
Prince Among Slaves: A Documentary Film Project

by

Alex Kronemer, Louis Barbash, and Michael Wolfe

Overview

Some biographies help us understand the broad historical themes and issues of the period during which the subject lived. Others appeal to the universal emotions of the human experience. And some simply entertain us with vivid characters and nearly novelistic events. One compelling story that does all three is *Prince Among Slaves*. A 90-minute documentary aimed for broadcast on PBS, it tells the true story of an African prince who was sold into slavery in the American South in 1788. His name was Abdul Rahman Ibrahim Sori, and he remained enslaved for forty years before ultimately regaining his freedom and returning to Africa.

The broad outline of Abdul Rahman's biography reads like a fairytale: A young prince falls from a life of power and privilege into exile and enslavement in a strange land. There he endures unimaginable indignities, yet carves out a life, marries a woman enslaved like himself, and has children. Then, through improbable circumstances, he is granted his freedom and returns to his homeland, manages to rescue his wife and children from enslavement, and sees his royal status recognized in the very land that held him in bondage.

But the story did not take place in a fantasyland. Rather, it happened in the United States, during the foundational period of American history. Arriving in the United States just after the country adopted the Constitution, Abdul Rahman remained enslaved until the fateful election of 1828, a forty-year period when early divisions between North and South began to grow and the contradictions deepened between the ideals of liberty and equality to which the country was dedicated and a dependence on slave labor that many considered essential to the national economy. Abdul Rahman lived his life against the backdrop

Alex Kronemer, Executive Producer; Louis Barbash, Creative Consultant; and Michael Wolfe, Executive Producer; Unity Productions Foundation, Silver Spring, Maryland.

of this eventful period of history, and his story sheds new light on all its essential themes.

Through his dramatic biography, *Prince Among Slaves* will probe deeply into the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Beginning from its sources in Africa, the film will examine the slave routes that brought enslaved Africans like Abdul Rahman to America. From his story, we learn how the “business” of slavery worked, and about the social, economic and political factors that lured Africans, Europeans, and Americans alike to participate in it. As his story continues, we see how enslaved Africans worked within their limited circumstances to create lives for themselves. We also see the country’s first attempts to reconcile the conflict between the desire for freedom of enslaved persons like Abdul Rahman and the nation’s economic and social dependence on the “peculiar institution.”

Our story also sheds light on the surprising and little known history of the early religious and cultural lives of newly enslaved Africans in post-Revolutionary America. It reveals the early anti-slavery movement and delves into the characters of the African-born enslaved people, who have received scant attention on American television since audiences were mesmerized in the 1970s by the story of Kunta Kinte on the groundbreaking series “Roots.”

Thoroughly researched and documented in Terry Alford’s biography of the same name,¹ *Prince Among Slaves* comes alive through first-person accounts as well as letters, photographs and historical records that taken together paint a vivid picture of the extraordinary times in which Abdul Rahman lived. Newspaper articles, numerous diaries, plantation registers, advertisements for slave sales, and church sermons provide depth and a fuller context to the story, which interweaves themes of bondage and deliverance, pride, forbearance, guile and providence. With strong, vivid characters animating a great, morally complicated narrative, we also learn about a long-forgotten group – America’s first Muslims. Abdul Rahman was among the tens of thousands of African Muslims who were captured and brought to the Americas through the slave trade.

This window on history is also a story of universal themes that reach deeply into the human experience. The archetypal tale of the prince becoming a pauper so ignites our imagination that it is found worldwide in folklore, myth and religion. When paradise is lost, what do people do? What happens when a person of power becomes powerless?

The true story of Abdul Rahman Ibrahima Sori, the prince

who became enslaved in Mississippi, does more than help us better understand the American, African, and African American experiences; it also expands our understanding of the human experience.

Program Structure

Prince Among Slaves is conceived as a vehicle to help viewers learn and understand two important stories. The first is the incredible tale of an African prince enslaved in America. His story of courage and forbearance under the meanest of circumstances is a powerful drama that not only speaks directly to the African American experience, but also to the human experience. It expands our idea about what it means to be human, what we are capable of surviving, and how our dignity can remain intact, even when under relentless assault. And because his story takes place beginning around 1776, it also illuminates the foundational period in American history as viewed from a perspective that is generally ignored when thinking about the establishment of the country: that of the African people enslaved in the early years of nationhood. From that perspective the film will tell the second story: the larger history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and its devastating impact on African societies, on American ideals, and on the lives of the people who were involved and victimized by it. Our approach will take advantage of both these narratives, balancing story with scholarship, and relying on dramatic reenactments, scholarly comment, archival material, and the first-person writings of Abdul Rahman and other major figures of his day to bring to a large audience this neglected and surprising chapter in American history and the story of a man whose life should be better known.

Program Themes

Nothing bestrode this country's early history like slavery. The trans-Atlantic trade in slaves was a cruel yet critical component of the settlement and continuation of the New World colonies. Slavery supplied the foundation on which the great agricultural economies of the South – and the careers and fortunes of Washington, Jefferson, and other founding fathers – were built. It was the great moral issue before which the country's first patriots – men bold enough to have taken on the world's most powerful empire – flinched when they wrote the Constitution. And as the conflict between the country's bedrock values of freedom and equality eventually became unbearable, it was slavery

that accomplished what no foreign enemy could have done: it split the country.

