or Carriacou through the networks of intra-colonial trade. While possible, this seems unlikely. Ships arriving in other ports that might have transshipped cargoes to Grenada, like Dominica, for example, could easily sell their cargoes to foreign vessels under the Free Port Act of 1787.⁶ The same act also granted Grenada access to foreign traders. In these places, market forces had the power to pull slave cargoes away from their port of arrival and toward other parts of the Caribbean after local obligations had been met. For example, Grenada reported to Parliament in 1787 that it received 3,713 new captives from Africa and exported 536 to

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⁵ On the 156 ships for which suitable data exist, mortality averaged 9.9 percent. This figure includes ships of all nations and destinations that left Senegambia and Sierra Leone between 1787 and 1790. These numbers exclude ships that increased their cargoes during passage or that were captured or destroyed.

foreign ports.\textsuperscript{7} In the following year, it retained 4,893 of the 7,436 Africans who arrived. By virtue of its new free port status, Grenada experienced a rising flood of ship traffic in the years after 1787. In 1792, for example, at least 361 foreign ships passed through the island; either to sell their cotton, sugar, or indigo, or to buy slaves and manufactures.\textsuperscript{8} This figure does not account for British vessels that stopped there. By any estimation, St. George’s, Grenada was a bustling port.

As their ship docked in the harbor, Bilali and his shipmates who survived the middle passage relived some of the experiences of their lading. They were scrubbed clean, rubbed with oil, and prepared for the marketplace. Those who were purchased to fill pre-arranged orders would have gone directly to their new owners, while the rest faced the auction block. When Bilali stepped off of the slave ship he stepped into an uncertain future and a bewildering scene. The port and then the market buzzed with activity. Longshoremen and porters shuttled goods and people to their respective warehouses while prospective buyers milled around the marketplace to examine those they hoped to purchase. Unlike at his first sale, where many different people were collected together to form a cargo, the group of Africans who had endured so much together was now to be split and scattered into the plantations of Grenada and places beyond.

When Bilali stood in the slave market he was, to the host of eager bidders, a nameless figure divorced from his African past. The value of his literacy, faith, lineage, and ethnic molding mattered little to the planters who examined his body for signs that

\textsuperscript{7} House Of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century, Sheila Lambert, ed., Volume 67, George III, Slave Trade 1788-1790, (Wilmington: Delaware, Scholarly Resources Inc.), 431.

\textsuperscript{8} Armytage, Free Port System, 150.
he could work in the fields. The auctioneer or the *St. George’s Chronicle and Grenada Gazette* might have advertised the cargo as hailing from Sierra Leone or the Gambia, but probably offered little more as to Bilali’s origins. It is doubtful that any additional information would have mattered much to the assembled buyers, though what they did know of his coastal origins might have sparked some prejudice about his fitness for labor. According to a doctor who wrote about his experience caring for West Indian slaves in the 1780s and 1790s, Africans from Senegambia were “a handsome race of people…with bodies tall and well limbed.” “Many of them,” he described, “converse in the Arabic language and some are instructed even to write it. They are excellent for the care of cattle and horses…though little qualified for the ruder labours of the field.” If these ideas were in the mind of the prospective buyers, they were hardly an endorsement for Bilali’s purchase. One factor they could not have overlooked, however, was his height. Those who remembered Bilali in his later years said that he was very tall. This fact certainly would have made him stand out among his peers in the marketplace. Had they known or suspected that he was Fula, it might also have led prospective buyers to imagine him as being well-suited for particular types of labor—

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9 The *St. George’s Chronicle and Grenada Gazette*, which began in 1788, was the sole newspaper at the time of Bilali’s arrival in Grenada. See: Howard S. Pactor, *Colonial British Caribbean Newspapers, A Bibliography and Directory* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 49-50.


11 Collins, *Practical Rules*, 41-42; Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, Vol II (Philadelphia: Humphreys, 1806), 266. Bryan Edwards agreed with this sentiment, arguing that Fulas were “in general…not well adapted for hard labour.”

12 Georgia Writers’ Project, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (1940; Athens: University of Georgia Press: reprint 1986), 166; see also, Benjamin Goulding Affidavit, 12 Oct 1931, Box 2:3, Francis R. Goulding Collection, MS 2807, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries.
Fulas, for example, were often tasked with managing livestock, given their experience with that work in Africa.\textsuperscript{13} With rude labor as the basis of their economic livelihoods, the men who valued Bilali did so on his form and strength, not his intellect. Over the next decade, however, this would change, and Bilali’s value within the plantation system would be based more on his skill than muscle. For now, though, the market succeeded in bringing seller and buyer together, and once the payments were settled, Bilali found himself moving toward Carriacou in the possession of a Scotsman named John Bell. After spending weeks chained in the hold of a slave ship bound for points unknown, Bilali must have felt no small trepidation as he boarded the packet to Carriacou. This voyage was certainly shorter and less confined, but no more reassuring.

Carriacou had long been a neglected French possession before the British acquired it as part of the settlement of the Seven Years War in 1763. In 1779 the French regained control only to relinquish it to the British again in 1783 after the Treaty of Paris.\textsuperscript{14} Almost immediately, migrant Scots took their place alongside a handful of resilient French planters to occupy the whole of the crescent-shaped, thirteen-square-mile island. Carriacou’s principal crop was long staple cotton. A census in 1776 noted that the island produced 772,763 pounds of cotton along with 133,495 pounds of sugar and 8,332 pounds of indigo.\textsuperscript{15} By the end of 1790, though, the Governor did not even

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}


\item[15] “State of Carriacou and the other Grenadine Islands,” transcribed in Donald Raymond Hill, “‘England I Want to Go’: The Impact of Migration on a Caribbean Community,” (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1973), Appendix A.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
mention sugar and indigo in his reports to London; instead he focused on the impressive figure of 1,148,876 pounds of cotton produced by the labor of the island’s residents.\textsuperscript{16}

To Bilali, Carriacou must have seemed a strange and provincial place. The island was small and hilly, with a peak at each end and a ridge running down its center. Compared with his African home, Carriacou’s population was sparse and scattered, lacking any real signs of urban life. In 1790, the sole town, Hillsborough, housed only about 76 people: one constable, a few doctors, sundry tradesmen with their enslaved workers, and a handful of free blacks. At a time when Timbo’s population was at least 7,000, Carriacou’s total population stood at 3,495, fewer than 100 of whom were white. Since 1776, the island had seen a net increase of only about 250 enslaved residents.\textsuperscript{17}

In Bilali’s eyes, the setting certainly would have seemed rustic. Another strange feature he would have noticed was the odd mix of language on the island. While the new British arrivals spoke English, the dominant language among the enslaved population was a variety of Creole French.\textsuperscript{18} To what extent English had penetrated the slave quarters is difficult to determine, but at least some level of bilingualism existed at this time as seen in the example of Jack, a runaway from Carriacou, who spoke “both French and

\textsuperscript{16} British National Archives, CO 101/31, Letter from Edward Matthew to Lord Grenville, 7 January 1791. The produce figures are dated 1 September 1790 and may reflect only a portion of the year’s crop.

\textsuperscript{17} According to “State of Carriacou,” the white population in 1776 was 86 and the enslaved population 3,153.

\textsuperscript{18} Ronald F. Kephart, "Broken English": The Creole Language of Carriacou (New York: P. Lang, 2000), 24. Even through the turn of the twentieth century, Creole French was the first language of some of Carriacou’s residents.
English” according to a 1790 advertisement.\textsuperscript{19} Perhaps the only thing that did not seem unusual to Bilali was the cultivation of cotton, which was common in Futa Jallon. This familiarity with cotton probably increased Bilali’s value to Bell in the long run, even if he did not know so at the beginning.

In the 1780s, as Carriacou was enjoying a period of expansion, John Bell was keen to capitalize on the opportunities there. Based on his appearances in the land records of Carriacou, Bell seems to have been an important figure in the plantations of the northern end of the island. Most of these documents are sales or conveyances, not censuses, so it is not possible to locate Bilali in them. Nevertheless, there is good evidence to suggest that Bilali spent a span of time in Carriacou before he was moved by Bell to the Bahamas. In an appraisal of Bell’s Bahamas holdings in February 1801, Bilali is listed along with his wife, Phoebe, and their four children, and the oldest of these children was reported to be ten years old.\textsuperscript{20} Given that Bell had received his Bahamian lands through a Crown grant scarcely ten years earlier, the timing of events makes it unlikely that in the Bahamas Bilali would have had time to find a wife, settle down on a new plantation, and for her to have carried a child that would have been ten years old by the end of 1800.\textsuperscript{21} This timeline suggests that Bilali and his wife arrived together in the Bahamas with their infant child after Bell received the grant. This is reinforced by the fact that several children of other families on the plantation were


\textsuperscript{21} Bahamas Government Records, 1700–1860, Old Series volume, Book F-1, 127, 128, 142.
thirteen years old at the appraisal, which places those births well ahead of their arrival in the Bahamas. As if to suggest something of their provenance, one of these families also had a young child named “Carriacou.” Still, a variance of several months could affect the interpretation of Bilali’s arrival; information about his wife, however, gives a strong link with Carriacou. When interviewed as an ex-slave in Georgia in the 1930s, Bilali and Phoebe’s granddaughter recalled some of the words spoken by their family—a language the granddaughter did not understand—that were clearly a variety of French.²² French is not a language Phoebe or her daughters would have acquired or found very useful in the Bahamas, but is a language we would expect her to know had she lived in or been born in Carriacou. These pieces of evidence together suggest that Bilali lived in Carriacou from at least the early months of 1790, if not earlier. The evidence of John Bell’s presence is much clearer.

Over the course of nearly a quarter century that Bell maintained an interest in Carriacou, he seems to have made steady efforts to increase both his plantation holdings and prestige. By the end of the century, he was thoroughly entwined in a network of commerce not only within Carriacou, but one that stretched to South Carolina, Scotland, and the Bahamas. John Bell’s first appearance in the land transactions of Carriacou dates to the late 1770s. In June of 1777, “John Bell, Gentleman of Carriacou” purchased a 38 acre tract at the northern tip of the island “in the quarter of Bay a L’eau” for £729 “current money.”²³ His next purchase was in 1784,

²² Georgia Writers’ Project, Drums and Shadows, 134. For example, her granddaughter said that Phoebe called water “deloe,” which is her rendering of “de l’eau.”

²³ Registrar’s Office, Supreme Court of Grenada, Book B3:343. These records are microfilm copies of manuscripts in the Registrar’s Office, Supreme Court of Grenada, St. George’s, Grenada, West Indies,
when he bought a small adjacent plot of land, expanding his original plantation by about twelve acres.\textsuperscript{24} In this record he is listed not as a gentleman planter, but as a “Practitioner in Physick and Surgery.” This change in title might offer some clue to his activities in the seven years between the two purchases. At the very least, if he was working as a doctor to the island’s residents he would have enjoyed multiple revenue streams; one from planting cotton, and another from practicing medicine. Only a few years later, Bell took control of a plantation that was nearly double the size of his holdings at that point. The French owner of “Bellevue” sold the 113-acre plantation to settle debts, which gave Bell (now “Esquire”) a new estate with land and slaves worth nearly £4,000.\textsuperscript{25} By the middle of the 1790s, John Bell had increased his portfolio of holdings about 350 acres, adding £14,907 in land and laborers in 1793 alone.\textsuperscript{26}

Through his appearances in the land records, it is clear that John Bell was heavily invested in the land, labor, and capital of Carriacou’s cotton economy. He also gained some measure of social prestige—or responsibility, at least—as in 1798, Bell was named as one of three “Guardians of Slaves” for Carriacou under the auspices of “An Act for the better protection and for promoting the natural increase and population of Slaves within the Island of Grenada.”\textsuperscript{27} This position obligated Bell to visit each

\textsuperscript{24} Registrar’s Office, Supreme Court of Grenada, Book G3:518.

\textsuperscript{25} Registrar’s Office, Supreme Court of Grenada, Book N3:462. The plantation’s land and buildings were valued at £3,927.4s, though it is unclear whether the “divers Negro and other slaves” on the estate were included in that price.

\textsuperscript{26} Registrar’s Office, Supreme Court of Grenada, Book H4:378, 386.

plantation at least once every six months to examine the “cloathing, lodging, feeding, and maintenance” of the enslaved people on the island and empowered him to correct any abuses that he found. Bell’s medical experience and his long residence on Carriacou made him a good candidate for the Guardian post. But beyond these few facts—his landholdings, Guardian assignment, and supposed medical practice—little else is clear about John Bell’s identity. It appears that Bell was, indeed, actively practicing medicine on the island, as word had reached Scotland by 1783 that “Dr. John Bell, of the Island of Grenada” had “perfectly cured” a “black girl” of a tetanus infection through his unique intervention. He probably continued to practice the healing arts in the slave quarters of Carriacou, but the reference above is the only reliable source.

There was not a surplus of John Bells in the late-eighteenth-century Atlantic world—most of them, though, seem to have been physicians, which makes evidence about the early life of Doctor John Bell of Carriacou difficult to find. It is possible that Bell’s medical experience before coming to the island (and, perhaps, after) was as a doctor in either the slave trade or the British military. In December 1776, a Dr. John Bell wrote to the owner of the slave ship Thames about having survived an attempted insurrection on the Jamaica-bound ship as it waited in the Cape Coast road. This ship


30 Finding Bell proved a challenge. The disqualified list of John Bells includes: a notable surgeon of Scotland who lived to 1820; a doctor to the Sierra Leone colony who died in 1792; a British inspector of prisoner of war camps during the American Revolution; and a Loyalist of Rhode Island, among others.

arrived in the West Indies in April of 1777, which would have given Bell sufficient time to arrive in Carriacou for his earliest land transaction. Bell’s shipboard service remains in the realm of conjecture, though, as no other sources verify his labor as a ship’s surgeon.

Equally plausible—and better documented—is the possibility that Bell was a military surgeon before beginning his life as a planter. The London Medical Journal of 1784 noted the promotion of a John Bell who was “Surgeon of the late 94th regiment, to be Surgeon of the 5th regiment of foot.” This John Bell published at least two works related to his military service. The first was a long poem entitled “The Wanderer,” written in 1784 in honor of the Fifth Regiment’s officers. Bell identified himself in the document as the regiment’s Surgeon, but offers nothing of the nature of his position. The second piece was a medical tract published in 1791 concerning the health of British soldiers and sailors in the West Indies. The author of this work—an admonition about liquor provisions to the military—was the same John Bell who wrote “The Wanderer,” as he refers to his duties as surgeon of the 94th and 5th Regiments. At some point between 1784 and 1791 he mustered out of the service, citing his “former” position. Some clues to his earlier whereabouts come from this document, since in it he describes being stationed at the headquarters of the 94th in Jamaica in 1781. It is clear, then, that Bell was in the West Indies, practicing medicine, and earning the kind of salary that could


34 John Bell, An Inquiry into the Causes Which Produce, and the Means of Preventing Diseases Among British Officers, Soldiers, and Others in the West Indies (London: J. Murray, 1791).

35 John Bell, An Inquiry, xi.
fund his later acquisitions. Another source confirms his military service and might account for the time between his first land purchase in 1777 and his second in 1784. According to the *Medical Register* of 1783, John Bell was admitted to the Medical Society of Edinburgh in January 1778. The Register also notes his promotion to the position of Regimental Surgeon of the 94th in March 1780, and his acceptance as a surgeon of the Royal Navy in May 1782. Finally, Bell is listed among the ranks of “Surgeons and Apothecaries” in Antigua, apparently in 1783. With these kinds of military experience, it comes as little surprise that John Bell was named as a Captain in the Carriacou militia in 1787.

What emerges from these sources is a picture of an individual who worked his way into the medical service of the British military and who was on the ground in the Caribbean for several years leading up to 1784, which would have left him well-situated to move to Carriacou after the island returned to British possession. Within Carriacou, Bell built a network of plantation holdings in the 1780s and 1790s that extended his influence across much of the island. His ongoing interest in the plantation system there included not only cotton agriculture, but likely a medical practice, too. Beyond the

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36 *The Medical Register for the Year 1783* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1783), 140. In the aforementioned *Inquiry*, Bell identifies himself as a member of the Medical Society of Edinburgh; John Bell, *An Inquiry*, xi.

37 *Medical Register*, 155, 162.

38 *Medical Register*, 170.

39 *An Almanac, Calculated for the Island of Grenada and the Grenadines* (St. George, Grenada: George Burnett, 1787) unnumbered page.

40 Bell is listed as a planter, not a surgeon in the 1790 census of Carriacou. Several other residents were registered as surgeons, but it seems reasonable to assume that Bell provided medical care to his own laborers and, possibly, those of neighboring plantations.
commercial network that joined his various estates, Bell also participated in a social network that linked him with his enslaved workers and them with each other.

Bilali’s time in Carriacou—brief though it might have been—was his introduction to the plantation system, with new and unfamiliar labors, people, and customs. His first challenge in his new home was to survive. The middle passage left Africans weakened—if not broken—in both body and spirit and often malnourished to the point of illness. In this diminished state, Bilali would have been susceptible to any of the wide range of “fluxes” or “fevers” that attacked and killed new arrivals. He was also more vulnerable to insect-borne diseases in the islands, since they were less prevalent in the highland environment where he had been raised. Even if dysentery, pneumonia, or tropical disease spared him immediately, he was still not out of danger. The first few years on a plantation, when slaves learned the habits of work and discipline and acclimated to the environment, took a heavy toll on their numbers. Planters called this process “seasoning” and expected that it would take the lives of some of their workers. Mortality from seasoning varied across the region, but it is possible that as much as one fourth of the Africans arriving via the transatlantic trade might have died within their first three years in the islands.

To help Bilali gain his strength and health, Bell wanted Bilali to be well-fed and cared for as quickly as possible. If another Fula were on the plantation, Bilali would

have been put under his direction. Planters in Grenada felt that “a seasoned Slave is particularly desirous of taking a new Negro of his own Country in his House,” and it was customary that “Masters or Managers always put such new Negroes under the Care of the most trust-worthy, where they learn their Work, and by degrees to cultivate the own Ground, and to subsist themselves.”

45 A seasoned and skilled mentor helped to guide Bilali through the transition to plantation life. As he became more accustomed to his situation, Bilali certainly struggled to find some stability in this new environment; seeking out other Fulas, other Muslims, and other things to help anchor himself in what was surely a quickly-changing world.

He did not need to search far to find other Muslims in Carriacou. One of Bell’s plantations housed two men who almost certainly shared Bilali’s faith. These men, Mahomet and Buccarie, lived on Bell’s Kindeace plantation in early 1792. 46 Names like these make for easy identification of Muslims, while English and French names probably mask the identities of other Muslims. Overall, the odds are good that there were other Muslims living on Bell’s plantations or on neighboring farms. Given Carriacou’s small size and the breadth of Bell’s holdings—at most, his plantations were no more than four or five miles apart—it would not have been difficult for Muslims in different parts of the island to locate each other.


46 Grenada Supreme Court, F4:15, 18 May 1792. This appears to be the earliest slave register for the Kindeace estate. Bukhari is the name of a Muslim author who recorded some of the traditions of the Prophet, called Hadith.
Whites in Carriacou and Grenada also acknowledged the presence of Muslims and Muslim practitioners in the enslaved population; and their observations speak to the state of Islam there. “The Negroes distinguished by the Name of Mandingoes,” wrote an agent named Spooner representing Grenada and St. Vincent in 1789, “are generally Mahometans by Profession, and bear the external Marks of it.” From this comment, we can discern several things, the first of which is that the Muslim population was large and distinct enough that it could be associated with a specific ethnic identity. While the agent accepted that not all Mandingoes were Muslim, his comment reflects the common practice of using “Mandingo” as a kind of shorthand for “Muslim,” irrespective of an individual’s real ethnic identity. Still, there were enough Muslims that whites seemed to notice them. More important is the fact that these Muslims were identifiable by the “profession” of their faith. Rather than citing a vague group of supposed Mandingoes or Muslims, the informant noted that he saw Muslims in the islands who expressed their faith publicly, probably through their prayers, customs, and attire. In whatever ways the population of Muslims in and around Grenada might be obscured to us today, the governing class of the islands in the eighteenth century was keenly aware of their presence and, perhaps, their power. The agent told Parliament that many of the Muslims “know very little of [Islam’s] Doctrines or Tenets,” hinting at the difficulties they might have faced in preserving their faith without texts or teachers. Nevertheless, he saw the possibility for certain individuals to wield some power within and over the

47 Lambert, Vol 69, 376.


49 Lambert, Vol 69, 376.
community—individuals who either retained status that they possessed in Africa, or who rose to new positions in the institutional vacuum of the islands. Spooner seemed suspicious of the legitimacy of these new leaders, but described a social and religious hierarchy wherein, “their Priests, called Mirabous, do not claim any Skill, but have not less Influence over their Sick, than the Obeah-men over the other Negroes Natives of Africa.” Some religious practitioners clearly found themselves in a position to minister to the community of Muslim faithful, applying their skills and experience to guide others through the trials of illness and suffering in the plantations. We find in Spooner's account a Muslim population struggling, perhaps succeeding, to maintain faith and order in spite of the fissures created by transatlantic separation.

These kinds of interactions must have occurred between and across plantations. Indeed, as Bell enlarged his portfolio of land and chattels, he joined different plantations and their populations in Carriacou under common management. Under Bell’s ownership his plantations continued to grow cotton, unlike his neighbors in St. Vincent and Grenada where sugar was both established and ascending. Since cotton plantations on Carriacou customarily used the task labor system, Bell likely focused on the financial management of his business and left the daily operations to a few trusted drivers. Under the task system, enslaved drivers typically measured out specific jobs to be performed for the day and distributed those tasks among the workers according to their age, strength, and skill. While they might have consulted with a white manager or

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50 Lambert, Vol 69, 376.


52 Higman, *Slave Populations*, 179.
overseer about the work to be done, drivers were ultimately responsible for making sure that the plantation ran smoothly. Bilali eventually occupied one of these trusted positions for John Bell. That would have been the culmination of a long journey, which began on Carriacou under the supervision of an elder African, who guided Bilali in the habits of tending cotton, growing provisions, and navigating the plantation hierarchy. For the first year, some of his food was provided and prepared for him.\textsuperscript{53} Eventually, though, Bilali would have learned enough to live on his own by himself or with a few others in a separate stone or wooden house. When he was not working in the fields, Bilali maintained a provision plot to supplement whatever rations Bell supplied. Judging by the produce of some neighboring plantations, Bell’s slaves likely grew corn and cassava as their primary food crops.\textsuperscript{54} In addition to these staples, workers were given some measure of salted beef, fish, and pork, though Bilali would have chosen to avoid the latter.\textsuperscript{55}

After Bilali settled into the rhythm of the plantation, he turned his interests toward finding a spouse. In the time between his seasoning and their move away from Carriacou, Bilali and Phoebe joined in a life-long partnership.\textsuperscript{56} Bell was under no legal obligation to recognize or endorse their union, yet he did so, as they remained together

\textsuperscript{53} Lambert, Vol 69; p 366. Committee of the Grenada legislature. “New Negroes are usually fed in a Mess with Victuals prepared for them Twice or Thrice a day, for the space of Twelve Months or longer, until they are found capable of raising their own Provisions, and of subsisting with the usual Plantation Allowance.”

\textsuperscript{54} Slade, “Estates,” 507, 518. According to Slade, the plantations of the Urquhart family seemed to shift from cassava to corn, which they grew as their primary crop when cotton was not in season.

\textsuperscript{55} Slade, “Estates,” 518.

\textsuperscript{56} Bahamas Government Records, 1700–1860, Old Series, Book E-2, Pages 290-295. Bilali and “his wife Phoebe” appear in an inventory of Bell’s Caicos estate taken in February 1801. A detailed examination of the inventory appears in Chapter 3.
in Caicos as their family grew. Bell’s own experiences might have made him keen to respect the ability of slaves to marry. In 1787, he came into possession of Bellevue plantation, which had belonged to a French proprietor named Pierre Servant. One of the terms of this sale was that Bell was to set aside an annuity to support Servant’s “natural Daughter named Alsaire.”57 While Servant acknowledged this enslaved woman as his daughter, it seems that fact did not immediately justify her freedom, as an inventory of the plantation at that time listed one “Alzire” among the estate’s property.58 Gaps in the records, unfortunately, make it unclear whether she was enslaved or free. It appears, though, that her status was eventually resolved, as Alsaire and John Bell married at some point before 1800. In his will, Bell bequeathed to his “Mallotto Girl Alzee and hir Child Marian” twenty slaves and a small plantation adjacent to Bellevue.59 After Bell’s death in 1801, she married the plantation manager, William Bell (no relation to John Bell) and moved with him first to New Zealand and then to Scotland.60 John Bell might have seen his marriage to Alsaire as a way to protect his financial interests, since her father’s terms compelled Bell to give £400 for her support. Still, he was under no apparent legal obligation to free her, yet he did. His experiences with Alsaire must have made him more aware of the fragility of relationships within the enslaved community. The evidence of persistent relationships between enslaved men and women on his plantations suggests that he encouraged and supported slave unions. Nevertheless,

57 Grenada Supreme Court, N3:462, 13 July 1787.
58 Grenada Supreme Court, D4:124, 25 July 1787.
59 Grenada Supreme Court, H2:217, 3 January 1800.
whatever lessons he learned from his own marriage did not push him to free his married chattels. Even under slavery, though, Bilali’s marriage to Phoebe gave them both a measure of stability in a tempestuous world. This support soon proved valuable as they faced a new set of challenges when Bell moved them nearly 1,000 miles away from Carriacou.

Early in 1789, John Bell began to turn his attention to expanding his holdings beyond the borders of Carriacou and looked to the Bahamas as a site for a new plantation. Between 1789 and 1791, Bell made several trips to the Bahamas to try to secure more land. In the end his efforts paid off, as in 1791 he acquired three tracts on Grand Caicos Island by way of grants from the crown. Whatever Bell’s motivations for wanting more land, this was a puzzling move. He already owned or controlled several established cotton plantations on Carriacou with intact slave workforces. The fact that he purchased several tracts after 1791 suggests that there must have been other lands available on Carriacou for the right price. In the Bahamas, it appears that Bell was seeking a good bargain. The crown offered land grants in the Bahamas on very favorable terms to Loyalists who had been displaced by the American Revolution. Bell seems to have leveraged his position in the British military as a way to get free land. His maneuver was successful—crown grants on Caicos for Loyalist military service averaged about 300 acres, but Bell received more than three times that amount. With 1,100 acres of virgin soil at his disposal, Bell shifted a portion of his enslaved

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61 Bahamas Government Records, Book F-1, 127, 128, 142.

