

They Survived the Crossing

Identity, Resistance, and Cultural Survival on the Middle Passage (1619–1808)

Track	Contribution
Era	ERA II — Colonial America & the Founding Contradiction (1600–1776)
Lens	Secular & Political · Church & Religion
Content Warning	None
NC Connection	Yes — Senegambian survivors in the Cape Fear; Omar ibn Said
Research Status	Needs citation review
Paired Entry	Entry 7 — The Middle Passage (ERA II · Persecution)

The Middle Passage was designed to break the person before they arrived. The conditions in the holds — the chains, the darkness, the death on every side, the deliberate mixing of language communities to prevent communication and organize resistance — were a calculated assault on identity, community, and will. The people who survived the crossing did not survive it passively. They survived it through acts of mutual care, cultural transmission, spiritual practice, and organized resistance that the ship’s logs recorded as problems to be suppressed. The crossing did not erase them. It revealed what they were made of.

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Mutual care, community formation, and the "shipmate" bond

Enslaved people on the Middle Passage formed communities under conditions designed to prevent community formation. Traders deliberately mixed language groups in the holds to prevent communication and organized resistance. What they created instead was a new basis for community: the shipmate bond. People who had crossed together — regardless of ethnic origin, language, or prior relationship — recognized each other as family in the Americas. In Jamaica, the Barbados creole term "shipmate" described a relationship close enough to prohibit marriage — the equivalent of siblings. In Brazil, the term *malungo* carried the same weight.

Historian Marcus Rediker's *The Slave Ship* (2007) documents the specific ways in which enslaved people organized mutual care in the holds: tending the sick, sharing what little food was available, maintaining spiritual practices, and transmitting cultural knowledge through the hold communities that formed during the crossing. The women and children, typically housed in separate compartments with somewhat more freedom of movement, often served as the community's cultural memory — maintaining songs, prayers, and practices that connected the community to the world they had left.

RESISTANCE ON THE CROSSING

More than 400 documented shipboard revolts

Historians have documented more than 400 revolts aboard slave ships across the history of the Atlantic trade. The frequency of shipboard revolts — which occurred despite chains, despite armed crews, despite the impossibility of navigating to safety if the revolt succeeded — is evidence of the continuous, active refusal of enslaved people to accept their condition. Revolts were most common in the early stages of the voyage, while the ship was still close to the African coast and return was conceivable. They occurred throughout the crossing. They were suppressed with lethal force. They happened anyway.

The ten people aboard the *Zong* who jumped overboard voluntarily on December 1, 1781 — recorded in the ship's log without apparent recognition of what they were doing — were making the same choice that shipboard rebels made throughout the trade: that death on their own terms was preferable to the life the crossing was designed to deliver them into. The ship's log called it a suicide. It was an act of sovereignty.

"They revolted on the ships. They revolted in the holds. They revolted before the ship left the coast and after it reached the Americas. The crossing did not produce a defeated people. It produced a people who had already demonstrated, under the most extreme conditions imaginable, that they would not stop fighting."

WHAT SURVIVED THE CROSSING

Language, faith, knowledge, and the will to transmit them

Language	West African tonal and grammatical structures survived inside African American English. The Gullah/Geechee language of the Carolina and Georgia Sea Islands preserves significant West African vocabulary and structure. Lorenzo Dow Turner's <i>Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect</i> (1949) identified more than 4,000 words of African origin in Gullah — from Wolof, Mandinka, Twi, Yoruba, and Kongo.
Spiritual Practice	Bakongo, Yoruba, and Akan spiritual traditions survived through synthesis with Christianity. The ring shout — a counterclockwise circular sacred movement documented in African American churches throughout the antebellum South — is a structural survival of the Bakongo dikenga cosmogram. Islamic practice among enslaved West African Muslims was maintained in memory, prayer, and in manuscripts written on American soil.
Agricultural Knowledge	Wet-rice cultivation, indigo processing, and cattle herding expertise survived the crossing in the knowledge of specific enslaved people who had practiced these arts in West Africa. That knowledge built colonial economies. Planters documented their value without acknowledging their origin.
Music and Oral Tradition	West African call-and-response structures, rhythmic traditions, and oral narrative forms survived and transformed into the musical traditions — the blues, gospel, jazz — that became the most globally influential American cultural exports. The root of American music is African.
Naming Traditions	African day-names — Kofi/Cuffee (Friday-born), Kwesi/Quash (Sunday-born), Amba/Abba (Thursday-born) — appear throughout American plantation records. The persistence of these names, maintained by enslaved communities alongside the European names imposed by enslavers, is evidence of cultural transmission under conditions designed to prevent it.

The crossing did not produce a blank slate — it produced a diaspora

The ideology of slavery required that enslaved people arrive in the Americas as blank slates — without culture, without history, without knowledge worth preserving. The evidence of the crossing itself refutes this. The revolts documented on more than 400 slave ships prove that the people being transported understood what was happening to them and resisted it. The cultural survivals documented in Gullah language, African American religious practice, musical tradition, and naming convention prove that what they carried across survived the crossing.

The African American cultural tradition — the music, the faith, the language, the foodways, the social structures — is not a derivative of European American culture. It is a parallel civilization built by people who survived a crossing designed to destroy them, who rebuilt community on the other side with the materials they had carried inside them, and who transmitted what they carried to every generation that followed.

NC LOCAL LENS · CUMBERLAND COUNTY / FAYETTEVILLE

The Senegambian people who survived the Middle Passage and were brought to the Cape Fear region brought with them the knowledge traditions documented in this entry. Their survival — of the crossing, of the slave codes, of the plantation system — is the foundation of the African American community of Cumberland County.

Omar ibn Said (c. 1770–1864), enslaved near Fayetteville in the Bladen County area, survived the Middle Passage from Futa Toro, Senegal, carrying with him the Islamic scholarly tradition of the western Sudan. He maintained his faith and his literacy in Arabic throughout his enslavement, producing in 1831 the only known Arabic-language autobiography written by an enslaved person in the United States. His manuscript is held by the Library of Congress. It is direct evidence of what survived the crossing — in one specific person, to one specific place in North Carolina.

NC Figures Referenced

Omar ibn Said (c. 1770–1864) — enslaved Futa Toro / Senegalese scholar, Fayetteville / Bladen County area. Autobiography (1831) held at the Library of Congress: <https://www.loc.gov/item/2005440981/>. Unnamed Wolof and Mandinka Middle Passage survivors in early Cumberland County colonial records.

CITATIONS · CHICAGO STYLE

- 1 Rediker, Marcus. *The Slave Ship: A Human History*. New York: Viking, 2007.

Peer-Reviewed Secondary

- 2 Turner, Lorenzo Dow. *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949.

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- 3 Diouf, Sylviane Anna. *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas*. New York: New York University Press, 1998.

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- 4 ibn Said, Omar. *Autobiography of Omar ibn Said, Slave in North Carolina, 1831*. Manuscript. Washington, DC: Library of Congress, American Memory Collection.

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- 5 Thompson, Robert Farris. *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*. New York: Random House, 1983.

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- 6 Raboteau, Albert J. *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

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PAIRED PERSECUTION ENTRY

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- 7 The Middle Passage: The Crossing That Was Designed to Break the Person Before They Arrived (1619–1808)