Along the historical course carved by these powerful tides and currents traveled Abdul Rahman bin Ibrahima Sori. Although he and his experience were far from typical, to tell his story is to tell the story of slavery itself in all its varied chapters, including: capture and enslavement, the nature of the international slave trade, the horrors of the Middle Passage, the slave markets that flourished in the country that was founded on the notion that all men were created equal, the lives the slaves made for themselves – how, in other words, they bore the unbearable – and finally, the freedom one of them achieved. But freedom to do what? To make a new life in a country where blacks, even when free, were never equal? Or to live out the rest of one's life where it had started, in Africa? These are the complex emotional questions that *Prince Among Slaves* will explore.

History divided Abdul Rahman's life into three periods, and dramatically into three acts, each associated with one of the program's major themes, and each of which raises important historical issues.

Act I: A Prince in Africa

Abdul Rahman Ibrahima Sori was born in 1762, son of Sori the *almaami* or king of the Fulbe, a predominantly Muslim population of cattle herders who ruled the West African country of Futa Jallon (an area now part of the Republic of Guinea) from his family's traditional seat in Timbo, a town of airy, large-roomed houses surrounded by hedges and dominated by a large mosque. Economically, the Fulbe were traders, acquiring salt and European manufactured goods in exchange for the products of Fulbe craftsmen, and in exchange, too, for slaves, members of rival groups defeated in battle.

As a son of the *almaami*, Abdul Rahman received a traditional Muslim education, beginning with learning to read and write passages from the Qur'an. His aptitude for his studies persuaded his father to send him abroad for further education, first to Macina, in what is now Mali, then to Timbuktu, where he studied not only Islam, but also geography, astronomy, calculations, and the law.

At seventeen, Abdul Rahman returned to Timbo, entered the army, and quickly rose to command. It was during this period that Ibrahima met his first white person, John Coates Cox, a marooned Irish ship's surgeon, who was found, ill and insect-bitten, and brought to

Sori, who provided shelter and care until Cox regained his health and returned to Ireland. It was also during this period that Abdul Rahman married and fathered his first child – a son.

In 1787, Sori dispatched Abdul Rahman, then in his late twenties, at the head of an army of two thousand to confront various rivals then threatening the commerce on which the Fulbe depended. The campaign went well at first, with Abdul Rahman's army advancing easily against only scattered opposition. Flush with apparent success, Abdul Rahman Ibrahima sent his infantry home, retaining only a detachment of three hundred horsemen. The enemy, however, had not fled, but merely retreated to a more strategically advantageous position. As Abdul Rahman and his cavalry entered a narrow mountain pass, they were engulfed in a hailstorm of gunfire. By the time Abdul Rahman escaped the pass and reached the summit, he faced the enemy virtually alone. In short order he was overwhelmed, stripped, bound, and walked barefoot a hundred miles, trailing behind his own horse.

In March of 1788, just three months after he had left Timbo as commander of a powerful army, Ibrahima Abdul Rahman and about 160 other men were marched onto the river-running brig *Africa*, manacled, and led below deck to begin the long journey into slavery, down the Gambia River and across the Atlantic.

After a trans-Atlantic voyage of 3000 miles, the *Africa* made landfall in tiny Dominica in the Windward Islands. There Abdul Rahman and fifty-six others from the *Africa*'s human cargo were sold for \$4090, less than \$72 each, and transferred to the cargo hold of another ship, the *Navarro*, for a twenty-six hundred mile journey across the Caribbean Sea to the Yucatan Channel, then north to Spanish-ruled New Orleans, and up the Mississippi to the river town of Natchez. In Natchez, six thousand miles from Timbo, eight months from his life as a prince, Abdul Rahman reached the end of his forced journey.

Major themes and intellectual issues to be explored in this act include the societies that Africans built in Africa. This first act of *Prince Among Slaves* will introduce viewers to an approach that extends throughout the program: that of viewing enslaved people as actors and participants in their lives. The traditional history of slavery prefers the passive voice, depicting enslaved populations and individuals as faceless people (enslaved by one culture, kept in bondage by another, and freed by yet another). In fact, the enslaved people actively participated in all these stages, despite the obvious constraints placed upon their freedom

to do so. Although the enslaving culture went to great lengths to erase the notion that slaves had been the authors of their own societies in Africa, Act One of *Prince Among Slaves* will demonstrate the complex and successful society of Futa Jallon, in West Africa, where Abdul Rahman and his family played crucial roles as political, religious, and military leaders.

The influence of the lives led in Africa

The vast majority of United States slaves were born, lived and died in America, thousands of miles and several generations away from Africa. Yet in the life of Abdul Rahman, and in the story of slavery, Africa played a critical part. Abdul Rahman spent a full third of his life in Africa, and those years shaped his life in inescapable ways. The education and abilities that would set him apart from the American-born slaves – who were generally forbidden to learn to read and write – he owed to his upbringing in Africa. To that upbringing and to the culture in which it took place, he also owed a sense of dignity and a sense of his own humanity, qualities that fueled his quest for freedom during forty years of bondage. And to his heritage and his years in Africa he owed his Islamic faith.

