

“I Am Omar” by Jennifer Berry Hawes and Gavin McIntyre

Dust rolling in from the Sahara Desert cloaks the horizon, shrouding the clay structures ahead and disorienting the band of strangers as they approach. Yet they come to this ancient village in search of clarity.

Imam Amadou Baïdy Sy, among the most learned men in the area, welcomes the unexpected guests into his home. Gathering around him on colorful mats and tapestries, they clutch two Arabic texts, each laden with a trans-Atlantic mystery.

The documents contain words written two centuries ago by a man captured somewhere out here in the sand-swept expanse of northern Senegal. The visitors, who include two Post and Courier journalists, explain the importance of the author.

Draped in folds of royal purple, Sy leans over to grasp the packet.

He has never heard of this Omar ibn Said.

That’s not surprising. Omar wrote his most historically important text, a brief autobiography, 190 years ago, and it spent much of the last century forgotten in an old trunk in Virginia.

When he wrote it, Omar was 61 and more than two decades into a long enslavement in America, first in Charleston and then North Carolina. He lacked the freedom for candor, though he’d become a minor celebrity for his exotic script and born-again zeal for Jesus.

Or so they said.

Despite memorizing the Quran during his youth here in this region called Futa Toro, Omar apologized when he wrote. He had forgotten much of his people’s script and hoped they wouldn’t laugh at him should they somehow, miraculously, ever read it.

Now, the imam holds those words in his hands.

Perched on a high-back wooden chair, Sy flips quickly through the pages, scanning them. At the last one, he pauses. From a 171-year-old photograph, Omar stares out wearing a headwrap and a gaze of wisdom.

Sy smiles back.

Then he returns to the start of Omar’s story. The room falls silent as he reads, save the sounds of tea pouring and children giggling and songbirds chattering as they fly in and out of his home.

Sy is among the first people living in Futa Toro to read Omar’s autobiography in full. He can understand Omar’s meaning in a way only someone who lives here can.

Omar wrote that he was 37 years old when “infidels” attacked his village. They slaughtered many people and dragged him away to a slave ship that hauled him across the Atlantic Ocean. The ship landed in Charleston, the nation’s busiest slave port.

During the 56 years of captivity that followed, Omar wrote at least 15 surviving texts in Arabic, although nobody around him could read them. They include letters, Muslim and Christian verses, and the only known surviving autobiography written in Arabic by someone still enslaved in America.

Given that perhaps one in five African captives brought to the U.S. was Muslim, the rarity of such texts speaks to a great loss of faith and learning.

Even today, despite its historical significance, relatively few Americans have read Omar's autobiography. The Library of Congress bought it in 2017, [digitized its pages](#) and shared it with the world.

Omar's story sprang from obscurity.

Spoletto Festival USA, an international arts event held each year in Charleston, then commissioned Grammy Award-winning music star Rhiannon Giddens to write an opera about his life. With a nearly all-Black cast, it will premiere at the 2022 festival amid the country's reckoning with race and the vestiges of slavery. Several scholarly books about Omar also are in the works. And Charleston artist Jonathan Green created a coloring book about him.

They all seek to answer the most basic question: Who was Omar, really? For two centuries, his story has morphed based on who was telling it. And why.

That question drove the group of guests sitting with Sy, in his village called Dimat Walo, to embark on this quest. If few Americans have read Omar's words, even fewer Senegalese have — and fewer here in Futa Toro.

Seated around the imam are the two journalists from South Carolina, a professor of linguistics from the Senegalese capital, his French graduate assistant, two Senegalese drivers, and an Arabic teacher who hails from Futa and descends from one of its great intellectuals.

Given Omar was enslaved when he wrote, he wasn't free to reveal his deepest self, his true faith or wishes. This team embarked on a quest to better understand him — and to bring his writings home.

But where exactly that home was remains a great part of Omar's mystery.

He mostly wrote religious passages, not personal details, although twice he wrote what looks like a specific place name. Knowing where the place is could reveal much about him: his home, his family, his people, where he was captured and from which Senegalese port a slave ship took him.

Omar likely spoke Pulaar, which Sy also speaks. But he wrote in Arabic, an alphabet lacking letters for some sounds in Pulaar. Writers like him improvised, such as using the "b" to represent a "p" sound. Omar also sometimes wasn't clear about vowels.

He wrote the place name in an 1819 letter imploring, "I wish to be seen in our land called Africa, in a place on the river called ..."

Scholars have surmised the next word might be read as Kaba or Kabya, perhaps even Gambia, as in the Gambia River, none of which are places in Futa Toro.

Sy has no trouble reading it.

"Fî makân al bahri yusummâ Coppe."

He shows it to his nephew sitting nearby.

"Coppe," his nephew agrees.

Abdoulaye Gueye, the Arabic teacher, looks surprised. "This is a revelation, eh?"

Mamaramé Seck, the professor, agrees. "That is a big, new revelation!"

Sy reads what appears to be the same place name in Omar's autobiography. "They took me to Coppe by the river, and they sold me to the White people."

Coppe is in Futa Toro, he adds, right on the Senegal River.

It's not far. He will help us get there.

The closing door

It's hard to grasp why slave traders would buy a smallish man pushing 40, already older than the average life expectancy at the time, and think he'd draw a decent price at an American auction.

Unless you understand their desperation.

By 1807, South Carolina planters had pushed their luck. Due to their gluttony for slaves, Congress had passed a law that would ban the importing of new African captives. At year's end, the door would slam shut.