62 Charlene J. Kozy, “A History of the Georgia Loyalists and the Plantation Period in the Turks and Caicos Islands,” (PhD diss., Middle Tennessee State University, 1983), 86-87. Kozy states that the average military grant was 302 acres, compared with 189 acres for non-military claims.
workforce—including Bilali—to Grand Caicos, where they established two new cotton plantations.
CHAPTER 4
“THE BAHAMA ISLANDS ARE AT THIS TIME RISING INTO CONSEQUENCE”: BAHAMIAN MIGRATION, COTTON, AND SLAVERY IN THE 1790S.

In the first week of May 1789, the Bahama Gazette heralded the arrival of Dr. John Bell from Grenada as one of the week’s newsworthy happenings. Judging by his inclusion in the newspaper’s regular roster of shipping news, it would seem that at least some of the Gazette’s readers in the Bahamas probably knew Dr. Bell. Those among the growing Bahamian planter class who did not know Bell personally would certainly have appreciated his situation as he stepped off of the schooner Bascome and onto the busy streets of Nassau that late spring day. Bell, like other aspiring planters, came to the Bahamas in the late 1780s with sanguine expectations of prosperity and power from the islands’ recent boom.

The bales of long-staple cotton that greeted Bell in Nassau’s port frontage were a sign of what he hoped to achieve. In the years just prior to his arrival, cotton swelled from 2,500 to almost 8,000 acres under till, and in 1787, for example, 219 tons of cotton were heaved into the holds of ships to feed England’s hungry mills. Those bales of cotton lint—planted, picked, cleaned, and pressed by black hands—were a familiar sight to Bell. Furthermore, the multitude of African and African-American faces that greeted Bell were also a familiar sight to him and to the other whites who made their homes in the Bahamas. While this labor force probably appeared to be a timeless feature of Bahamian life, the enslaved people who formed the overwhelming majority of the islands’ population, like Bell, were also recent migrants.

1 Chief Justice Delancey to the Bahamas Grand Jury, Bahama Gazette, February 28, 1789.

In choosing to establish a new plantation there in the 1790s, John Bell was part of a crucial transition in the Bahamas. During the last decade of the eighteenth century, the Bahamas experienced a multitude of changes that were in many ways related to the development and decline of cotton agriculture. Within a few years, the enthusiasm that drew men like Bell to the Bahamas waned as cotton crops began to falter. By the turn of the century many planters abandoned the crop, while others abandoned the Bahamas altogether. Bell's experiences in this period mirror those of many others in the Bahamas, and thus by examining Bell's plantations, it is possible to gain some insight into the multiple migrations that brought black and white Bahamians together. These migrations affirm the framework offered by historian J. H. Elliott that sees the “creation, destruction, and re-creation of communities as a result of the movement, across and around the Atlantic basin, of people, commodities, cultural practices, and ideas.”

Indeed, the history of the Bahamas in this period is deeply imbued with the dynamics of community building and relocation.

Historians have understood that the 1790s were an important transitional period in the Bahamas, but that awareness has not translated fully into historiographical analysis. In some ways this decade is glossed more generally into the “Loyalist Era,” the period between 1783 and 1834. But it is difficult to understand the challenges and changes of early nineteenth century Bahamas without examining the final years of the eighteenth century. Undertaking an analysis of the 1790s, however, is a challenge, as the first censuses appear in 1805, and slave registration was not implemented until the

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1820s. Nevertheless, the period of roughly 1791-1801 is bookended by a few valuable sources that make an informed examination possible. British land grants to Loyalists and other immigrants began in the early-mid 1780s, but the last significant wave of crown grants ended in 1791. Thus, most of the planters who would try their luck in the islands were already present by that point, and the grant records provide names and locations of many of these planters. While there was certainly internal migration and land trading, the overall physical boundaries of the plantation system had been established by 1791. If the grant records offer a starting point to this analysis, then the local Bahamian newspaper provides an end. The *Bahama Gazette*, a biweekly newspaper written by and for Loyalist planters, is a valuable record of Bahamian society and culture between 1784 and the end of 1800. Beyond these sources, there also exist two travel narratives, one preceding and one following this period, that offer a snapshot of the islands around this time. These sources help give a sense of who was living in the Bahamas and what kinds of activities they pursued. Furthermore, those sources help outline the kinds of opportunities Bahamians, both black and white, imagined for themselves on the cusp of the nineteenth century. Finally, commercial agriculture in the Bahamas peaked during the 1790s. By the start of the decade, nearly every Bahamian planter was committed to cotton agriculture, the networks of exchange and communication that would support their businesses had been drawn, and many patterns of the plantation regime established within this time frame would persist for the next dozen or so years.

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Beyond a lack of sources, the Bahamas also suffer from an appearance of marginality. Historians have sometimes portrayed the Bahamas as peripheral to the British Empire because the colony did not produce sugar and because it bestowed neither great wealth nor prestige upon its proprietors, its residents, or the crown. Eighteenth-century Bahamians sometimes complained of their position as they bemoaned being in "this much neglected and unbefriended country." This stereotype of marginality might be as much a consequence of historiography as of reality. Certainly, the Bahamian economy paled in comparison to its sugar-producing neighbors, but the islands were something more than a mere backwater. For the Loyalists who relocated there, the Bahamas gave them a prime position to maintain social and economic ties with the American southeast. Beyond that, the Loyalists arrived in the Bahamas at a vital moment in the history of the industrial revolution. Concurrent with the Loyalist migration, technological advancements in the machinery of textile manufacture made the final decades of the eighteenth century an important time for the British cotton trade. New methods of mechanized spinning, particularly Arkwright's water frame, at the turn of the 1770s produced cotton thread that was strong enough to replace the linen that was previously used in the weft of rough cloth. British millers could begin to weave cloth made entirely of cotton for the first time—an innovation that the Crown viewed as being "laudable." Further advances in spinning technology both at the beginning and

5 Bahama Gazette, April 2, 1785.


end of the decade increased the volume and quality of cotton thread supplied to weavers.\textsuperscript{8} Thus, at the start of the 1780s, the British textile industry had the means to engage in the spinning and weaving of cotton as a full-time business in larger, more centralized factories.\textsuperscript{9} As its domestic population grew and its overseas trade continued to expand, demand for cotton in Great Britain increased significantly during the 1780s and 1790s. In the 1760s, for example, Britain imported about 3.5 million pounds of cotton. During the 1790s, that number increased to well over 28 million pounds.\textsuperscript{10}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Retained imports of raw cotton (in millions of pounds)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1760-1769</td>
<td>3.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1770-1779</td>
<td>4.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1780-1789</td>
<td>15.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1790-1799</td>
<td>28.64</td>
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</tbody>
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The Loyalists’ arrival in the Bahamas could not have had happened at a more opportune time. The thin Bahamian soil supported only cotton. Had the Loyalists arrived a decade earlier, this fact might have doomed the Loyalists to financial ruin and the Bahamas to failure. However, they came at the exact moment that demand for raw cotton was booming, which put them in a strategic position to fill the ever-widening gap between demand and supply in the British market. The opportunities Bahamians saw to push cotton toward British mills were augmented by London’s desire to pull cotton

\textsuperscript{8} Deane and Cole, \textit{British Economic Growth}, 183. Notable among these new technologies were the spinning jenny, patented by James Hargreaves in 1770, and Samuel Crompton’s mule, patented in 1779.

\textsuperscript{9} Deane and Cole, \textit{British Economic Growth}, 183.

\textsuperscript{10} Deane and Cole, \textit{British Economic Growth}, 51.
toward England. In February 1786, the Board of Trade in London heard petitions from cotton goods manufacturers hoping to increase affordable supplies of cotton wool, "in order that we may have from our own Islands the raw material in such perfection, as we are under the necessity of drawing from other foreign powers."\textsuperscript{11} The Board then sent notice to Britain's overseas territories that they should encourage local planters to begin or increase production. This request met with varied success in the different territories, but, apparently "[t]he greatest response to the circular was made in the Bahamas."\textsuperscript{12} It was there that Joseph Eve crafted a cotton gin that could speed the cleaning of raw long-staple cotton by several orders of magnitude. Eve's gin was put to market in 1788 as a consequence of these government subsidies. London also took other actions to sustain its domestic trade—actions that had direct and positive consequences for the Bahamas. In 1787, Britain passed the Free Port Act that allowed a handful of British Caribbean ports, including Nassau, to receive foreign commodities for transshipment to the metropole. This Act accrued real benefits to parties on both sides of the Atlantic, as Bahamians profited from shipping and England gained valuable French and Spanish crops.\textsuperscript{13} In their fortuitous position at the cutting-edge of the Industrial Revolution, Loyalist planters were able to make their new island home successful and profitable for a time as they fueled one segment of Britain's industrial complex. Their success


\textsuperscript{12} Edwards, \textit{Cotton}, 76.

presaged the meteoric rise of American short-staple cotton, which, as markets and technology matured, eventually overwhelmed the islands’ produce.

The Bahamas are not nearly as well-studied as other parts of the British Atlantic, and they have not drawn the attention of many scholars. However, the few historians who have researched and written on the islands have done so extensively and, consequently, have dominated the historiography.\textsuperscript{14} Other historians have examined slavery during the Loyalist, including Thelma Peters, who, in her 1960 dissertation on the Bahamas asserts that “Lacking gold, good soil, and abundant water the Bahamas failed to attract Spanish settlers. The British, willing to pick up scraps of islands where they could, eventually moved into the void.”\textsuperscript{15}

The Loyalist period provides one of the most fruitful fields for writing on Bahamian history. Craton and Saunders (both separately and in collaboration) have written chapters, articles, and monographs about the changes wrought by the Loyalists. Several other authors have also written about the Bahamas during and after the Loyalist migration as part of either general or island-specific studies.\textsuperscript{16} Several factors account


for the proliferation of scholarship on this period, which Craton and Saunders characterize as “one of the most crucial phases in Bahamian social history.”

First, the Loyalist migration stands as a symbol of changes within the British Empire vis-à-vis Spain. Despite decades of land grants, settlement, and expanding political economy in the islands, the British had only a specious claim to the territory. As Howard Johnson explains, “[a]lthough Spain never effectively occupied the Bahamas, its claim to the territory was not officially given up until 1783, by the terms of the Treaty of Versailles.” As the British came to formally possess the Bahamas, the same treaty ceded British East Florida into the hands of Spain. This transfer of East Florida to Spain in 1783 put Loyalist squatters in a position that demanded relocation. They had been forced by the American Revolution from their homes in Georgia and South Carolina toward refuge in Florida. After Versailles, a number of schemes were imagined by which they might negotiate command of the territory or possibly affirm allegiance to Spain, but for many evacuation seemed to be the best option. Those Loyalists who sought refuge in Florida became “small pawns on the chessboard of the New World, moved by great forces beyond their control.” In order to ease transition and encourage the exodus of Loyalists from East Florida (as well as Nova Scotia and New York) the Crown offered generous head rights and subsidies for those who moved to the Bahamas.

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17 Craton and Saunders, *Islanders*, 179.
18 Johnson, *Slavery to Servitude*, 3.
19 James, *Exuma*, 11.
Second, the Loyalists swelled the population of the Bahamas in a very short period of time. Encouraged by the opportunity to keep their slave property and the desire to flee American and Spanish mistreatment, Loyalists rapidly moved toward the islands. In the years prior to 1783, argues Thelma Peters, “Britain’s hold on the ragged, isolate, unfriendly island was due in large measure of the stubbornness of a few hundred Anglo-Saxons who had come in search of freedom and adventure and who refused to be dispossessed.”21 But the Loyalists comprised several thousands, not several hundreds, and “in the period between 1783 and 1790, approximately 1,600 whites and 5,700 slaves and free blacks from the United States settled permanently in the Bahamas.”22 These numbers pale in comparison to the nearly one hundred thousand Loyalists who fled the United States, but their impact on the Bahamas was significant. Those seven thousand migrants—of whom nearly seventy-five percent were enslaved—tripled the Bahamian population and caused at least seven new islands to be settled.23

Third, the Loyalists brought with them a new philosophy in which they imagined themselves at the helm of an ascendant plantocracy based on a widespread slave plantation economy. Cotton would be their crop—an unusual position in the British West Indies that were mainly devoted to sugar. None of this should be construed as suggesting that the Loyalists were solely responsible for the advent of slavery and cotton in the Bahamas. Cotton had a long history in the Bahamas prior to the Loyalists’

22 Johnson, Slavery to Servitude, 11.
23 Craton and Saunders, Islanders, 179.
arrival, and perhaps dated to the days of the Arawaks prior to Columbus’ arrival.24 There is evidence that cotton was being cultivated in 1721 by the islands’ first African slaves, and that in 1729 the local government passed an act to encourage cotton growing.25 It is helpful to remember, too, that enslaved Africans accounted for about one-half of the islands’ population prior to 1783. The Loyalists, then, were not wholly innovative, but they did change the scale of the slave economy.26

An example of this scale can be seen in the changing statistics of cotton agriculture. Peters argues that Loyalist “desire to raise cotton amounted almost to a mania.”27 As early as 1785 nearly 2,500 acres of cotton were being tended in the islands. Within three years that acreage had more than trebled.28 Crop yields were significant. By some contemporary estimates, the Bahamas produced close to one million pounds of long-staple cotton per year between 1789 and 1799, despite their ongoing battles with pests and soil depletion.29

Despite the new lust for cotton agriculture, conditions across the archipelago were often inauspicious. Loyalist migrants brought with them neither experience in cotton specifically, nor in agriculture generally.30 In the view of one historian, the “typical” Loyalist immigrant was usually “from Scotland or England, Presbyterian or

24 Craton and Saunders, Islanders, 32, 196.
26 Craton and Saunders, Islanders, 179.
28 Johnson, Slavery to Servitude, 12.
30 Johnson, Slavery to Servitude, 14.
Anglican, well-educated, and bred to accounting.” They “generally had little experience or training in agriculture, and...little interest in the hands-on operation of that enterprise.” In addition to their scant experience with cotton (although some had experience with rice and indigo), there were physical conditions that militated against their success. One visitor noted that “an acre or piece of arable ground here has indeed a fearful look, for there is to be seen hardly anything but rock, full of larger and smaller pits and holes.” The soil might be productive in different times and places, but nature also provided pests that hurt crops. Planters were aware of these dangers, but believed that they might be mitigated somewhat by their status as British colonists. Despite planters’ premonitions of both crop blight and metropolitan assistance (as evidenced in letters to the *Bahama Gazette*), only one of those came to pass. Chenille and red bugs attacked the cotton fields with vigor, but London sent no assistance other than “the appointment, for the most part, of weak and ineffectual governors, with little or no leadership ability.” As a consequence, cotton experienced periodic fluctuations in production due to pests and poor or improper cultivation. In fact, from 1800 to 1805 the cotton crop was so compromised that for two years exports were less than 1,500 pounds, and for the remaining three years no cotton left the Bahamas. In the face of this agricultural collapse, large numbers of Loyalists chose to return to the United States. At least one contemporary observer believed that over 3,000 of them had fled back to


33 James, *Exuma*, 78.
Georgia.\textsuperscript{34} It seems that “many prominent planters had left the Bahamas by 1800” as they found their enslaved labor forces without work to perform.\textsuperscript{35} Furthermore, the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, passed in 1807, prohibited British subjects from selling their slaves out of the empire, so some planters instead chose to move their slaves to Jamaica or Barbados. Others decided to remain, and continue to test their luck in the “much neglected and unbefriended country.”\textsuperscript{36} Some, however, did not have such an opportunity.

In early 1801, John Bell died, leaving behind a large estate of land and slave holdings. His property included more than 2,000 acres and nearly 100 enslaved workers divided between two plantations on Middle and East Caicos Islands. The most detailed information about Bell’s estate comes from an inventory made in late February 1801 after Bell’s death. The Bell inventory is not particularly unusual, but it is a valuable source. First, it allows us to see the outlines of a large cotton plantation and workforce. Bell’s “Increase” and “Industry” plantations and the laborers bound to them were not the largest in the Bahamas, but Bell was part of a small cohort of large Bahamian planters. The inventory also shows the state of a large cotton operation at the very moment when many of its neighbors were struggling to maintain good crops and were reevaluating their long-term options. It is possible to determine the value of his land, crops, tools, and slaves, and the detailed information given in the appraisal makes it possible to compare the material conditions of enslaved workers on Bell’s property with those elsewhere in

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{34} Johnson, Slavery to Servitude, 28.
  \item \textsuperscript{35} Johnson, \textit{Race Relations}, 27.
  \item \textsuperscript{36} Bahama Gazette (Nassau), 2 Apr 1785.
\end{itemize}
the Bahamas. The inventory is also valuable because it lists Bell’s slaves by name in families, connecting parents and children, spouses, and even those who were single and unattached. Some individuals have annotations listing their occupations or health conditions. Because of this demographic information, the Bell inventory can help demonstrate the connections shared between British Colonial North America, the Bahamas, and the United States.

The three men who signed the Bell appraisal made careful assessments of the estate’s lands, buildings, implements, and slaves. They also suggested something about the state of cotton and the economy of the Caicos. “Under the many disadvantages which lands on the Caicos must be valued at this present time,” they wrote, “we are at a loss how to proceed.” Land values appeared to be declining for some reason, either due to an excess of supply or a decrease in demand. Similar comments appear in the appraisals of neighboring properties from the same time, but remain similarly ambiguous. It is likely that declining cotton yields had pushed land values down and the resulting exodus of Bahamian planters had glutted the real estate market.

The men noted that “Increase” plantation comprised “about 1,470 Acres of Land 300 of which is in Cotton highly Cultivated, and 200 in pasturage.” This property held all the infrastructure needed to support a cotton operation, including residences, storage, and processing facilities. The improvements to the land amounted to £1,000, bringing the total for “Increase” to £3,743. They also valued Bell’s other lands: 1000


38 Bell appraisal.
acres at “Industry” plantation at £1,000, 300 acres on East Caicos at £150, and “A small key” worth £35. In total, Bell’s lands appeared to number near 2,800 acres with a total value approaching £5,000. Few other planters in the Out Islands were able to amass such acreage. While the note made by the appraisers points out the difficulties facing both cotton and land around 1801, Bell’s estate speaks to the success that a cotton planter might have been able to enjoy in the decade prior.

When Bell first arrived in the Bahamas in 1791, he was given three grants of land on the Caicos Islands. Two of these original tracts are identifiable in the estate appraisal—the “small key,” originally titled as “Eighty Acres lying and being on a Key,” and the 300 acre parcel on East Caicos.39 While no maps seem to be available from either the original grants or later, these two spots appear to match in both cases. The other grant Bell received in 1791 seems different, though. The final assessment of “Increase” measured at 1,470 acres, but the grant allocated in 1791 for the same location offered 720 acres. There appears to be no grant in 1791 for the land which eventually became “Industry” plantation. Thus, it seems that in the ten years between Bell’s arrival and death, he was able to more than double the acreage of one parcel and was able to assume ownership of another 1,000 acres beyond that.

Among the many avenues through which Bell might have gained these lands, two seem most plausible. Either Bell had sufficient capital or credit to purchase the additional land when he arrived in the Bahamas, or he used the profits from his cotton crops to expand his plantation holdings. Certainly, the appraisers might have misjudged the size of “Increase,” but probably not by more than double its real acreage. Instead,

39 Bahamas Government Records, Book F-1, 142, 128.
some combination of early purchase and later expansion is most likely. While it is not possible to speak with any great precision about John Bell's finances prior to his death, he appears to have come to the Bahamas with significant wealth.

The *Bahama Gazette* announced the voyage of “Dr. Bell” to the Bahamas in January 1790. The newspaper article told of Bell's misadventures after his leaky ship sought safe harbor in St. Eustatius in November of 1789. He was en route from “Cariacou, with 180 of his Negroes, to settle his estate in one of the Bahama Islands” when the Dutch governor threatened to charge him with importing slaves illegally. Bell and the governor agreed upon a fine, based on the fact that his enslaved cargo, according to an observer, “were all seasoned Slaves, regularly cleared out from the British settlement to another, and not one was attempted or meant to be landed in St. Eustatius.” This account of Bell's voyage shows some of the perils of navigation and negotiation in the Caribbean, and at the very least shows how success might depend on one's ability to patch leaks and line pocketbooks. More importantly, the article makes no reference to any other owners, ships, or slaves. It is possible that Bell was transporting 180 of his own from his plantations in Carriacou toward new opportunities in the Bahamas. It is also possible that he was operating as the supercargo of a slave ship belonging to someone else. In either case, Bell clearly had either capital of his own or the ability to leverage others' capital to his own benefit.

The newspaper account tells plainly of Bell relocating his plantation from Carriacou northward to the Bahamas, but gives no explanation as to why he moved, or

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40 *Bahama Gazette*, 5 January 1790. All quotes come from this article, which is cited as a reprint originally appearing in the *Antigua Journal* of 22 December 1789. Spellings are unchanged from the original.
why he had such troubles in St. Eustatius. To judge from the newspaper report of Bell’s voyage to the Bahamas, it would seem that he was financially sound. If all the 180 enslaved workers aboard the ship belonged to Bell, as the report suggests, then they would have represented significant wealth, both in terms of slave property itself, and as to the kind of plantation that would have demanded that much labor. Were he shipping his own slaves to the Bahamas for sale or selling a cargo of slaves on commission, the proceeds of such a sale would have been large. Within a few years of Bell's arrival, a cargo of Windward Coast slaves would sell in Nassau at $260 each for men and $250 for women.\(^{41}\) Having ready labor, either for use or for sale, at his disposal allowed Bell to turn his hand toward plantation agriculture in short time.

The land grants Bell received in early 1791 formed the core of his early plantation ventures and he was able to expand greatly those original lands. Craton and Saunders argue that most of the usable land throughout the archipelago was distributed following the “explosion of land grants” that occurred between 1785 and about 1795.\(^ {42}\) If a planter could not count on land grants after the early 1790s, he could turn instead to a growing real estate market. If the \textit{Bahama Gazette} can be trusted as a barometer of land sales and transactions, then it seems that would-be plantation owners had an opportunity to purchase land in nearly all corners of the Bahamas, including Caicos, throughout the 1790s. For example, in 1790, two parcels of 1,000 acres, “very well adapted to the Cultivation of Cotton,” were offered for sale on Middle Caicos.\(^ {43}\) Within the next four

\(^{41}\) \textit{Bahama Gazette}, 31 August 1792.

\(^{42}\) Craton and Saunders, \textit{Islanders}, 191-192.

\(^{43}\) \textit{Bahama Gazette}, 21 December 1790.
years, at least two more Caicos plantations were listed, one at 2,800 acres, and the other at 805 acres. Based on these accounts of land offerings, Bell would have had no problems expanding his operations.

There is good reason to believe that the people who migrated to the Bahamas were optimistic about their moves. Around the time Bell was making his way northward to the Bahamas, William Wylly published *A Short Account of the Bahama Islands*. Wylly was a prominent Loyalist in Nassau, controlling several plantations, and wielding significant political power. Wylly’s account smacks of boosterism. He lauded the islands’ strategic location for commerce, and praised the facility with which food crops could be grown. Owing to the “great abundance” of food, Wylly remarked, “The negroes are consequently fed at little expense, and without being dependent for their subsistence for supplies from abroad, which is too much the case in the other *West-India* Islands.” Apart from foodstuffs, “the climate would be equally favourable to Indigo, Tobacco and Vines,” he argued. But no commodity could stand in for cotton: “while that bears any thing like its present price, it would be idle speculation to attempt any other staple,” he wrote.

Bell and other planters may not have read Wylly’s book, but they would have certainly read the *Bahama Gazette*, and would have blackened their hands with all its twice-weekly ink about cotton. The newspaper literally swelled with news about slave

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44 *Bahama Gazette*, 27 July 1792; 21 March 1794.


auctions, “To be sold on Monday...Six Plantation Slaves, one of whom is a compleat Driver”; cotton exports, 989,981 pounds "exported from the Bahama-Islands in 1790", and marketing, “the 'Nassau Cash Price - Current' for clean cotton was 1s.5 to 1s.6 per pound.” By all appearances, cotton was the best option on which to grow one's fortunes, and Bell and his cohort were certainly optimistic. Reports of large and profitable crops from relatively small holdings fueled investment in cotton. Based on his experience in Carriacou, he had good reason to be hopeful about the future. The returns of Bell’s “Black Rock” plantation in 1790 shows that the eighty-nine acre farm used 110 slaves to produce a staggering 60,000 lbs of cotton.

At the time of Bell's death in 1801, 300 of the more than 1,400 acres at Increase plantation were “in Cotton highly Cultivated.” In addition to this, he had 200 acres of stone-walled pasture, on which lived ten horses, twenty-three head of cattle, and thirty-nine sheep. In order to process and the tons of cotton that would have sprouted from his 300 acres, Bell had a handful of implements to prepare the cotton for sale. A mix of older and new cleaning equipment was on hand, with five “compleat” foot gins backed up by “a Parcel” of older ones. Bell also had another “Cotton Cleaning Machine,” which might have been a larger roller gin like those made by Joseph Eve, although this is uncertain since the stated value of the machine was only £8, less than the value of the

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48 Bahama Gazette, 21 March 1794.
49 Bahama Gazette, 7 January 1791.
50 Bahama Gazette, 23 September 1791.
51 British National Archives, CO 101/31/25.
52 Bell appraisal.
53 Bell appraisal.
expensive and complicated Eve gin. As might be expected of what was essentially a monocrop plantation, Bell invested heavily in cotton production. With his land needs clearly met, and his equipment capital in place, labor remained Bell's most valuable and essential asset.

Thus far, Increase has appeared in the abstract, as a plot of land on which Bell attempted to establish himself as a planter and businessman. While it was indeed a business, built as an ongoing calculation of debits and credits in Bell's now-absent ledger book, Increase was also a community composed almost entirely of enslaved workers and their families. The Africans and African Americans who lived on Bell's estate arrived there through a series of migrations that brought together people from all parts of the Atlantic littoral. Because of the sources available, it is possible to examine the specific origins of only a few of Increase's African residents. However, since slave importation into the Bahamas was limited in terms of both duration and volume, it is possible to make some observations about the migrations of enslaved Bahamians in aggregate. For the slaves of Industry and Increase, labor was defined by both the seasonal needs of long-staple cotton and the perpetual demands of growing provisions. As the waves of harvest seasons came and passed, Bell's black neighbors turned their attentions toward building fences, families, and communities. Using the combined data of Bell's estate and other plantations, some comparisons can be drawn between the material conditions of slaves at Increase and those living elsewhere.

