

Transatlantic Slave Trade through the Lens of Omar ibn Said and Gorée Island

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Overview: In this lesson, students will take a narrowly focused view on the slave trade by investigating the story of Omar ibn Said and how it connects Senegal and North Carolina. In addition, students will explore Gorée Island in Senegal and its connection to the Atlantic history of slavery.

Essential Questions:

- How did enslaved people preserve their home culture?
- How do primary sources affect or deepen our understanding of the Transatlantic Slave Trade?
- How can we *know* if we weren't there?

Intended Grade Level: 4th-5th

Intended Content Areas: Social Studies

Standard Alignment with NC Standards:

Social Studies

I.1.8 Accurately use information from sources when making claims.

I.1.9 Make inferences from information in sources.

I.1.10 Construct responses to compelling questions with specific claims and information from teacher-provided sources.

4.B.1.2 Explain how the values and beliefs of various indigenous, religious, and racial groups have contributed to the development of North Carolina.

4.G.1.3 Summarize the reasons for forced and voluntary migration to, from, and within North Carolina.

4.H.1.5 Use primary and secondary sources to compare multiple perspectives of various historical events in North Carolina.

5 G 1.4 Explain the reasons for forced and voluntary migration to, from, and within the United States.

5.H.1.5 Compare multiple perspectives of various historical events using primary and secondary sources.

Materials (including any slides, handouts, list of digital documents...)

- [Resource Slides for Classroom Use](#)
- [Omar ibn Said Artifacts](#)
- [Artifact Comparison Chart](#)
- [Historical Marker Template](#)
- Teacher Resources as needed:

- [Teaching Hard History: American Slavery](#)
- [Interactive story map](#) from Library of Congress
- [Background biographical information](#) on Omar ibn Said
- [Documenting the American South biography](#) on Omar ibn Said
- [Discussion of Omar ibn Said's autobiography](#)
- <http://africaaccessreview.org/http-discoverafricaintheworld-org/united-states/discover-africa-in-north-carolina/omar-ibn-said/>
- Omar ibn Said Day [proclamation](#)
- [Background on Gorée Island](#)

Suggested Length of Time: Two, 45-minute classes

Prior Work to be Completed:

This lesson assumes that students already have background knowledge of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and is best used as a catalyst for looking at this historical event from a slightly different, up-close perspective.

Procedures:

- Tell students, “Today we are going to learn about Omar ibn Said. His autobiography as an enslaved man is the only known one written in Arabic in the United States. As a result, his autobiography was not edited by anyone as others written in English were and is believed to be a more authentic, factual account. It also reminds us that, like many enslaved Africans, Omar ibn Said was educated, came from a culture with written traditions, and was a follower of Islam.”
- Watch the video [The Atlantic Slave Trade in Two Minutes](#). (Slide 2)
- Ask students to share observations about the video.
- Have the students point out the locations of North Carolina and Senegal on the map (slide 3), and tell the students that they will be learning about someone who bridged the space between these two places.
- Introduce the students to Omar ibn Said (slide 4) using the biography resources listed above highlighting facts such as
 - Omar ibn Said was born around 1770 into an aristocratic family in an area of West Africa called Futa Toro but now is part of Senegal. The Library of Congress states that Omar ibn Said “was a member of the Fula ethnic group of West Africa who today number over 40 million people in the region extending from Senegal to Nigeria. In the interviews he gave during his lifetime he stated that he was born in a place called Futa Toro "between the two rivers" referring to the Senegal and the Gambia rivers that separate those two countries.”

- Identify on the map where Futa Toro is located. Have students compare North Carolina and Senegal using correct geographic terms such as coastline, latitude, hemisphere, equator, continent, ocean, etc.
- ibn Said was well educated and went to school and studied under religious leaders.
- He was captured, enslaved, and taken to Charleston, SC in 1807. In 1810, he escaped and made his way to Fayetteville, NC and was recaptured. He was enslaved by James Owen and moved with this family to Wilmington in 1836.
- Omar ibn Said died around the age of 94.
- Tell the students that today we will be looking at *artifacts* that have to do with Omar ibn Said. Artifacts are objects made by humans that usually have cultural or historical importance or interest. (Slide 5)
- Pass out [a set of photocopied artifacts](#) or have students look at them digitally (slides 6-10). For each artifact, have students fill out the [chart](#) below:

Artifact	What do you think it is?	Why do you think it is important?

- Have students share their ideas about what the artifacts are, always asking them to back up their inferences with details from the artifacts.
- Discuss the true identity of the artifacts:
 - Artifact 1: Photograph of Omar ibn Said taken around 1850. Why is this unusual to have?
 - Artifact 2: A copy of the first page of Omar ibn Said's 15 page autobiography that he wrote in 1831. It was translated many times but the original was lost for years. In 1995, the original was found in an old trunk in Virginia and is now owned by the Library of Congress. The autobiography starts with a passage from the Qur'an and then talks about his birth and enslavement.
 - Artifact 3: Text written by Omar ibn Said in Arabic. On the back of the card it says in English: "The Lord's Prayer written in Arabic by Uncle Moreau (Omar) a native African, now owned by General Owen of Wilmington N. C. He is 88 years of age & a devoted Christian." The handwritten Arabic text, however, is in fact a passage from the Qur'an **not** the Lord's Prayer.