That launched a frenzied race to fill the final slave voyages. Ships lined up along West Africa's coast. Among the key ports was Saint-Louis at the mouth of the Senegal River, a liquid highway for commerce, including gold and slaves. That put villages like Omar's at particular risk. Futa Toro hugs the Senegal River for 250 miles, and raiders often plundered its banks.

Omar was born there at a time of upheaval.

Islamic revolutions spread across the region, led by religious men determined to stop the instability and violence that the slave trade was sowing. Given that Islam's laws forbid one Muslim from enslaving another, it held strong appeal.

Around 1776, Futa's new leader banned the practice.

Omar and his 10 siblings lost their father then, likely killed in the fighting. About 6 years old, Omar was just starting his Quranic education with other little boys in Futa. The region's hot air filled with their chanting until the entire book rooted deeply into their memories — should they ever find themselves without a copy.

Omar proved a skilled student. As he grew up, he traveled to religious schools in Futa, then left on a quest for the mystical secrets of Sufi Islam. A master had to receive and initiate him, said Gueye, the Arabic teacher, whose grandfather embarked on a similar journey.

"The learner must be not only intellectually mature but also of impeccable moral integrity," Gueye said. In time, Omar received the *Ilm al-Asrar*, or "knowledge of secrets," learning to construct amulets and talismans that could seek from Allah blessings of health, good fortune and protection from others.

At 31, Omar returned to his village. For six years, he lived with his fellow Muslim faithful, heeding the call to prayer five times a day and giving alms of sheep, rice and gold.

Then, three key events took place.

On March 2, 1807, President Thomas Jefferson signed the law banning slave importation.

The next month, Futa's leader was murdered.

And that year, “infidels” attacked Omar’s village.

The din of Babel

The fabric of Charleston, of any place really, gets conveyed on the coarse wood pulp of the day’s newspaper pages.

In 1807, the city’s news filled, as usual, with ads touting “Prime Negroes” for sale in batches large and small. Runaway slave notices ran alongside ads for Black wet nurses, the latest theater shows, fine silver, horse saddles, and merchants hocking brandy and rum.

A feature called Ship News announced the day’s vessels. And their cargo.

Those ships docked in a city teeming with White merchants and the enslaved laborers who comprised its majority. Carriage horses plodded along narrow lanes past fine antebellum homes and shops. Church steeples sprouted all around the thin peninsula, which was laced with wharves.

Omar didn’t write details about the Middle Passage he endured. But others described their journeys.

A man named Olaudah Equiano, captured in Nigeria as a boy, later recounted his first moments aboard a slave vessel.

“When I looked round the ship too and saw a large furnace of copper boiling, and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted of my fate and quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted.”

Crewmen branded and shackled the captives, then stuffed them into the hull. As days and weeks at sea passed, people lay in each other’s waste. Disease flourished. Nothing deterred sexual predators among the crew.

“The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable,” Equiano wrote.

A surgeon who worked aboard slave ships described similar conditions. The average mortality he witnessed reached 15 to 20 percent. In Charleston, so many bodies washed ashore that the city passed a rule against dumping them in the water.

Into this world, a ship carrying Omar lumbered up the glittering currents of the Cooper River. It steered toward Gadsden’s Wharf, already crowded with slave vessels.

Around that time, with the new year’s arrival, the Charleston Courier published a notice: “The importation of Slaves from Africa, ceases this day, according to act of Congress.”

It listed the total captives sold in town by year.

In 1804, the number was 5,386.

By 1807, it soared to 15,676.

In all, arrivals averaged about 10,000 a year, or roughly half of the entire population of Charleston at the time, itself one of America’s largest cities.

Others put the number much higher.

Omar didn't write the ship's name that carried him or precisely when it arrived. But he did provide two critical clues that help pinpoint a few possibilities. Given he was in Futa Toro, he likely was taken from the Senegal River. And he wrote that he spent "a month and a half" at sea, or about 45 days.

Slave traders kept almost no records of captives' names or family ties. But international researchers have been piecing together the scant clues that survive to build a database called Slave Voyages.

A search of it shows three possibilities in 1807. The last one to arrive, the Carolina, slipped in just nine days before the deadline. It had spent 42 days at sea, then landed with 130 captives on board — two dozen fewer than it took from the Senegal River.

The ship docked at Gadsden's Wharf a few days before Christmas, then began advertising sales of its cargo starting Jan. 11. That day, nine ships advertised loads of enslaved Africans for sale at the wharf, crammed with thousands of captives.

A British visitor described the scene: "The din raised by slaves, sailors, sellers, and buyers was akin to the Old Testament Babel."

Omar stood before the probing eyes of potential buyers.

"In a Christian language," he wrote, "they sold me."

Flight for freedom

As he stepped off the ship, inhaling the humid air of this new world, Omar surely was naked and chained. He carried only the Quran stored in his mind's eye.

"Then a puny, weak, wicked little man named Johnson bought me. He was a big disbeliever and did not fear Allah at all," Omar wrote, as Gueye translated it.

Omar didn't include Johnson's first name or describe the plantation he owned. But coastal South Carolina was notorious for its rice operations, where enslaved laborers often died young.

About four years after disembarking in Charleston, Omar fled. Given the risks, most people who attempted escape were men in their 20s. But fear drove him.

"I was afraid to stay with such a wicked little man who committed a lot of sins," he wrote. "So, I escaped."

If he fled on foot from the Lowcountry, Omar traversed hundreds of miles of forest and plantation country — not to mention several major rivers — across the state's vast Pee Dee region. Or he slipped up the coast, navigating bays, rivers, swamps and the White man's maritime traffic.