A full and rich depiction of Abdul Rahman's life in Africa gives the lie to two common myths – first, that the enslaved Africans were primitive hunter-gatherers. In terms of economic and social development, conditions in West Africa in 1776 compared favorably with those in America. Militarily, Sori commanded an army larger than Washington's and in some ways better equipped. These were vital, thriving, developing societies. Nonetheless, they were in thrall to a debilitating institution – the trans-Atlantic slave trade – which leads to the second misconception.

It is commonly imagined that captivity and enslavement were wrongs perpetrated on Africans solely by whites. In fact, as the story of Abdul Rahman illustrates, most enslaved Africans were captives and prisoners of war taken in conflicts fought among African nations, conflicts that were largely due to pressures exerted on the region by the slave trade. From the 18th century on, an ever-increasing demand for slaves in the New World threw West Africa into a state of constant war, as nations fought one another to avoid enslavement, selling prisoners of war and other captives for guns to aid in that effort. It was an arms race paid in the lives of millions of human beings, creating a period

of anxiety, warfare, and a draining away of human capital that badly weakened even the best developed societies of West Africa.

Act II: A Slave in America

Natchez today is a river city of a little less than 20,000, trading on its plantation mansions and antebellum charm. But the settlement Abdul Rahman first saw in August of 1788 was a collection of twenty houses, an old earthen and wood fort, and a handful of taverns and stores to service the tobacco planters who lived inland along the creeks that fed the Mississippi.

Four planters examined the African captives on auction there on an August Saturday in 1788. But only one of them, Thomas Foster, could pay cash. He purchased Abdul Rahman and Samba, a fellow Fulbe soldier who had served under Abdul Rahman's command. The two men were secured with rope and led to Foster's land in the Pine Ridge area, six miles from Natchez.

Thomas Foster was twenty-nine – the same age as Abdul Rahman – a tobacco farmer with a wife and three children, working a thousand acres. Home was a fifty year-old blockhouse, little more than a hut (as a daughter later remembered). Here the entire family, including Foster's mother, lived in a single room. The rude building sat in the only five acres that had been fenced. This land was to be Abdul Rahman's home for the next forty years.

A series of incidents quickly demonstrated to Abdul Rahman the depth of his fall and the bleakness of the future he faced. Upon arriving at Foster's land, Abdul Rahman (probably communicating through another African from a neighboring plantation) offered Foster a ransom for his freedom, a common strategy in West Africa, but an outlandish suggestion on the Mississippi River. The offer was rejected out of hand.

Further indignities awaited him. In Futa Jallon, Abdul Rahman's long, plaited hair had been a symbol of distinction. The plaits were immediately cut, though Abdul Rahman struggled so hard that he had to be tied to a tree. He was then confined to a shed for three days to regain his composure.

He was released to gather in the tobacco crop, the kind of labor that in his kingdom would have been performed by people far below Abdul Rahman's caste and royal breeding. He refused to go into the fields, and only whipping overcame his defiance.

In due time, he managed to escape, slipping from his bed one night, crossing the fields, and entering the trackless woods that lay beyond. Patrols were mustered but failed to find him. Sadly, he had not been in the New World long enough to know where to flee to find his freedom, or whether, indeed, freedom was available to Africans anywhere on the new continent. Suicide was foreclosed to him by his Muslim faith. After several weeks in the forest, Abdul Rahman returned to the Fosters' plantation. Escape solved nothing. Now only his faith would give him the strength to accept his situation as the will of God, as a test he must succeed in and endure.

Battle, capture, the Middle Passage from Africa to Dominica, to New Orleans and Natchez, from the auction block to a tobacco plantation, escape and surrender, all in a matter of weeks: Abdul Rahman's life had moved at a dizzying pace.

Now it slowed. Henceforth, his life would be measured not in hours, days and weeks, but in years and decades. Outside the Foster plantation, the world moved on. In Futa Jallon, Abdul Rahman's father died, and was succeeded as *almaami* by his second son, Saadu. Seven years later, Saadu was killed in a coup.

That same year, 1795, Spain ceded the Natchez District to the United States, where it became part of the Mississippi Territory. The new territory's agricultural economy and slavery joined America's rapidly expanding western regions, helping to build the developing American economy. Its benefits and growing pains would no longer be Spain's but America's.

On Thomas Foster's Pine Ridge plantation, later known as Foster's Fields, Abdul Rahman slowly pieced together a new life, an enslaved life. After his early escape attempt, he "sank into [being] a common slave," as an acquaintance of his later life put it.² Although farming had been considered *déclassé* for Fulbe soldiers, not to mention Fulbe royalty, Abdul Rahman became primarily a farm hand, working crops he was familiar with from Futa Jallon – tobacco, cotton, coffee and indigo – and tending farm animals. On occasion, he distinguished himself even now, drawing on his experience as a leader and a soldier, becoming in time the groom to Foster's racing horses and gradually rising in the farmland hierarchy.