Prior to arriving in the Bahamas, most of the islands' black residents had to survive a series of migrations that were always dangerous, often traumatic, and seldom voluntary. As mentioned above, Loyalist refugees, primarily from St. Augustine and East
Florida, fled to the Bahamas in the wake of the American Revolution. They took with them as much of their former estates as they could, which for many former planters meant their slave property. The exact number of slaves who arrived in this manner is difficult to ascertain, but Craton argues that they numbered about five thousand.\footnote{Craton and Saunders, Islanders, 188.} This accounts for only a small percentage of the total Loyalist exodus from the United States, but it ballooned the Bahamas’ population about three fold.\footnote{Craton and Saunders, Islanders, 179.} The effect on the out islands was immediate. Islands, like the Caicos, that were essentially uninhabited prior to the Loyalists’ arrival soon saw slaves outnumbering whites by as much as thirteen to one.\footnote{Craton and Saunders, Islanders, 260.}

As cotton acreage increased from the mid-1780s onward, planters supplemented the ranks of black loyalist migrants through direct importation from Africa. According to the most recent version of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, the Bahamas received approximately 2,100 Africans directly from Africa between 1789 and 1800.\footnote{http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?yearFrom=1789&yearTo=1800&sla1port=35200} Several cargoes of Africans listed in the Bahama Gazette do not appear in the Slave Trade Database, but only increase this total by about 125.\footnote{Laurie A. Wilkie and Paul Farnsworth, Sampling Many Pots: An Archaeology of Memory and Tradition at a Bahamian Plantation (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2005) 42.} These arrivals were probably the result of slaves leftover from voyages intended for or diverted from other Caribbean ports. The ship Orange, for example, disembarked 52 of its 119 Africans in
the Bahamas in the spring of 1799, while en route to its final destination in Havana.\footnote{http://slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces?yearFrom=1514&yearTo=1866&voyageid=36684; Wilkie and Farnsworth, 42.}

Smaller numbers of enslaved Africans, often advertised as “New Negroes,” were offered periodically in the \textit{Bahama Gazette} and appear to have arrived through channels outside of those recorded in the Slave Trade Database. In May 1789, for example, “a Consignment of Seventy-Two Windward Coast Negroes in high Health,” arrived from Barbados, and an individual promoted the sale of “18 Prime Windward Coast Negroes on six months credit.”\footnote{Bahama Gazette, 2 May 1789.} Transactions such as these in many ways reflect the movement of people, goods, and capital within the British Caribbean, including both direct importations from abroad and intracolonial exchanges. In the big picture of African and African American population in the Bahamas, these sales that do not appear in the \textit{Slave Trade Database} might increase the raw numbers of arrivals by several hundreds. If the two sales mentioned above are any indication, however, such slave sales might not have dramatically affected the overall distribution of African regional affiliation within the islands.

As Craton’s estimates and the \textit{Slave Trade Database} figures suggest, somewhat more than half of black Bahamians had roots in North America. Most of those who had a North American connection could look to Georgia or South Carolina as either a former or ancestral home, judging by the origins of white refugees.\footnote{Carole Troxler, “Uses of the Bahamas by Southern Loyalist Exiles” from “Loyalism and the Revolutionary Atlantic World” conference, 4-7 June 2009. 1. Troxler argues that “By the end of the Loyalist settlement period, former residents of Georgia and the Carolinas made up about 70 percent of the people who received lands as Loyalists in the Bahamas.”} Given this fact, it is
possible to draw some inferences about the African origins of slaves who moved from the North American lowcountry into the Bahamas. Based on the work of historian James McMillin, who analyzed patterns of slave arrivals in Georgia and South Carolina both before and after American Independence, no other slave-receiving colonies in this hemisphere absorbed a greater percentage of Senegambians than did British North America. “More than anything else,” McMillin argues, “the large number of Senegambian imports sets North America apart from the rest of the Americas during the colonial period.”

Tables I and II compare African origins for slaves arriving in Georgia and South Carolina in the years immediately preceding the American Revolution.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4-2. Regions of Origin for Slaves Entering Georgia, 1765-1775.\textsuperscript{63}</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Africa</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Senegambia</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sierra Leone</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Windward Coast</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Gold Coast</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4-3. Regions of Origin for Slaves Entering South Carolina, 1760-1774.\textsuperscript{64}</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Africa</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Senegambia</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sierra Leone</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Windward Coast</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gold Coast</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


\textsuperscript{63} McMillin, *The Final Victims*, 53.

\textsuperscript{64} McMillin, *The Final Victims*, 52.
While these data are not entirely conclusive, and contain a fair amount of uncertainty with regard to the generic “Africa” category, they suggest that Georgia and South Carolina’s slave owners purchased a relatively large portion of their slaves from the Upper Guinea Coast of Africa. Taking a longer view, McMillin found that the between 1720 and 1770 about forty-one percent of the Africans who entered the Lower South came from Senegambia, Sierra Leone, or the Windward Coast. Gold Coast arrivals increased these West African totals by about ten percent.\textsuperscript{65} On one hand, the knowledge that Southern North American slave markets were somewhat weighted toward Upper Guinea simply highlights some of the differences between North America and other parts of the Americas which showed no such connections with that part of Africa. More importantly, however, when the North American data are viewed in relation to slave imports into the Bahamas, some unique patterns emerge.

First, the cohort of Africans who arrived in the Bahamas during the 1790s showed somewhat less regional diversity than those arriving in British North America in the previous decades. Of the nineteen slave cargoes listed in the Slave Trade Database and the \textit{Bahama Gazette}, thirteen came from Senegambia, Sierra Leone, or the Windward Coast.\textsuperscript{66} Five cargoes listed no specific point of origin, and only one carried

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{65} McMillin, \textit{The Final Victims}, 54. McMillin lists the percentages as follows: Senegambia, 30%; Sierra Leone, 5%; Windward Coast, 11%, Gold Coast, 10%.
\item \textsuperscript{66} The following data are compiled from Wilkie and Farnsworth, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, and the author’s reading of the \textit{Bahama Gazette}. One cargo from Wilkie and Farnsworth has been omitted, since its information is ambiguous and listed only one African captive. This author’s data are more complete for the first half of the 1790s.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
slaves from the Gold Coast. Table III below provides some more specific data about the numerical breakdown of these voyages.

Table 4-4. Slave Cargoes Arriving in the Bahamas, 1789-1800.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region of Origin</th>
<th>Number of Cargoes</th>
<th>Number of Slaves</th>
<th>Percent of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>455</td>
<td>19.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senegambia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>11.96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>10.87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Windward Coast</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1131</td>
<td>47.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gold Coast</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>10.83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2391</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Compared against the data for Colonial British North America and those of the general British slave trade during similar periods, the Bahamas imports demonstrate an unexpected bias toward the Upper Guinea and, specifically, the Windward Coast. As a point of comparison, for example, Wilkie and Farnsworth argue that Sierra Leone and Windward Coast cargoes amounted to only about fourteen percent of the overall British Trade during the Loyalist period.\(^67\) Within the larger context of the African slave trade, and even the trade within the British empire, slave imports into the Bahamas during the 1790s were notably different from those in the decades immediately prior or following.

Whether these trends reflect the influences of supply or demand is a matter of some scholarly debate. Close analysis of slave export figures clearly demonstrates that the volume of trade from particular regions varied over time. Several factors affected these changes in the numbers of captive Africans boarding ships on the Atlantic, including changes in warfare, relative price of slaves within or across regions, and

\(^67\) Wilkie and Farnsworth, *Sampling Many Pots*, 58.
political changes among European or African governments. For example, jihads and other warfare caused a tremendous spike in slave exports from Upper Guinea between 1751 and 1775. In fact, more than half of all the slaves exported from the Windward Coast, and more than one fourth of those who left Senegambia, were shipped in that twenty-five year period.68 The ever-changing supply of slaves clearly had important impacts on the strength and character of slavery across the Americas. Demand for slaves, particularly demand for slaves of a specific region, was another important factor.

Some historians who examine North American slavery have long argued that Georgia and South Carolina slave purchasers actively sought Africans from regions of rice production: places such as Senegambia, Sierra Leone, and the Windward Coast. Buyers in the American lowcountry ascribed certain positive characteristics to the ethnic groups of those African regions—like intelligence, tractability or rice knowledge—while they eschewed Africans from other places. Being subject to supply forces far outside of their control, it seems that lowcountry planters did not always receive Upper Guinea slaves as frequently or in the numbers that they desired, yet newspapers and contemporary sources suggest that the demand rarely abated. When these same or similar planters found themselves exiled in the Bahamas, they found those regional preferences easily fulfilled. Many of the early shipments into the Bahamas during the 1790s were cargoes of new Africans transshipped from other points in the British Caribbean. For whatever reasons, those slave cargoes (often from the Windward Coast) did not find ready buyers in Barbados or Grenada, yet were quickly sold in the

Bahamas. While it may not be possible to extract precisely the relationship between supply and demand in the Bahamian slave market, a few inferences can be made. First, it is clear that a significant portion of the slaves who arrived in the Bahamas by way of loyalist migration, especially those from Georgia, had a connection to Upper Guinea. Furthermore, Loyalist planters who purchased newly-imported slaves in the Bahamas prior to 1801 were very likely to buy Africans from Upper Guinea. Finally, when these planters and their families fled back to the lowcountry, as many did to escape the collapse of cotton, the slave property they returned with fed coastal Georgia and South Carolina with numbers of Africans from Upper Guinea in proportions beyond what one would expect to find from Atlantic arrival records alone. These processes, which effectively clustered Africans from Upper Guinea, ultimately had a powerful impact on the contours of African American culture in coastal Georgia.69

Within the slave neighborhoods and plantations of Caicos and the Bahamas, this clustering process would have had more immediate consequences. In a general sense, these patterns suggest that the Creole populations arriving from North America and the saltwater slaves arriving via the Atlantic trade would have shared “a significant cultural heritage.”70 During and after the initial shocks of landing, auction, and seasoning, Upper Guinea Africans would have found that the slave barracks of the Bahamas echoed with familiar sights and sounds. We might fault one early-nineteenth-century visitor for undue

69 For more information on the cultural influences of Upper Guinea Africans on coastal Georgia, see: Lorenzo Turner, Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949) and Matt Schaffer, “Bound to Africa: The Mandinka Legacy in The New World,” History in Africa 32 (2005), 321-369. Among other things, these studies found strong evidence of Mande/Mandinka and similar Upper Guinea African linguistic forms in the speech of African Americans in coastal Georgia and South Carolina.

70 Wilkie and Farnsworth, Sampling Many Pots, 62.
enthusiasm when he observed that new Africans “beheld many of their own colour, whose appearance, friendship, and hilarity had the most powerful influence in rendering them contented and happy in their new scene of life,” but we should also not underestimate the impact that familiar languages, names, and practices would have had on these enslaved communities. While many of the social and cultural parallels between old and new African populations in the Bahamas rest on anecdotal or aggregate evidence, several of these intersections appear in more concrete terms. Religion, for example, is one.

The confluence of both older and newer streams of Upper Guinea Africans increased the likelihood that Islam would exist, and even thrive, in the Bahamas. Unfortunately, Bahamian records offer few comments on the general state of enslaved peoples’ religion. Government records note where and when different islands were formed into parishes, and the Society for the Preservation of the Gospel (SPG) sent missionaries into the field to ensure the spread of Anglicanism throughout both the black and white populations. As might be expected, there were strong currents of dissenting religious activity in the islands—many planters feared the leveling impulses of Methodism and Baptism as those religions gained both black and white (including some elite) adherents. Islam, however, was rarely, if ever, publicly acknowledged in official sources. As Bell’s plantation was being inventoried, however, an SPG missionary named Rose on another Bahamian island made an important observation. In one of his letters to SPG headquarters, he wrote that on Exuma there were “one thousand and

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seventy-eight slaves. Many of the negroes called themselves the followers of Mahomet."\textsuperscript{72} Rose seemed pleased with having won a handful of nominal converts to Christianity, but otherwise said nothing of this large Muslim enclave. Had Rose taken an interest in the religious life of the Caicos islanders, he might well have discovered a similar scene. The religious history of the Turks and Caicos is one of ecclesiastical neglect—they did not become a parish until 1795, and saw no SPG visits for several more years. In that environment, Islam likely flourished. In fact, it is possible to mark at least a small, yet prominent, Muslim presence on Bell's estates. As we know, Bilali and his wife, Phoebe, were both practicing Muslims.\textsuperscript{73} Whether they acted as missionaries or ambassadors for the spread of Islam in Caicos is unknown, but it is safe to assume that Bilali, Phoebe, and their five children constituted one part of a larger Muslim presence in their neighborhood.

The names of slaves on Increase and Industry, in particular those of the plantation's children, suggest Muslim affiliation. Names like Bellely (Bilali), Medina, Fatima, Hawa, Limatta, Yoma, Buccarrie, and Haminatta show that for Bell's enslaved families, African names served as important cultural markers. Moreover, the names listed above all have Islamic or Arabic antecedent forms and are found in areas of West Africa where Islam is influential. Having a Muslim name does not guarantee that an individual is an adherent of Islam, but, it does suggest that the cultural vocabulary which


\textsuperscript{73} Georgia Writers' Project, \textit{Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes}, Brown Thrasher Edition, 1986 (Athens, GA; University of Georgia Press, 1940), 161. Bilali and Phoebe are not specifically indicated as being Muslim in Bell's inventory. Within a few years, however, they and their children arrived in Sapelo Island, Georgia, and are documented in several sources as actively practicing Islam there.
influenced such a name choice would be one in which Islam was prestigious, hegemonic, or at least present. Thus, one would expect Muslim parents (or parents from regions of Muslim influence) to give their children Muslim names, and would not expect non-Muslim parents to give their children Muslim names. Aside from Bilali and Phoebe, several other Bell plantation families show Islamic naming patterns. One example is Caesar and Nanny, whose two children are listed as Ben and Medina. Medina is an important name to Muslims generally, but for some West African nations, it bears special significance as the name of a holy city in Mali. Another family is that of Glasgow and Nancy. Their three children were named Hawa, Fatima, and Mary Ann. Fatima is clearly a popular Muslim name, “Hawa” is the Arabic for “Eve,” and “Mary Ann” might well be an erroneous writing of “Miriam” by the transcriber. More compelling, however is the family of Pompey and Frances. Their four children are listed as Buccarrie, Abap, Fabara, and Limatta. The eldest and youngest child both bear the names of early followers of Muhammad who collected the Hadith, or the traditions of the Prophet—“Bukhari” or “Buqayrah” and “Limazah.” The names of the two middle children seem to have no clear Arabic parallels, although they seem similar to several other names, including other Hadith narrators. While it is wise not to attempt to infer too much about the religious or cultural origins of a population from the names of its children, at the very least these naming practices show some proximity to Islam and reinforce the aforementioned statistical links to West Africa, where such names were most common.

Bell’s appraisal is also valuable for the insight it gives into the social dynamics and material culture of a large and expanding cotton plantation in the Bahamas. What follows is an analysis of enslaved labor, family, and conditions on one plantation,
gleaned from an imperfect, yet rich source. The data offered by the Bell appraisal are imperfect because the document shows the plantation at the end of its life. We have no records that describe the plantation at its inception. Nevertheless, there is still ample opportunity for interpreting some of the plantation's defining characteristics, such as its demographic makeup.

Industry and Increase were home to ninety-nine enslaved Africans. Eighty-two of those Africans are listed as being part of one of the plantation's fifteen families. The remaining seventeen residents are listed in a separate group and appear to have no association either among themselves or with the families. Those slaves listed in family units are deliberately listed as such, and are not random groupings, as they mark descent and affiliation in terms such as, “his Wife,” “her Daughter,” and “his Child.” Most of the families had between four and six children, although some had as few as three and one had ten children. The appraisers assigned a cash value to each slave, based upon that individual’s age, sex, and skills. Bilali and Jamie, for example, are listed as “Drivers,” and their values (the greatest on the plantation) reflect their places in the management hierarchy. Enslaved children aged thirteen years and younger are given an age in addition to value, which is helpful for several reasons. First, that threshold suggests that fourteen was the age at which a slave was considered to be a “full hand” and could be assigned his or her own tasks rather than a shared or diminished task. This seems to resonate with the standard practices of long-staple cotton plantations in places like coastal Georgia during the same period. Based on this fact, and since the age assignments are so consistent through the document, it is safe to assume that any

74 The statistical mean of family size was 5.46, with a median size of 5, a mode of 6, and a range of 7.
person without a given age above a certain value is an adult (or at least a more than thirteen years old). In a few cases, this age/value correlation has been used to estimate the age of a few young children who were not assigned an age in the appraisal. Second, using the age data, it is possible to estimate the birth year for each child listed. While the annual data extracted in this way are subject to some errors of reporting, which might cause children born in one year to be listed with those born in another, they provide a glimpse into trends like birth spacing and years of very high fertility. Finally, these age and birth year data make it possible to determine the minimum number of children born on the plantation. Since John Bell received his land grants less than thirteen years prior to the date of the appraisal, any children who appear to have been born after 1791 are assumed to have been born in Caicos and not elsewhere.⁷⁵

Using the ages given in the inventory, it is clear that Bell's plantation was filled with young people. Just over half of the slaves, fifty-one of the ninety-nine, were age thirteen or younger. Of those fifty-one, forty-nine were ten years old or younger. Thus, for the plantation as a whole, scarcely half were adults capable of working what a planter would call a "whole task" or a full day's labor. It is possible that younger children might have been able to provide some productive labor, but, it is unclear whether they would have been able to offset the labor lost due to caring for the large numbers of infant children.

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⁷⁵ This assumption is complicated by the fact that Bell arrived in the Bahamas in 1789, although there is insufficient evidence whether he stayed or returned to Carriacou before the 1791 land grant. Birth data suggest that he might have been established on those lands in 1790, but based on the year of the grant, only children aged ten and under are assumed to have been Bahamas-born.
In concrete terms, the large numbers of children at Increase meant that most workers probably stayed very busy. Increase was wholly devoted to cotton monoculture—there is no evidence of sugar, or any other type of staple crop production. It is possible that the slaves engaged in seasonal salt production, as this was common in the Caicos and Turks Islands. Were this the case, it would have been a burdensome, but sporadic and supplemental part of the overall labor regime. Aside from cotton, growing provisions would have occupied the bulk of the slaves' time. Any provision crops grown would likely have been intended solely for consumption on the plantation, and if the slaves grew any other crops for market, no such evidence exists. Furthermore, the isolation of Caicos, the lack of towns on the island, and the absence of any apparent domestic market for produce nearby suggests that Increase's slaves were not well-integrated into a local cash economy. Whatever kinds of labor they might have engaged in, cotton alone would have occupied much of their time. By the estimate of several local observers, each full hand on a Bahamian plantation could manage about five or six acres of cotton. In 1801, Increase had 300 acres of cotton, meaning that each of the forty-seven adult enslaved workers would have been responsible for almost six and a half acres. When the labor of those who were caring for young children is removed from the equation, the burden on the rest increases. It is likely that by 1801 cotton yields were in steady decline at Increase, as was the case elsewhere in the Bahamas, and the high acres-per-slave figure did not actually reflect an increase in the amount of labor required. Nevertheless, it appears that the cotton fields demanded

much attention—attention that might otherwise have been paid to provisioning. With this in mind, the 500 bushels of corn Bell had on hand as “Negroes Provis[ions]” seems logical. The appraisal makes no reference to land being used for food crops, though it does mention pasturage. Clearly the ninety-nine slaves could not subsist on corn alone, and the appraisers might have omitted provision grounds since every plantation would have had them, or they might have included them in the tally of pasturage. Whatever the case, the large proportion of children on the plantation would have had significant consequences for the labor dynamics at Increase.

Finally, even if the slaves at Increase were struggling to grow cotton or provisions, they were having great success at growing their own numbers. In the ten years that Increase was in John Bell’s hands, at least forty-nine children were born on the plantation. Unfortunately, no listing of Increase's initial enslaved population exists, and there are no records of mortality or relocation to or from Increase. In the absence of these data, it is impossible to accurately calculate specific rates of natural increase. Notwithstanding, it remains possible to track the annual minimum birth rate of Increase's slaves by counting retroactively from the date of the appraisal. These calculations are grounded in the assumption that any child under ten years of age was born on the plantation.

Table 4-5. Bell Appraisal, Births by Year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Births</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1800</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1799</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1798</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>1791*</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1790</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1789</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Year of Bell’s Caicos Land Grants

From the very beginning of Bell’s Caicos venture, it appears that conditions were favorable for enslaved couples to begin expanding their families. An increase of forty-
nine surviving children in the span of a decade (perhaps a little longer) implies a mean birth rate of about five children per year, although most of those births occurred within the plantation’s final four years. Historians, such as Michael Craton, have argued that marginal colonies in the British Caribbean—places like the Bahamas and Barbuda, in particular—enjoyed “a fortunate combination of demographic, family, employment, and locational characteristics” that resulted in surprisingly high rates of natural increase. 77 In these places, high fertility was certainly a factor in population increase, but low mortality seems to have been equally, if not more, important. 78 With very few exceptions, most of the families with multiple children at Increase and Industry had a child every two or three years, consistent with a “regular and healthy” birth interval. 79 This pattern is common enough across all the families to suggest both that this was normative on the plantation, and that most of the children born on Bell’s plantations survived infancy. The families that do not follow this pattern often show gaps of four or five years between one pair of births, suggesting that a child born at the typical interval died prior to the appraisal. 80 Further evidence that these gaps are a result of childhood mortality is offered by the years in which these gaps appear. Table IV shows that the years 1793-1794 had some of the lowest numbers of births, which also coincides with a cluster of missing, but expected, births in those same years. Not surprisingly, these dates are

77 Craton, “Hobbesian or Panglossian?,” 325.
80 Gaps in birth spacing can be found in Appendix 2. See, for example: Buck and Betty, Cyrus and Fatima, Dick and Mary, Glasgow and Nancy, John and Victoirie, Pompey and Frances, Swift and Clie, Tom and Jeanie, and Will and Jeanie Canga.
consistent with an epidemic of infectious fevers which began in the Caribbean, first in Grenada, in 1793.\textsuperscript{81} If Bell was moving back and forth between his Caicos and Carriacou holdings he might have brought the disease north with him. Even if he did not introduce the disease to his slaves, they would have found themselves at risk from the spreading pandemic as it moved from Grenada in early 1793, to Saint Domingue in mid-1794, and eventually to much of the Bahamas by late 1794.\textsuperscript{82} What kinds of overall impacts disease may have had on Bell's enslaved community is impossible to determine, since the most vulnerable portion of the population seems to have fared well in the long term. For 1793 and 1794, however, there appears to be a strong link between infant mortality in Bell's slaves and yellow fever in the region.

Bell probably did not set out to breed slaves in his Caicos plantations. But a variety of "locational characteristics" favored population growth, like stable families, a diet supplemented by the plantations' seaside situation, and a moderate climate. One other factor—housing—should be considered as well. The appraisal states that the plantations included thirteen "Large Negroe Houses Built of Stone besides others Watl'd [and] plaistered." Archeologists Wilkie and Farnsworth describe three general types of slave housing that existed in the Bahamas. One was the oft-mentioned "Negro house," which is likely unplastered wattle and daub, which they find "were well known and needed no further explanation to those living at the time."\textsuperscript{83} More valuable than those would have been "plastered" dwellings, likely over wattle walls, that were somewhat

\textsuperscript{81} David Geggus, "Yellow Fever in the 1790s: The British Army in Occupied Saint Domingue, Medical History, Vol. 23 (1979): 40.

\textsuperscript{82} Geggus, "Yellow Fever," 39-40.

\textsuperscript{83} Wilkie and Farnsworth, Sampling Many Pots, 150.
more permanent and valuable. Finally, some owners provided stone houses, although these represented a great expense to the owner, and thus, seem to be less common.

On Bell's plantation, there was a nearly equal ratio of stone houses to slave families. Excluding the two families with a single infant child, the ratio is exact: thirteen families and thirteen stone houses. Thus, it would appear that at Increase, solid housing should be added to stable families as one of the factors that supported rapid population growth.

Overall, the demographics of Bell's enslaved community reinforces the ideas advanced by Craton, and others, that marginal colonies like the Bahamas favored a self-replicating cycle of increasing numbers of slave families and, thus, slave populations.

As we reflect on the matter of housing, another layer might be added to this montage. The stone structures that housed Bell's slave families were built by black hands, apparently as the need for them arose. If enslaved families were growing due to forces largely beyond the control of the proprietors, then the burden of maintaining those families fell primarily on the slaves around them. In this way, we might see the construction of permanent habitations as an effort by Bell's enslaved community to control its own health and security in spite of the odds that surely weighed against it.

In 1789, Chief Justice Delancey of the Bahamas was proud to announce to his peers that they had succeeded in “gaining the attention of the mother country.” He looked forward to the day when Bahamians might “not only cultivate the earth, but also policy, jurisprudence, and science,” in a society built around the “valuable and productive staple... that promises abundance.” In retrospect, we see that he was too optimistic—but for Delancey and many around him, the future seemed pregnant with
promise. Between 1785 and 1787, cotton yields and acreage had nearly doubled.\textsuperscript{84} While planters were able to make a living through cotton agriculture over the next decade and beyond, their successes were hard-fought against “disastrously declining average acreage yield.”\textsuperscript{85} By the end of the century, many Bahamian planters chose to try their fortunes elsewhere rather than to suffer a slow economic death. Some were undoubtedly also motivated by another economic factor—quit rents. Loyalist land grants were exempted from quit rents for ten years, and as the decade pressed on, many probably groaned as their very modest rents came due.\textsuperscript{86}

John Bell, whose hearty ambition led him to the Bahamas, probably lived his last months pondering the direction of his next move as he watched Industry and Increase wane. Bell’s enslaved workforce was parceled out to new homes, new masters, new places. Just as economic forces beyond their control collected Africans and African-Americans in the Bahamas, a new set of forces now scattered them. Most of them drifted into anonymity. Bilali, Phoebe, and their children, however, avoided that fate.

\textsuperscript{84} Saunders, \textit{Cotton Production}, 333.

\textsuperscript{85} Craton and Saunders, \textit{Islanders}, 197.