He crossed about 220 miles, then approached Fayetteville, N.C. He spotted some structures.

"I went in there to pray," he wrote.

Did he enter a vacant house? A church?

Or was it a safe house along a precursor to the Underground Railroad? Quakers lived and worked in the area. And when Omar wrote about this moment later, he didn't describe himself alone, the way he did when he escaped Johnson. Instead, he referred to "us."

Whatever the building was he entered, someone kept an eye on it. A young person riding horseback spotted Omar.

More men came with "a pack of dogs."

Omar's flight for freedom ended. The slave patrol walked him for 12 miles to Fayetteville.

"They put me in a big house," Omar wrote. "I couldn't get out. So I stayed in the big house, called 'jail' in the language of Christians, for 16 days and one night."

What happened in that jail would launch the myth-making of Omar's life.

No more hiding

In the Deep South, captured runaways got thrown into the local jail, then waited for their enslavers to arrive and dole out whatever punishment they chose.

It might take time for Johnson to come.

But there was no more hiding.

News of runaways and captures seeped into every pocket of the White man's world. It filled newspaper pages. Broadsheets hung at ports. Steamboat captains carried word up and down the waterways.

And Fayetteville was a major stop on the Cape Fear River, busy with commerce and travel.

There, in the Cumberland County jail, Omar waited.

He sat in a cell, its floor blanketed in soot and slivers of charcoal from a fire. Grasping a chunk, he plied the prayers woven into his memory. Across the cell walls, Omar wrote them, wrapping himself in pleas for Allah's protection.

Or so the story went. Nobody there could read Arabic.

Omar was more educated than most White people around him. Although they used a narrative of the uncivilized African to justify slavery, barely a third of Whites in North Carolina were literate at the time.

As White writers later told the story, Omar's exotic script captured the town's attention. Up and down the river, people heard about this Black man at the jail who could write a litany of foreign symbols, explicable to no one.

But attention also meant word traveling to Charleston. For 16 days, Omar agonized.

Then the jail door opened.

He wrote, "I saw several men who were all Christians."

Becoming Moro

Johnson wasn't among the crowd standing there. But the local sheriff was, and he had mentioned this intriguing runaway to his new son-in-law, one of the area's wealthiest men.

James Owen was a 27-year-old state legislator and planter, the elder brother of a future governor. The siblings had inherited substantial property, in land and people, when their father died a few years earlier.

They now lived on plantations — Milton and Owen Hill — that straddled the Cape Fear River about 30 miles south in rural Bladen County. To the White world, they were places of antebellum glory.

Owen Hill sat on a bluff overlooking the river. The men's father, Thomas Owen, had cultivated an orchard along an avenue of magnolias that led to the plantation house. Visitors described pear, plum and peach trees blooming in fragrant clouds. Breeze from the river carried the sweet scents to the home's wide veranda.

Out in the plantation's fields, however, enslaved people toiled in obscurity. The Owens were among the county's largest slaveholders. In 1810, James Owen alone reported owning 43 people.

After retrieving Omar from the sheriff, Owen took him home to Milton.

It's unclear exactly when the man from Charleston showed up. But a man did come.

When Omar heard the news, he begged: "No, no, no, no, no, no, no."

The man who stood before them wasn't Johnson. His name was Mitchell.

And Mitchell claimed he had bought Omar for cheap from his prior owner after Omar fled. An Owen descendant later recalled that the man produced a bill of sale, then played like he didn't want to sell Omar, who was in clear distress.

Apparently, so was James Owen. He saw value in the strange literacy and regal bearing of this man they dubbed Moro.

He offered to trade two white carriage horses.

Mitchell agreed. Then, as he prepared to leave, he feigned uncertainty. A sum of cash would cement his decision.

James considered it extortion. But he threw \$1,000 into the deal, according to one of his descendants. The sum normally bought a young, healthy male.

To Omar's relief, Mitchell left

Becoming Uncle Moro

As his life settled into a new rhythm, Omar clung to his Muslim faith.

Praying five times a day and strictly observing Ramadan gave structure and holiness to his life. He preserved a modest Muslim appearance, covering his head and body. And he wrote prayers in Arabic, then tacked them to trees on the plantations, a common practice back home.

Nobody around could read them. White people figured he had written thanks to the Owens and prayers for his refuge at Milton.

In this world, Omar prayed alone.

If any other Muslims worshipped among the enslaved people on the plantations, neither Omar nor the White people around him mentioned them.

He had no imam to offer guidance. Muslim calls to prayer were replaced with hymns and church bells. And instead of people chanting the Quran, James Owen or his wife and daughter read Omar the Bible every day.

As Omar learned to speak broken English, the Owen family stories describe children slipping onto his knee, eager for tales about Africa and wisdoms about life.

Those children also grew up watching him cover his head each morning. He would attach one end of a cloth to a tree or post, then wrap the other end around his head and turn until his head was covered.

He wasn't just Moro.

He became Uncle Moro.

And Uncle Moro lived in his own little private cabin near the big house, not the slave cabins — an in-between world.

Later, people would describe Omar as everything from a butler to an overseer. One Owen family descendant said he served as majordomo, or head of a household staff. Another wrote that "he was waited on by a little colored boy and his food carried to him from the Owen kitchen."

Omar clearly recognized his unique lot.

"I continue in the hands of Jim Owen who does not beat me, nor calls me bad names, nor subjects me to hunger, nakedness, or hard work."