He accepted his condition in other ways as well. Although he had left behind in Africa a wife and child, in time he married a recently acquired woman, Isabella, a Christian. Abdul Rahman did not convert

to Christianity; rather, he maintained his Muslim faith. Without a Qur'an, without pen or paper, he maintained his literacy in Arabic by tracing figures in the sand. And he maintained the abstemiousness, the industry, the tolerance, and obedience to the Will of God that had been cornerstones in his Muslim education and upbringing in Futa Jallon.

These qualities – his intelligence, experience, and self-discipline – served him, and his purchaser as well. Foster switched from tobacco to cotton, expanded his acreage, and became one of the area's most prosperous planters. His original complement of three adult slaves grew to ten by 1795, to twenty in 1800, forty in 1810, seventy by 1818, and more than a hundred in 1819.

Abdul Rahman's status improved, too, raising him to a position of authority on the plantation. In return, Foster granted Abdul Rahman small but important privileges. He enjoyed freedom of worship. He tended a small garden and sold the excess in Natchez, keeping the proceeds. His family grew to nine. His place on the periphery of the cash economy, his skill with the crops, and his acknowledged position on the Foster plantation made him a familiar figure in Natchez on weekends.

Despite his accommodation to, and even success in, the life he was forced to lead, Abdul Rahman still bore the stigmata of slavery. From the day his hair was cut, he ceased caring for it, and it grew coarse and tangled. His skin became weathered and dry. A friend of long standing recalled that over the course of their long acquaintance, he had not once seen Abdul Rahman smile.

In 1807, a weekend trip into Natchez changed Abdul Rahman's life forever. While selling his produce by the road, he saw a familiar-looking white man in the streets. After a moment's hesitation, the man asked where in Africa Abdul Rahman was from. When he replied that he was from Timbo, the man asked whether his name was Abdul Rahman. It was Dr. John Cox, the Irish ship's surgeon who, marooned in Africa in the early 1770s, had been nursed back to health in Timbo by Abdul Rahman and his father.

The two embraced, and went to Cox's rooms, where Abdul Rahman recounted the story of what had happened over the past two decades. Together they went to the plantation to talk to Foster. Cox asked Foster to name a purchase price for Abdul Rahman. When Foster refused, Cox stated his own price, and raised it in one-sided bidding until it reached \$1000, almost twice the market price for a male slave

at the Natchez slave auctions. Foster still refused: the auction price could not come close to the value Abdul Rahman had added to Foster's fortune.

Although Cox could not buy Abdul Rahman, the two continued to see each other frequently over the years. Cox settled in Natchez. Periodically, he renewed his offer to Foster; always it was refused. Although the friendship ended with Cox's death in 1816, Cox's son continued his father's efforts to gain Abdul Rahman's manumission.

By the time of Cox's death, Abdul Rahman's relationship with the doctor, combined with his royal lineage and the tale of his dramatic escape and return, made him a figure of some prominence in Natchez, and his circle of acquaintances widened. One newly acquired friend was Andrew Marschalk, a New York-born printer who had come to Mississippi with the Army in 1798. Marschalk and Abdul Rahman may have met as early as 1803. Their relationship deepened over the years. In letters to friends Marschalk extolled Abdul Rahman's virtues.

In 1821, Abdul Rahman was in Marschalk's printing office, when he saw a book of type specimens, one of which was Arabic. It was the first Arabic Abdul Rahman had seen since leaving Futa Jallon, and he quickly copied it and translated it into English. He told Marschalk that he wished to write to his home country, and Marschalk agreed to send a letter for him. But he wrote no letter in 1821 or for five years thereafter, despite Marschalk's repeated urging.

What can account for the delay? Professor Alford suggests that after thirty-five years, Abdul Rahman had created for himself a world with as much stability as could be expected under the circumstances. He had a large and stable family, stature among other slaves on the plantation, a high regard among whites on the plantation and in Natchez, and cash proceeds from his garden with which he could house, clothe, and feed his family at a level at least marginally higher than the conditions which other slaves endured.

According to Alford, however, 1826 brought a string of events that demonstrated once again the subservience to which all enslaved people – even those who enjoyed their master's favor – were subject. Thomas Foster's son and namesake, Thomas Foster Jr., had been carrying on an affair for some years with a young enslaved woman named Susy, who was in all likelihood one of Abdul Rahman's four daughters. Foster Jr.'s wife uncovered the liaison, and threatened divorce unless Susy was sold.

To Foster Sr., selling Susy offered a chance to save his son's marriage and keep his family from being split asunder. But to Abdul Rahman, as to every enslaved person, the breaking up of a family by selling "down the river" a spouse or child was the most severe punishment that the owner could inflict, short of death, and for many, even death would have been preferred. It was also the clearest demonstration of the owner's absolute power over those he held in slavery and of the fundamental powerlessness of a slave – even a favored slave. In the end, Susy was saved when Thomas Foster Jr. divorced his wife and left Mississippi with Susy. But the impact on Abdul Rahman was deep, and he finally decided to write the letter.

The major themes and intellectual issues to be explored in this act include the world the enslaved Africans made. This second act of *Prince Among Slaves* will continue the program's exploration of the society and culture made by enslaved Africans in America. The picture will depict the life that Abdul Rahman led in Mississippi, including the wider community in which his life unfolded. It will also explore how enslaved people were compelled to come to terms with their enslavement while simultaneously managing to resist it.

