
Abd Al-Rahman, Ibrahima

(1760?-1829),

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a military leader in Africa, a slave in Mississippi, was born into the rising Bari family of the Fulbe people in the fabled but real African city of Timbuktu. His name is sometimes written as Abdul Rahahman and Abder Rahman. The Fulbe people were prominent leaders in West African jihads from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries and, though enslaved, the most persistent adherents to Islam in the Americas. Abd al-Rahman's father and family had moved south to territory soon to be called Futa Jallon in the highlands of present-day Guinea after he and non-Muslim allies wrested power from their animist opposition between 1776 and 1778. Well into the twentieth century the military Bari-Soriya and religious Karamoko Alfiya families, usually peacefully, traded rule over their people and lands.

For about a century Futa Jallon was the strongest nation in the area. In its capital Timbo, Abd al-Rahman was educated in Fula-Muslim schools to read and write Arabic and to fight his people's enemies. The city's teachers instructed many important West African Muslim students, teachers, and leaders. At least three of the latter were stolen away to the New World and gained some renown there: Bilali, born in Timbo, became a de facto imam in Georgia; Samba, taken with Abd al-Rahman to Natchez, Mississippi, maintained his Muslim traditions and gave his children Muslim names; and the student-teacher Lamine Kebe (a Serahule), was returned to Africa after enslavement in Georgia in 1835.

In 1788, in his early twenties, married, a father, and a respected cavalry officer, Abd al-Rahman commanded a troop charged with reopening trade to the coast. After an apparent victory, he and fifty of his men were ambushed and taken to the Gambia River where they were sold as slaves. Including a stop in Dominica, his six-month passage across the Atlantic Ocean ended in Spanish New Orleans. After a month there he was sold up the Mississippi to Thomas Foster of Spanish Natchez. Soon, however, Abd al-Rahman recovered his land legs and ran away. Weeks later he returned, presumably having not found allies or escape beyond the plantation. Nevertheless, though he was forced to adjust to his circumstances, Abd al-Rahman had his limits. He was called Prince by his master in deference, it seems, to his proud manner, antipathy to labor, and to his early, undoubtedly discounted argument that he was of royal blood.

Abd al-Rahman became a kind of slave foreman and was favorably noticed because of his seriousness, honesty, and religiosity. Though he listened politely to Christian preachers, he adhered to his Muslim obligations. Abd al-Rahman appreciated some Christian principles and practices, but declared, according to Cyrus Griffin, a sympathetic Natchez newspaper editor: "the [New] Testament very good law; you [Christians] no follow it; you no pray often enough; you greedy after money ... you want more

land, more neegurs; you make neegur work hard, make more cotton. Where you find dat in your law?" Not finding a Muslim to marry, he settled down with a recently purchased Baptist woman, Isabella, around 1794.

His own narrative of his place in Futa Jallon might have been forever overlooked but for the arrival in Natchez in 1807 of a medical doctor named John Coates Cox. Cox was the only European known to have sojourned in Abd al-Rahman's hometown of Timbo in the 1780s, and for six months as a patient he had even been within Abd al-Rahman's own family compound. The two men recognized one another at first sight. Cox corroborated the slave's high African status and emphasized it in his attempts to persuade his purchaser to free him.

After the doctor's death in 1816, his son also tried to free Abd al-Rahman. Both were unsuccessful. Abd al-Rahman's managerial skills (as well as his wife's obstetrical talents) had become indispensable to Foster and their growing plantation. Finally in 1826, having become something of a local celebrity, a father of nine children, and an old man by then relieved of his heavier duties, Abd al-Rahman decided to write home in Arabic—the only written language he knew. His letter was sent to Morocco—the only Muslim nation with which the United States had diplomatic relations. Cyrus Griffin sought the American Colonization Society's (ACS) assistance. Two years later, a surprising response came to the U.S. State Department asking for the Muslim man's freedom and transportation to Morocco. Foster agreed, providing the old man would leave the United States as soon as arrangements could be made. But he came up with a surprising caveat. Instead of quickly getting rid of Abd al-Rahman via a riverboat to New Orleans and out to sea, Foster wanted his proud African to be taken north and east so that he might be awed by and would report to his people about the urbanization, wealth, and productivity of the United States.