The hidden plea

Five years after Omar arrived at Milton, a group of prominent White men who foresaw slavery's eventual end formed the American Colonization Society.

Early members ranged from abolitionists who outright opposed slavery to enslavers fearful of the growing numbers of free Black people. Supporters included slave-owning presidents Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe and James Madison.

Despite different motives, they saw a common solution: relocate emancipated and freeborn Black residents to a new colony in Africa.

Its circuit of prominent adherents would alter Omar's life.

Evangelical Christians in the group, including the Owens, saw a potential side benefit to the relocation idea: Black Christian converts could help spread the gospel to Africa's unsaved pagans and "Mohammedans."

The Owens looked at Uncle Moro. They could start at home.

James Owen had become a leader at Fayetteville's First Presbyterian Church. Clergy from around the country came to visit. And evangelize.

In 1819, with pressure mounting to convert, Omar sat down to write a letter.

In Arabic, he addressed it to James' brother, then-state Sen. John Owen, and his church community in Raleigh. Men there were forming a new chapter of the Colonization Society.

Perhaps Omar hoped that John would send the letter through the Society's channels to get it translated. Maybe someone would be sympathetic to his plea.

When he began to write, Omar quoted passages of Muslim texts. Then he drew a large Sufi talisman, a geometrical shape with six interlocking arabesques on each side.

In the middle of the design, he wrote "Jim Owen," the name of his enslaver.

He also wrote another name that has confounded translators. Setting people's names in the center of this type of talisman can aim to bring them together. Or pull them apart.

Omar continued on then, quoting more Muslim passages onto the second page. Halfway down, he drew a small pentacle, a five-point star, used in Sufism to seek protection, said Gueye, the Arabic teacher.

Then, he wrote his plea: "I wish to be seen in our land called Africa, in a place on the river ..."

And then the word Kaba or Kabya.

Or, maybe, Coppe.

It was a bold move. If the Owens learned that he had asked to leave them, he could lose what privileges he enjoyed. Or worse.

He then quoted Surah Al-Mulk, a chapter in the Quran that describes God's sovereignty over creation. Omar ended the page with its phrase: "Speak secretly or openly; God knows what is in your hearts."

Breaking the code

Nobody around Omar could read his letter.

But they wanted to.

Upon receiving it, John Owen promptly gave it to John Louis Taylor, a friend from Fayetteville and chief justice of the state Supreme Court.

Taylor, who was active in the Colonization Society, in turn forwarded it to a far more influential member: Francis Scott Key, lawyer and poet who had written the words of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Taylor explained his purpose, using a new take on Moro's name. "The man, whose adopted name is Moreau, is believed to have been powerfully connected in his own country, and to have received a very uncommon education."

Moreau, he added, didn't want to go back to Africa. He so appreciated his enslavers' great "unbounded confidence and indulgence" that he couldn't leave them. Despite the plea Omar tucked in the letter, Taylor declared: "He is unwilling to return to his native country."

If they could read the man's script, they would know more.

"Many persons were desirous of procuring a translation of the inclosed (sic) letter, which I hope to obtain by your assistance."

Taylor also asked for another favor.

They needed to get an Arabic Bible for Moreau. With it, they could prove to him the Christian Scriptures' clear "authenticity and divine origin."

Yes, books were expensive. Finding this one would be difficult. But if Moreau could read the Bible for himself, he'd have no excuse for clinging to his Muslim faith.

Allah in the Bible

One day, a leather-bound Bible arrived at the plantation. It was 11 inches tall, "the size of the old timey Bible which used to be on every family's center table," an Owen descendant recalled.

Omar held the heavy book, which topped 400 pages. When he opened its cover, he set eyes upon the first Arabic words, besides his own, that he had seen in 13 years.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth ...

It wasn't the Quran. But the essence of worshipping an omnipotent God felt familiar, the message not unlike the opening of Islam's holy book. Was it comforting to read the Psalms, the Lord's Prayer, the stories of Abraham and Moses and Noah and Jesus, all prophets who appear in the Quran?

Joining the Christian church would give Omar a spiritual home — a place to pray and sing and study with other people again.

It also would please the Owens.

Omar made a soft leather bag for the Bible and hung it on a chair when he wasn't reading it.

Later that year, a few weeks before Christmas in 1820, he traveled upriver into town with the Owens to attend the worship service at First Presbyterian Church. He stood before the congregation — Black people in the balcony, White people in the sanctuary pews — as the minister baptized him.

The church's membership rolls officially recorded him, under People of Colour, as "Moroe-Property of Geo. Owen."

Though deemed property, he "never considered himself a negro and never mingled with the negro slaves on the two plantations, nor would he sit with the slaves in the church balcony," an Owen descendant later wrote. He had his own chair, which he placed in the aisle.

Omar became a fixture at the church. And a symbol of successful evangelism.

The following year, the Colonization Society secured a patch of land in Africa, the seed of what would become Liberia. Soon, the first free Black people from America landed there.

Becoming 'Prince Moro'

Five years after Omar's baptism, in the summer of 1825, a Philadelphia-based publication called the Christian Advocate published an article written by an anonymous Fayetteville doctor.

It was titled "Prince Moro."

The editors promised "a faithful statement of facts" that would "give pleasure to our Christian readers."

Those readers learned about an enslaved man who'd escaped from a South Carolina rice planter, been captured and then thrown into jail. There, he displayed writing in a "masterly hand."

“It would seem that he was a prince in his own country, which must have been far in the interior of Africa — perhaps Timbuctoo or its neighbourhood.”