\textsuperscript{86} Craton and Saunders, \textit{Islanders}, 191.
CHAPTER 5
“WITHOUT THE INTERVENTION OF ANY WHITE MEN”: LIFE ON SAPELO ISLAND

John Bell’s death signaled to Bilali that another wave of transition and uncertainty was to come. Since Bell was often away from Industry and Increase, Bilali probably learned of his death when the men arrived to inventory the farms in order to value Bell’s estate. This must have been powerfully unsettling, as the stability Bilali had enjoyed for nearly a decade was immediately put in jeopardy. In the years following his relocation to Caicos, Bilali had seen the steady progression of seasons and crops, and had felt the blessings of a few children growing under his care. The enslaved people of Industry and Increase certainly knew what might happen at the death of an owner—particularly the death of an absentee owner. After the departure of the inventory crew, they had little choice but to wait and see what might happen. This chapter follows Bilali after Thomas Spalding brought him to Sapelo Island, Georgia to work as head driver on his plantation and examines the habits of life and labor that shaped Bilali’s experiences there.

If Bell took a keen interest in his affairs on Caicos, it is hard to tell today. There is no evidence of a will for the disposition of his Bahamian properties. Even if there was a will, there is no reason to expect that Bilali and the others would have known anything of it, or that it would have calmed their fears. The will that does exist for John Bell is for his properties on Carriacou. Penned on his deathbed, the will is—literally and figuratively—Bell’s last gasp. In his Scottish brogue he dictated his final wishes to the men who watched over him as he lay dying far from his Bahamian, Carriacouan, or Scottish homes. Bell distributed his Carriacou estate to a group of people scattered around the

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Atlantic, including Scotland, St. Vincent, and South Carolina. His bequests included considerable sums of cash—upwards of £3,000 to his friends—and real and slave property. Even if Bell had ready cash to give away, it is difficult to imagine any kind of settlement that would not have involved the sale of his Bahamian holdings. Indeed, this is what happened, though the circumstances of the sale are unclear.

Bilali, his family, and the other enslaved people of Industry and Increase were destined to meet new owners, whether by probate, via private transfer, or at the auction block. Bilali spent the next year watching crops rise from the thin soil as he waited for news of his fate. He probably saw a steady procession of prospective buyers and Bell’s executors survey the lands and people of Industry and Increase over the course of 1801. The plantations likely saw even less white management than had been usual, leaving Bilali and the other driver to manage affairs on the farms. In many ways, the enslaved people there were left hanging in limbo. Then, in 1802, Bilali began to see some changes that were initiated from several hundred miles away in Georgia.

In 1802, Thomas Spalding, a twenty-eight-year-old Georgia attorney, set out to establish a new grand plantation. Combining the money he made from the sale of a tract on St. Simons Island, Georgia with his wife’s recent inheritance, Spalding purchased about four thousand acres on Sapelo, a barrier island near the town of Darien, sixty miles south of Savannah.² At this early date, there were several other planters on Sapelo, but Spalding eventually purchased nearly all of the twelve-mile-long, three-mile-wide island. Many of his neighbors around Darien and the Altamaha

² E. Merton Coulter, Thomas Spalding of Sapelo, (University, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1940), 39-40.
River delta grew rice. Sapelo was not suited for rice farming because it lacked the freshwater supply needed for tidal-flow rice fields—instead, Spalding set out to grow long-staple, or Sea Island, cotton a crop that was both suited to Sapelo’s environment and was one that he had some familiarity with. When Thomas Spalding was a child, his father, James, was one of the first planters in Georgia to grow Sea Island cotton using seed furnished by a business associate in the Bahamas.³ Now, with land acquired and his mind set toward cotton, Spalding’s next priority was to assemble a workforce.

Spalding had access to the thriving slave markets of Charleston and Savannah, where he is said to have “bought many” of the workers who would toil in Sapelo’s fields.⁴ But Spalding needed, and long-staple cotton demanded, experienced management to make the crop successful and profitable. Skilled cotton drivers were probably not in great supply in coastal Georgia and, even if they were, their owners would have been reluctant to part with them. Training a driver anew was both time consuming and risky. In his search, Spalding eventually turned his attention toward the Bahamas, where cotton was dominant and where planters restive with fear over the future might be willing to sell parcels of slaves. In all likelihood, the Bahamas were probably the first and last place Spalding sought experienced cotton labor. The fact that he looked to the Bahamas for a driver is not at all surprising, considering his connections to the islands. Beyond the general ties that joined the Bahamas with the American lowcountry, Spalding was able to profit from a network of business and family

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associates in Nassau. His father was a Loyalist during the Revolution and, like so many other Loyalists, had to flee Georgia during the war. Like many of his friends and associates, James Spalding moved his family (including young Thomas) to East Florida, but was able to return to Georgia before the Loyalist exodus to the Bahamas. While the Spaldings remained in Georgia they maintained contact with the Loyalist community abroad. So, his father’s former business partners offered one series of connections; his father-in-law provided another. The latter, in fact, might have been a source of some of Spalding’s enslaved workers. In a letter of April 1798, Joseph Eve, the builder of the improved roller gin in the Bahamas, wrote to Spalding’s father-in-law about a protracted negotiation to acquire some slaves for him in the Bahamas. Eve ended his letter with fond greetings to Thomas Spalding and his wife Sarah.

With relationships like these, Spalding could put out a call for a driver and let his agents in the Bahamas work on his behalf. Indeed, that is very likely how Spalding found Bilali. As planters left the Bahamas or consolidated their holdings, skilled laborers, like task leaders and drivers, began to appear in the advertisements of the Bahama Gazette. One could find slaves sales, for example, that announced the availability of a “compleat driver.” There does not appear to have been any advertisement in the Gazette for the sale of Bell’s estate, though, which suggests that his property might have been liquidated though private arrangements. If Spalding signaled to his Bahamian associates in 1801 or 1802 that he was seeking a driver for a

5 Coulter, Thomas Spalding, 6-8.
6 Letter from Joseph Eve to Richard Leake, 23 April 1798, Folder 28:2, E. Merton Coulter manuscript collection II. MS 2345. Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries.
7 Bahama Gazette (Nassau), 21 March – 25 March 1794.
new plantation, they would have found Bell’s executors eager to settle his affairs and could have arranged to put Bilali in Spalding’s hands. While the timing of these events makes such a sale possible, it seem even more likely given Spalding’s grandson’s recollection that “from the West Indies [Spalding] brought hands trained for the management and guidance of…raw labor.”\(^8\) Spalding sought a cotton driver in the Bahamas, where experience told him one might be found, and where he could count on friends to arrange a purchase. Through the happenstance of timing, Spalding found Bilali.

There is no way of knowing how much Spalding paid for Bilali; whatever records might have existed for his sale are yet to be found. In all likelihood, the transaction was handled as discreetly as possible, since importing foreign slaves to Georgia was illegal after 1798.\(^9\) But we can imagine that Bilali was valuable to Spalding for several reasons. Foremost, he brought nearly a decade of experience as a driver of a large cotton plantation. Also, for much of that time, Bilali alone likely shouldered much of the responsibilities of managing the plantation. Since Bell appears repeatedly in the land records of Carriacou after acquiring his Bahamian lands, there is good reason to believe that he focused his attention on Carriacou and, from the perspective of the Bahamas, was present only sporadically. One hint toward Bilali’s value comes from the fact that he arrived in Sapelo with his family intact. There was no apparent legal obligation for Bahamians to sell slaves in family groups, and many slaveowners showed little remorse

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\(^9\) James A. McMillin, *The Final Victims: Foreign Slave Trade to North America, 1783-1810*, The Carolina Lowcountry and the Atlantic World (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 36. The 1798 Georgia Constitution outlawed slave imports, but smuggling continued. Spalding was operating outside the law, but had little reason to fear any penalty.
at separating spouses or children at the time of sale. Spalding might have seen such a deal as a shrewd bargain, but he was just as likely to have seen Bilali’s children as a liability instead of an asset. While the children might hold the promise of future labor, the risks of transportation and seasoning to a new environment were high when weighed against the prospects of having to invest many years’ support before they could be put to work. Still, Bilali’s knowledge and skills proved decisive and, in the end, Spalding felt that Bilali’s value made the risks worthwhile.

When Bilali arrived at Sapelo in 1802 or 1803, there was little to indicate that the island would grow to be a thriving plantation. Much of the land was probably still in timber at the time and the island lacked a permanent home for Spalding. Within a few years, Sapelo saw crops in the ground and the construction of a new mansion, the South End House, befitting a man of Spalding’s status. Like all other things on the island, the mansion was built with enslaved labor; more than that, though, the South End House is a fitting example of the way Spalding approached much of life on Sapelo. Spalding designed the house, but was minimally involved in its construction, leaving most or all of the direct management to another person who supervised the enslaved laborers who did all the building. Spalding was confident in his own ability to do the mental work of imagining and designing the plantation and was happy to pass the responsibilities of management to someone he trusted could execute his plans.

Bilali’s leadership meshed well with Spalding’s laissez-faire approach to daily labor management. It appears that before long, Spalding placed nearly all of the responsibilities of the plantation in Bilali’s hands. In a popular journal of agricultural news and techniques, Spalding stated with simple directness that he used a “black
overseer” and that his operations enjoyed success “without the intervention of any white men.”¹⁰ This was a definitive, if indirect, statement of Bilali’s real value to Spalding and was the nearest Spalding came to singling out Bilali for his contributions to the Sapelo enterprise. Spalding was clear that this arrangement worked well for him. He wrote that by giving over responsibilities to enslaved managers he gained the leisure in his growing years to pursue “avocations of various character” apart from running the plantation.¹¹ Enslaved leadership on Spalding’s farms seems to have been the norm, and not just exaggeration. There is very little evidence of white management around Sapelo during the middle decades of the operation. In the early years, Spalding hired a white manager to handle the construction of his home, and later, in his will of 1848, he sought to retain his current overseer. By that point, Bilali, and any of the other most experienced drivers, were probably among the eleven enslaved people who had been exempted from work. But, it appears that for most of their years together, Bilali was known to people in the area as “Mr. Spalding’s head man.”¹²

The fact that Spalding used enslaved management is not unusual in the context of the Georgia lowcountry. Several factors encouraged this practice. First was the area’s overwhelming enslaved population. In McIntosh County, where Sapelo is located, between 1820 and 1845 blacks outnumbered whites by a ratio of about three to one.¹³

This kind of demographic imbalance was found elsewhere in coastal Georgia and South

¹³ George White, Statistics of the State of Georgia (Savannah: W. Thorne Williams, 1849), 414; 1820 Federal Census. The Census of 1820 shows a white to enslaved ratio of 1:2.8, White’s 1845 figure shows 1:3.4.
Carolina in the antebellum years. With whites in relatively short supply, some of the responsibilities for oversight necessarily sifted down through to the ranks of the enslaved. Another factor was the habit of planters to retreat from the coastal swamps during the region’s hot and malarial summers. Spalding, for example, was often away from the island for long stretches of time. This is not to say that he was an absentee owner in the manner of a Caribbean landlord who might never have seen his properties. Spalding did consider Sapelo his home, but his political and banking activities frequently kept him in Darien or the state capital of Milledgeville. Indeed, during two moments of crisis on Sapelo—when British warships threatened the island in 1813 and when a hurricane struck in 1824—Spalding left his wife and children on the island while he attended to business on the mainland. The final, and probably most important, reason for employing enslaved managers was the use of task labor.

Agriculture defined the rhythm of life in the lowcountry, and the daily operations of Sea Island cotton and rice plantations followed a unique cadence that relied on relatively independent, self-paced labor, with minimal direct white supervision. The task system, as this was known, was the dominant labor system in the region for almost all of the plantation era and was so ubiquitous as to be considered a “way of life” in the lowcountry.¹⁴ Tasking in North America was not widely used outside of coastal Georgia and South Carolina; and the majority of enslaved Africans living in the United States toiled under the more common gang system of labor management. The organizational

differences between these two systems were significant, a fact that had direct
consequences for the lives of the enslaved.\footnote{Philip Morgan, "Work and Culture: The Task System and the World of Lowcountry Blacks, 1700-1880," \textit{The William and Mary Quarterly} 39 (October 1982): 563-599; Coclanis, "Taken to Task," 61-62.}

The daily operations of the task system followed a fairly common pattern,
although the nature of work to be completed varied according to the crop being tended
and its phase in the growth cycle. On a plantation like Sapelo, a typical day during the
pre-harvest season might start with Spalding surveying his fields to determine the broad
scope of work to be completed for the day, though is it likely that this was among Bilali’s
responsibilities. He would convey his instructions to Bilali, who was responsible for
allotting tasks and ensuring their completion. Bilali or one of the subordinate drivers
would then measure out “tasks” and would assign one or more workers to each task
and set them to the day’s work. Throughout the day, Bilali would traverse the plantation
to ensure that work was being completed correctly and efficiently. When the enslaved
laborers finished the day’s task, usually in the mid-afternoon, they could have—with the
driver’s approval—the remaining time for their own use. This description, albeit
simplified, points out three main features of the task system: labor management was left
primarily to drivers, each slave worked his or her own task independently, and slaves
had the opportunity to gain personal time if they completed their task before the end of
the day. Each of these characteristics had an impact on plantation life.\footnote{Morgan, "Work and Culture," 569.}

Drivers assigned duties to individual workers, based on each person’s age and
ability. The size of a “task,” as a unit of measure, was generally standardized within
each plantation; and though the measurement varied with the crop, season, and driver,
a quarter-acre was common enough across the region to be considered the norm. To ease the division of labor, Spalding laid out his fields in rows of 105 feet in length, since a square of that dimension equaled a fourth of an acre.\textsuperscript{17} In an 1844 letter published in \textit{Southern Agriculturalist}, Thomas Spalding described some typical tasks: “the fields being previously cleaned up… was half an acre; the laborer was required to ridge afterwards, when carefully done, 3/8ths. of an acre; and in hoeing, half an acre.”\textsuperscript{18} A task was the amount of work that one prime field hand could complete in one work day. Sapelo, however, housed enslaved men, women, children and the elderly, not all of whom were considered prime hands, and part of Bilali’s responsibility was to assign each individual a rating—as a full hand, half hand, or quarter hand—according to his or her abilities. A half hand, for example, could be given either an eighth-acre task to complete, or a quarter-acre task to share with another half hand. The head driver, regardless of the presence or absence of a plantation owner or white overseer, was responsible for much of this direct labor management under the task system.\textsuperscript{19}

Bilali was experienced in the habits of tasking. He first worked under the task system on Carriacou, and later managed tasks on Caicos. This gave Spalding good incentive to place responsibility for the operation in Bilali’s hands. Since planters like Spalding did not generally directly supervise their farms, and compared with their

\textsuperscript{17} Thomas Spalding, Untitled, \textit{New Jersey Journal}, 26 October 1813.


chattels, knew relatively little about the crops they were growing, this situation created an imbalance that tipped toward the benefit of the enslaved. Since white managers were unable or unwilling to maintain constant direct supervision, due in part to the serious threat of disease, they were put in the position of figuring out how to get their slaves—who had superior crop knowledge—to work in the best interest of the plantation. Task labor offered benefits to both sides: planters got labor with minimal supervision, and enslaved workers gained free time and limited autonomy.

One of the most striking features of the task system was the potential availability of free time for enslaved people. Tasking created a division between the master’s time and the slave’s time and, as the system became more ingrained in lowcountry life, those two were seen as separate and distinct. Access to free time, however, was sometimes more a promise than a reality. Planters generally expected that a slave’s task would take a full day of labor: somewhere in the range of eight to ten hours of work. Of course, work requirements varied according to the crop and season, but plantation managers did not want to see their slaves having what they considered excessive free time. Even if an average day’s task took nine hours, though, enslaved workers in the lowcountry were eager to have their own free time, and would work faster or assist each other to obtain it. Jeremiah Evarts, a minister who visited the lowcountry in 1822, noted in his journal that, “negroes on the islands are generally through their tasks by 2 o’clock.”²⁰ Spalding’s grandson suggested that a similar, or maybe less rigorous, pattern prevailed.

on Sapelo. He recalled that the work day was often in the range of six or seven hours, except in the harvest season. After the slaves tasks were completed and checked, and they were released by the driver, they might still have about a third of the day for their own use.

The real reward for slaves in having free time was not just the amelioration of their labor, but the opportunity to improve their lives. With their free time, slaves tended their own crops and livestock. They also fished, hunted, made crafts, and travelled with little apparent hindrance to other nearby towns or plantations. Spalding's grandson wrote that “favored families” on Sapelo and elsewhere were allowed to keep cattle and horses for which their “absolute personal ownership was guaranteed and inviolable.” Families were also able to market surplus produce and crafts in the local economy. Jeremiah Evarts noticed that it was common for slaves in the region to sell their own goods for cash or barter – a benefit not often available to those under the gang system.

Thus, with the fruits of their own time, enslaved people participated in an economy through which they could accumulate property and money. Although the South Carolina and Georgia colonial and state legislatures tried on several occasions to restrict slaves’ ability to own or trade various types of property, those attempts were

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22 Wylly, *The Seed that was Sown*, 20-21.


largely unsuccessful and unenforceable. Furthermore, though planters and lawmakers might have been concerned about slaves’ economic practices, they too benefitted from their slaves’ free time. The meats, vegetables, livestock, and commodities slaves produced lessened the planters’ overhead expenses and gave them the opportunity, as well, to purchase these desirable goods. Realistically, only a minority of lowcountry slaves actually benefitted from the promises of free time and personal property. The demands of daily tasks occupied much of a slave’s day, and the additional burden of cultivating subsistence crops gave them little actual free time. The possibility of free time, however, was valued by both enslaved people and their owners, who believed it rewarded harder work. While Spalding probably never considered gang labor, the kind of calculus above might well have encouraged Spalding both to support the use of tasking and to place Bilali at the head of the plantation.

It is clear that enslaved drivers played a pivotal role in the success of plantations like Sapelo that used the task system. Planters needed to choose men who were trustworthy, experienced, and loyal; and who were willing and able to wield authority over the enslaved population.\[^{25}\] Bilali’s former experience as a driver on one of John Bell’s cotton plantations certainly made both Spalding’s decision and Bilali’s transition easier. Bilali brought with him minute knowledge of the cotton plant and its growth and care—hard-earned experience about when to plant seeds, pluck weeds, and pick blooms. Equally, if not more, valuable to Spalding was Bilali’s experience in the direct management of other enslaved workers. He knew how to mark tasks, rate hands, and

prioritize jobs. He knew from his own toil what a day’s work produced, which illnesses were feigned or real, and how judge when a task was truly done. In short, he knew how to keep the farm running smoothly through the constant push-and-pull of labor against management.

Bilali’s Muslim faith provided another reason for Spalding to entrust him with authority. As a practicing and, by all accounts, devout Muslim, Bilali did not drink alcohol. Even though liquor was generally proscribed from the slave quarters, the permeable boundaries of the plantation made it inevitable that hard drink would seep into the slave community and make an impact on productivity. Bilali’s steadfast sobriety guaranteed a measure of reliability that Spalding could not demand even from a white overseer. Bilali’s faith also separated him in some ways from the bulk of the enslaved population. Spalding surely saw Islam as occupying a higher status than the African or hybrid Christian religious practices of most of the island’s people. From the perspective of those others, Bilali’s faith and literacy, along with the trappings of his position, would have made him appear different, if not superior. Some planters shared this desire with their contemporaries through popular agricultural journals. Roswell King, manager of a neighboring plantation and associate of Spalding, wrote that “It is a great point in having the principal drivers men that support their dignity.” Elaborating on the point of driver’s relationships with field hands, he suggested that “a condescension to familiarity should be prohibited.” If planters hoped to encourage their drivers to keep

26 Evarts, “Diary,” 20. Evarts wrote of enslaved people selling surplus goods in town and that anything, “which they can carry to market, is sold for liquor.” No doubt biased, his observation shows how planters could not limit access to some kinds of contraband.

social distance from the rest of the enslaved population, it would appear that Spalding and Bilali succeeded in doing so. This fact emerges in the recollection of a visitor to Sapelo who described this separation when she wrote that Bilali and his family “held themselves aloof from the others as if they were conscious of their own superiority.”\textsuperscript{28} This aloofness might have arisen from the shared religious and cultural identities of Bilali’s family, from the extension of Bilali’s position to his kin, or from a combination of the two. Though he remained enslaved, Bilali’s faith and habits ensured that he was something more than a first among equals.

The position of head driver on lowcountry plantations served as a reward to loyalty and experience, but it also accrued its own set of benefits. As was the case with Bilali, some head drivers answered only to the plantation owner, irrespective of any other white overseers. When Frederick Olmstead visited the lowcountry, he found that head drivers often were “de facto” managers of their respective plantations.\textsuperscript{29} Planters acknowledged that their drivers best understood the operation of their farms and deferred to their judgment in most matters. In some cases, planters employed white overseers only to satisfy legal requirements that plantations not be left without a white authority in the planter’s absence.\textsuperscript{30} Thus, some enslaved drivers wielded incredible authority and for this they enjoyed some rewards. These rewards came either in the form of money or labor. Planters allowed drivers to use the labor of other slaves in part


\textsuperscript{30} Olmstead, \textit{Seaboard Slave States}, 438.
because the responsibilities of a driver were a full-time job. If a driver were required to wake the laborers for a day’s work, he would need to be awake and ready before sunrise. Meting out tasks, supervising progress, and checking work for completion occupied the day. Inspecting slave quarters and meeting with the planter to determine the work of the following day took away from what might otherwise have been free time. Drivers consequently received or took labor for their own use to use for things like tending to their provision grounds.\textsuperscript{31} Some drivers also received financial rewards akin to salaries in the form of gifts or money. Olmsted met an enslaved manager whom he believed to be better paid than the white overseer and who lived “in considerable luxury.”\textsuperscript{32} Another planter rewarded his drivers, as a matter of policy, with extra rations, better housing, transport into town, and cash bonuses.\textsuperscript{33}

The extent to which Bilali enjoyed these perquisites is unclear. Given Spalding’s habit of being away from the island for extended periods of time, however, it follows that Bilali’s role on the plantation would have been magnified compared with a plantation with both a resident owner and white overseer. The visitor’s observation of Bilali’s, and his family’s, aloofness suggests that the habits of life and management on Sapelo succeeded in creating a measure of division and distance between Bilali and the other enslaved people. There might be other explanations for Bilali’s behavior, but it meshes well with the manners of other drivers in the lowcountry. The fact that Bilali was able to practice his faith without interference by Spalding might also be interpreted as benefit

\textsuperscript{31} King, “Management,” 524.

\textsuperscript{32} Olmsted, \textit{Seaboard Slave States}, 429.

\textsuperscript{33} VanDeburg, \textit{Slave Drivers}, 51.
accruing to his position. While his daily prayers did not necessarily occupy a large measure of the day, the time spent in retreating from his post, washing himself, and praying did represent an repeated interruption in the execution of his duties. Spalding might have turned a blind eye toward Bilali’s beliefs, but could not have overlooked the fact that the expression of his faith sacrificed part of the work day. We might see this time as a small bonus given to Bilali as a benefit of his position. Aside from this, the best evidence of Bilali’s rewards for being the head driver comes from the latter years of his life. In addition to the land on Sapelo, Spalding owned property on the mainland, where he kept another home. When Bilali became too old to work, he apparently took up residence there or nearby, “on the mainland just opposite Sapelo.” This description fits the location of Spalding’s second home, called Ashantilly. Beyond being relieved of his labors, it appears that Bilali was able to retreat into retirement on the mainland, where he could live apart from the din and toil of Sapelo. Ashantilly served only as a residence—there was no farm, no planting, only the family of Spalding’s son. For Bilali, this must have been a welcome reward for decades of labor. Elderly—or in the parlance of the day, superannuated—slaves often saw their labor reduced or eliminated, but they typically remained on the plantation, living in the slave quarters, surrounded by the misery of the regime that bound them. But owing to his position and his relationship with Spalding, Bilali escaped this common fate. At Ashantilly, he had the opportunity to pass his days as he wished, either in quiet reflection or in the company of

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34 Benjamin Goulding Affadavit, 12 Oct 1931, Box 2:3, Francis R. Goulding Collection, MS 2807, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries.

visitors. Regular boat traffic to and from Sapelo allowed him to visit his friends and family on the island when he wanted. It was there on the mainland where Bilali came to know a Presbyterian minister named Francis Goulding, and the two men apparently spent time together regularly. The topics of their conversations are lost to us—perhaps they shared tales of their youth or of years lived on the Georgia coast—but they certainly spoke of faith. At one point toward the very end of Bilali’s life, he gave Goulding his Arabic manuscript. Goulding’s son recalled that Bilali “made a present to my father of the Arabic Document in question, stating that it was written by himself and that it contained some of his Meditations.”

In giving the manuscript to a man of faith, and a man whom he trusted, Bilali ensured that his thoughts and words would be preserved, something he could not guarantee had it remained within the enslaved community. The reward Bilali received of retirement on the mainland not only freed him of the labors of the slave quarters, it ultimately ensured that his story would not be lost to the anonymity of the plantation.

Bilali’s manuscript, which is examined in Chapter 6, brought him to the attention of scholars in the early twentieth century, while his actions on the plantation when acting as head driver won him attention during his own lifetime. Two episodes in particular help illuminate his place, position, and character. The first was during the War of 1812 and the second was during a hurricane in 1824—on both occasions, Bilali acted on his own, as Spalding was away from the island. In 1813, as the United States was locked in war, British frigates blockaded ports on the Georgia coast, including the port of Darien adjacent to Sapelo. As British warships pressed their way along the coast, they offered

36 Benjamin Goulding Affadavit.
“shelter and protection” to the enslaved people who fled the Sea Island plantations they raided.\textsuperscript{37} These ships decimated the plantations on St. Simons Island, to the south of Sapelo, where one planter claimed to have lost fifty thousand dollars in slaves and goods.\textsuperscript{38} As the British frigate \textit{Lacedemonian} anchored in the sound near Sapelo, Spalding rightly feared that an attack might be imminent and sought a way to protect the island.\textsuperscript{39} He requested support from the Georgia militia, but also enlisted the aid of Sapelo’s enslaved residents. According to his son, Spalding:

\begin{quote}

called his negroes together and asked them if they were satisfied to stay with him and pursue their regular business. On receiving assurance to that effect he procured a large supply of United States muskets and accoutrements and had them stacked in his main hall, and appointed trusty negroes to watch the Frigate and give notice of any landing.\textsuperscript{40}
\end{quote}

Bilali’s experience in the battlefields around Timbo proved an asset in this crisis, and he was given charge over these weapons and the men who were to use them.\textsuperscript{41} The fact that Spalding was willing—perhaps eager—to arm a band of slaves to fight against, and in spite of, British offers of freedom was a bold move. Perhaps Bilali did as his friend and Fula coreligionist Salih Bilali did on the nearby Hopeton plantation, and warned the others that they were better to remain in their present situation than to face

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\footnotetext{37}{George Baillie to William Jones, 18 November 1815, Collection 448, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia.}
\footnotetext{38}{Sidney Walter Martin, ed. “A New Engander’s Impression of Georgia in 1817-1818: Extracts from the Diary of Ebenezer Kellogg,” \textit{Journal of Southern History} 12, No. 2 (May 1946): 256.}
\footnotetext{39}{Sullivan, \textit{Early Days}, 123.}
\footnotetext{40}{Charles Spalding, “Some Memoranda in Relation to Thomas Spalding Late of Sapelo Island, by his son Charles Spalding” in Charles Spalding Wylly, \textit{The Story of Sapelo}, 98. This also appears in Sarah Spalding McKinley, “Docket Book,” 9 June 1888, pp. 29-30, Collection 750, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia.}
\footnotetext{41}{Coulter, \textit{Thomas Spalding of Sapelo}, 83.}
\end{footnotes}
an uncertain fate under the British flag.\textsuperscript{42} Whatever he said to his fellow slaves to buttress their loyalty to Spalding, Bilali’s reply to Spalding regarding the others was less equivocal. When asked about his own loyalty, Bilali is said to have responded: ”Master, I can only speak for myself; I will be faithful, but I cannot speak for these Christian dogs.”\textsuperscript{43} We are left to imagine Spalding’s response.