Remind students that about 10% of enslaved Africans brought to Americas were Muslim. Records show that Omar converted to Christianity, but many scholars believe that he kept his Muslim faith.

- Artifact 4: Photograph of Masjid Omar ibn Sayyid in Fayetteville, NC. (A masjid is a Muslim place of worship).
- Omar ibn Said continues to be remembered. Rhiannon Giddens has recently written an opera about Omar ibn Said simply called “Omar.” Why do you think she did that? Consider playing [this brief overview clip](#) and [this song](#) from the opera. (Slide 11)
- Tell the students that many, many of the individual stories of enslaved people have been lost to time, and we don’t know them. Ask students to partner share why the story of Omar ibn Said is different and why it is important or have students share these thoughts via an exit ticket.

Optional Extension Activities:

- According to the sources below, artifacts relating to Omar ibn Said were “lost” for many years. Share these facts with the students:
 - “Finally, although it is a very well-known collection, it appears to have moved from owner to owner, and even to have disappeared for almost half a century before having been re-discovered by the last private owner Derrick J. Beard.” [Library of Congress](#)
 - “Since 1831, when Said first recorded his autobiography as a 15-page manuscript in Arabic, it has undergone multiple translations, and the original manuscript was unlocated for many years. In 1995, the manuscript was found in an old trunk in Virginia and purchased by a private collector, who has since displayed it at Harvard's Houghton Library and the International Museum of Muslim Cultures in Jackson, Mississippi.” [Documenting the American South](#)
- How does Omar ibn Said’s collection qualify as a long lost treasure? How do you think it went missing for so long? Have students write a newspaper article detailing the rediscovery of Omar ibn Said’s papers based on the additional resources cited above.

SECOND CLASS SESSION:

Procedures:

- Quickly review what was covered in the previous session, highlighting Omar ibn Said’s biography via the excerpts below or through the [Library of Congress’s story map](#).
 - According to the Library of Congress’s collection on Omar ibn Said, “In his autobiography, Omar Ibn Said writes that as he grew older he sought

knowledge in Bundu, an area in Senegal today that had historically been controlled by another ethnic group, the Mande people, until the Muslim Fulas conquered the region in the second half of the 17th century. Omar ibn Said writes that in Bundu he studied under his own brother Sheikh Muhammad Said, as well as two other religious leaders and "continued seeking knowledge for twenty five years."² He then returned to his own town and lived there for another six years, until a "big army" came "that killed many people," captured him and sold him to a man who took him "to the big Ship in the big Sea."³ After sailing for a month he arrived in Charleston, South Carolina, where he was bought by a man called Johnson, who apparently was cruel to him. So he escaped, was captured and landed in jail in Fayetteville, North Carolina, where he spent 16 days. That is where he began writing in Arabic on the walls of his jail, and where he was discovered and eventually taken into the household of Jim Owen and his brother John Owen, the Governor of North Carolina (1828-1830) with whom he remained until his death in his late eighties."

- The Documenting the American South resource recounts Omar ibn Said's capture and the Middle Passage as, "The existing translation of Said's text begins with recollected passages from the Koran. Said starts his account with his birth in Futa Toro but quickly transitions to the time of his enslavement. The description of his capture by "a large army, who killed many men" and his crossing of "the great sea" for a month and a half testifies to the raw violence of the slave trade and the terrors of the middle passage (p. 793). Said's account of the so-called "Christians" who bind, transport, sell and buy him links Said to other slave narrators who question the validity of Christians' participation in and justifications for slavery. In fact, he sets true Christianity in opposition to slavery by describing his first "master" in Charleston, South Carolina, as "a small, weak, and wicked man called Johnson, a complete infidel, who had no fear of God at all" (p. 793)."
- Remind students that Omar ibn Said was one of many, many people who were forced to pass through African ports and were enslaved.
- On the map (slide 13), have students locate Senegal and specifically Dakar. Tell students that they will be learning about a specific place in Dakar called Gorée Island, a place that was a slave-trading center on the African coast from the 15th to the 19th century and was controlled by Portuguese, Dutch, English and French.
- Refer to images and videos in the Resource slides (slides 14-18).
- In the United States, it is common to commemorate famous people or events with a historical marker. Often you see this on the side of highways or streets

when driving [such as this one](#) about Omar ibn Said located near the mosque in Fayetteville, NC that is named after him. What do you think about this historical marker? Would you change anything about it? Add to it? Revise about it?

(Slide 19)

- Think about what you have learned about Omar ibn Said as well as Gorée Island. What facts or details would you like to highlight about this specific person and this specific place, keeping the people and their experiences central? (Slide 20)
- On a piece of paper, create a historical marker for either Omar ibn Said or Gorée Island. Will you include just text? Symbols? What facts are truly important and keep the humanity of people at the center? Students can draw a marker or [use this template](#).
- Have students share their markers with partners or as a whole class to review and reinforce concepts discussed in these lessons.