Never mind that Timbuktu, a city in present-day Mali, is about 700 miles away from Futa Toro.

The same lore of royalty grew within the Owen family. When they offered Omar “the privilege of choosing a wife from among the house slaves,” he declined, a descendant wrote. “A Fulah Prince could not condescend to marry less than royalty.”

Perhaps what Omar really said, or thought, was that he could only marry a Muslim woman, and there were none around him. Although he often penned short prayers for his mother, Omar never wrote about a wife or children back home.

He also never wrote that he was royalty.

But that didn’t matter to the White world crafting its own identity for Omar. To them he was now Prince Moro, faithful Christian.

Tale of resistance

In 1831, the Owens gave Omar a blank tablet of paper. They had new ideas for him.

John Owen had become governor of North Carolina at a time when fears of slave insurrections flared across the South.

A Black man named David Walker, who hailed from the state, had written a scathing essay urging enslaved people to revolt. He appealed to Christians in particular, insisting “that God Almighty is the sole proprietor or master of the WHOLE human family.”

Copies appeared across the South, including in Charleston and Wilmington, N.C.

Gov. Owen sent one to North Carolina lawmakers, warning of insurrections and urging crackdowns. Fears raged.

Not a year later, shortly after Owen left office, Nat Turner led a rebellion 165 miles away in Virginia. Enslaved people killed at least 55, almost all of them White.

Arguments between slave owners and abolitionists intensified. Rumors of planned revolts spread. Amid the increasingly divided politics, Colonization Society members struggled to find traction for their idea of relocating free Blacks to Liberia.

But they did have a new marketing plan.

Members began gathering stories from enslaved people. They wanted to demonstrate that at least some weren’t savages, that “there is something exceptional about this person that makes him worth saving,” said Hussein Rashid, a lecturer in religion at Columbia University who studies Muslims in America.

The Owens handed Omar the tablet of paper.

It’s unclear if his 1819 letter, with the plea to return to Africa, had been translated yet. But in the 12 years since, Omar had stuck to quoting religious verses.

Now 61 years old, he looked at the tablet of quarto paper, its cream-colored pages blank, and faced expectations to write about his life. Given the broader tensions over slavery, he could not let the Owens get any whiff that he might be open to even the faintest seditious thought.

He must appear as they wanted.

Grateful servant.

Trusted worker.

Faithful Christian.

Yet he began writing what Sylviane Diouf, a prominent historian of enslaved Muslims, would later call “a document of resistance.”

Dipping a pen into iron gall ink, Omar filled the first page by quoting the familiar lines of Surah Al-Mulk.

In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate. May God bless our Lord Muhammad:

Blessed be He in whose hand is the mulk (sovereignty) and who has power over all things.

Omar included the surah’s promise of a fiery hell for those who tried to usurp Allah’s command over all things. The argument sounded a lot like what Walker had written a year earlier in his “Appeal” — that Christian slave “owners” were acting as if they were lords of men.

Unlike Walker, Omar didn’t specifically mention enslavers or insurrection.

But he would be clear about one thing:

He was not Uncle Moro.

Or Prince Moro.

Or Moreau.

“I am Omar,” he wrote.

And he loved to read the “Great Quran.”

Yet Omar added that he had tried to open his heart to the Bible “because the law was to Moses given, but grace and truth were with Jesus Christ,” Gueye translated.

Omar praised Muhammad but also said the Lord’s Prayer.

Then, he added the basic personal details that give us what little we know about him in his own words. After filling 15 pages, Omar concluded with praise.

“I stayed in the hands of Jim Owen who did not beat me, insult me, deprive me of food or clothing, or force me to do hard labor. I cannot do heavy labor. I am a sick little man. Over the past 20 years, I have never had a problem with Jim Owen.”

‘The leaning tree’

Omar knew of a fellow enslaved Muslim who performed a similar tightwire act. Lamine Kebe had been a Quranic teacher in modern-day Guinea when he was kidnapped while buying paper for his school.

Now, he was feigning conversion to Christianity and cooperating with the Colonization Society so they would transport him to Liberia. A few years after Omar wrote his autobiography, someone sent it to Kebe in New York. The man was about to board a ship.

What if Kebe had taken the text to Africa, to anywhere even close to Futa Toro?

Instead, he gave it to Theodore Dwight, a White abolitionist and scholar with an interest in West Africa and Islam. Dwight didn't, or couldn't, get it translated until 17 years after Omar wrote it.

A White New Yorker finally wrote a rudimentary translation. Even then, Dwight didn't publish it until the year after Omar's death.

Mbaye Lo, a Duke University professor with roots in Senegal, studies Islam in Africa and is co-authoring a book about Omar's writings. Given the Owens' connections, he feels certain they saw the translation while Omar was alive.

But the family was busy.

A few years after Omar wrote his autobiography, James Owen sold Milton and moved his family downriver to the bustling port city of Wilmington. Fireplaces, chandeliers and gifts from around the world adorned the rooms of their new three-story house on leafy Front Street.

The family often entertained there, with Omar as a centerpiece.

One guest, a prominent doctor and planter, described Omar as "a fine looking man, copper colored, though an African" in a black coat that reached below his knees. When summoned, Omar announced he would read the 23rd Psalm.

The visitor also asked him to write the verse in Arabic, which he did.

The Owens' new minister, the Rev. Matthew Grier, also recalled seeing Omar recite the 23rd Psalm and how he would never forget "the earnestness and fervor which shone in the old man's countenance as he read the going down into the dark valley."

