The New York Times | http://nyti.ms/1M54lo4

The Opinion Pages | OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The Muslims of Early America

By PETER MANSEAU FEB. 9, 2015

IT was not the imam's first time at the rodeo.

Scheduled to deliver an invocation at the Fort Worth Stock Show and Rodeo last week, Moujahed Bakhach of the local Islamic Association of Tarrant County canceled his appearance because of the backlash brought on by a prayer he had offered a few days before. The imam had been asked to confer a blessing on horses, riders and members of the military. He was met with gasps from the audience and social media complaints: "Outraged at a Muslim prayer at an all American event!" "Cowboys don't want it!"

Vocal anti-Islamic sentiment is undergoing a revival. Four days before the imam's canceled benediction, protesters at the State Capitol in Austin shouted down Muslim speakers, claiming Texas in the name of Jesus alone. In North Carolina two weeks earlier, Duke University's plan to broadcast a Muslim call to prayer was abandoned amid threats of violence. Meanwhile Gov. Bobby Jindal, Republican of Louisiana claimed that if American Muslims "want to set up their own culture and values, that's not immigration, that's really invasion."

No matter how anxious people may be about Islam, the notion of a Muslim invasion of this majority Christian country has no basis in fact. Moreover, there is an inconvenient footnote to the assertion that Islam is

anti-American: Muslims arrived here before the founding of the United States — not just a few, but thousands.

They have been largely overlooked because they were not free to practice their faith. They were not free themselves and so they were for the most part unable to leave records of their beliefs. They left just enough to confirm that Islam in America is not an immigrant religion lately making itself known, but a tradition with deep roots here, despite being among the most suppressed in the nation's history.

In 1528, a Moroccan slave called Estevanico was shipwrecked along with a band of Spanish explorers near the future city of Galveston, Tex. The city of Azemmour, in which he was raised, had been a Muslim stronghold against European invasion until it fell during his youth. While given a Christian name after his enslavement, he eventually escaped his Christian captors and set off on his own through much of the Southwest.

Two hundred years later, plantation owners in Louisiana made it a point to add enslaved Muslims to their labor force, relying on their experience with the cultivation of indigo and rice. Scholars have noted Muslim names and Islamic religious titles in the colony's slave inventories and death records.

The best known Muslim to pass through the port at New Orleans was Abdul-Rahman Ibrahim ibn Sori, a prince in his homeland whose plight drew wide attention. As one newspaper account noted, he had read the Bible and admired its precepts, but added, "His principal objections are that Christians do not follow them."

Among the enslaved Muslims in North Carolina was a religious teacher named Omar ibn Said. Recaptured in 1810 after running away from a cruel master he called a kafir (an infidel), he became known for inscribing the walls of his jail cell with Arabic script. He wrote an account of his life in 1831, describing how in freedom he had loved to read the Quran, but in slavery his owners had converted him to Christianity.

The story of Islam in early America is not merely one of isolated individuals. An estimated 20 percent of enslaved Africans were Muslims, and many sought to recreate the communities they had known. In Georgia, which has joined more than a dozen states in the political theater of debating a restriction on judges' consulting Shariah, Muslims on a secluded plantation are known to have lived under the guidance of a religious leader who wrote a manuscript on Islamic law so that traditional knowledge might survive.

A clue to what happened to these forgotten American Muslims can be found in the words of a missionary traveling through the South to preach the gospel on slave plantations. Many "Mohammedan Africans," he noted, had found ways to "accommodate" Islam to the new beliefs imposed upon them. "God, say they, is Allah, and Jesus Christ is Mohammed. The religion is the same, but different countries have different names."

The missionary considered this to be lamentable evidence of Muslims' inability to recognize the importance of religious truths. But in fact it proves just the opposite. They understood that their faith was important enough that they should listen for it everywhere, even in a country so distant from the places where they had once heard the call to prayer.

Islam is part of our common history — a resilient faith not just of the enslaved, but of Arab immigrants in the late 19th century, and in the 20th century of many African-Americans reclaiming and remaking it as their own. For generations, its adherents have straddled a nation that jolts from promises of religious freedom to events that give the lie to those promises.

In a sense, Islam is as American as the rodeo. It, too, was imported, but is now undeniably part of the culture. Whether or not protesters in Texas and elsewhere are ready for it, it is inevitable that some Muslims will let their babies grow up to be cowboys. A few cowboys may grow up to be Muslims as well.

Peter Manseau is the author, most recently, of "One Nation Under Gods: A New

American History."

A version of this op-ed appears in print on February 9, 2015, on page A17 of the New York edition with the headline: The Muslims of Early America.