Any discussion of the ways in which Abdul Rahman and others made the best of their servitude must begin and end with the recognition that, as one scholar put it, "slavery, even at its most patriarchal, always rested on physical compulsion."³ Only the force available to the slave owners, backed up by the force of the state, held slavery together. Often, force was expressed by the whip. But it was also represented by less violent reminders of control: in Abdul Rahman's case the early compulsory haircut and the later arranged marriage to a woman of another religion, presided over, not by a symbol of religious authority (a minister), or by a symbol of civil authority (a judge), but by the ultimate authority in the universe of slavery, his purchaser, Thomas Foster.

Yet within their sphere of authority, enslaving farm owners had to tolerate degrees of personal autonomy among slaves, degrees that were different for each purchaser and each enslaved person. The owners' motives were, to say the least, mixed. At bottom, of course, slavery was profitable not only for them but also for society in general, including the North, which profited substantially from the manufacture of cotton goods. Individual resistance, both passive and active, and larger, plantation-wide revolts were all reminders to the enslavers that it was wise to exercise some degree of flexibility or suffer the consequences

when order broke down. While not free – slave owners had to buy, house, feed and clothe the people they enslaved – the practice of slavery was far more economical than employing free labor. But there were other motives as well. “[F]or a complex of reasons of self-interest, common humanity, and Christian sensibility,” Eugene Genovese wrote in *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, “they could not help contributing to their slaves’ creative survival.” Within these limits, as Genovese writes, the slaves “struggle[d] to survive spiritually as well as physically – to make a livable world for themselves and their children within the narrowest living space and harshest adversity.”⁴ Within such boundaries lay Abdul Rahman’s family, their garden with its small cash profit, his freedom to travel into Natchez, the relationships he established with white people like Cox and Marschalk, his maintenance of religion and literacy, and his relations with other Africans.

Even beyond the explicit limits of master-slave relations, enslaved people had some leverage. Project advisor Walter Johnson describes the subtle but critical ways in which the transaction at the auction block itself depended on slaves’ presentation of themselves. “Precisely because slave deals invariably relied upon the slaves’ own presentation of their bodies and minds,” Johnson writes in *Soul by Soul*, “slaves had the ability to shape the moment of sale.”⁵

These relationships and areas of autonomy, and the relationship with his owner that made them possible, underscore the fact that “the world the slaves made” was not solely the slave world, but an interdependent world inhabited by black and white, enslaver and enslaved. C. Vann Woodward noted the degree to which southern whites and blacks “shaped each other’s destiny, determined each other’s isolation, shared and molded a common culture.”⁶ “Placed on a scale between slavery and freedom,” says Walter Johnson, “these slave-shaped sales do not look like much: as many skeptics have put it, ‘after all, they were still enslaved.’ But placed between subordination and resistance on the scale of daily life, these differences between possible sales had the salience of survival itself.”⁷

The African experience influenced the lives slaves led in America. Everybody’s past influences their present. But this was especially true for what *Prince Among Slaves* project scholar Professor Ira Berlin calls the “charter generation” of slaves, those people captured in Africa and brought to America.⁸ And it is especially important to note these connections, because their existence dispels the popular depictions and

conception of slaves as, so to speak, the mere raw materials of slavery, that is as beings defined and shaped exclusively by their servitude.

Enslaved people brought with them from Africa a broad knowledge of the climate and flora that the two areas shared. Both Mississippi and West Africa have warm and humid temperate climates, favorable to tobacco, cotton, rice, indigo and coffee.

There were, of course, many more differences between Africa and America than there were similarities. Some of these differences were staggering. The technology with which crops were tended, harvested, and processed in America was far ahead of what Abdul Rahman knew in Africa. Late eighteenth-century African farmers cultivated their fields with hoes and sickles; Americans used horse-drawn plows and more specialized implements. But most consequential was the reality that in Africa these people had been free, while in America they were slaves. Although there were slaves in Africa, African slavery was far less oppressive than the United States Southern version, following a system more like feudal serfdom than the harshly authoritarian New World version.

Abdul Rahman's success in dealing with these differences was due in large part to the moral and spiritual legacy he brought with him from Africa. As a prince and commander he was used to leading and directing others. And from his personal characteristics and his Muslim faith he took qualities that in Natchez earned him status, money, and a degree of autonomy in plantation life. Nor was his experience unique. Scholars have remarked that enslaved people of the Muslim faith were especially well equipped to survive slavery's ubiquitous cruelty and oppression. "There is ample evidence," says project advisor Sylviane Diouf, "that the Muslims actively used their cultural and social background and the formation they had received in Africa as tools to improve their condition in the Americas."⁹

Act III: Freedom – To Do What?

After forty years of slavery, events moved quickly. Once Abdul Rahman wrote his "letter home" and gave it to publisher Andrew Marschalk in 1826, Marschalk wrote a cover letter and gave it and Abdul Rahman's statement to Mississippi Senator Thomas Reed, who in turn forwarded them to Secretary of State Henry Clay. Clay in turn sent the documents to the United States Consul in Tangier, Morocco, who presented the case to the vizier of Moroccan Sultan Abd al-Rahman II.