"Me no fear, master's with me there," he recalled Omar saying.

The Owens' church, First Presbyterian, listed family members who joined after their move, including "Morrow, the servant to James Owen, an Indian Prince."

Meanwhile, Gov. Owen continued his political rise. He had just declined an offer to run as the Whig Party's vice presidential candidate when he died of a liver disease.

By then, Omar was 71.

One of the Owens' daughters wrote to her little sister at boarding school: "As Uncle Moro says, it is not the leaning tree which always falls first."

Twilight of life

Even as Omar aged into his late 80s, he continued his veiled resistance. In 1857, he penned his last known writing.

James Owen gave it to a minister's daughter in Virginia. A note in English attached to it says that Uncle Moreau, "a devoted Christian," had written the Lord's Prayer in Arabic.

That isn't what Omar wrote.

In fact, he wrote Surah An-Nasr, the last chapter revealed before the prophet Muhammad died. It translates to "The Victory" and speaks of a great triumph for Islam.

When God's help and victory come, and you see people embrace God's faith in multitudes, give glory to your Lord and seek His pardon. He is ever disposed to mercy.

He signed it, "My name is Omar."

But he also read his Bible often. Over the years, he fashioned six cloth covers for it, wrapping each new one around the old fabric, worn from use. Ayla Amon, who is writing a book translating all of Omar's writings, noticed that at both the beginning and end of the Bible, he wrote: "Praise be to Allah," a common phrase in Muslim discourse.

The Whites around him continued to identify him how they chose.

The 1860 census recorded Omar as a 91-year-old "African Prince called 'Monroe.'" Not long after, the Civil War exploded when a 10-inch mortar round blasted across Charleston Harbor.

In declining health, and war upon him, James Owen moved back inland to Owen Hill. He brought Omar with him, two old men in the twilight of life.

Omar died there in summer 1863, before the war's end would have freed him. He was 93 years old.

Owen buried him in the family graveyard, then died himself two years later.

Seasons passed. Years passed. The war ended. Reconstruction ended. The plantation house burned down one Sunday morning in 1876.

Today, almost 160 years after Omar's death, nothing at Owen Hill speaks to his legacy, or anyone else's. No marker points to the spot.

At the end of a rural side street lined with houses and mobile homes, in a field of thorny vines and trash, only a brick wall remains. It rises about 3 feet from the ground and forms a rectangle roughly 10 feet by 12 feet.

Inside, a spindly tree grows through the heart of patriarch Thomas Owen's grave. An empty Smucker's jelly jar lies in repose. His wife and three young grandchildren are buried here with them, their tombstones somewhere in the jumble of broken parts.

Nothing marks where Omar is buried, though a gravestone once did. Legends blame vandals and thieves for its disappearance.

A few years ago, a handful of men from a Fayetteville mosque named for Omar came to the spot seeking to honor him. They too had become fascinated by the man. They too stood in the brambles, shocked at the neglect.

The Quran had taught them what to do, as it taught Omar. They prayed.

In the name of God, the infinitely compassionate and merciful.

Praise be to God, Lord of all the worlds.

It dawned on the imam, Adam Beyah, as they spoke those words. This surely was the first time that a Muslim verse had seeped through the air and settled on the earth of this place since Omar's final prayer.

Omar as criminal

Like many Black Muslims in America, Beyah came to his faith through the Nation of Islam. He converted as a young man in 1972, back when he knew a lot more about civil rights than the enslaved Africans who brought Islam here.

Beyah, an accountant, moved to Fayetteville and joined the mosque named for Omar. He felt an instant connection to the man and led an effort to place a state historical marker for him — but not one that claimed Omar was Christian, as some wanted.

Through his work, he met another man with a keen interest in Omar: Thomas Parramore, a prominent North Carolina historian.

Parramore had devoted immense effort to learning about Omar and clarifying the myriad rumors that framed him, namely the title of African prince.

He was a White man working in the mid-1970s. The first African American student had just graduated from Meredith College, where he worked. U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms had been elected after mocking civil rights protestors and admonishing "negro hoodlums."

In this milieu, Parramore considered Omar's reluctance to divulge personal stories, combined with his supposed aversion to returning to Africa, as evidence:

Omar was hiding something.

Parramore wrote that Omar "occasionally exhibited what some may have perceived as a strong sense of guilt, suggesting that he may, indeed, have committed such a wrong."

At the time, Parramore was the premier researcher of Omar in North Carolina. Yet, in the 1980s, when he co-authored a state history textbook, he wrote for school children to read: "Apparently, Omar was sold into slavery by his own people as punishment for a crime he had committed."

Parramore amplified the idea, but he didn't invent it.

The notion had emerged in 1856 with the Rev. John Leighton Wilson, a South Carolina native and missionary in Africa. In a book about his travels, he wrote that the Fulani people had not participated in the slave trade except a few times to rid themselves of criminals.

"There is another still living in Wilmington, North Carolina, by the name of Moro, now eighty-five years of age," he wrote. "He has had the opportunity to return to his country, but has always been averse to returning. He was expelled from his own country for crime, but found the Saviour here, and loves the country where he has found so inestimable a treasure."

Wilson gave no reason why he connected a long-enslaved man in North Carolina with someone in Africa booted for committing a crime.

As with so many things written about Omar, it's hard to separate truth from fiction. But we don't have to rely on the words of other people to explore his true identity.

Omar left us his own clues.

The authentic story

An ocean away from the Carolinas, Africa is reclaiming its story in the gleaming halls of a new \$30 million museum in Senegal's capital city.

