



Smithsonian
***Anacostia Museum and Center for
African American History and Culture***

News

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Anacostia Museum Exhibit Explores History of African-Born Muslims in Early America

Throughout America's early history African-born Muslims played significant roles as explorers of the Americas, as managers on Southern plantations, as patriotic servicemen in times of war, and as entrepreneurs, religious leaders and educators.

"Forgotten Roots: African American Muslims in Early America" examines the presence and contributions of persons of African descent and Muslim heritage during the 18th and 19th centuries. The exhibition opened July 11 at the Smithsonian's Anacostia Museum and Center for African American History and Culture and will be on view until Oct. 16.

Organized by Washington-based historian and curator Amir N. Muhammad, this exhibit brings together an extraordinary range of artifacts, drawings, religious texts, documents and photographs. Among the highlights are:

- An ambrotype, c. 1850, of Omar ibn Sayyid (1770-1864), an Islamic scholar from present-day Senegal who left behind at least 14 manuscripts, many written while he was enslaved in Charleston, S.C., and Fayetteville, N.C.
- The Old and New Testament Bible, c. 1811, accompanied by its handmade cover, written in Arabic and given as a gift to Omar ibn Sayyid by his owner James Owens, a state militia leader and brother of North Carolina Governor John Owens
- An 1853 edition of The Koran, with an inscription reading "only book saved from the University of Alabama Library which was destroyed by fire during the Civil War"
- An 1822 portrait of Yarrow Mamout (1736-1844), an enslaved African on a Montgomery County, Maryland, plantation who became a Georgetown, D.C., property owner and businessman after gaining his freedom in 1807



Drawing on private collections, university libraries, state historical societies, census records and newspaper archives, exhibition organizers selected items to, as curator Muhammad puts it, “paint the big picture and the little details of this fascinating tale of America’s first Black Muslims.”

“Small paper documents like letters, pages from diaries and deeds of sale come together to create vignettes of Muslim individuals—enslaved and free—who were known for their passion for freedom, their pioneering spirit and their steadfast faith,” Muhammad said.

This exhibition is the first phase of the Anacostia Museum’s multiyear initiative to document family and community life among African American Muslims. Through research and oral history interviews in major cities across the United States, the museum will explore what it means to be of African descent, Muslim and American.

Muhammad is the founder of Collections & Stories of American Muslims Inc., established in 1996 in Washington, D.C., as the nation’s first Muslim American museum. CSAM’s goal is to explore the depth, diversity, growth and history of Muslim Americans.

Educational Programming

The following educational programs are offered in conjunction with the exhibition “Forgotten Roots: African American Muslims in Early America.”

Slide-illustrated Lecture: Black Muslims in America, Saturday, July 23, 3 p.m.

Washington, D.C., historian and exhibit curator Amir Muhammad will focus on the Moors of Delaware and a group of highly educated Africans who lived in the American South during the 1700s and 1800s. Among the subjects are Job ben Soloman, an enslaved African admired for his literacy and his knowledge of the Koran, and Ben Ali Muhammad, an Islamic law scholar and a Georgia plantation manager credited with organizing a group of Muslims to defend the United States against Britain during the War of 1812. Reservations, (202) 633-4870.

Islamic Heritage Day, Saturday, July 30, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Curator Muhammad and a group of cultural historians will host a day of activities celebrating the diversity of Islamic traditions ranging from music and hand-painting to poetry and calligraphy. An open-air marketplace will offer jewelry and traditional foods. Details, (202) 633-4870.

Healing Herbs and Foods used by African American and African Muslims, Thursday, Aug. 5, 10:30 a.m.

Anacostia Museum registrar and food historian Habeebah Muhammad shows how and why many of the same herbs, foods and spices have been used for medicinal purposes in African American communities and in West African communities.

Muslim American Women: An Overview, Thursday, August 11, 7 p.m.

Historians and scholars explore the role of Muslim women in American history, focusing on faith, education, gender roles and contributions to society. Guest speakers include Precious Muhammad, founder and editor of The Journal of Islam in America; Zakia Mahasa, Baltimore Circuit Court Chancery; and Ayesha Mustafaa, editor of The Muslim Journal. Location: Ring Auditorium, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Reservations required, (202) 633-6867.

Customs and Traditions: African American and West African Muslims, Saturday, Aug. 20, 2005 3 p.m.

Sylvaine A. Diouf, author of “Servants of Allah,” explores issues distinguishing African American and West African Islamic traditions in food, dance, song and culture. A book signing follows. Reservations required, call 202-633-4867.

Created in 1967, the Anacostia Museum and Center for African American History and Culture works to explore and document the historical and cultural experiences of people of African descent. The museum, at 1901 Fort Place S.E., is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, except Dec. 25. Admission is free. For more information, call (202) 633-4844 or visit the Web site at anacostia.si.edu.

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Note to Editors: Digital images are available by calling (202) 633-4869 or sending e-mail to paysourf@si.edu