The Sultan's favorable response was duly returned to Clay. He read and passed it to President John Quincy Adams, who approved the purchase of Abdul Rahman from his owner. Adams' decision was duly sent to Marschalk, who then approached Thomas Foster, by this time one of Natchez's wealthiest, most influential planters.

For twenty years Foster had refused to sell this valuable slave at any price. By 1827, however, Abdul Rahman was well into his sixties and his economic value to Foster was considerably diminished. Foster now told Marschalk that, if means were found by which Abdul Rahman could return to Africa, he would be released without payment. The terms were crucial. He was only willing to release Abdul Rahman on the condition that he leave the United States.

Marschalk relayed these terms to Henry Clay, who replied in February of 1828: "There is no difficulty in acceding to the conditions presented by Mr. Foster. You will please to send Prince to [Washington]... for the purpose of his being transported to his native country."¹⁰ On February 22, less than a month after receiving Clay's letter, Foster and Abdul Rahman rode into Natchez, and Foster deeded the slave in trust to Marschalk. The forty years of Abdul Rahman's slavery were indeed over, but he now faced perhaps his biggest challenge: how to also free his family. A local fundraiser on his behalf helped raise the money to buy the freedom of his wife, Isabella, in less than twenty-four hours. But where to find the money to free nine more?

Forty years before this, Abdul Rahman had traveled up the Mississippi to Natchez in the hold of a schooner. On April 8, 1828, he headed upriver again, this time in the cabin of a steamboat, a transportation marvel invented during his years of bondage. His ultimate destination was Africa, as Marschalk and Clay had promised Foster, but Abdul Rahman had his own priorities. For him, a more important obligation took precedence over the agreement among Foster, Marschalk, and Clay: the obligation to redeem his children from slavery trumped everything. Redemption cost money. Abdul Rahman was going up the Mississippi to raise it.

He steamed first to Louisville, then to Cincinnati. From Cincinnati he headed north on the Ohio River to Wheeling, Virginia, then by stagecoach to Baltimore along the route now followed by Interstate 68. At each stop he called on town leaders, giving them letters of introduction penned by Marschalk. More than once he walked the streets soliciting contributions. In the next eight months, while the heat

of a presidential election rose around him, Abdul Rahman raised \$3,000, money that ultimately freed all but one of his children. In Baltimore he met Henry Clay, who was busy campaigning for President Adams in the election. Clay urged him on to Washington D.C.

The Washington that Abdul Rahman visited on a rainy day in May, 1828 was one of the smaller cities on his tour, just a quarter the size of Baltimore and very much a work in progress, “[s]traggling out hither and thither,” wrote a visitor from Philadelphia just a few years later, “with a small house or two a quarter of a mile from any other.”¹¹ After thirty years as capital of the young nation, Washington was home to the great-domed United States Capitol and the White House – and to the largest slave market in North America.

Abdul Rahman secured an appointment with the President and called on John Quincy Adams at the White House. The meeting was cordial, but when Abdul Rahman asked directly for the President’s help in redeeming his children and grandchildren from slavery in Mississippi, Adams was congratulatory but non-committal. He recorded his reflections in his diary for that day. From the White House Abdul Rahman went next door to the State Department to meet with Clay. Clay was cordial too, offering Abdul Rahman the hospitality of his own home, but like Adams he made no decision on the redemption of the former slave’s family. After just a few days in Washington, Abdul Rahman returned to Baltimore, then traveled north, bound for Philadelphia and Boston.

Natchez received word of Abdul Rahman’s barnstorming with displeasure. Marschalk had personally vouched for Abdul Rahman’s character and for his desire to return immediately to Africa. Foster was incensed. Had not Clay given his word that Abdul Rahman would be at liberty only in Africa, not in the United States? “I consider the contract entered into by [Clay] entirely violated,” he wrote.¹²

Back in New England, Abdul Rahman continued his patient rounds. In Hartford he met Reverend Thomas Gallaudet, later the benefactor of education for the deaf, who took up his cause. From his pulpit Gallaudet preached the importance of Abdul Rahman’s return to Africa. “It would seem as if Providence had taken him under His peculiar care, and destined him...to be the means of opening into the very interior of Africa ‘a wide and effectual door’ for the diffusion of [the] Gospel.” “I think I see Africa,” he told another audience, “pointing to the tablet of eternal justice, making us Americans tremble, while the words are

pronounced, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord.’”¹³

Gallaudet’s patronage re-energized the movement in support of Abdul Rahman’s mission. From Hartford Abdul Rahman went to New Haven, then to New York. Wherever he went, Gallaudet wrote letters of introduction to philanthropists and advocates of colonization. Prominent men agreed to contribute and to initiate arrangements for Abdul Rahman’s voyage. From New York he traveled to Philadelphia, where he marched with Philadelphia free blacks in their New Year’s Day parade. From Philadelphia, it was back to Baltimore.