The Museum of Black Civilizations opened in downtown Dakar in late 2018 after a long and fitful effort begun by the country's first president after French colonization ended. He wanted the continent to reclaim its narrative.

Spanning 150,000 square feet across four stories, it is among the largest museums of its kind in Africa.

Yet even the concept of a museum is a Western one, museum Director Hamady Bocoum explains. In the past, Europeans told the African story in their museums as one of ethnography, the study of other cultures.

"Africans weren't interested," Bocoum says.

Mamaramé Seck, the linguistics professor guiding our journey to find Omar in Senegal, knows Bocoum well. He works at nearby IFAN Cheikh Anta Diop University and is curator of a museum exhibit that explores Abrahamic faiths in African societies. He translates for the two Post and Courier journalists, given Bocoum speaks French, as do most people in Dakar.

"We want to show Africa as we understand it," Bocoum says. "There has been a consistent need to tell the African story from the African view."

The vast majority of Africa's cultural heritage is held in museums outside of the continent. One museum in Paris alone has 70,000 objects from Africa. Now, this museum has space to reclaim many of them.

But it's not just about regaining artifacts.

Descendants of enslaved people in America, confronting racism and other scars of slavery, have long sought to find their lost ancestors and cultural origins on the continent.

But here in Africa, the aftermath feels different. Children learn songs that talk of slavery and its horrors, but not of what happened to people after their capture. The mass vanishing of 12 million loved ones left a huge void, after which lives of those who remained continued on.

"The diaspora did a lot to understand Africa," Bocoum says. "But Africa did not do enough to understand the diaspora. We want to fill that gap."

We tell him that we also want to fill the gap. That is why we have come — to bring the writings of one man from the diaspora home.

But first we must find that home.

The 'wrong' places

The two-lane road to Futa Toro slices through the hot Sahel, a buffer between the Sahara Desert to the north and the savannah below. Except for dottings of scrappy shrubs and trees, little interrupts the vast terrain of apricot-colored sand.

As we drive inland, modern buildings with WiFi give way to simple structures built of clay. Fertile land here used to feed its people, but today the desert encroaches. Many of the gaunt cows and goats that roam won't survive to the rainy season, still a few months away.

Before we left Charleston, Duke University professor Mbaye Lo, who has family ties here, offered some advice.

"We say in Wolof that 'change is groomed in wrong places,' " he emailed. "I think you may benefit more from visiting those 'wrong' places."

Indeed, it's hard to know where to begin.

Given Omar wrote that he was born in Futa Toro, we cruise toward it. In the front seat, as Gueye reads Omar's autobiography, he notices something.

Gueye teaches Arabic at a prestigious Islamic institute in Dakar but hails from Futa. And he thinks Omar wrote that a large army captured him and took him to a specific place. And that place name looks very similar to the one Omar wrote in his 1819 letter, where he pleaded to return to Africa.

Urgency propels us into Futa.

Because what if we can find that place?

Omar's writing isn't clear. The name looks like Kaba, or Kabya, maybe. But we don't see any obvious matches on maps, ancient or modern.

We turn to Omar's clues.

He wrote, "My birthplace is Futa Toro, between the two rivers." But Futa hugs the Senegal River for 250 miles. From it sprout myriad branches and tributaries.

Omar also set his capture in 1807. That is the year Futa's revolutionary leader was murdered, his close supporters killed or captured, not far from the river.

Gueye calls his grandfather, who lives near the area. Does the place name Omar wrote look anything like a village there, specifically one between two rivers?

He suggests one such place. The next morning, we head there.

Two centuries after the Islamic revolution swept through Futa, it remains steeped in Quranic teaching. Along our travels, five times a day, speakers mounted atop mosques of all sizes launch the song of the muezzin. These men intone the distinctive call to prayer, which guides the rhythms of everyday life.

When we reach the tiny village off a dirt road, its imam greets us warmly and invites us to join him on colorful mats spread over the sand. He cautions the name Omar ibn Said is very common. In fact, it was his own father's name.

"And here is not between two rivers," he adds. "When you hear between the two rivers, that is coming from Podor heading to Salde."

In other words, the Isle of Morfil. It is a 100-mile-long tongue of land within Futa framed by the Senegal and Doué rivers.

We thank him, then head to a village where a roadside vendor sells colorful plastic brooms alongside Coca-Cola and Fanta. Then to a larger town where the Muslims in our group pray at a pastel-painted mosque. Then to a small city where an imam greets us in a house with French TV blaring.

Everywhere we stop, people point us to other places whose name just might be the word Omar wrote.

When we reach a small rice-growing village on the Isle of Morfil, a very old man shakes his head.

"The place between two rivers cannot be this area," he says.

It is around Halwar, near Coppe — on another end of the island.

Over the past two days alone, we have driven almost 300 miles across paved roads and fields of sand in search of Omar. Our clothes are grimy, our rented Toyota Fortuner smothered in dust. The idea of driving across the island in search of a remote village feels daunting.

From the front seat, Gueye bursts into laughter.

"Omar is making me crazy," he says.

Our driver agrees. "But also, it's thrilling. Like a movie that never ends!"

'A true Muslim'

Our quest doesn't seek only to find Omar's home. We're also searching for his essence, that part of him and his faith and loved ones that he wasn't free to reveal.

Which brings us to Dimat Walo, home of Imam Amadou Baïdy Sy, one of the area's most learned men.