Despite what Spalding may have felt about Bilali’s posturing and his derogation of his Christian neighbors, he did not seem to question Bilali’s loyalty or ability to protect the island. Spalding felt comfortable “sleeping peacefully with his family under the protection of armed negroes,” and seeing that the situation was stable, he returned to the mainland to attend to his legislative and public duties.\textsuperscript{44} Eventually, the standoff ended in Spalding’s favor—the British never attempted an assault on Sapelo.

The next episode that won notoriety for Bilali came a decade later when a powerful hurricane assaulted Sapelo. The Georgia coast was no stranger to gales and storms in the early nineteenth century, but few compared with the destruction that came on September 1824. The hurricane passed directly over Sapelo and Darien in the night,

\textsuperscript{42} James E. Bagwell, \textit{Rice Gold: James Hamilton Couper and Plantation Life on the Georgia Coast} (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2000), 133. Bagwell writes that Couper’s driver Salih Bilali, or “Old Tom,” as he was known, told the other slaves at Hopeton that he had experienced West Indian slavery and would not go with the British.

\textsuperscript{43} Richard N. Clark, ”Randolph Spalding, A Grand Old Georgia Family Nearly Obliterated by the Decrees of Fate,” \textit{Macon Daily Telegraph}, Sunday 19 June 1887, in Wylly, \textit{Story of Sapelo}, 109. The emphasis on “Christian dogs” is retained from the original. This quotation is repeated, in a slightly modified form, in Wylly’s text and in a subsequent work of his. Its origin is unclear, but this 1887 date seems to be its earliest publication. Clark does not name his source for Bilali’s words, though it most likely came either from Randolph Spalding’s wife or daughter, both of whom he mentioned in the article. The quotation adds and offers little in the context of the piece, and seems like an interesting fact that Clark uncovered and felt compelled to include. That Wylly repeated it suggests that it was either part of the family lore or, at least, plausible in his eyes. Neither man appears to have been in a position to profit from fabricating or embellishing Bilali’s statement.

\textsuperscript{44} Coulter, \textit{Thomas Spalding of Sapelo}, 35. Charles Spalding, ”Some Memoranda,” in Charles Spalding Wylly, \textit{The Story of Sapelo}, 98.
laying waste to much of the region. Spalding was fearful of storms and built his home on the exposed south end of Sapelo to withstand nature’s fury.\textsuperscript{45} His design prevailed, to the great fortune of Spalding’s wife and three daughters who sheltered themselves inside the mansion as the hurricane blew.\textsuperscript{46} Spalding, however, had left Sapelo earlier in the day and was not on the island to offer any hand or guidance in protecting his family, his property, or enslaved workers.\textsuperscript{47} Bilali took charge of the island’s slaves. He might have recognized this as no common storm from his experience with earlier hurricanes, like the one in 1796 that hit the Bahamas and the one that struck coastal Georgia in 1804.\textsuperscript{48} Seeing that the small and low-lying houses of Sapelo’s enslaved people offered no protection from the storm, Bilali ordered all the island’s residents into the cotton and sugar processing houses.\textsuperscript{49} These two-story structures were made of the same strong tabby as the South End House and, likewise, withstood the hurricane. The storm overflowed Sapelo, destroying the year’s crop and nearly all the island’s livestock.\textsuperscript{50} The storm and tidal surge were so destructive that the land had “not even yet recovered” in the early 1830s.\textsuperscript{51} The plantation could easily have been a total loss, but because of Bilali’s quick thinking, all the enslaved residents survived. Spalding returned the

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\item \textsuperscript{45} Coulter, \textit{Thomas Spalding of Sapelo}, 43.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Wylly, \textit{Story of Sapeloe}, 28.
\item \textsuperscript{47} Wylly, \textit{Story of Sapeloe}, 27; Sullivan, \textit{Early Days}, 100.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Wylly, \textit{Story of Sapeloe}, 29.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Sullivan, \textit{Early Days}, 125.
\item \textsuperscript{51} John D. Legare, “Account of an Agricultural Excursion made into the South of Georgia in the Winter of 1832,” \textit{Southern Agriculturist and Register of Rural Affairs}, Vol VI (1833): 147.
\end{itemize}
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following morning, doubtless relieved to find that the hurricane had spared the lives of his family and slaves.

Both of these incidents highlight Bilali’s leadership and his relationship of trust with Spalding. Whether Spalding was present or—as was frequently the case—absent, he could stand assured that his farm and its attendant workforce were in good hands. This fact was not lost on other planters, too. One of Spalding’s contemporaries, Zephaniah Kingsley, praised both Bilali and his neighbor Salih Bilali for their intellect, “integrity,” and “influence,” in keeping slaves from running to the British in the War of 1812. Word of their actions must have traveled wide for Kingsley, who lived near the current site of Jacksonville, Florida to have mentioned it in his writings. It appears that other planters in the vicinity of Darien also knew about Bilali and Spalding’s habits of management, with some of them suggesting that Sapelo was a something of an oasis for its enslaved residents. Spalding might or might not have been a lenient master—either way, the plantation could not run itself. Despite fluctuations in crop prices and the vicissitudes of nature, Sapelo and its people persevered under Spalding’s and Bilali’s

52 Zephaniah Kingsley, A Treatise on the Patriarchal, or Co-Operative System of Society As It Exists in Some Governments, And Colonies in America, and in the United States, Under the Name of Slavery, with Its Necessity and Advantages (1829; reprint Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 13-14. Kingsley does not name the two men directly, but refers to two Muslim drivers southward of South Carolina who prevented desertion of slaves to the enemy. Bilali and Salih Bilali are the most, perhaps only, plausible candidates.

53 In two twentieth-century sources, authors argue that Spalding’s treatment of his slaves was positive, possibly to the extreme. The first, Dolores B. Colquitt, “Sapeloe,” in Flags of Five Nations: A Collection of Historical Sketches and Stories of The Golden Isles of Guale (Sea Island, Ga: The Cloister, 1950), 17, states that “Humanitarians the civilized world over praised [Spalding’s] management of slaves and envious planters elsewhere called Sapelo ‘Nigger Heaven.’” The second source, Betsy Fancher, The Lost Legacy of Georgia’s Golden Isles (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 76, mirrors the words and sentiments of the first. I am reluctant to include these as evidence of Spalding’s management, since there is no clear provenance for the quotation. It does suggest, however, that life on Sapelo was noteworthy compared with life on other nearby plantations or, at least, that white residents’ notions of slave life there transitioned into the local folklore.
care. At the same time, Bilali himself seems to have prospered on the plantation, raising a family, maintaining his faith, and earning some recognition for his labors. Bilali’s successes might be attributable to Spalding extending him privileges or being uninterested in his religious practices. But his experience as a driver and laborer accounts for only a part of his success in Georgia.

Bilali’s habits of leadership and deportment have roots that reach beyond Sapelo or even the Bahamas. It might be possible to locate the origin of his behavior in the very fabric of his African youth. The struggles of the Middle Passage turned Bilali, in the eyes of the American slave market, into a commodity. Though the ordeal certainly traumatized him, it did not strip him of his identity—he did not lose the core of his being, nor was he rendered socially dead. The slave societies he encountered in Carriacou, Caicos, and Georgia were foreign at first, but bore echoes of his past. He approached the predicament of slavery as a survivor, not simply a hollow shell of his former self, struggling in opposition to the challenges of his situation to build a life that made sense to him. Just as Bilali did not lose or abandon his Muslim faith, neither did he forget the guiding principles of his African upbringing. The examples from his life in Georgia might be seen as an attempt on Bilali’s part to construct a manner of living that would have seemed appropriate and legitimate for a person of his status in his African homeland. To do this, Bilali drew not only on Muslim education, but also on the lessons of his culture.


55 See Vincent Brown, “Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery,” American Historical Review 114, No. 5, (2009): 1231-1249, for a valuable discussion of how enslavement might be seen as a “predicament” rather than a “condition” (p. 1248), and how this affected enslaved people’s actions in slavery.
In the historical record, Bilali is always remembered as a Muslim, but to him, his ethnic identity would have been at least as important, if not more prominent. This is not to discount the importance of his faith, as it was certainly deeply entwined in his concept of self. The fact that he was a Pullo—a member of the Fula ethnic group—however, is probably more instructive in helping to understand his actions in and responses to slavery. Until being taken captive in his teenage years, Bilali was immersed in Fula culture, learning both explicitly and implicitly its folkways and mores. Central to his understanding of Fula culture and identity was *pulaaku*—introduced briefly in Chapter 2—the moral and ethical code that defines one’s membership in the Fula community.56

Bilali would have understood and interpreted his identity, relationships, and behavior through the lens of *pulaaku* not only in his home of Timbo, but throughout the rest of his days. The lessons of *pulaaku* were powerful and persistent, guiding his actions in slavery. In the most general sense, *pulaaku* is a collection of traits and rules that govern the interactions of Fulas with other people, both within and beyond the Fula community. Ultimately, this worked to help Fulas maintain a cohesive group identity, particularly because it depended fundamentally on the Fula idea of ‘self’ in opposition to ‘others.’57 *Pulaaku* allows some flexibility and has demonstrated change over time, but "its central message as a pattern of behaviour expected of a Fulani is unalterable."58 For


example, when Bilali was growing up in Timbo, his education likely emphasized pulaaku because the state was concerned with solidifying Fula identity as it encountered and incorporated people of other ethnicities. At the same time, the elaboration of pulaaku would have placed particular importance on militarism, bravery, and piety to support the needs of the expanding Islamist state. Fulas believed that pulaaku was an innate feature of their genealogy, such that all Fulas inherited it at birth. Because pulaaku is socially defined, it was not sufficient simply to possess it, one needed to demonstrate it publicly. Thus, a Pullo “must always be able to validate this membership [in the Fula community] by behaving appropriately” in public, even if they themselves were the only audience.

At the heart of pulaaku stands several core components, known in the Fula language as: semteende, munyal, and hakkiilo. Semteende is a sense of shyness and reserve, which is sometimes glossed as ‘shame,’ though it extends beyond that to suggest a command of one’s desires and emotions. Munyal expresses a combination of patience, fortitude and endurance. Finally, hakkiilo describes a sense of propriety, care,

Greene (Manchester: Manchester University Press in association with the International African Institute, 1986), 41.


61 Riesman and Szanton, First Find Your Child a Good Mother, 203, and Kirk-Greene, “Maudo Laawol Pulaaku,” 44.

62 Victor Azarya, et al., “Introduction,” 3, and Kirk-Greene, “Maudo Laawol Pulaaku,” 42. The definitions following come from the latter source. This list is not exhaustive—pulaaku encompasses many different traits, but these are among those most commonly identified.
and forethought. Through the lens of pulaaku, we can see how Bilali used these tools to understand and affect the predicament of slavery.

First, the concept of patience, or munyal, would have helped Bilali adapt to his status from even the earliest days of his enslavement. Munyal enlaces the ideas of endurance and perseverance with a sense of fatalism—though, not to the extent that one would resign himself completely. In the words of one scholar, munyal is "a cross between manly fortitude in adversity and an acceptance of the pre-ordained and inevitable slings and arrows of misfortune."\(^{63}\) Clearly, Bilali would have benefited from a deeply-rooted and culturally prescribed impulse to endure his enslavement with self-restraint. In the eyes of Bell and Spalding, this might have made him appear to be passive or compliant, traits they would have valued in a slave. This apparent yielding on Bilali’s part might have encouraged the men to elevate him to positions of authority, as they believed they could rely on his cooperation. From Bilali’s perspective, though, he could assume a posture of acceptance (even to the point of aiding his owners) without surrendering his self-identity to the plantation system.

The value of reserve or humility—semteende—would also have shaped Bilali’s actions on the plantation. This concept revolves, in part, around being aware of one’s conduct with relation to others. A Pullo who acknowledged his proper position in Fula society would demonstrate semteende by honoring his elders, helping his age-mates, and respecting taboos, among other things.\(^{64}\) This would have provided some valuable guidance for Bilali’s position as head driver. On one hand, it informed his methods in

\(^{63}\) Kirk-Greene, “Maudo Laawol Pulaaku,” 42.

\(^{64}\) Derrick J. Stenning, Savannah Nomads: A Study of the Wodaabe Pastoral Fulani of Western Bornu Province Northern Region, Nigeria (1959; Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 1994 edition), 56.
dealing with other members of the enslaved community for whom he was not just a manager, but also an elder. Without doubt, a spirit of restraint would have been appreciated by the workers under Bilali’s charge. In his interactions with the white community—particularly with Bell and Spalding—semteende helped him to approach those in power over him with respect and restraint, acknowledging his position vis-à-vis theirs. As with munyal, this would have made him appear to be both well-suited for management and effective in that role. Bilali’s performance of semteende can best be seen in the testimony of the visitor to Sapelo who remembered the “aloofness” of Bilali and his family. In properly demonstrating semteende, especially in the presence of whites from outside of the planation, Bilali would have maintained a poise of quietness, restraint, and modesty. What he saw as display of propriety, she read as an air of superiority. He may have felt himself to be better than the others by virtue of his position and privileges, but his actions suggest a more deeply-rooted sense of self informed by his African past.

The last trait examined here is *hakkiilo*, which encompasses forethought and personal management. Historically, this idea reflects the needs of nomadic Fula herdsmen in looking after their cattle, such as making proper corrals, finding new pastures, and learning about environmental and market conditions elsewhere. Among sedentary Fulas, like Bilali, hakkiilo also proscribed the proper characteristics of leadership and respect for authority.\(^{65}\) Care and forethought were necessary skills for a manager of a large plantation and its attendant workforce of several hundred enslaved people. Thus, the lessons of Bilali’s childhood on the proper application of hakkiilo

would have found a constructive outlet on Sapelo. As interpreted through the frame of hakkiilo, for example, Bilali’s actions during the hurricane of 1824 might be seen as something more than just quick thinking. Whatever responsibility he might have felt for his Sapelo neighbors was magnified by his understanding of hakkiilo. He was obligated, according to Fula cultural mores, to care for the people and things under his command. Hakkiilo also embraced a spirit of care and organization with respect to military action.\textsuperscript{66} Given the tumultuous times of Bilali’s early years, he surely would have learned about the value of pulaaku in military leadership, either through direct training or from stories of battlefield prowess. From this angle, we can see Bilali acting on the lessons of hakkiilo during the War of 1812 when Spalding entrusted him with protecting Sapelo. With a cache of guns and a troop of provisional soldiers under his command, Bilali had to conceive and execute of plan to prevent British attack. He organized training drills, patrols, sentries, and channels of communication, all of which worked to forestall enemy action. A combination of preparedness and good fortune saved Sapelo, but Bilali could take pride in his efforts to care for and to protect his community by following the precepts of hakkiilo.

From these examples emerges a portrait of a man who was self-conscious of both his ethnic heritage and its moral code. In guiding his actions by the compass of pulaaku, Bilali was able to look beyond the predicament of slavery and find, instead, legitimacy in his circumstances by thinking and acting in the manner prescribed by Fula culture. In addition to pulaaku, some elements of Fula social organization also gave

\textsuperscript{66} Kirk-Greene, “Maudo Laawol Pulaaku,” 46; Catherine Ver Eecke, “Pulaaku: Adamawa Fulbe Identity and its Transformations,” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1988), 51, also describes components of pulaaku, including leadership and bravery, that are related to military service.
Bilali tools through which he could interpret his life on the plantation. Bilali understood that over the span of his life a Pullo must move through several different age categories—youth, maturity, and elderhood—each with different rights and obligations. As a youth, a Pullo learned about herding or attended school; in this phase he would also find a mate and begin a family. In the transition to maturity, Fulas became more peripherally involved in group decision-making, but they were still considered to be part of their father’s household. It was not until he became an elder that a Pullo was fully acknowledged as the head of his own household and was allowed to assume positions of leadership in society. Elder men hoped “to have four wives, to provide for them comfortably and equally, and to provide for all family members” during this phase of their lives.

Bilali’s social transitions must have been difficult, since he was taken as a youth and could not benefit from the collective wisdom of his native community as he aged. Still, he would have fixed his sights on achieving the status of an elder, as that role marked the full measure of a man in Fula society. On one hand, elderhood reflected the accrual of age and experience, but it also was the foundation for other types of achievement. Wives, children, and wealth could win a man pride and respect. When these were combined with the approval of his peers and subordinates, a Fula man of at least middle age could earn a place as the head of his lineage group. A man in this position was known as an ardo, and was responsible for representing the consensus of

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68 Ver Eecke, “Pulaaku,” 194.

69 Stenning, Savannah Nomads, 50-51.
his group in its dealings with others.\textsuperscript{70} The ardo’s role was also symbolic, as he represented “the successful—and therefore, by inference, the good—Fulani,” to the members of his group.\textsuperscript{71}

With this in mind, if Bilali wished to judge his status on Sapelo by the standards of his African home, he would have found a measure of success. He had lived into middle age and had acquired some wealth, if not in property, certainly in status. He had at least one wife and seven children, though both of these numbers could be understated. Bilali’s great granddaughter, Katie Brown, clearly named seven of Bilali’s daughters, but this number included no male children.\textsuperscript{72} Some scholars believe him to have had as many as twelve sons in addition to the seven daughters, which would have given him an abundant family.\textsuperscript{73} There is also a chance that Bilali had other wives besides Phoebe. Katie Brown recalled that one daughter said, “Phoebe he wife, but maybe hab mone one wife. I spects das bery possible.”\textsuperscript{74} Lydia Parrish, in her research on Sapelo in the early twentieth century, also believed that Bilali might have had more than one wife, as she found that Katie Brown disagreed with her cousin, Shad Hall, on the name of Bilali’s wife.\textsuperscript{75} Whether he had one wife or more, Bilali commanded the

\textsuperscript{70} Stenning, \textit{Savannah Nomads}, 51.

\textsuperscript{71} Kirk-Greene, “Maudo Laawol Pulaaku,” 43.

\textsuperscript{72} Georgia Writers’ Project, \textit{Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes} (1940; Athens: University of Georgia Press: reprint 1986), 161. Spelling is retained from the original.

\textsuperscript{73} Allan D. Austin, \textit{African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook} (New York: Garland, 1984), 265.

\textsuperscript{74} Georgia Writers’ Project, \textit{Drums and Shadows}, 161. Katie Brown’s reply might be interpreted as a veiled affirmation of the possibility of Bilali having multiple wives.

\textsuperscript{75} Lydia Parrish, “Notes on some Southern Loyalists,” (unpublished manuscript), Microfilm 140-A, p. 136, University of Florida Special Collections, Gainesville, Florida.
family and resources that typically belonged to an ardo. Moreover, by virtue of his position as the intermediary between Spalding and the enslaved population of Sapelo, Bilali could easily have seen himself as the group’s representative. If Bilali sought to square his experiences in Georgia with the expectations of a free Fula man, the roles of ardo and elder provided him ample opportunities. Bilali could not have overlooked the fact, however, that he was not free. Still, he could look to his Fula upbringing to make sense of his predicament through the lens of slavery.

Slavery was omnipresent in Bilali’s African home, and he would have seen it as a legitimate institution. While it would never have been his wish to become enslaved, his faith would have guided him to surrender his fate into Allah’s hands. Just as his early social and cultural education helped him to find legitimacy by the standards of free men, it would also have helped him to understand enslavement. Bilali’s most valuable insight about slavery society involved the reciprocal relationship between masters and bondsmen. Fula slaveholders valued obedience and rewarded it with “positions of importance and even titles.”76 One such reward was to make a loyal slave the head of the enslaved community, where he was responsible for the “general surveillance of work and the allocation of tasks” to be done.77 These tasks often demanded that slaves work the master’s fields part of the time and their own subsistence fields during other times.78 The parallels between this system and Bilali’s life on Sapelo are striking, from the use of a head driver down to the division of labor. While it was no substitute for the

76 VerEecke, “Pulaaku,” 173.


78 Dilley, Islamic and Caste Knowledge, 46-47.
pleasure of freedom, Bilali might have felt some comfort in finding himself in system that appeared familiar, occupying a position meant to reward loyal service. He probably also looked forward to the eventual possibility of manumission that sometimes came to the driver in Africa, although, unlike his African peers, that freedom never came.

By the time Bilali died in 1857, he has spent more than five decades living and working on Sapelo Island. He both witnessed and guided the island’s transformation into a thriving cotton plantation, home to one of the largest enslaved communities in coastal Georgia. Bilali also witnessed his own transformation into a leader and elder. Slavery dictated the cadence of life on Sapelo, but there is good reason to believe that Bilali did not allow it to define his identity. As he confronted the misfortunes of enslavement in the Caribbean and on Sapelo, he found opportunities to forge a link between the present and the past, using the lessons of his African youth to build a successful life.
CHAPTER 6
“THERE IS NO STRENGTH BUT FROM ALLAH”: BILALI’S MANUSCRIPT AND OTHER ENSLAVED MUSLIMS

For almost seven decades, Bilali was buffeted by the forces of slavery. Amid the uncertainties in his long life, he clung tightly to his Muslim faith, which gave him a bedrock of stability in an otherwise tumultuous world. There is ample evidence from the people who knew Bilali to confirm that he was a practicing, if not devout, Muslim during his years on Sapelo. Still, the hallmark of our understanding of Bilali’s religion comes not from anecdotes and stories, but from Bilali himself. In his own hand, Bilali spelled out what it meant for him to be a Muslim far from home. This chapter examines the text and context of Bilali’s Arabic manuscript to highlight how Bilali described and expressed his faith during his years on Sapelo Island. It also looks at the examples of several other enslaved Muslims to see how they persevered in the plantations of the Americas.

Among all the aspects of Bilali’s life that have come to light, his text has attracted the most scholarly and public attention. The manuscript exists today in booklet form, about 3.7 by 6.3 inches in size, and comprises thirteen pages of handwritten text wrapped in a soft leather cover.1 The writing is wholly in Arabic script in red-brown ink on light brown paper. Due to stains, fading ink, bleeding through of the thin paper, and the fluctuating quality of Bilali’s penmanship, the manuscript is nearly indecipherable in places. While the booklet contains thirteen pages today, there is strong evidence that it was originally longer. Bilali did not number the pages, but marked the pagination and flow of the text by writing the first word of the following page at the bottom of each page.

1“The Ben-Ali Diary, n.d.,” AMs, Hargrett Room, University of Georgia, Athens. The manuscript is kept with the Francis R. Goulding Papers at the University of Georgia. The booklet is in surprisingly good condition for a document of its age. The leather cover is entirely intact, but the pages within have become brittle and some have broken free of the booklet’s stitched binding.
This pattern is consistent throughout except for the pages at the very center of the booklet. At that point—where the stitched binding is exposed and the paper is most likely to be pulled free—the word at the bottom of the sixth page does not match that at the top of the seventh, indicating that at least one or more set of pages was removed or lost.

Bilali did not date his manuscript nor offer any indication of when he wrote it. There is, however, evidence from its paper and ink that suggests something of its origins. Judging by its watermarks, the paper Bilali used appears to have been of European manufacture, intended for the African market. Watermarks are impressions made in the body of paper during its manufacture to indicate its origin or maker. The two visible watermarks in the manuscript’s paper both suggest that the paper was made in Italy, probably during the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. During this time, some Italian mills specialized in—even dominated—the paper trade to Muslim North Africa. From there, some of this paper was “re-exported to the Blacks” via the Saharan trade. If the paper is, indeed, Italian, as it appears to be, then its appearance in Georgia is certainly a mystery. Since Spalding and merchants in Darien maintained close connections to trans-Atlantic commerce, the most plausible explanation is that Bilali purchased the paper himself in Darien or got it from Spalding. Still, the fact that the

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3 Martin, “Sapelo Island’s Arabic Document,” 600. Martin could not find a specific maker’s name, but found the watermarks consistent with Italian “tre lune” paper common to the African market of the time.

paper was originally made for the African Islamic marketplace begs the question as to how and why Bilali came into possession of this particular paper in Georgia. He might have sought out this variety of paper specifically, but, ultimately, it is impossible to know for sure. A more definitive date for the manuscript’s origin might come from its ink. One researcher used a technique of chemical analysis to determine when the text had been written. The ink’s iron content suggests that Bilali penned the manuscript in the mid-1820s.\(^5\) This date is clearly within the time when Bilali was living on Sapelo, eliminating the possibility that he brought it with him from Caicos.

Bilali’s manuscript first came to public knowledge beyond Sapelo in 1857, when William Brown Hodgson spoke of Bilali to a meeting of the Ethnological Society of New York. Hodgson did not address Bilali’s manuscript specifically, but he did acknowledge that Bilali had penned “various written papers, supposed to be ritual,” and expressed hope that they “may be preserved.”\(^6\) When Hodgson presented this information, Bilali had already given his manuscript to Rev. Goulding, as Hodgson said that Bilali had died recently. This suggests the possibility either that Hodgson knew of the manuscript in Goulding’s possession or that he knew of other texts still on Sapelo. If Bilali wrote any other texts, they have not come to light—something Hodgson assumed might happen, as he wrote that there was “a great superstition and reverent secretiveness among his

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race” with respect to Bilali’s writings. Eventually, Bilali’s manuscript came to the attention of historians by way of Goulding’s son.