By now, his time in the United States was drawing to a close. Andrew Jackson had won the 1828 election. Inauguration Day would end the terms of Adams and Clay, and Abdul Rahman had been warned that Jackson’s new pro-slavery White House might return him to Natchez. On January 21, 1829, almost a year after leaving Mississippi, he and Isabella boarded the steamboat *Virginia*. After stopping to pick up fifteen freed people, the *Virginia* proceeded to Norfolk, the point of embarkation for the voyage to Liberia. There Abdul Rahman and his traveling companions from the *Virginia* joined 136 other free blacks on board the *Harriet*, bound for Africa. On February 7, less than a month before Inauguration Day, the *Harriet* cast off.

On his return crossing, Abdul Rahman traveled not in the cargo hold but in the *Harriet*’s best cabin, a guest of the government of the United States. After an uneventful thirty-eight days, the *Harriet* sailed into the harbor of Monrovia, the capital of Liberia. Hundreds of settlers welcomed the new arrivals as they disembarked. Forty-one years after being abducted, Abdul Rahman was back in Africa.

The major themes and intellectual issues to be explored in this act include colonization. Freedom for slaves is often popularly understood as a binary choice: either slavery or abolition. The colonization movement appeared to offer an option, one that might serve the purposes of both white supporters and white opponents of slavery. Abdul Rahman left America at the beginning of the Colonization Movement. His story provides a good lens through which to view this interesting, contradictory development in American history.

Supporters of slavery saw in colonization the possibility of retaining the economic benefits of slavery without risking its frightening consequences. “[F]ree Negroes inspired fear and apprehension among the whites of the old south,” Genovese wrote in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. “In the words of Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, ‘Many men of the South thought

of themselves and their neighbors as living above a loaded mine, in which the Negro slaves were the powder, the Abolitionists the spark, and the free Negroes the fuse.”¹⁴ Numerous slave uprisings had in fact occurred by the time Abdul Rahman was seeking his freedom.

Northern supporters of colonization emphasized its benefits to the blacks themselves and to the nation’s general domestic tranquility. Lincoln, for example, spoke of “restoring a captive people to their long-lost father-land, with bright prospects for the future.”¹⁵ What future could freed, but poor and uneducated, blacks look forward to in the country that had enslaved them? How could white workers compete with former slaves, for whom any wage was more than they had earned before? What social unrest, even violence, might result from conflict between men and women recently freed from bondage and those who had enslaved them? “I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just,” Jefferson wrote about slavery, “that his justice cannot sleep for ever...”¹⁶

A varied assortment of supporters gathered under the banner of colonization. The great Chief Justice John Marshall was one of the founders of the American Colonization Society, as was his adversary Andrew Jackson. Thomas Jefferson, another frequent Marshall opponent, was also a supporter. And presiding at the American Colonization Society’s first meeting was the man who had earned his fame and sobriquet seeking common ground between pro-slavery and free states, the Great Compromiser, Henry Clay. Long after Abdul Rahman had departed America, President Lincoln entertained colonization as a viable option.

Nonetheless, among free blacks, the supposed beneficiaries, colonization was bitterly controversial. Colonization, if successful, would mean the expatriation of *all* free blacks, not just freed slaves, including leaders of the growing abolitionist movement. By the 1820s, the vast majority of blacks, both free and enslaved, were not African at all, but second- and third-generation Americans. To these passionate opponents of Colonization, Africa was a foreign and unfamiliar continent, populated with cultures of which they were not part, and with languages they could not speak. Even those born in Africa, or whose parents had been born there, traced their connections to individual countries and kingdoms, not to some mythical pan-African homeland. More importantly, as Abdul Rahman’s story illustrates, they had families in America, many of them in bondage, and they did not want to leave.

Ultimately, the Colonization movement foundered on the shoals of reality. David Herbert Donald summed it up: “The plan was entirely rational – and wholly impracticable. American blacks, nearly all of whom were born and raised in the United States, had not the slightest desire to go to Africa; Southern planters had no intention of freeing their slaves; and there was no possibility that the Northern states would pay the enormous amount of money required to deport and resettle millions of African Americans.”¹⁷

For Abdul Rahman, colonization represented less a half-baked solution to a national policy dilemma than a personal path out of slavery. Having been born and grown to maturity in Africa, his ties to the continent were real and well-remembered. Moreover, his West African homeland of Futa Jallon was not far from Liberia, the colony established by the Colonization Society to receive free blacks from the United States.

Abdul Rahman pursued the opportunity, cultivating support from both constituencies of the colonization movement. In Mississippi, he had depended on the willingness of Thomas Foster, the man who had enslaved him for forty years, to release him, and on the readiness of Andrew Marschalk and other white Natchezians to build support, raise funds, and win the approbation of Clay and Adams. In the north, he needed the support of pro-colonization, anti-slavery advocates like Thomas Gallaudet and Francis Scott Key. Their endorsement of his cause opened doors and drew northerners to lectures, whose proceeds provided the funds he needed to redeem his family from bondage, pay for passage to Africa, and start a new life.

Here as in other aspects of the film, the importance of Abdul Rahman’s story is not that he was typical, but that by being very atypical his biography illuminates this theme with unusual clarity. Precisely because his unique situation attracted the widespread interest and sympathy that ultimately led to his freedom, and because his skill and steadfastness won support from warring factions within the colonization movement, his story opens a window on this fascinating historical episode that a more typical story could not.

