

They Were Not Numbers

Contribution pair to Entry 9: "12.5 Million"

Prepared for the Two Americas Archive

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Contribution Track • ERA II • Fayetteville, North Carolina

ACF Field Draft — timeline_entry

entry_year: 1807–1864

entry_year_sort: 1807

entry_track: Contribution

entry_era: ERA II

entry_lens: Identity & Memory

entry_short_description: Behind the trade's aggregate count of 12.5 million stand real, named individuals — none more fully documented than Omar ibn Said, a West African Islamic scholar sold into Fayetteville, North Carolina, who left the only known Arabic-language slave autobiography written in America.

entry_250_badge: No

entry_living_record: No

entry_present_day_nc: Historical marker, Murchison Road, Fayetteville, NC, dedicated 2010.

entry_content_warning: No

entry_nc_connection: Direct and strong — see NC Local Lens below.

entry_nc_figures: Omar ibn Said; James Owen; Gov. John Owen

entry_related: Entry 9 — "12.5 Million" (Persecution, ERA II)

entry_see_also: Entry 7 — "The Middle Passage"; Entry 7B — "They Survived the Crossing"

entry_research_status: needs_citation

entry_content_notes: NC connection independently confirmed across Library of Congress and Fayetteville historical-marker sources; Thomas Peters (Cape Fear/Wilmington) considered and set aside as a secondary candidate — his route into NC via a 16-year, undocumented resale chain is too uncertain to anchor an entry on. Verify exact Arabic manuscript translation wording against Ala Alryyes's scholarly edition before quoting Said directly.

entry_full_content

A Statistic With a Name

The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database estimates that roughly 12.5 million captive Africans were forced aboard slave ships between 1501 and 1867 — a number so large it flattens into abstraction, thirty-five thousand individual voyages compressed into a single figure on a page. Behind nearly every one of those voyages was a person with a name, a language, a family, and a life interrupted mid-sentence. Recovering those names has become its own historical project: registers kept by British anti-slave-trade patrols after 1808 recorded tens of thousands of African names spoken by liberated captives at the moment of their freedom, and a small number of individuals — through extraordinary circumstance, literacy, or luck — left first-person accounts in their own words. Omar ibn Said is one of them, and his story runs directly through Fayetteville, North Carolina.

Captured, and Carried to Carolina

Omar ibn Said was born around 1770 in Futa Toro, in the Islamic Fulbe empire of present-day Senegal, and spent some twenty-five years in formal Islamic scholarly education — mathematics, astronomy, theology, Arabic composition — before a regional military conflict in 1807 ended in his capture and sale into the Atlantic trade. He was transported to Charleston, South Carolina. What happened next set his story apart: Said escaped an enslaver he later described as harsh, and traveled roughly two hundred miles inland on foot to Fayetteville, where he was captured and jailed as a runaway. Unable to communicate in English, he began writing on the walls of his jail cell — in Arabic, in a hand local observers had never seen and could not read. Word of the literate, praying captive spread, and in the 1810s he was purchased by James Owen, a prominent Fayetteville-area planter whose brother, John Owen, would go on to serve as governor of North Carolina from 1828 to 1830. Said remained enslaved on Owen land near Fayetteville and in Bladen County for the rest of his life.

Fourteen Pages, Written to Be Believed

In 1831, Said composed his life story in Arabic — the only known autobiography of an enslaved person in the United States written entirely in that language and, by the Library of Congress's own description, the only one "written without owner editing." Fourteen of his Arabic manuscripts survive today, part of a larger forty-two-document collection assembled by the abolitionist Theodore Dwight in the 1860s, lost for roughly fifty years, rediscovered by a private collector, and donated to the Library of Congress in 2017, where it is now held as the Omar ibn Said Collection. The manuscript's own title, given by its subject, refuses to let him disappear into the record as property: "The Life of Omar ben Saeed, called Morro, a Fullah Slave in Fayetteville, N.C." He named the place. He named himself. He remained enslaved until his death in 1864, at roughly ninety-three or ninety-four, and is buried in Bladen County — a man whose own handwriting outlasted the system that tried to erase him.

NC Local Lens

This entry's North Carolina connection is not incidental — Fayetteville is the center of the story. Omar ibn Said was jailed, discovered, and sold in Fayetteville, lived the rest of his enslaved life on Owen land in the immediate area, and is buried in neighboring Bladen County. A North Carolina historical marker dedicated in 2010 on Murchison Road in Fayetteville — described as the first roadside marker in the

state to recognize a Muslim historical figure — commemorates him at the site of his story. This entry treats Said's manuscript, in his own words and his own hand, as the clearest possible answer to the abstraction of "12.5 million": a single name, a single life, refusing to be only a number.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Manuscript translation wording: quotations and paraphrases of Said's autobiography should be checked against Ala Alryyes's scholarly translation (A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar Ibn Said, University of Wisconsin Press, 2011) before use as direct quotes.

James/John Owen family detail: the exact nature of Said's treatment under James Owen, and the extent of any relationship to Francis Scott Key regarding an Arabic Bible translation, should be verified against the Library of Congress collection notes before further elaboration.

Thomas Peters (Cape Fear/Wilmington): considered as an alternate NC-connected named individual but not used here — his documented enslavement under a Wilmington owner in 1776 follows an unclear sixteen-year chain from an initial 1760 Louisiana landing and should not be presented as a direct slave-ship arrival in North Carolina.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. Omar ibn Said, "The Life of Omar ben Saeed, called Morro, a Fullah Slave in Fayetteville, N.C., Owned by Governor Owen," 1831 manuscript, Omar Ibn Said Collection, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/omar-ibn-said-collection/about-this-collection/>.
2. Ala Alryyes, ed. and trans., *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar Ibn Said* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011).
3. "Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database," Rice University, accessed September 14, 2026, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/>.
4. North Carolina Highway Historical Marker Program, "Omar ibn Said," Murchison Road, Fayetteville, NC, dedicated 2010, North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources.
5. "Omar ibn Said Collection Acquired by the Library of Congress," Library of Congress press release, 2019.

Prepared by the Two Americas research process. Verify all figures against primary sources before publication if stronger originals become available.