Bilali gave his manuscript to Rev. Francis Goulding shortly before his death in 1857. Presumably, this was to ensure its survival by guaranteeing that it would not be lost, forgotten, or destroyed on Sapelo. Goulding cared for the document until his death in 1881 when it passed into the hands of his son Benjamin. In the five decades that followed, Benjamin Goulding showed the manuscript to his friends and associates and attempted to sell it at least once. Among the people who saw Bilali’s manuscript was Joel Chandler Harris, author of the *Uncle Remus* stories, who eventually published several books that included Bilali as a character. Goulding’s attempt to find a buyer was unsuccessful, and in the 1930s he donated the manuscript to the Georgia State Library.

After Bilali’s work became property of the state, it was opened to scholarly examination and, almost immediately, the first of several translations began. The first attempted translation of the Bilali manuscript occurred in the late 1930s when a copy of the text was sent to Melville Herskovits at Northwestern University. Herskovits forwarded it to linguist Joseph Greenberg, who published his initial translation in 1940 in the *Journal of Negro History*. Greenberg identified “several common religious formulae” in the manuscript and was thus able to determine that it was neither a diary nor a

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8 Benjamin Goulding Affidavit, 12 Oct 1931, Box 2:3, Francis R. Goulding Collection, MS 2807, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries. Benjamin Goulding claimed that Bilali presented his father with the manuscript in 1859, but this conflicts with Hodgson’s claim that Bilali had died at some recent time prior to October, 1857. Hodgson’s account appears to be more reliable than Goulding’s. Harris’s interpretation will be explored in Chapter 7.

plantation record, as many others had previously assumed. He eventually took the book to Africa where he sought the input of Muslim clerics in its translation, but discovered that the text contained nonstandard Arabic spellings which made its interpretation more difficult. The Nigerian Hausa scholars Greenberg consulted were able to identify specific Arabic words in the text, but were confused by the frequent misspellings and declared the manuscript to be the work of jinn, or spirits, and refused to offer any additional help. Greenberg was, however, able to make a telling comparison between the manuscript and a classic Islamic legal text—the Risala of Ibn Abi Zayd al Qayrawani. Greenberg was also able to identify patterns in the misspellings, which he believed were the result of Bilali transcribing from memory texts that he had learned orally. Greenberg concluded, based on the differences between the Bilali manuscript and the text of the original Risala, that the manuscript was written by “a young student,” who “was unaware of the meaning of much of what he had written.” His judgment that Bilali scribbled Arabic phrases he learned by rote and only half-remembered has been criticized by later scholars, but Greenberg admittedly labeled his translation a “preliminary statement.” These problems notwithstanding, this early attempt brought the manuscript into academic circulation and spurred its continued examination.

In the decades since Greenberg’s first analysis, several scholars have undertaken the translation of Bilali’s manuscript. The most complete translations to

date are by Ronald Judy, Joseph Progler, and Muhammed Al-Ahari. While each author employs and interprets the text in a different manner, all three are in general agreement about its content. To summarize them in brief, Ronald Judy’s work focuses on the ways Bilali’s manuscript can be used to critique Western approaches to the cultural “other.” Progler is most interested in how Bilali asserted his Muslim identity and how modern readers negotiate the categories of African and Muslim in American history. Al-Ahari sees in Bilali’s writing the work of a Muslim jurist presenting the earliest Islamic legal text in the United States. Bilali’s meditations are sufficiently capacious—or esoteric—to allow any or all of these interpretations. At the very least, by carefully reading Bilali’s text it is possible to gain a brief glimpse into his faith and identity.

“In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful,” begins Bilali’s meditations, “Allah's blessings be upon our master Muhammad and his family and his companions.” At a most basic level, it is evident from Bilali’s invocations of Allah and Muhammad that he is a follower of Islam. Next, Bilali identified a Muslim legal scholar by name; a scholar with whom he either studied, or whose work he was familiar with. While the fact of Bilali’s Islamic learning has not been contested—given that his manuscript was written in Arabic and is clearly a statement of faith—interpreters have

University of New York at Buffalo, 1996); Yusuf Progler, “Reading Early American Islamica: An Interpretive Translation of the ‘Bilali Diary’,” Al-Tawhid, Vol. 16, No. 3, (2000): 5-43; Yusef Progler, “Ben Ali and his Arabic diary: Encountering an African Muslim in Antebellum America,” Muslim and Arab Perspectives; International Islamic Magazine, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2004): 19-60; Muhammed Abdullah Al-Ahari, Bilali Muhammad: Muslim Jurisprudist in Antebellum Georgia (Chicago: Magribine Press, 2010). Correspondence relating to other incomplete or unpublished translations can be found in the Francis Goulding Papers in the Hargrett Library at the University of Georgia. I wish to thank Muhammed Al-Ahari for generously sharing with me a draft of the expanded edition of his Muslim Jurisprudist text.

13 Josef Progler, “Encountering Islam: Essays in Cultural History and Representation” (PhD. diss, SUNY Buffalo, 1996), 143.

14 Progler, “Encountering Islam,” 144.
disagreed over the level of his education and his intent in writing. Early analysis of the manuscript, such as in Greenberg, highlighted its irregularities of both grammar and Quranic citation. These first readers seemed to have expected an enslaved middle-aged African man to remember perfectly the instruction of his childhood. When they did not find that perfection they assumed him to be merely reciting fragments of words and phrases of which he had little understanding. Recent scholarship has shown that Bilali was not only aware of what he was writing; he was actively editing and correcting his work. Joseph Progler, for example, cites several instances where Bilali changed words and phrases that were misspelled or misplaced. The fact that Bilali was reviewing his work is a strike against the long-held assumption that he was merely jotting notes in Arabic. Instead, it shows that he was writing with deliberation and purpose. The assumptions of early researchers about Bilali’s knowledge and abilities basically stem from incomplete translation of the manuscript, wherein they were able to identify only portions of the Qur’an and the Risalah. Progler’s and Al-Ahari’s more thorough translations highlight Bilali’s connections with and divergences from those two sources. Al-Ahari ultimately concludes, for example, that “the text does not copy the Risalah, or any other text, verbatim,” rather, it is an original composition based upon some of the concepts of (and incorporating excerpts from) the Risalah.

In its totality, Bilali’s writing seems to be a kind of Muslim catechism or primer, offering instructions on how to practice and maintain one’s faith. Further, it contains

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16 Muhammad Al-Ahari, Bilali Muhammad: Meditations upon the Beliefs of Islam & Calling Upon Your Lord at Morning Prayers Volume One (unpublished manuscript provided by author, 2008. Forthcoming from Magribine Press, Chicago) 103.
messages that seem to be particularly relevant for Muslims living in bondage. From the beginning it is possible to identify Bilali’s purpose: “This is a very concise summary of the obligatory actions of the religion.... And this is what was told and described about them to ease their instruction for those who want to understand.”

He continues, “I will take this up chapter by chapter, so that Allah willing it will be easy for learners to understand.” Bilali’s message is clear that he hopes to help—or to follow in the model of others who have helped—fellow Muslims to know and maintain their religion. He then directs his reader to acknowledge and respect Muhammad and the caliphs, and to remember that “All power is from Allah and staying near to anything else but him leads to despair.”

The value of repetitive practice is listed next, along with the reminder that those who fail to acknowledge Allah or his commandments “shall be committed to flaming fire.” At this point in the text, there is an indeterminate number of pages missing. After the break, Bilali’s instruction continues with lessons on how to wash oneself prior to prayer, followed by an outline of the call to prayer and the manner, times, and text of the daily prayers. Bilali must have thought seriously about ritual washing, as this is one of the places in the manuscript where the text has been corrected. Washing before prayers must also have been a very visible part of Bilali’s daily routine, as Spalding once made a comment about it. In an article about growing and processing sugar, Spalding wrote that “no Mahometan with his seven daily ablutions, is a greater enemy to

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17 Al-Ahari, *Bilali Muhammad: Muslim Jurisprudist*, 16.

dirt than sugar is.”¹⁹ This appears to be an acknowledgement by Spalding about the presence of Muslim practices on his plantations. Of all the examples he might have used to describe the purification needed for sugar manufacture, it is telling that he chose to offer an analogy about Muslims and cleanliness. While Spalding might have overstated the number of ablutions in a Muslim’s normal day, he did not criticize the process nor offer any value judgment about it other than to suggest that cleanliness was good.

Bilali clearly listed several of the fundamentals of Muslim belief and practice in his meditations, touching on two of the ‘five pillars’ of Islam.²⁰ While Bilali wrote about the profession of faith and prayers, we can only guess whether the missing pages contained any instruction on fasting, giving alms, or pursuing a pilgrimage. The Qur'an allows believers some flexibility in both fasting and *hajj* depending on one's condition and situation; allowing people who are under duress to forgo those rituals.²¹ Still, it would be fascinating to read how Bilali chose to reconcile those obligations with the restrictions he faced in slavery. There is one piece of evidence about how Bilali adapted his religious practice to slavery that comes from his great-granddaughter, Katie Brown. She recalled that Bilali and his family were “bery puhti culuh bout duh time day pray and

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dey bery regluh bout duh hour.”

This in itself is not unusual, but Brown said that they prayed thrice daily—“Wen duh sun come up, wen it straight obuh head and wen it set,”—instead of five times each day, as the ritual normally demands. Other witnesses in the vicinity of Sapelo also recalled the same pattern of morning, noon, and evening prayers. Instead of eschewing their prayers altogether, which would be understandable given their situation, these men and women appear to have combined the noon and afternoon prayers and evening and nighttime prayers, which Muslim practice permits in times of hardship.

While silent about some aspects of his faith, parts of Bilali’s writing seem as if they are intended specifically for an enslaved audience. For example, he addressed the plight of those who are persecuted for their faith: “Allah protects those who put faith in what He has decreed to practice. Those that taunt the believer and his practices, [remember that] [God will come] on the Day of Resurrection with His angels in array to put people on display, together with their accounts, their punishments....” The testimonies of other enslaved Muslims, such as those of Job ben Solomon, echo with memories of abuse and, very often, taunting at the hands of non-Muslims. Bilali’s words ring with encouragement, imploring himself and others to stay strong in their faith.

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23 Georgia Writers’ Project, Drums and Shadows, 161.
24 Georgia Writers’ Project, Drums and Shadows, 141, 156.
26 Al-Ahari, Muslim Jurisprudist, 18.
There is another piece of his text which seems relevant to the experience of slavery, but, unfortunately, only exists as a fragment. He ends a statement by writing about “those who are patient with the Kafirun ["unbelievers"] and promote peace among them.”\textsuperscript{28} While it is impossible to grasp his idea in full, it is certain that he and his coreligionists were surrounded by people they would have deemed nonbelievers, both black and white. We can imagine that these enslaved Muslims would have found strength through building their own community of faith while maintaining peace with those around them.

Taken in its entirety, Bilali’s text spells out the desires of a devout, dedicated, and educated Muslim who wished to maintain or even spread his faith in his new home. As if to emphasize this point, he wrote, “I do hope we will receive the reward of those who have taught or called men to the religion of God.”\textsuperscript{29} If Bilali was looking for a receptive audience that he could lead or teach, he would certainly have found it on or around Sapelo. The testimonies of former slaves contained in \textit{Drums and Shadows} are peppered with references to Muslims and Islamic practices among African-born people in the area. Some of those interviewed mention prayers, where people kneeled on the floor, bowing three times toward the sun.\textsuperscript{30} Sometimes these individuals used strings of beads resembling the prayer beads some Muslims employ.\textsuperscript{31} Their testimonies also

\textsuperscript{28} Al-Ahari, \textit{Muslim Jurisprudist}, 19.

\textsuperscript{29} Al-Ahari, \textit{Muslim Jurisprudist}, 17.

\textsuperscript{30} Georgia Writers’ Project, \textit{Drums and Shadows}, 121, 141, 144.

\textsuperscript{31} Georgia Writers’ Project, \textit{Drums and Shadows}, 161, 165.
recall Africans who observed Fridays as a day of prayer and others whose daily prayers were supplemented by books they kept hidden, presumably the Qur’an.  

It is certainly within the realm of possibility that Bilali proselytized to or prayed with these other Muslims. Many of the area’s enslaved residents had the liberty to travel with little restraint in the free time given by their owners or in the time they seized for themselves. What is clear from the examples on Sapelo and nearby St. Simons Island is that some members of the Muslim communities in these places knew of each other and likely maintained regular contact. The best example of these types of interactions comes from the relationship between Bilali and his friend Salih Bilali on James Couper’s St. Simons Island plantation. There are striking parallels between Bilali’s life and Salih Bilali’s, despite their different African origins. Salih Bilali’s story offers valuable information about both Bilali and the lives of other Muslims in coastal Georgia.

Salih Bilali was the head driver of the Couper family plantations to south of Sapelo Island, and a glimpse into his life helps expand our understanding of Islam and slavery in coastal Georgia. Salih Bilali was, like Bilali, remembered as a faithful and dedicated Muslim. His owner’s son remembered him as “the most religious man that he had ever known,” and claimed that his final words were, “Allah is God and Mohammed his prophet.” Salih Bilali left no written records of his own hand. In further contrast to the sources on Bilali, Salih Bilali’s owner, James Hamilton Couper, left a lengthy record of his trusted slave. Couper wrote a letter to his friend William Brown Hodgson, during the late 1830s or early 1840s in which he recounted his conversations with Salih Bilali.

32 Georgia Writers’ Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 145, 179.

This letter is an invaluable source of information about Salih Bilali, Bilali, and the Muslim community of which they were members.  

Couper wrote that Salih Bilali was “a remarkable man” who was a “native born Foulah” enslaved first in the Bahamas before being brought to Georgia. Salih Bilali’s “intelligence” and “sound judgment” gave the Coupers cause to make him their head driver in 1816; a position which put him in charge of more than 400 enslaved workers. He is described in positive terms, possessing, for example, traits of character which Couper says are “rare in a slave,” and which allowed Couper to leave the plantation in Salih Bilali’s sole care for long periods of time. While it is uncommon, and shockingly candid, to hear a slaveholder correlate his enslaved management with his own success, Couper’s observations on Salih Bilali’s religion are even more fascinating.

Couper wrote of Salih Bilali:

He is a strict Mahometan; abstains from spirituous liquors, and keeps the various fasts, particularly that of the Rhamadan. He is singularly exempt from all feeling of superstition; and holds in great contempt, the African belief in fetishes and evil spirits. He reads Arabic, and has a Koran (which, however, I have not seen) in that language, but does not write it.

If on Sapelo, Bilali was writing to encourage Muslims to cling to their faith despite the obstacles presented to them, Salih Bilali was demonstrating how one might act out that faith. That a “strict” Muslim would eschew alcohol comes as little surprise. For Couper, however, this sobriety seemed to have been part of the calculus that made Salih Bilali fit

34 Couper’s letter was published in: William B. Hodgson, *Notes on North Africa, the Sahara and Soudan* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1844), 68-75. Citations of Couper’s letter will refer back to this volume.

35 Couper in Hodgson, *Notes*, 68.

36 Couper in Hodgson, *Notes*, 68.

37 Couper in Hodgson, *Notes*, 69.
for leadership, especially when the enslaved people under his charge seemed to have ready access to alcohol.\footnote{38}

It is noteworthy that Salih Bilali observed Ramadan on the plantation. Fasting during the month of Ramadan is one of the five pillars of Islam—a duty incumbent upon the faithful. Though the Qur’an allows dispensation from fasting for those upon whom it would be unnecessarily burdensome, Salih Bilali chose to observe this ritual. Bilali probably did, too. For an enslaved worker who was subject to the whims of his owner, the weather, and the crops in his care, maintaining a month-long fast was a serious and strenuous undertaking. Since it is based on the lunar calendar, the timing of the fast changes each year, and this fact could itself become a burden. If, for example, Salih Bilali had the ability to track the Islamic calendar, he would have found that in 1840 the month Ramadan fell between October 27 and November 25.\footnote{39} This period would have coincided with one of the busiest times of the year on the plantation, when sugar cane had to be cut and processed at a steady and ceaseless pace.\footnote{40} While it may be impossible to determine if Salih Bilali was able reckon his own calendar in accordance to the orthodox Islamic calendar, the fact still stands that his fast would have been a matter of intense personal sacrifice.

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\footnote{38} Jeremiah Evarts, a minister traveling through the Sea Islands in the early 1820s noted that slaves in the area were able to sell produce on their own accounts, and alcohol was one of their favored purchases. He wrote, anything “which they can carry to market, is sold for liquor.” Jeremiah Evarts, “Jeremiah Evarts Diary, 1822,” p. 20, Collection 240, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia.

\footnote{39} Date conversion taken from: Calendar Converter, accessed 10 August 2013), http://www.fourmilab.ch/documents/calendar.

\footnote{40} James Bagwell, Rice Gold: James Hamilton Couper and Plantation Life on the Georgia Coast (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2000), 68; “Cutting [of sugar cane] began around the middle or last of October.” And there was a “period of intense activity from October through December.”
Couper also stated that Salih Bilali rejected non-Muslim spiritual practices on St. Simons Island. This comment might have served to mark Salih Bilali as unique and important in Couper's eye. When he wrote of “African belief,” Couper was likely commenting as much, or more, about the majority of Africans on his plantation rather than Salih Bilali. By invoking the common trope of African “fetishes,” Couper was playing into the long-standing equation of Africans and non-Christians with paganism. Muslims, in the view of many Christian slaveholders, might not have been of the “true” faith, but given Islam's Abrahamic origins, “African Muslims could not be accused of idolatry.” Couper's remark, therefore, is most useful in demonstrating that the two Bilalis, and the Muslim communities around them, faced the challenges of confronting Christian beliefs, African beliefs, and various combinations of both in their quest to cultivate Islam in Georgia.

Despite the trials of slavery, and of living in a land absent the institutional structures of his faith, Salih Bilali must have taken some comfort in his ability to hold and read the Qur'an. He would have seen the Qur'an as the revealed word of Allah, and having a copy of his own would have given Salih Bilali answers to his questions of faith and refuge in his times of need. Couper seemed confident that Salih Bilali had a copy, even if he had not seen it himself. Another of Couper’s African-born slaves, named Israel, also secreted a book that he used during prayers, which was most likely a copy of the Qur'an. Hodgson wrote that on Sapelo, Bilali “read his sacred book with

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42 Georgia Writers’ Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 179.
constancy and reverence,” and that “his numerous descendants, who are Christians, buried him with the Koran resting on his breast."\(^{43}\) We must ask how likely it was that Bilali, Salih Bilali, and Israel had gotten copies of the Qur’an. Evidence exists from elsewhere in the Americas that the Qur’an was available to enslaved Muslims who sought it out. Sylviane Diouf explains that through “thorough planning,” rather than by “extraordinary chance,” enslaved people could procure copies of their own.\(^{44}\) On some occasions, sympathetic Christian missionaries would gain access to Qur’ans for Muslim slaves, while in other cases, booksellers might fill the demand. More likely, though, is that the enslaved faithful managed to get copies from other scholarly slaves who penned it from memory or from clandestine supplies originating in Africa and traveling through the channels of Atlantic commerce.\(^{45}\) Whatever their origins, it seems that “Korans in Arabic were taken for granted, by both blacks and whites,” in the early nineteenth century, and for people living in slave societies, “the presence of these books was not surprising.”\(^{46}\) If sacred Muslim texts were so common in the Americas that slaveholders and white observers could merely mention them as normal part of the enslaved experience, perhaps, then, the received notion “slave religion” bears closer examination. Assuming that Salih Bilali did have a Qur’an, what does his ability to read, but not write, Arabic suggest about his African origins?


\(^{44}\) Diouf, Servants of Allah, 113.

\(^{45}\) Diouf, Servants of Allah, 113-118.

\(^{46}\) Diouf, Servants of Allah, 115.
First, Salih Bilali’s childhood education very likely ran parallel to that of Bilali’s. As a young child, he would have been raised in a Muslim home and would have entered into an Islamic primary school. The bulk of that primary education would have centered around learning the basics of Muslim practice, and also learning to read the Qur’an. Couper wrote elsewhere in his letter that Salih Bilali told him that in his African home, “all the children are taught to read and write Arabic.” Salih Bilali’s ability to read Arabic but not write it actually fits within the pattern of Muslim schooling. If a student were to have his schooling curtailed after (or toward the end of) primary school and prior to the start of extensive secondary education, then that student’s reading skills would certainly exceed his writing abilities. The primary-secondary school transition usually occurred when a student was in early adolescence, a fact which is reinforced by Salih Bilali telling Couper that he was “seized by a predatory party” when he was “about twelve years old.”

In addition to sharing a similar educational background, the two Bilalis shared something else in common—they were both of the same aforementioned Fula ethnic background. Salih Bilali claimed that he was a “native born Foulah” and came from “the Kingdom of Massina.” Massina is in the modern state of Mali, and in the late eighteenth century was home to large communities of sedentary and nomadic Fula peoples, some having practiced “centuries of adherence” to Islam. Couper wrote that,

47 Couper in Hodgson, Notes, 73.
48 Couper in Hodgson, Notes, 74.
49 Couper in Hodgson, Notes, 68, 70.
“Mr. Spalding of Sapelo, has, among his negroes, one called Bul-Ali, who writes Arabic, and speaks the Foulah language. [Salih Bilali] and himself are intimate friends.... [Salih Bilali] informs me that [Bilali] is from Timbo.”51 Since Bilali’s home of Timbo is in the Futa Jallon region of modern Guinea, and Salih Bilali’s was in Mali, the two men were not neighbors in Africa, as they were in Georgia. Nonetheless, they came out of similar ethnic, cultural, and religious environments—facts that would have given the two men great cause for companionship, especially in their adoptive homes. Knowing where the two men began their lives also allows us better understanding of their religious trajectories on both sides of the middle passage. Although Futa Jallon and Massina lie about one thousand miles distant from one another, the two regions shared much and maintained close connections—most of the Fulas in Futa Jallon, for example, considered Massina to be their ancestral home.52 The two Bilalis, along with their Muslim neighbors, found in Georgia the community and resources they needed to hold their religions bearings.

Beyond Georgia, elsewhere in the United States and the Caribbean, other enslaved Muslims found ways to express their faith. These other examples offer a comparative frame through which it is possible to examine some of the different challenges and responses of enslaved Muslims in the Americas. The first of these is a man most commonly known as Job ben Solomon.53 Job was born Ayuba Suleiman

51 Couper in Hodgson, Notes, 74.
53 Job ben Solomon wrote an autobiography in 1734 with the aid of an Englishman named Thomas Bluett describing his early life, capture, and repatriation. Some sources on Job ben Solomon can be found in: Philip D. Curtin, “Ayuba Suleiman Diallo of Bondu,” in Africa Remembered: Narratives of West Africans
Diallo around 1701 or 1702 in the Futa Toro region of what is now Senegal.\textsuperscript{54} He belonged to a long line of learned and politically active Fula men, and his father sat at the head of his town’s mosque. Job was educated in the manner of his family and was groomed for a career in politics or commerce. His schooling apparently prepared him for religious leadership, also, as when Job was fifteen years old he assisted his father in his duties as an Imam.\textsuperscript{55} In 1730, Job traveled to the Gambia River to sell a pair of slaves and to procure some paper. Not finding a suitable bargain with the waiting slave ship captain, he crossed the river into enemy territory to complete the sale. While resting at the home of a friend on his return home, Job was ambushed, captured, and marched back to the Gambia. There he was sold to the same captain with whom he had negotiated earlier. The captain allowed Job to attempt to ransom himself back to freedom by sending messengers back to his home.\textsuperscript{56} The ransom party arrived too late to secure Job’s release—he, along with the rest of the ship’s cargo, was shipped to the slave markets of Annapolis, Maryland. Eventually, he arrived at a plantation on the Chesapeake Bay where he was forced into the tobacco fields. Job withered under the work, saying that he “had never been used to such labour.”\textsuperscript{57} His owner tried putting him in charge of the plantation’s cattle, which was both less strenuous and more familiar to a


\textsuperscript{54} Curtin, “Ayuba,” 23.

\textsuperscript{55} Curtin, “Ayuba,” 38.

\textsuperscript{56} Curtin, “Ayuba,” 40.

\textsuperscript{57} Curtin, “Ayuba,” 41.
Fula man. Still, he found the work unsuitable and ran away during which time he was captured and jailed. While in jail, he met some sympathetic whites who learned of his faith and origins. After he was returned to his owner, Job wrote a letter in Arabic to his father in another attempt to secure another ransom, requesting that it be sent with a slave ship back to the Gambia. A small group of prominent men purchased Job from his owner in Maryland, who was “very willing to part with him,…finding him no way fit for his business,” and transported him to London.  

Job was introduced around the city—including an audience with the royal family—and eventually set out on a ship bound for Africa. In 1734, after little more than three years in slavery, Job returned to rebuild his life in Bondu. Job’s story highlights the opportunities that existed for enslaved people to mobilize networks of patronage to gain their freedom. Certainly, Job was not the only African in the eighteenth century to win his freedom and repatriation after being delivered to the Americas, as the example of the Robin John brothers from Calabar shows. Other Africans likely secured a ransom on the coast before being shipped away. The crux of Job’s success lay in the willingness of his American owner to agree to his sale. Had he been an effective or valuable laborer, the outcome would surely have been different.

Another example of a literate enslaved Muslim in the United States is Omar ibn Said. Omar was born in Futa Toro, like Job ben Solomon, around 1770. By his own


59 Randy J. Sparks, “Two Princes of Calabar: An Atlantic Odyssey from Slavery to Freedom,” William and Mary Quarterly LIX, No. 3 (July 2002): 555-584.

60 The most recent translation of Omar ibn Said’s autobiography, along with a collection of contextual essays, appears in: Ala Alyyes, A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar Ibn Said (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011). Quotations from his autobiography are taken from this source.
description, Omar was “a Fullah Slave,” who lived in Fayetteville, North Carolina. His autobiography, written in 1831, was not his only work in Arabic, but it is the only known Arabic-language autobiography written by an enslaved person in the United States. Though it is brief, Omar’s Life encompasses his years before enslavement and some of his trials afterward. In Futa Toro, Omar received twenty-five years of schooling, almost certainly focused on the Qur’an and its interpretation. At the hands of an invading army, he was captured and forced to the coast where he was sold “into the hand of a Christian man” in 1807. The slave ship delivered Omar and the other captives to Charleston, South Carolina, where he was purchased by a “small, evil man” who put him to work on a rice plantation. He grated under the work there and escaped the plantation, and after wending his way northward was captured and delivered to the jail in Fayetteville, North Carolina. He soon drew attention by writing in Arabic on the walls of his cell.