Epilogue: Prince back in Africa

No man can step into the same river twice, said the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, because neither the man nor the river remains the same. The man who returned to Africa in 1828 was not the same

man who had left in 1788. The continent to which he returned was not the place he had been torn from. Facing a seasonal delay before he could travel from Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, to Timbo, his home in Futa Jallon, Abdul Rahman set about planning his future. He hoped in Timbo to complete his goal of buying his children's freedom and bringing them to Africa. He also took seriously the dreams of the many businessmen who had contributed to his journey. "I shall try to bring my countrymen to the Colony [Liberia] and try to open the trade," he wrote in a letter home.¹⁸ He hoped to divert at least some portion of Futa Jallon's trade from British Sierra Leone to American Liberia. A supporter raised \$500 for Abdul Rahman to travel on to his birthplace and begin to lay the foundations for this trade.

Mid-May brought the seasonal rains. After four decades in the drier climate of Mississippi, Abdul Rahman was no longer used to the night chills that accompanied the monsoon and penetrated the bamboo walls of his makeshift cottage. Forty years of slavery had weakened his constitution, too. June brought diarrhea, but he failed to consult a doctor. As with many elderly people, the illness sapped his strength. On July 6, 1829, at the age of sixty-seven, Abdul Rahman Ibrahima Sori died in Monrovia.

That same year, Thomas Foster also died. The fates of these two men could not be more ironic. While Abdul Rahman received a long obituary on the news of his death, Foster, the man of power and accomplishment, received no mention in the local Mississippi papers. After his death, Foster's holdings, including his slaves, were divided among his children. All but one descendant agreed to sell Abdul Rahman's children into freedom and, except for one son, Prince, all were freed and joined their mother in Monrovia.

The story of the Prince is far from over. In April 2003, the first reunion of Abdul Rahman's Liberian and American families was held in Natchez, Mississippi as part of a celebration of the 175th anniversary of his liberation. There Dr. Boubacar Barry, an African descendant from Timbo, author of *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*¹⁹ and a project advisor, made a presentation to his oldest living American relative. "When they enslaved us," Barry said, "the first thing they did was take our sandals." Then handing the American relative a gift of sandals made in Timbo he said, "Here are yours back that you may come and visit us someday."

* The documentary is a production of Unity Productions Foundation in association with Spark Media and Duke Media and supported by generous grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the National Black Programming Consortium, Sohail Masood, and the Safi and Anita Qureshey Family Foundation. For more information about the film go to www.upf.tv

NOTES

- ¹ Terry Alford, *Prince Among Slaves* (1977).
- ² Thomas H. Gallaudet, *A Statement with Regard to The Moorish Prince, Abduhl Rahhahman* (1828).
- ³ Alex Lichtenstein, "Right Church, Wrong Pew: Eugene Genovese & Southern Conservatism," *New Politics* (1997).
- ⁴ Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1976), xvi.
- ⁵ Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul* (1999), 187.
- ⁶ C. Vann Woodward, *American Counterpoint*, quoted in Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1976), xv.
- ⁷ Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 187.
- ⁸ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone* (1998).
- ⁹ Sylviane Diouf, *Servants of Allah* (1998).
- ¹⁰ Letter from Henry Clay to Andrew Marschalk, quoted in Alford, *Prince*, 107.
- ¹¹ "Georgetown" *WASHINGTON DC GENWEB Genealogical Research and Resources in the District of Columbia* <http://www.rootsweb.com/~dcgenweb/georgetown.htm>
- ¹² Alford, *Prince*, 145.
- ¹³ *African Repository* (4 Oct. 1828), quoted in Alford, *Prince*, 156-157.
- ¹⁴ Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 398-99.
- ¹⁵ Abraham Lincoln, Eulogy on Henry Clay Springfield, Illinois July 6, 1852.
- ¹⁶ Dumas Malone, *Jefferson the Virginian* (1948), 265.
- ¹⁷ David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (1995), 166-167.
- ¹⁸ Letter from Ibrahim Abdul Rahman to R.R. Gurley, quoted in Alford, *Prince* (1977), 181.
- ¹⁹ Boubacar Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade* (1998).

WORKS CITED

- Alford, Terry. 1977. *Prince Among Slaves: The True Story of An African Prince Sold Into Slavery in the American South*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Barry, Boubacar. 1998. *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Trans. by Ayi Kwei Armah. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Orig. publ.1988.
- Berlin, Ira. 1998. *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Diouf, Sylviane A. 1998. *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the*

- Americas*. New York: New York University Press.
- Donald, David Herbert. 1995. *Lincoln*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Gallaudet, Thomas H. 8 Oct. 1828. *A Statement with Regard to the Moorish Prince, Abduhl Rahhahman*. New York.
- Genovese, Eugene D. 1976. *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World The Slaves Made*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Johnson, Walter. 1999. *Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Lichtenstein, Alex. 1997. "A Right Church, Wrong Pew: Eugene Genovese & Southern Conservatism." *New Politics* 6.
- Malone, Dumas. 1948. *Jefferson the Virginian*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co.

Copyright of *Southern Quarterly* is the property of University of Southern Mississippi and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.