Abd al-Rahman was happy about being freed, but he was unhappy that no provision had been made for his wife and children. Showing something of their respect for him, sympathetic Natchezians raised enough money to redeem his wife. In late March 1828 he and Isabella were shipped up the Mississippi and Ohio rivers. From the time they arrived in Cincinnati to the time they left Virginia for Liberia on 7 February 1829, Abd al-Rahman, then aged sixty-four or sixty-five, a black man in a geographically extended, largely white world, was in constant motion. He was not awed by the cities, their prodigal materialism, or their mechanical progress. Instead, he became the chief campaigner in an attempt to redeem his children through donations in the North, comparable to the lesser campaign Natchez neighbors had completed to buy his wife.

In newspaper accounts composed in all the major coastal cities, Abd al-Rahman, though at some level begging, displayed a splendid dignity wherever he went. He appeared at the White House, Congress, the offices and homes of wealthy American Colonization Society members, street corner rallies, school campuses, and—most extraordinarily—public marches and meetings with African American leaders in opposition to the ACS. President John Quincy Adams donated to his cause, as did dignitaries and common people alike in Philadelphia, New York, New Haven, Hartford, Springfield, Worcester, Boston, and Providence. The Reverend Thomas Gallaudet, founder of the first school for the deaf, became one of his most ardent supporters. It was the Colonizationist Gallaudet who prevailed upon the artist Henry Inman to produce a wonderful crayon portrait of the remarkable freedman. John Russwurm, one of the founders of *Freedom's Journal*, the first African American edited newspaper, met and soon followed Abd al-Rahman to Africa. David Walker, soon to be the author of the strongest and one of the earliest

publications opposing slavery by an African American, toasted Abd al-Rahman in Boston. (This was in a time, 1828, at which William L. Garrison and other white abolitionists had not yet begun their fight against slavery. Indeed, Garrison donated to the ACS in that year.)

Commentators admired Abd al-Rahman's dignity, seriousness, and apparent spirituality as he sought money to purchase and free his children. Colonizationists assisting his travels hoped that he would increase interest in their plans to send other freed or troublesome people to Liberia. Businessmen hoped that he would improve African trade. Ministers hoped that their help and advice might convert him and other Muslims to Christianity. Abd al-Rahman's literacy led potential donors to seek samples of his writing. Some of his writings were presumed to be the Lord's Prayer but they were, in fact, variations on the first chapter of the Quran or were short autobiographical statements.

Abd al-Rahman became a kind of hero in the Northeast, but an anti-slavery villain in the old Southwest. Foster, his former owner, was incensed by his eloquent Prince's progress through cities that he had wanted his freed slave to be awed and dumbfounded by. In the election year of 1828 Foster and Natchez and New Orleans newsmen, former allies, and others, saw in Abd al-Rahman's travels a political rather than a charity-seeking campaign engineered by anti-Andrew Jackson (the incumbent's Democratic rival) and antislavery Adams supporters.

Ultimately Abd al-Rahman managed to raise only half of the exorbitant prices that Foster demanded for his children, but he was able to pay for passage for him and his wife to Africa. (Coincidentally, the future first president of Liberia, Joseph J. Roberts, crossed the Atlantic Ocean on the same ship. It is not known whether the two men met.) Immediately upon sighting the coast of Africa, Abd al-Rahman reconfirmed his adherence to the faith of his fathers.

Shortly after landing in mid-March 1829 Abd al-Rahman corresponded with his family in still-distant Timbo. Although he looked forward to revisiting his homeland with Isabella, his plans were cut short by his death in July. A year later, however, Isabella was able to greet the eight children and grandchildren whom her husband's heroic efforts had redeemed.

Further Reading

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See also

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