

A United States Without Muslims, Has Never Existed

01/06/2016 01:14 pm ET | Updated Jan 06, 2016

- [Carla Gardina Pestana](#) historian, author, and college professor



MEHMED ZELKOVIC VIA GETTY IMAGES

The idea that all Muslims should be blocked from entering the U.S. plays well with people who think adherents to Islam are relatively recent arrivals on the American scene. Yet Muslims have been in this country from its inception. Far from being a foreign element, Muslims have been here throughout American history and indeed longer than some Christian religions.

Followers of Islam were present in the U.S. when it was founded. They were represented in the slave population during the colonial period and in the early U.S. Most enslaved Africans who were forcibly brought to the Americas came through ports in West Africa, in a broad swath from modern-day Senegal down to Angola. The captives themselves came from many locations, as numerous people were kidnapped, taken as prisoners of war or purchased in a vast expanse of the African interior. Especially in the northern slaving ports, the transatlantic slave trade scooped up people who adhered to the Islamic faith. Islam had spread into Senegal and Sierra Leone from North Africa; in addition, many more Muslims traveled into the region as traders. Their presence in the regions most affected by the transatlantic slave trade meant they too were captured and enslaved, and scholar Sylviane A. Diouf collected much evidence demonstrating that they had indeed been part of the enslaved population throughout the colonial period and beyond, in her prize-

winning 1999 book, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas*. One of the best examples she unearthed involved an illiterate slave master who relied on his Muslim slave to keep the books for his plantation. (Muslims, because they learned to read their holy book, the Qur'an, enjoyed high rates of literacy.)

Slave owners may not have been aware that they owned Islamic slaves, however. Much of the evidence found by Diouf and other scholars involved inadvertent references, such as to individuals praying at set times of day or using certain naming practices. The enslaved faced challenges in keeping up their religious practices. The practice of praying briefly five times daily confronted many obstacles, ranging from inability to control their own movement when laboring for another on a slave plantation, to knowing the time of day and the direction of Mecca. But evidence suggests that they preserved against great odds and tried to lead a devout life.

Slave owners tended to ignore the religious practices of their chattel. They wanted to deny their humanity, which discouraged them from showing any interest in their culture or beliefs. They assumed all Africans adhered to some less familiar religion (not Christianity, Judaism or Islam--which were all well-known to Europeans and Euro-Americans at this time) or even to no religion at all. Denying their religion, then as now, arose from efforts to deny their humanity. In fact the enslaved population included Catholic Christians, Muslims, and adherents of traditional West African religions. The slave population--just like the free population--was religiously diverse from the first.

When the first free Muslim immigrants began to arrive in the United States in the decades after the American Civil War, the United States already had a Muslim history, a history that went back long before the American Revolution. **A United States devoid of Muslims has never existed.**