Eventually, he was purchased a local politician who, according to Omar, “does not beat me, nor calls me bad name, nor subjects me to hunger, nakedness, or hard work.” Unlike Job ben Solomon, Omar did not secure his freedom—he died a slave in 1864. Still, the attention brought by his faith and literacy landed him in a situation that relieved him of hard labor. According to one account, he was “trusted and indulged” by his new

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61 Alryyes, *Muslim American Slave*, 49.
64 Alryyes, *Muslim American Slave*, 4, 63.
More important to understanding Omar’s actions in slavery is his autobiography. Ala Alryyes argues that Omar’s Arabic text “is replete with concealed utterances” that were intended for an enslaved audience. He included, for example, at the start of his autobiography, a verse from the Qur’an that asserts Allah’s ownership over the world. By including this verse, Omar rhetorically rejected the claim of his owners in the temporal world and chose, instead, to submit only to God. This is a subtext of resistance that would have resonated with other enslaved Muslims as it slipped past the observation of white readers. We might find a similar turn in Bilali’s writings when he encouraged peace among non-believers while also warning of the hellfire that awaited them. Bilali might have been less circumspect than Omar, but he was no less critical of his enslavers.

Much of what is known about Omar came from his correspondence with another enslaved Muslim named Lamine Kebe. Kebe, commonly called “Old Paul,” lived as a slave for forty years in the American South before being manumitted in 1835. On receiving his freedom, Kebe moved to New York to gain passage back to Africa through the American Colonization Society [ACS]. Through a series of interviews with ethnologist Theodore Dwight, he told about his life and education in Africa before being

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68 Alryyes, Muslim American Slave, 18. The verse begins: “Blessed is He in whose hand is the mulk [ownership/dominion] and who has power over all things.”

69 Al-Ahari, Muslim Jurisprudist, 18-19.


enslaved. Kebe came from Futa Jalon and received advanced training from the age of fourteen to twenty-one in the city of “Bunder” to become a teacher.  

He worked for five years as a schoolteacher before being captured by slavers on a trip to purchase paper for his students. He traveled within Futa Jalon as a trader and soldier, but his interviews show that Kebe was most passionate about his calling to train young scholars. He spoke extensively about the nature of schooling in the region and the habits of sound pedagogy. Even after more than four decades away from his African home, Kebe recalled the names, authors, and contents of almost thirty of his textbooks. Beyond these details of his life in Africa, Dwight did not publish anything of Kebe’s years in the United States. It is likely that Kebe succeeded in making the voyage back to Africa; first to Liberia and then to Sierra Leone. Despite the American Colonization Society’s wishes—and Kebe’s claims—that he could help spread the Christian gospels in Africa, Kebe, it appears that he remained steadfast in his Muslim faith.

Natchez, Mississippi in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century provided the backdrop for another enslaved African Muslim, Abd al-Rahman, known to his friends as Ibrahima. Ibrahima came from Timbo in Futa Jalon, where his father was the almaami, or ruler. He and Bilali both grew up in the same African city, though Ibrahima, 


74 Austin, African Muslims, 118.

born in 1762, was about a decade older. His youth was spent in training as a scholar and warrior, so that he might follow in his father’s footsteps. In Timbuktu, Ibrahima learned Islamic arts and science before returning to Timbo in his early twenties to become a cavalry officer. He won praise at home as a brave and successful war leader until a change of fortune left him on the losing end of a battle and landed him on a slave ship in the Gambia in 1788. Ibrahima spent the next six months aboard slave ships, touching land at Dominica and New Orleans before finally arriving in Natchez. On the plantation of Thomas Foster, Ibrahima offered a ransom for his release, but without success. After a brief flight from the plantation, Ibrahima returned and “laboured hard” for thirty years, though he said the last ten years brought him some relief. Ibrahima earned a reputation as an honest, sober, and faithful man—giving cause for Foster to make him a “second authority” on the plantation. In the Natchez market, he happened to meet an old friend, a former slave ship surgeon, named Dr. Cox, who had spent six months convalescing in Timbo in 1781. Cox announced Ibrahima as his friend and as an African prince to the people of Natchez, and tried to gain his release. Despite Cox’s pleas and offers reaching $1,000 for Ibrahima’s purchase, Foster refused to sell him. Ibrahima had become “so valuable as a slave, and so serviceable to Foster” because of

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76 Alford, *Prince Among Slaves*, 12.
79 Austin, *African Muslims*, 81. This quotation comes from an interview with Ibrahima originally published in the *African Repository* of May 1828.
80 Alford, *Prince Among Slaves*, 57.
his positive influence on the other enslaved people that he was simply too precious to lose.82 Years passed until 1826 when Ibrahima, at the encouragement of a local newspaper publisher, sent a letter in Arabic to Africa via the United States consulate in Morocco. Within a year word arrived back in Natchez by way of Washington that Ibrahima could return home with the consent of his master. Foster finally agreed to sell Ibrahima on the condition that he return to Africa and not remain in the States. After his supporters negotiated the purchase of his wife, Ibrahima began his voyage back to Africa with a tour through the United States. In February 1829, Ibrahima and his wife left American shores for Liberia. They reached land six weeks later and Ibrahima began to catch up on the news from home. Ibrahima never reached Timbo—the long travels and African climate took their toll on his health and he died in July before leaving Liberia and before his many children made the same voyage.

Significant numbers of enslaved Muslims lived in the Caribbean and Brazil, as we would expect from the disproportionate numbers of Africans delivered to those places in comparison with the United States. In Jamaica, for example, a notable cohort of literate Muslims came to the attention of a colonial officer named R. R. Madden.83 In his months on the island, Madden spoke with many recently-freed Muslims who found in him a willing audience. On one occasion, he was visited by three African-born Muslims, who Madden claimed “could all read and write Arabic; and one of them showed me a Koran


83 Madden was sent to Jamaica to help manage emancipation in the colony. He published two volumes of his Jamaican correspondence in: Richard Robert Madden, *A Twelvemonth’s Residence in the West Indies, During the Transition from Slavery to Apprenticeship; With Incidental Notices of the State of Society, Prospects, and Natural Resources of Jamaica and Other Islands*, (1835; Westport, Conn: Negro Universities Press, 1970).
written from memory by himself." One of these men, called Benjamin Cockrane, was a successful doctor in Kingston. He and the others professed that they had become Christians, but Madden wrote that he “had my doubts on this point” after he engaged them in a session of Islamic prayers. Madden also met an aged former slave named Abon Beer Sadiki, whom he described as a man “of great discernment and discretion.” Sadiki was born in Timbuktu and, in the thirty years he toiled as a slave, had made himself “invaluable” to his owner, even keeping the plantation books in Arabic. After his manumission, Sadiki gave to Madden an account, written in Arabic, detailing his life in Africa before he was taken to Jamaica. The portrait of Sadiki that emerges is that of a child of wealth and prestige who spent his youth studying both Islam and the Qur’an. In addition to the autobiographical details of his schooling and capture, he included a list of foundational Muslim beliefs of his family—including the five pillars—which was remarkably similar to a list provided by Omar ibn Said in his autobiography. Sadiki also engaged in correspondence with other Muslims in Jamaica, using Madden as a “medium of communication.” One of Sadiki’s communicants was from a man named Mohammed Kaba or “Robert Peart (or Tuffit,)” who had been enslaved for more than five decades in Jamaica. Caba was born “near the country of the Fouhlahs, the capital of which is Timbo” and wrote to congratulate Sadiki on his manumission and to seek assistance in getting copies of several texts. Kaba claimed to have converted to

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Christianity decades earlier, but Madden doubted his sincerity as Kaba’s letter included requests for the Qur’an and books on Arabic grammar.\(^{88}\) His account of life in Africa is less detailed than that of Sadiki, but he had been trained in Islamic law before he was captured. Kaba’s account also tells of the ability for Muslims in Jamaica to get information from Africa. He claimed to have received a letter several years earlier that was “written in Africa, forty-five years previously.” Not much is known about the letter—which “exhorted all the followers of Mahomet to be true and faithful if they wished to go to Heaven”—because Kaba’s wife destroyed it during the Baptist War of 1831-1832.\(^{89}\) It is unclear how the letter arrived in Jamaica or if there were similar letters in circulation. Still, the presence of an Arabic letter from Africa, even if it was decades old, suggests that Muslims in Jamaica, and possibly in North America, had opportunities to participate in networks of trans-Atlantic communication.

The last, and perhaps most striking, example of enslaved Muslims in the Americas comes from Brazil in the early nineteenth century. The coastal city of Salvador in the eastern province of Bahia was the site of a major slave uprising in January, 1835.\(^{90}\) The rebellion, which began late on January 24 and ran into the morning of January 25, demonstrated the power that could be mobilized by a critical mass of Muslims. As many as five hundred rebels, many wearing long white garments and Islamic amulets, rallied together from the large enslaved and free African Muslim


Beginning in the very early years of the nineteenth century, Bahia received increasing numbers of enslaved Muslims from the Atlantic. This coincided with political turmoil in West Africa, particularly with the advent of the Sokoto Caliphate in northern Nigeria beginning in 1804. With such a large population of African-born adherents, Islam became a viable religious choice in Bahia. Some members of the Muslim community accrued great power and influence due, in part, to their literacy and education. In fact, the Islamic population of Bahia underwent a period of expansion in the 1830s, as “vigorous proselytizing and conversion” brought new members into the fold. These missionary activities included training converts to read and write so they could understand the Qur’an and pray in Arabic. According to several accounts, some members of the Muslim community in and around Salvador appeared to have set up Qur’anic schools much like those in West Africa. Although Muslim leaders could count some success in increasing their number in the years leading up to 1835, the rebellion itself was a failure. By the time it was subdued, some seventy or more rebels died in the fighting, while they claimed only a handful of casualties from the civilian side.

There are other examples of enslaved and, often, literate Muslims in the Americas, but the cases above provide a useful sample from which we can draw some comparisons. They all share a few common traits, yet there are notable divergences.

91 Reis, Slave Rebellion in Brazil, 91, 103.
92 Reis, Slave Rebellion in Brazil, 93.
93 Reis, Slave Rebellion in Brazil, 98, 112.
94 Reis, Slave Rebellion in Brazil, 104-107.
95 Reis, Slave Rebellion in Brazil, 91-92.
that highlight the different lived experiences of these individual Muslims in the Americas. Despite the different circumstances of the cases we have seen, they all shared an important similarity in that each was an African-born man. Neither their nativity nor gender may be particularly surprising, but these facts point out something important about their lives on both sides of the Atlantic. Foremost, the ability of these men to read or write in Arabic was a specifically African feature of their identities. It was not something they could have learned to do in the Americas, neither was it something most white authorities would have endorsed. Even if we consider the unidentified students who tried to learn Arabic in Brazil, their studies marked an embrace of African culture and a rejection of Portuguese and Christian forms. It also appears that the individuals who could read and write Arabic seemed eager to maintain their literacy. Bilali, for example, retraced the lessons of his youth, while Mohammed Kaba sought books on Arabic grammar. For those who could acquire copies of the Qur’an, keeping up their Arabic helped maintain a connection with the divine words of Allah’s message. For those who could not get copies of the Qur’an, literacy still offered some benefits. It is likely that some of these men accrued power in the slave quarters by way of their literacy, as they had access to signs, symbols, and knowledge few others possessed. Even if some of their enslaved companions could read or write in English (or Portuguese, in the case of Brazil), the power of Arabic literacy must have been magnified by the fact that it was outside even the slaveowner’s realm of knowledge.

Many, if not most, of the individuals cited above either identified themselves as Fula or came from the Fula heartland, which stretches from Senegambia to Nigeria. It is not surprising that these men all came from West Africa, as the long history of
Islamization south of the Sahara certainly concentrated Muslim populations in that part of the continent. These men became enslaved because of the increase in warfare during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that accompanied waves of jihad and state formation described in the Chapter 2. What seems unlikely, though, is the large number of these literate men who claimed to be Fula. From the examples above, Bilali, Salih Bilali, Job ben Solomon, Omar ibn Said, Lamine Kebe, and Abdul Rahman Ibrahima all identified themselves as being Fula. In contrast to these North American slaves, the participants in the Brazilian rebellion of 1835 appear to have been overwhelmingly of Yoruba origin, from the southwest of modern Nigeria. The differences between the Brazilian Muslim population and the North American and Jamaican one are best explained by the geography and dynamics of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Nevertheless, the preponderance of Fulas in the North American cohort raises some questions about why their stories survived when others’ did not. To be sure, there were Muslims of other ethnicities in North America, but they do not appear as prominently among the numbers of literate slaves. Was there something unique about the African origins of these Fulas—like the patient endurance of pulaaku—that helped them emerge in the historical record? Or is this a case of survivorship bias, wherein the lives and writings of Africans of other ethnicities have simply been lost, forgotten, or ignored? No clear answers emerge from the sources.

One facet of these men’s lives that does emerge is that they remained steadfast in their Muslim faith. Some men, such as Bilali and Omar ibn Said, chose to overtly or subtly defy the Christians around them. Others, like Lamine Kebe, veiled their criticisms

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96 Reis, Slave Rebellion in Brazil, 140.
in describing how life in Africa was better than the Americas. These individuals all had an array of religious options to choose from: they often faced shades of Christianity offered by slaveholders and varieties of Afro-Christianity that emerged from the enslaved community. Still, they seemed to resist pressure to abandon Islam. Several of them, though, either professed to have converted to Christianity or were identified by witnesses as having converted. These feigned changes of heart appear to be a tactic employed by enslaved Muslims to gain assistance or legitimacy from the white community. Lamine Kebe, for example, explained his desire to help the American Colonization Society missionize abroad and, in so doing, was able to return to West Africa. His interviewer, Theodore Dwight, was unconvinced about Kebe’s conversion. In a similar way, Abdul Rahman and Omar ibn Said both “equivocated with the ACS” about their willingness to promote Christianity. These negotiations won Abdul Rahman freedom and repatriation and Omar ibn Said amelioration and stability. Through their literacy and education, some enslaved Muslims found a breach in the armor of the planter class that they were able to use to their own advantage. Just as Job ben Solomon appeared to be “no common Slave,” the white community seemed willing, at times, to extend these men freedom or privileges based on the impression that they were Arabs or princes—that they were different, if not better, than other black


98 Alryyes, Muslim American Slave, 20.
Africans. Some of these men, as we have seen, were able to capitalize on whites’ orientalist fantasies to gain their freedom. Others, like Bilali and Salih Bilali, could not count on being manumitted, but they could leverage their knowledge to win concessions from their owners.

Finally, for all the differences in the lives of these Muslim men, there is some striking congruity in the stories they chose to record. Many of their texts focus primarily on Islam or on life in Africa. Given their valuable ability to document their lives, the fact that these men focused on the relatively safe topics of faith and life prior to the middle passage suggests that they were aware of their audience—that they were aware that whites could and would interpret their words. Bilali, for instance, wrote only of Islam, despite early claims that his work was autobiographical. Job ben Solomon penned copies of the Qur’an from memory. When visitors requested of Ibrahima to write something for them in Arabic, he would give them the opening verse of the Qur’an, the *fatihah*, a powerful statement of faith. Omar ibn Said seems to be the only author who devoted much attention to the details of his life in slavery. In addition to quoting the Qur’an and explaining the fundamentals of Islam, he praised his owner for being kind and generous. His gratitude is doubtlessly sincere, but it also seems that he was aware of the attention his autobiography would draw. It is also likely that the authors chose to focus on their days before slavery because of their faith in Allah’s plan for the present.

Abon beer Sadiki explained this best when he evaded discussing his enslavement by


100 Austin, *African Muslims*, 56.

reminding his reader of God’s will: “But, praise be to God, who has every thing in his power to do as he thinks good, and no man can remove whatever burthen he chooses to put on us. As he said ‘Nothing shall fall on us except what he shall ordain; he is our Lord, and let all that believe in him put their trust in him.’"\textsuperscript{102} These men were justifiably conservative and retrospective about their faith and origins. It seems that their trust in God led them to navigate successfully many different paths in the Americas.

In the end, Bilali and the other literate Muslims we have seen chose from a variety of options in the plantations of North America and the Caribbean. They could keep or abandon the powerful lessons of life and faith that they carried from Africa. Some found opportunities to bend the system to their advantage, while others could only try to make the best of a bad lot. In all cases, they faced a world that was contingent and unpredictable. They could scarcely know if whites would find Islam to be curious, harmless, or profane. They also had no way of knowing if their literacy would make them appear noble or potentially subversive in the eyes of the white community. For Bilali and these other Muslims, literacy helped save them from the inevitable anonymity of the planation system. Literacy not only helped Bilali to be remembered, but it also gave him a powerful tool to shape the way his life’s story would be told.

\textsuperscript{102} Madden, \textit{Twelvemonth’s Residence}, Vol II, Letter XXXI.
CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

Bilali successfully kept his story alive by removing the text of his meditations from the plantation, which allowed it to be accessible to the wider world. Bilali’s mortal days eventually came to an end and his words and legacy found their fate in the hands of other people. This chapter examines the end of Islam on Sapelo and several of the ways in which portrayals of Bilali evolved after his death.

Almost immediately after his passing, stories about Bilali began to spread beyond coastal Georgia. According to W. B. Hodgson’s speech in New York, for example, Bilali died in 1859 a very old man and was buried with his sheepskin prayer rug and his Qur’an. The details of his burial offer a fascinating glimpse into African Muslim burial practices in the Sea Islands and, perhaps, elsewhere. But Hodgson offered no sources for his information, and his description carries an orientalist veneer. While he gave no hints about his informants—perhaps the Gouldings, Coupers, or Bilali’s survivors—Hodgson’s account reflects other depictions of African Muslim practices.

The use of a sheepskin prayer rug, for example, seems to have been something that, while not unique to the Fula, was certainly present in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Futa Jalon. Lamine Kebe, in his description of life in Futa Jalon, recalled the use of sheepskins as a common feature of the Koranic school.¹ As Conneau traveled through the region, he saw sheepskins being used for both seating and prayer.² Thus, it

¹ Theodore Dwight, “Remarks on the Sereculehs, an African Nation, Accompanied by a Vocabulary of their Language,” American Annals of Education and Instruction V (1835): 453. Kebe saw these mats as being unremarkable in the sense that every student used one.

² Terry Alford confirms their use in prayers, citing that “[t]he faithful worshiped on sheepskin mats placed in rows three feet apart.” Terry Alford, Prince Among Slaves: The True Story of an African Prince Sold
comes as little surprise that Bilali would have found a sheepskin to be both a needful and desirable article for his daily rituals.

Hodgson’s notion that Bilali was buried with the Qur’an “resting on his breast” is, perhaps, a little more provocative.\(^3\) As suggested in Chapter 6, there is little evidence that Bilali had a copy of the Qur’an in his possession, at least at the time he produced his manuscript. The possibility certainly exists that he could have acquired a copy in the years after he penned his text. Were this the case, we would expect that he would have made some changes to his Quranic citations that he did not appear to make. Assuming Hodgson’s account was correct, Bilali might have been interred with some of the other “ritual papers” that Hodgson believed him to have written. As Bilali was clearly willing to act in ways that would protect his writings, maybe he requested some of his works to be laid in his grave as a way of insulating them from desecration or misuse. Of course, it is possible that that the text or texts that accompanied his body were placed there not at his request, but by the respectful actions of his kin. This would have been consistent with traditions in the lowcountry of placing memorial or ritual items on or in graves.\(^4\) Ultimately, there is no way to know for sure if Hodgson’s information was correct and, if so, the nature of the texts that rested with Bilali. It does, however, confirm the possibility that Bilali produced or possessed more texts beyond the one he gave to Goulding.


Bilali’s words survived away from Sapelo, which is a strange contradiction to the lack of long-term success his words and faith had on the island. Despite all the efforts Bilali put into maintaining his connections with the words and practices of his Muslim faith, it appears that Islam in coastal Georgia faded away with the passing of Bilali’s cohort of fellow African-born slaves. This fact does not reflect a lack of diligence on Bilali’s part—rather it shows the difficulties that enslaved Muslims faced in trying to perpetuate their faith and practices in the Americas.

Islam is demanding of its adherents in several ways. First, Islam requires a measure of literacy in Arabic. The Qur’an was written in Arabic and, in the strictest sense, must be read in Arabic. Individual enslaved Muslims, like Bilali, who had been raised in Africa and trained in the Qur’anic school there, learned the book by rote and could hold on to its words and meaning. Certainly, once in the Americas, they would have wished to acquire a copy of the text for their own edification, but they could persist in their faith without it. However, lack of Arabic literacy presented a robust, even impenetrable, barrier to extending the faith to their children or companions. Without access to the Qur’anic school and its years-long process of reading, reciting, and committing the Qur’an to memory, the first generation of African Americans was ill-prepared to keep Arabic and, by extension, Islam alive in the enslaved community. Subsequent generations were even less able to do so. The example of the Muslim community in Brazil offers a useful counterpoint to that of the Sea Islands. In and

around San Salvador, Brazil, specialized Muslim practitioners—imams and
schoolteachers, for example—arrived and continued to arrive in sufficient numbers to
allow them to build the infrastructure necessary to expand their ranks. They established
Qur'anic schools to teach new adherents Arabic. Through their collective efforts and
investments, the community gained access to copies of the Qur'an and other religious
materials. In the communities where Bilali lived, he was certainly able to find other
Muslims with whom he could worship and befriend—but in the absence of texts and
teachers, they did not have the critical mass necessary to extend their faith into the next
generation.

The children and friends of African-born Muslims might have been able to retain
isolated elements of their elders’ words or habits, but these quickly lost their context
outside of the systematic practice of Islam. An example of this can be found in Bilali’s
great-granddaughter Katie Brown’s recollection of her grandmother’s custom of making
ceremonial rice cakes. She said that her grandmother made special cakes called saraka
on the “same day ebry yeah”—an event that she recalled as a “big day.” Brown’s
cousin, Shad Hall, remembered his grandmother (another of Bilali’s daughters) making
the same rice cakes every month. She passed out the saraka to the children and said,
“Ameen, Ameen, Ameen,” before they were allowed to eat. To Brown and Hall, saraka
were a sweet interlude in life on the plantation that signaled some event unknown to
them. Since the system of Muslim practice did not pass from their grandparent’s
generation to theirs, they did not know that they were participating in a custom of

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7 Georgia Writers’ Project, Drums and Shadows, 167.
charity-giving by African Muslims. From West Africa to the Americas—including Futa Jalon, Carriacou, Brazil, and the Sea Islands—Muslims carried on the practice of sadaqah or saraka, voluntary offerings intended to give thanks, counteract sin, or gain the favor of Allah. The saraka given by Bilali’s daughters mirrored African Muslim practices not just in their intent, but also through the use of balls or cakes made of rice. Saraka could be given at any time, but were often associated with Friday prayers, Ramadan, or other holy celebrations. Bilali’s grandchildren participated in a common Muslim ritual that they did not understand. Even if their grandmothers had tried to explain the significance of making and giving the saraka, it is unlikely that Brown and Hall would have been able to make sense of the act outside of its wider religious and cultural context.

Islam also posed a problem to its adherents in that its rituals require periodic interruptions in the day. While enslaved Muslims could choose to pray thrice (by combining the two mid-day prayers and two evening prayers) instead of five times per day, this still represented one or more disruptions in plantation labor. Some planters and overseers, who might otherwise have been ambivalent about enslaved people’s faith, objected to Muslims’ prayers on these grounds. Aside from barriers like these that plantation managers could impose, Islam faced stern competition from Christianity through the early nineteenth century. Christianity had already made inroads into the enslaved communities of coastal Georgia when Bilali arrived there. By the 1830s, at least a generation of the region’s slaves had seen or felt the influence of slave

9 Diouf, Servants of Allah, 93.
preachers and white missionaries. Not only did missionaries work to convert Africans and African Americans, slaveowners across the South began to promote a strain of Christian practice in the slave quarters that emphasized submission and obedience. Whether this proslavery version of Christianity ever reached Sapelo is unclear. What is certain, however, is that the enslaved people of the island built their own interpretations of Christ’s message—one that undoubtedly meshed the words and ideas of the Bible with those of their African ancestors. As this hybrid Christianity grew in numbers and importance in the enslaved community, it provided a viable, homegrown alternative to the faith of Bilali and his Muslim kin and friends. After the end of the Civil War, in May 1866, the faithful of Sapelo constructed the First Baptist Church, later renamed the First African Baptist Church. We need not speculate about the impact this had on Islam on Sapelo. The founders of this church were Abram and Bilally Bell, two of Bilali’s grandsons. These men might have retained nominally Muslim names, but the passage of time and tradition kept them from retaining their grandfather’s faith.

Bilali himself even acknowledged the presence of enslaved Christians on Sapelo. If we recall Bilali’s reported exchange with Spalding during the War of 1812, when Spalding asked him to take charge of enslaved troops to protect the island’s people and


property, Bilali is said to have responded: "Master, I can only speak for myself; I will be faithful, but I cannot speak for these Christian dogs."¹³ This is a powerful statement by Bilali about his self-identity. In a moment when he stood on the cusp of great uncertainty—with the British presenting both the likelihood of attack and the possibility of freedom—Bilali chose to make a bold and unequivocal statement about both his faith and community. Clearly, Islam was important to his own identity. We might assume that he was also echoing the sentiments of the others in the Muslim community in asserting his judgment of the value of his own faith in contrast to the seemingly subhuman faith of his owner and many other enslaved people. At one level, perhaps, this statement can give us some insight into the relationship between Spalding and Bilali, but from another viewpoint, Bilali’s remark tells us something very important about the interplay between enslaved Muslims and Christians. Historians often seek and find evidence of pan-African (or multi-ethnic and multi-religious) unity within the enslaved community as a way of showing that enslaved people built a collective self-identity that existed in opposition to the white community that encompassed them. Bilali’s comment, however, asserts that relationships on Sapelo did not always fit into a simple white-versus-black model in which enslaved people naturally found common cause against their white opponents. At the heart of Bilali’s outburst was an acknowledgement of an enslaved Christian community on Sapelo—and his rejection of it.

Sapelo, it appears, had a burgeoning Christian presence as early as 1813, which doubtless continued to grow through the subsequent decades. This context helps offer some explanation for Bilali’s decision to give over his manuscript to Reverend Goulding, who would be a sympathetic caretaker away from Sapelo. In doing so, he protected his words, but surrendered control of how his story would be told and interpreted. After Francis Goulding died, his son Benjamin inherited the manuscript and began to show it to his friends and associates. One of the individuals who saw the manuscript was Joel Chandler Harris—the children’s author best known for his renditions of African American folk stories—who Goulding said took an interest in it. Harris eventually used Bilali’s text as the inspiration for two books, *The Story of Aaron (So Named) the Son of Ben Ali: Told by his Friends and Acquaintances*, published in 1896, and *Aaron in the Wildwoods*, published in 1898. Both these stories are told from the point of view of Aaron, the fictional son of a fictionalized Bilali—called “Ben Ali” by Harris. In *The Story of Aaron*, both Bilali and his manuscript make an early appearance, likely the first time the American popular press had published anything about Bilali.

