
Baquaqua, Mahommah Gardo

(c. 1824–?),

Paul E. Lovejoy

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.36138>

Published in print: 15 March 2013

Published online: 31 May 2013

A version of this article originally appeared in *African American National Biography*.

abolitionist and slave-narrative author, was born in the commercial center of Djougou, West Africa, inland from the Bight of Benin in what would later be the republic of Benin. He was a younger son of a Muslim merchant from Borgu and his wife, who was from Katsina, the Hausa city in northern Nigeria—then known as the Sokoto Caliphate; his parents' names are now unknown. His home town, Djougou, was located on one of the most important caravan routes in West Africa in the nineteenth century, connecting Asante, the indigenous African state that controlled much of the territory that would become Ghana, and the Sokoto Caliphate. After a childhood in which he attended a Koranic school and learned a craft from his uncle, who was also a merchant and a Muslim scholar, Baquaqua followed his brother to Dagomba, a province of Asante. There he was captured in war in the early 1840s, but he was released when his ransom was paid. However, back home in Djougou, he was again taken captive, apparently kidnapped, in 1845, at about age twenty or twenty-one. Baquaqua was then sold south to Dahomey and eventually to a Portuguese ship trading at Ouidah and Popo and taken to Brazil.

In Brazil he was initially sold to a baker in Pernambuco, probably in the city of Olinda, near Recife. Because he attempted to escape and even plotted the assassination of his master, he was sold south to Rio de Janeiro, where a ship captain purchased him for employment as a cabin boy on various trading expeditions to southern Brazil and then in 1847 on a voyage to New York City, where his master was taking a consignment of coffee. Upon arrival in New York in June 1847, Baquaqua became the object of a legal dispute between abolitionist members of the New York Committee of Vigilance, who helped him jump ship, and his Brazilian master, who attempted to recover him through legal means. When two judges refused to free Baquaqua and declared that he was a foreign sailor who had deserted, Baquaqua's abolitionist supporters helped him to escape from jail in lower Manhattan and make his way to Boston, via Springfield, Massachusetts, on the Underground Railroad. From Boston he was sent to Haiti to avoid being arrested again.

Upon arrival in Port-au-Prince, Baquaqua became associated with the American Free Will Baptist mission. He remained under their patronage until he was in danger of being drafted into the Haitian army, which was involved in an abortive invasion of the Spanish colony to the east of Haiti on the island of Hispaniola. In late 1849 Baquaqua returned to the United States and enrolled in New York Central College, south of Syracuse, where he was a student until 1853. Baquaqua was one of the first Africans to be educated at an American institution of higher education.

Baquaqua knew most of the key abolitionists in upstate New York in the early 1850s, initially through his Baptist connections and then through his association with Gerrit Smith, the wealthy radical abolitionist who was elected to Congress in 1854 and subsequently ran for President of the United States on the Liberty Party ticket. Unlike most other abolitionists Baquaqua was preoccupied with

returning to Africa. In pursuit of this goal he served as a member of the Baptists' Africa Mission, which in fact never sent a mission to Africa, despite Baquaqua's willingness to go and his speaking tours that were intended to raise funds for the mission. Baquaqua also tried to join the Mendi Mission of the Congregationalists, but was also unsuccessful in securing an appointment.

In 1854 Baquaqua traveled to Ontario, then known as Canada West, where he finished a fifty-six-page pamphlet about his life in Africa and his relatively brief experiences of slavery in Africa and Brazil. He wrote his autobiography in Chatham, Canada West, and published it in Detroit as *An Interesting Narrative. Biography of Mahommah G. Baquaqua, A Native of Zoogoo, in the Interior of Africa (A Convert to Christianity,) with a Description of That Part of the World; including the Manners and Customs of the Inhabitants* (1854). George Pomeroy, owner of the *Detroit Free Press* and founder of Wells Fargo, helped him to write and edit the manuscript.

His autobiography differs from the other “slave narratives” written in the United States and Canada in the 1840s and 1850s because of his description of Africa, the notorious “Middle Passage,” and his captivity in Brazil. His account is valuable because it was one of the most detailed and fully authenticated accounts of Africa and the Atlantic crossing on a slave ship. Despite his conversion to Christianity, Baquaqua chose to keep his Muslim name and his cultural identification with the families of his father and mother, whose association with the Hausa and Dendi commercial networks of the African interior beckoned him to return to his homeland. Despite Baquaqua's speaking tours on the abolitionist circuits of New York and Pennsylvania, sales of his autobiography were not sufficient to enable him to secure passage to Africa. In early 1855, however, he was able to sail for Liverpool and remained in England until at least 1857, at which point he drops from the historical record. How and where he died, whether he married and had a family, are all unknown today.

Further Reading

Law, Robin, and Paul E. Lovejoy, eds. *The Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua: His Passage from Slavery to Freedom in Africa and America* (2006).