Outside several simple clay structures, a dozen boys sit on a mat covering a patch of sand. As Omar did, they write Quranic passages on wood tablets and chant the words to memorize them. The gentle sound mingles with the bleating of goats and crowing of roosters. A woman hangs laundry from a pink bucket onto a long line near Sy's home.

Inside, he sits in the wooden chair beside his black-and-gold Quran.

Sy and two other men pore over Omar's letter and autobiography. They agree he was very educated. But did he convert to Christianity?

The men confer, then announce their findings.

"He is a true Muslim," Sy says. "We don't have a doubt."

Across an ocean, across cultures, leaders at the Fayetteville mosque saw the same thing when we visited.

"This brother is still a Muslim," Adam Beyah, now the imam emeritus, told us.

He saw a devoted man trying to survive enslaved in a Christian world. Just look how often Omar wrote Surah Al-Mulk after his conversion.

"He's inviting them to look at Allah's creation," Beyah said.

Sy emphasizes the same principles.

Before we arrived, he was reading a Quranic verse in which the prophet Muhammad praises Mary and Jesus. There is unity among Abrahamic faiths. Jesus, a great prophet in Islam, would have been familiar to Omar when he arrived in Charleston.

Sy holds up his Quran

"We are all one community."

That's when we ask him to look at Omar's letter where he pleaded, "I wish to be seen in our land called Africa ... *fi makân al bahri yusummâ Coppe.*"

Close encounter

Heading onto the Isle of Morfil, the air cools and dust hangs thick in the air. The drive feels like vaulting through dense fog into some secret, ancient place.

Donkeys pull wooden carts across the island, about 7 miles wide here. The paved road was built just in the past year. Women, who carry goods in baskets atop their heads, still grind millet by hand.

We cross the Doué and head toward the Senegal River, the country's northern border.

A sign ahead reads: Coppe Mangay.

When we park, the only cars around, much of the village sits waiting beneath a roof of woven branches attached to a structure. An elder named Samba Doucourel Ba settles into the center where Seck and Gueye join him.

"*Salaam alaikum,*" Seck begins, or, "Peace be upon you."

A chorus returns, "*Alaikum salaam.*"

He explains our quest and pulls out one of Omar's photographs. Ba takes it and leans over onto his side to study the image for several long seconds. Something in his countenance resembles Omar.

Soon, copies of all three surviving pictures of Omar weave through the gathering of people: Old men in caps and long robes called boubous. Young men in jeans and shorts. Women in colorful headwraps and flowing dresses. Are these descendants of Omar's family and friends?

Gueye hands Omar's 1819 letter to Ba, who begins reading it. When he reaches Omar's plea to return to a place in Africa, he glances up.

"Kopia?"

He suggests summoning the imam. When the man arrives, Seck hands him Omar's letter and points to his appeal.

"Kaba," the imam says.

He looks at the autobiography and repeats, "Kaba."

Seck asks: *Could it read Coppe?*

The imam stops and peers at him. His mood turns tense: Why exactly are these Americans here?

What would it mean if Omar — important enough for two journalists, one Black and one White, to travel across the ocean — was from this village? The weight of so much that Europeans and Americans have taken from Africa hangs in the air like the thick dust around us.

Seck explains that Sy, the imam in Dimat Walo, read the word as Coppe and suggested we come here for answers.

The imam respects Sy and wants to talk to him. From the crowd, someone produces a cellphone, and he disappears inside the structure beside us.

When he emerges a few minutes later, he says that he trusts Sy's interpretation. He can see where the word might be Coppe. To him, it looks more like Kaba, but they don't know of anywhere called Kaba in Futa Toro.

Later, when we show Omar's writing to other imams and historians in the region, most agree that the word could be read as Coppe, especially how Omar wrote it in his autobiography. But it isn't clear.

The call to prayer beckons in the distance, as it has for centuries, and no debate over Omar will interfere with it. The women and children vanish. Some men head away; others remain to pray beneath the thatched roof.

Seck translates the buzz around us: "They consider Omar as someone from the Futa, and they're praying for him because they believe he is one of them. If Omar was one of them, they can't tell for sure. But it is possible.

They cannot be 100 percent sure because there were many Africans, many *Fuutankoobe*, who were taken away."

After prayer, and after lunch, the village's leader and a dozen other men stroll with us to the Senegal River, not 100 feet away. Omar's pastor in Wilmington, who wrote one of the more accurate accounts of his life, noted that Uncle Moreau was born "upon the banks of the Senegal River."

At the water's edge, several men build a fishing boat, and their hammering bounces over the water. Behind a veil of dust, Mauritania sits on the other side.

Coppe used to be a trading post. For 400 years, as other villages succumbed to raids and war and time, this one never moved. Ancient maps, which spell it Kope, attest to that endurance.

It helped that the village sits higher than the surrounding areas. The river also flows wide here, a source of life and transport that stretches several hundred feet across, even now in the dry season.

That proximity also brought risk. The men describe two types of armies that attacked Coppe: Europeans who raided from boats on the river and Moors from Mauritania who slipped across it.

For a moment, we all stand silent at the water's edge. In this ancient village between two rivers, Omar feels close. He feels closer than anywhere we have traveled on this quest.

"This is it," Seck says softly. "I feel it."

But we cannot know for sure. Omar didn't tell us enough, a choice he made to protect himself and his most personal memories.

Before we leave, one of the men of Coppe asks our group if they can keep the packet of Omar's texts. They want to study it and allow imams around the region to discuss his meaning more deeply among themselves.

Yes, we tell them. It is theirs, and his, not ours.