According to the character Aaron, his father Ben Ali was not African. Instead, he was depicted as a being an Arab. The extended quotation below offers Harris’s details, beginning with the unveiling of the manuscript by Aaron to a few curious children:

> From his pocket Aaron drew a little package—something wrapped in soft leather and securely tied. It was a memorandum book. Opening this small book, Aaron held it toward Buster John, saying “What’s here?”

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“It looks like pothooks,” replied the boy, frankly. “Ain’t a word in it I can’t read,” said Aaron.  

Aaron then read some of the Arabic text to the children, telling them that it contained the words of, “Ben Ali, my daddy. Every word here was put down by him.” According to Aaron, Ben Ali was not a black African.  

“What then?” Buster John asked. “Arab—man of the desert—slave hunter—all put down here,” said Aaron, tapping the little book with his finger.  

Ben Ali was the leader of a band that made constant war on some of the African tribes in the Senegambian region. With their captives, this band of Arabs frequently pushed on to the Guinea coast and there sold them to the slave traders. These excursions continued until, on one occasion, the Arabs chanced to clash with a war-loving tribe, which was also engaged in plundering and raiding its neighbors. The meeting was unexpected to the Arabs, but not to the Africans. The Arabs who were left alive were led captive to the coast and there sold with other prisoners to slave traders. Among them was Ben Ali, who was then not more than thirty years old. With the rest, he was brought to America, where he was sold to a Virginian planter, fetching a very high price.  

Harris’s account is undoubtedly fictional, but it bears inclusion here for a few reasons. First, the overall arc of Harris’s narrative seems plausible. Some of the details, of course, are plainly inaccurate: Bilali was not an Arab and was not sold to a Virginian owner. It is conceivable, though, that he might have been captured while on a slaving mission that went afoul. Goulding suggested in his affidavit that Harris had done some research, writing that Harris made some “investigations for himself” after seeing Bilali’s manuscript. Neither Goulding nor Harris, though, gave any hints about the sources or

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16 Harris, *The Story of Aaron*, 12.  
17 Harris, *The Story of Aaron*, 13. Through Aaron’s words, Harris wrote, “He was no nigger.”  
fruits of his investigations. It is possible that he traveled to the lowcountry to interview
freedmen about their stories of Bilali or other enslaved Muslims, but there is no
evidence to suggest that he did so. Another possible source is the story of Abdul
Rahman, which Harris would have been able to find and which could easily have been a
model for his story. Regardless what the origins of Ben Ali’s biography in The Story of
Aaron might have been, Harris’s rendering becomes important because of its
relationship with Goulding’s biography of the real Bilali.

When Goulding donated the manuscript to the State of Georgia, he gave with it a
sworn statement about the text and its origins. His affidavit establishes the document’s
provenance and chain of transmission and gives a biographical account of Bilali. It also
affirms that Benjamin Goulding knew Bilali personally. The affidavit is a rich and
potentially valuable source about Bilali, but it poses some interpretive challenges. Some
parts of Goulding’s account are unproblematic. He claimed, for example, that Bilali was
Thomas Spalding’s “trusted foreman,” that he was Muslim, and that he was educated
and literate in Arabic. All of these points are independently verifiable. Beyond these,
however, some of the affidavit’s assertions seem difficult to prove. Goulding’s affidavit
and his portrayal of Bilali are not without their problems—problems that cast some
doubt on the accuracy of some of his statements. The biography he offered for Bilali is
drawn nearly verbatim from Joel Chandler Harris’s account of Ben Ali in The Story of
Aaron. This begs the question of whether Harris repeated Goulding’s childhood
memories of Bilali, or if Goulding drew on Harris’s fictional tale to buttress his failing
memory.
Goulding stated, for instance, that Bilali was the son of a prince. While this seems consistent with his education and comportment, it is uncertain whether this was something that Bilali himself said or whether it was an assumption Goulding made. Since Goulding knew Bilali at the end of his life, it is possible that he had access to first-hand information that is not in the documentary record. An example of this comes from his claims about Bilali’s family, as he stated plainly that Bilali had four wives. Just as before, there is no way of knowing how Goulding got this information or if it is true. It seems curious, though, that this meshes well with the suspicions that both Katie Brown and Lydia Parrish had about Bilali having other wives beside Phoebe. Goulding’s information presumably came from either his own or his father’s interactions with Bilali. His affidavit, recorded in 1931, predated Katie Brown’s interview with the Works Progress Administration by almost a decade, which suggests that he did not repeat his own version of her story. Lydia Parrish’s cited Katie Brown and Shad Hall as her sources, with the information gained through interviews with the two from the 1930s through the 1950s. Parrish seems to have come to believe that Bilali had more than one wife outside of Goulding’s sources. She was less assertive about her claim than he was, but still considered it to have been a possibility. In the end, this facet of Bilali’s life remains unresolved, but the fact that two different people came to the same conclusion independent of each other offers a compelling twist to the narrative of Bilali’s life on Sapelo. If he did, indeed, have more than one wife, then it would appear that he was

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19 See Chapter 5 above for Brown’s and Parrish’s comments.

20 Lydia Parrish, “Notes on some Southern Loyalists,” (unpublished manuscript), Microfilm 140-A, p. 136, University of Florida Special Collections, Gainesville, Florida. This collection contains her research on Georgia Loyalists in the Bahamas and was left unfinished at her death in 1953. She wrote: “But Katie and her cousin, Shad Hall, disagreed about the name of Bilali’s wife; Shad said it was Fatima, while Katie said it was Phoebe. Perhaps both were right—Bilali being a Mohammedan.”
more successful in enacting the norms of his Fula and Muslim culture than had previously been assumed.

In its entirety, Bilali’s life offers valuable insights into the ways African Muslims navigated the predicaments of slavery in the plantations of the Americas. Like so many other enslaved Africans, he faced multiple transitions in his journey through the Atlantic world. In the schools of Timbo, Bilali learned the words and habits of Muslim practice and Fula culture. The faith that he cultivated as a young man sustained him and guided his actions through decades of enslavement. If we consider one of the hallmarks of the Atlantic world to be “the creation, destruction, and re-creation of communities as a result of the movement, across and around the Atlantic basin, of people, commodities, cultural practices, and ideas,” then Bilali clearly highlighted these processes as he worked to find and establish familiar communities far from his African home.21 It is important to remember, however, that the course of Bilali’s actions was neither linear nor enduring. His life was marked by several forced relocations that caused him to begin anew—or at least, to modify—his efforts to build relationships and to plant roots in the Americas. In this way, perhaps, Bilali’s life might be more typical of the enslaved experience than it would first appear. While he was able to successfully negotiate for himself a position at the top of the plantation hierarchy, he was still forced to endure and navigate a host of circumstances that, ultimately, were out of his control. Like so many others who crossed the Atlantic, his days bore both fortune and failure.

Bilali did, however, achieve a measure of success that evaded most enslaved Africans. Through both his manuscript and his actions, Bilali escaped the pall of anonymity and built a legacy that survives to the present. Despite making himself an important character in the fact and fiction of life in coastal Georgia, Bilali was not able to make Islam an enduring feature of the lowcountry. This fact provides some insight into the processes through which African culture changed over time in the Americas. Historians and anthropologists have long debated about the cultural retentions and innovations of Africans in the plantation system. These arguments turn on the notion that enslaved people either chose to keep, elected to change, or were forced to forget elements of their African culture. The evidence from Bilali’s life shows that Africans themselves were keenly aware of who they were, what they remembered, and what aspects of their African past they could use in their new homes. These traits persisted throughout the lives of Africans who arrived in the Americas. The crucial transitions that occurred within enslaved culture appear to have taken place not in the Africans themselves, but in the first or second generation of African Americans born in the plantation system. Bilali’s Muslim faith provides one example of this change. His family’s use of language provides another. All the members of Bilali’s family were said to be able to speak both English and “their native tongue.” They could also speak French—likely


the creole French of Carriacou—with the exception of the youngest child. Thus, shifts in culture could take place even within members of the same generation, at least in the realm of language. Two generations later, the French of their ancestors was nothing more than “funny wuds” in the ears of Bilali’s descendants.24

While the transition across the Atlantic necessarily precipitated the change of some African customs over time, the move did not guarantee cultural loss. Bilali did not allow the profound disruptions of slavery to strip him of his identity. Instead, he saw in his circumstances opportunities to build some stability in the otherwise unpredictable world of the plantation. To be sure, much of what he encountered was beyond his control. As was the case with other enslaved Africans and African Americans, Bilali was subject to the whims of his owners and the forces of the marketplace. What differentiates Bilali from many other enslaved people is that we have the ability to see some of his actions and responses through his imprint on the documentary record. It is through this glimpse into the past, perhaps, that his life story is most instructive.

Through Bilali’s life we can see some of the different ways that the lived experience of slavery unfolded for Africans in bondage. Moreover, his example sheds valuable light on Fula people in the diaspora. Bilali’s desire to build a life that would have appeared legitimate and successful to his African elders is a testament to the sustaining power of pulaaku. While he was certainly not the only Fula to try to live up to the demands of pulaaku in the Americas, few—if any—others did so in ways that we can follow in such detail. We cannot be certain whether his origins were noble or humble, but it is clear that his teachers and kin in Timbo would have been proud that he

24 Georgia Writers’ Project, Drums and Shadows, 162.
demonstrated the restraint, loyalty, patience, faith, and leadership demanded of his people.

A close focus on Bilali’s life shows the many ways that he himself strove to make the most of his circumstances. It is important to remember, however, that his life was part of a much larger Atlantic story, and never a story that was his alone. During his early years in Timbo, he lived in a state that found it fortune in providing human capital to the Atlantic marketplace. The patterns of commerce and warfare that linked the Upper Guinea hinterland with the Atlantic system ensured that, like so many other Africans, Bilali would be carried far off into slavery. He and his shipmates crossed the Atlantic at an important moment in the history of the slave trade, as more Africans were transshipped in the 1780s than in any other decade of the centuries-long trade. As Bilali practiced the management of cotton and its attendant workforce, the crop’s importance exploded in the global marketplace. Finally, during Bilali’s years in Georgia, slavery became more entrenched in and economically significant to the United States. At no point did Bilali live or labor in isolation during these pivotal moments. The mechanisms of slavery, however, have obscured or erased the stories of the overwhelming majority of slaves. Bilali’s life history helps us to see beyond this anonymity and allows us to examine the ways other enslaved people negotiated their bondage.

APPENDIX A

APPRaisal OF JOHN BELL ESTATE

Appraisal of John Bell Estate

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Inventory and appraisement of the Goods and Chattels of Doctor John Bell, deceased taken at Increase Estate Middle Caicos Bahamas this 24th day of February 1801 by virtue of a Warrant to us directed, under the hand and Seal of His Excellency William Dowdeswell Esq Captain General and Governor in Chief &c &c &c

viz - -
Negroes  Bahama Currency
Bellely/Driver  160.0.0
Phoebe his Wife  120
Margaret her Child 10 years old  70
Sarate  Do  8  Do  55
Isata  Do  5  Do  40
Mamodie  Do  3  Do  24
Abagado  Do  1/2  Do  20
          ~~~  489

Jamie/Driver  160
Belinda his Wife  120
Francois her Son 13 years old  100
Philip  Do  7  Do  40
Silvester  Do  5  Do  40
Harriot her Daughter 3  Do  30
Zara  Do  D  9 months  Do  20
Bell a Field Slave  80
Ebbe her Child 6 [?] years old  40
Cy  Do  Do  3  Do  Do  30
          ~~~  660

Buck  120
Betty his Wife  120
Betsey her Child 9 years old  60
Joe  Do  Do  8  Do  45
Kate  Do  Do  4  Do  30
Lally  Do  Do  2  Do  20
          ~~~  395

Caesar  100
Nanny/his Wife/afflicted with a Cancer/  20
Ben Her Child 4 years old  40
Medina  Do  3  Do  25
          ~~~  185

Amount Carried over  £1729.-

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<tr>
<td><strong>Amount Carried forward</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>£7719.</strong></td>
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Amount Brought forward 7719.-

Stock
1 Gray Mare 32
1 Black Do 40
1 Roan Horse 40
1 Brown Mare 30
1 Grey Filly 24
1 Sorrel Do 24
1 3 year old Grey horse 40
1 3 year old Bay Do 35
1 Black Horse Colt 12
1 Grey filly Do 14

9 Cows + their 5 Calves 160
3 Bulls £16 48
2 Steers 15 30
4 Heifers 38
39 Sheep 61.12

Household Furniture +c +c
1 Bedstead 2
1 Pine Table .8
2 Carts with double Harness 50
1 Cotton Cleaning Machine 8
5 Foot Gins Compleat 16
a Parcel of old Do 5

a lot of Checks about 120 yards 18
1 pair Mill Stones 5
2 Grind Stones .16
2 Hand Corn Mills 3
1 Small Boat and Grapnel 6.18
2 Seines 5
2 Bundles Seine twine 3
40 Wt Clean Cotton 2/6/wts 5
About 500 Bushels Corn 300
Negroes Provis

A lot of Iron Pots 5

Amount Carried forward to next Sheet £8785.14
Amount Brought from first sheet 8785.14
1/2 Barrel Beef 3.4
a quantity of Black Soap 1
Plantation Tools in use 20
1 Keg White Paint 2
1 Box Glas/spare Panes 1.12
4 New hand Saws 4
6 Iron Squares .18
7 doz Small pruning Knives 8.8

~~~ 41.2

6 Shingling Hammers .16
A lot of Files 1
6 Two foot rules .12
a Lot of Door & Window Bolts fastenings 10
5 New Hammers .16
4 Do Stock Locks 1.4
5 doz New hatchets assorted 12.10
10 Whole & half Kegs nails assorted 18
32 large pruning knives 4.16

~~~ 49.14

24 pair large hook & eye hinges 8
16 do small do do 2.5
14 new hoes 2
2 do sledge hammers 1.4
16 pick axes assorted 6
a barrel chalk 1
1 ½ coils small rope 5
6 electrical rods 8

~~~ 33.9

6 whips and x cut saws 6
9 spades & shovels 3.10
4 doz fether locks 2.8
a lot of new laid rope 5
a lot of old iron bolts, axes, and cutlasses 10
3 new sash windows with frames and
weights compleat 10

~~~ 38.18

amount carried over £8948.17

amount brought over £8948.17

6 iron wedges .8
6 trowels  1.4
1 small coil tar’d rope  3.4
1 lot lumber & shingles  20

~~~  24.16
£8973.13

Note
Under the many disadvantages which lands on the Caicos must be valued at this present time, we are at a loss how to proceed. We therefore suppose the undermentioned tracts with the Improvements thereon, to be worth at this time about the Sums we have valued them at Viz:
Increase Plantation Containing about 1470 Acres of Land 300 of which is in Cotton highly Cultivated, and 200 in pasturage properly sub-divided with Stone walls, the remainder in Standing Woods together with all the Buildings thereon Consisting of a Fram’d dwelling House 28 feet long by 16 Sash’d and Glaz’d with a Hall, two Bed Rooms, and a pantry one floor and Cellars under the whole a Cotton house of Pitch Pine 39 feet long by 16 with a Piazza on one Side 11 feet wide and a Room in one end of it, a Stone Kitchen a Corn House Built of Stone 40 feet long by 12; a Store house also of Stone 46 feet by 15 Do & 13 Large Negroe Houses Built of Stone besides others Wat’t’d + plaistered Estimating the Land at a Guinea per Acre and the Improvements at £1000 Currency is

3743.0.0
A Small Key opposite Tuersall Plantation
32
A Tract of Land on the East Caicos q/ About 300 acres  150
Industry Plantation q/ 1000 acres with its Improve  1000

John Harrison
George Anderson
Thos Armstrong
APPENDIX B

BIRTHS ON BELL PLANTATIONS

Table B-1. Bell Plantation Births by Year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1800</th>
<th>1799</th>
<th>1798</th>
<th>1797</th>
<th>1796</th>
<th>1795</th>
<th>1794</th>
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<th>1792</th>
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<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1800 (11 births)
Abagado [Bellely and Phoebe]
Zara [Jamie and Belinda]
Fanny [Cyrus]
Catherine (estimated) [Dick and Mary]
Lancashire [George and Catherine]
Limatta [Pompey and Frances]
Haminatta [Silapla and Eve]
Caravan [Swift and Clie]
Jemmy [Will and Jeanie Canga]
Nancy [Venus]
Toby (estimated) [Dick and Mary]

1799 (2 births)
Mary Ann [Glasgow and Nancy]
London [John and Victoirie]

1798 (2 births)
Lally [Buck and Betty]
Sidney [Swift and Clie]

1797 (11 births)
Mamodie [Bellely and Phoebe]
Harriot [Jamie and Belinda]
Cy [? and Bell]
Medina [Caesar and Nanny]
Jasper [Cyrus and Fatima]
Carriacou [Dick and Mary]
Fabara [Pompey and Frances]
John [Swift and Clie]
Adam [Tom and Jeanie]
Pindar [Tom and Jeanie]
Charlotte (estimated) [Sandy and Dido]

1796 (4 births)
Kate [Buck and Betty]
Ben [Caesar and Nanny]
Falima [Glasgow and Nancy]
Charlie [Will and Jeanie Canga]

1795 (4 births)
Isata [Bellely and Phoebe]
Silvester [Jamie and Belinda]
Fortune [John and Victorie]
Abap [Pompey and Frances]

1794 (2 births)
Ebbe [? and Bell]
Yoma [Sandy and Dido]

1793 (1 birth)
Philip [Jamie and Belinda]

1792 (5 births)
Sarate [Bellely and Phoebe]
Joe [Buck and Betty]
Cudjoe [Cyrus and Fatima]
Hawa [Glasgow and Nancy]
Venus [Tom and Jeanie]

1791 (3 births)
Betsey [Buck and Betty]
Ali [Swift and Clie]
Peggy [Tom and Jeanie]

1790 (4 births)
Margaret [Bellely and Phoebe]
Friam [John and Victorie]
Buccarrie [Pompey and Frances]
Julia [Swift and Clie]

1789 (0 births)

1788 (2 births)
Francois [Jamie and Belinda]
Polly [Dick and Mary]
APPENDIX C
BILALI’S MANUSCRIPT

Meditations of Bilali Muhammad

Page One

In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Most Merciful. Peace and Blessings of Allah be upon our Master Muhammad and his descendants and those that remember Allah. This was said by the Shaykh of Islamic Law (Shaykhul-Fiqh) Abu Muhammad Ben Yusuf Ben Ubaid al-Qayrawandu, may the Mercy, Blessings, and Forgiveness of Allah be upon him. Ameen. By the power of Allah (qadr Allah), Ameen.

I am commanded to write a book that gives the obligatory rules at your hand. This is a very concise summary of the obligatory (wajib) actions of the religion (din). These actions are from the example (Sunnah) of the Prophet Muhammad. One of these is the example (Sunnah) and the obligatory (Sunnah muaqadah) and the optional (nafl) and the commendable (raghiba) pertaining to good manners from the principles and rules (Usul al-Fiqh). And this is what was told and described about them to ease their instruction for those that want to understand. [Hopefully], this is the Will of Allah.

Chapter (Bab)

I will take this up chapter by chapter (Bab ul-abwab), so that Allah willing (Insha’Allah) it will be easy for learners to understand. We seek goodness and assistance from Allah (to help us be on the straight path).

Page Two

There is no strength but from Allah. Allah is the Highest, Most Powerful.

Translation by Muhammad Al-Ahari, used with permission.
May the Peace of Allah be upon our Master (Sayidna) Muhammad, for he is the witness that witnesses [the truth], then Abu Bakr then ‘Umar then ‘Uthman then ‘Ali, May the Peace and Blessing of Allah be upon them all. None from among the companions of Prophet Muhammad (Rasul Allah Muhammad) are to be mentioned but with the highest respect, avoiding the mention of divisions amongst them.

Those that are not stubborn and who seek guidance and strength from Allah will take the gifts of His guidance and witness the knowledge given to them through our Noble Master Muhammad.

Despair will be upon those who will be entered into the Book which lists the inhabitants of the Hellfire. Their wealth and luxury will benefit them not. All power is from Allah and staying near to anything else but Him leads to despair [sic]. Those that have learned what He (Allah) had taught them and stood within the limits he set for them [will not be listed there].

Page Three

Allah will aid us all and provide the ability to take care of the things He has deposited with us. The reward, which I do hope we will receive, the reward of those who have taught or called men to the religion of God. To practice the obligatory from the principles of Fiqh and Shariah from which we were commanded to discuss, what I have taken up in this chapter, that which the tongue speaks, the heart believes is that which you are commanded to practice. Belief enters the heart more strongly with practice.

Page Four

Allah protects those who put faith in what He has decreed to practice. Those that taunt the believer and his practices, [remember that] [God will come] on the Day of
Resurrection with His angels in array to put peoples on display, together with their accounts, their punishments and their reward.

Their punishments, their blessings, their punishments.

From that handed to them.

Among men there are so many deeds, enough to fill the heavens and the earth, which by Allah’s command separate the good men and the aware from others and from their actions are recorded in a book of deeds that is handed to them on [the Day of Judgment].

Page Five

Given from among men of the command for we say, “O’ among men we say we are commanded to say tranquility is promised after acts of kindness.” We will feel the shelter of the happiness from within after tranquility is found [in following Allah’s will].

The scales will be set up to weigh the works of men; whoever’s balance is heavy has done well. It is written, “As for he that has been given his book with his right hand, he will be given an easy reckoning. As for he that was given his book with his left hand and behind his back, he shall be committed to flaming fire.”

Page Six

The path (sirāt) is real. Men will pass over it at different speeds, according to the measure of their works, being saved from the fire of Hell. But some will fall into the fire because of their works.

I seek your protection from the trials of life and death, from the trials of the grave, from the trials of the anti-Christ (Massiah al-Dajjal), from the torments of the Fire and an evil end. Peace and kindness of God be upon you, O’ Prophet, peace be upon us, and
the righteous servants of God. *Dhikr* and adoration of Allah will increase our trust and attachment to Him.…

Page Seven

For those who are patient with the *Kafirun* and promote peace among them.

Chapter of Ablution (*Bab-ul-Wudu*)

Start by reciting *Bismillah*, then wash your right hand three times, then the left hand. Using both hands, after that rinse your mouth three times, rinse out your nose three times, and wipe your face three times.

Page Eight

Wash your right hand to the elbow, then the left, then put your hand in the container of water, and wipe your head until it is wiped with the palms of hands. Wipe your ears and the nape of your neck until your chin and make sure to wipe the ear canal. When washing start from the wrist, then the lower arm, and then the elbow.

[Then] wash your feet to the ankles three times making sure to wash the heels and you will be finished with ablution *Wudu*’. And say, “*Allahuma as-shadu anna la ilaha ila Allah wa as-shadu anna Muhammadan Rasul Lillah.*”

Page Nine

Do not take partners with Allah [shirk] and continually declare that Allah is the King, the Praiseworthy, the Eternal Ever Living, and the Lord of Life and Death. He is all powerful and I depend on Him. Allah makes us among His purified and faithful. There is no deity worthy of worship except Allah and Muhammad is His Apostle. (And make us among) Muhammad’s companions and those who are in the religion [*Din-ul-Islam*].

The *Adhan* for *Subh* from within the *Adhan* [section].
Al-Adhan (Call to Prayer)

Allah is the Greatest. Allah is the Greatest.

Allah is the Greatest. Allah is the Greatest.

I declare that there is no deity worthy of worship except Allah.

Page Ten

I declare that there is no deity worthy of worship except Allah.

I declare that Muhammad is the Apostle of Allah

I declare that Muhammad is the Apostle of Allah

Come to prayer. Come to prayer.

Come to success. Come to success.

Prayer is better than sleep. Prayer is better than sleep.

Allah is the Greatest. Allah is the Greatest.

There is no deity worthy of worship except Allah.

Chapter on Prayer

You make your two bowing (rakat) for prayer (salah) then give peace to your right and to your left (taslim). You then sit back, in the Masjid, and make remembrance of Allah (dhikr) by saying Subhan Allah (33 times), Alhamdu Lillah (33 times), and Allahu Akbar (33 times).

Page Eleven

Wait until the proper time for prayer and have the prayer direction (qiblah) in front of you. After you stand and bow for prayers and make taslim, then wait for the dawn by making tasbih, and then make Subh prayer. The Imam stands in front of the faithful
(mumin) and the second call to prayer (iqamah) is announced, and then Subh prayer is made.

[The Iqamah]

Allah is the Greatest. Allah is the Greatest.

Allah is the Greatest. Allah is the Greatest.

I declare that there is no deity worthy of worship except Allah.

I declare that Muhammad is the Apostle of Allah

Allah is the Greatest. [twice]

Come to Prayer. Come to Success.

Hasten to Prayer. Hasten to Prayer.

Allah is the Greatest. Allah is the Greatest.

There is no deity worthy of worship except Allah.

Muhammad . . . Do not sit in the Mihrab (the niche that shows the direction of the Kaaba).

Page Twelve

Make Takbir by saying Allahu Akbar. Allah will be with the believers. After the Iqamah, the Imam stands in prayer and bows (ruku) and says, “Samia Allahu Hameeda” (Allah hears those who praise Him) [when standing]. The congregation says in response [when he stands straight], “Rabban aleikal hamd” (All praise is due Allah). When you are in sajdah (bowing with head and knees on the floor) you say, “Subhani-rabbil Allah” (All praise is due our Lord Allah). Say, “Glory be to you, my Lord; I have wronged myself and done evil; forgive me.”

Page Thirteen
Only the true servants of Allah make prayer (salah) and give blessings upon the Prophet (Salaams). Say your prayers, and make tasbih a long time. Make as much supplication (du’a) as you can.

It is disliked to sleep after the prayer of morning (Subh), and it is disliked to sit and talk after the prayer of morning except it [the talking] be in the remembrance of Allah, until the dawn and praise.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Joseph Beatty was raised in Falls Church, Virginia. He studied American history and the African diaspora at James Madison University, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in 2008. He began his graduate studies at the University of Florida later that year. In 2010, Joseph completed a Master of Arts in history with a project focusing on cotton and slavery in the Bahamas. He completed a PhD in history at the University of Florida in 2014.