There is no strength but Allah. Allah is the Highest, Most Powerful

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According to Islamic theology, in the year 610 C.E, the angel Gabriel appeared to Muhammad of Arabia as he was meditating in the Cave of Hira alone. The angel is believed to have spoken to Muhammad, and specifically spoke these specific words to him; “Read in the name of thy lord and cherisher who created: Created man out of a clot of congealed blood. Read! And thy lord is most bountiful, He who taught the use of pen; Taught man that which he knew not.” This phrase is believed to be the first words spoken to Muhammad, and is considered to be the first revelation. Many more revelations would occur. This is what is officially would be proclaimed as Islam which is based off of Gabriel’s revelation; “There is no god but God (Allah) and Muhammad is his Messenger.” These messages were memorized, organized and compiled into a collection of revelations, known as the Qur’an. The same exact message that the angel Gabriel spoke to Muhammad and in which then Muhammad spoke to his companions in Mecca would reach the Southern region of the United States of America twelve-hundred years later, preached and practiced by a slave from Africa.

Who was this slave that practiced Islam and how did his faith and ability to read and write allow for him to maintain the position as the head driver for the plantation he worked on? That slave that indeed practiced Islam and possessed the ability to read and write was known as Bilali Muhammad. Bilali was a victim of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The Transatlantic Slave Trade refers to the global economic practice in which major European powers, such as Spain or Britain, transported millions of ethnic Africans from their native homeland, throughout what was known as the New World, which
accounts for South America, Latin America, the Caribbean Islands, and the central location for this paper, North America. The purpose these Africans, men, women as well as children, were transported thousands of miles away from their homeland was to serve primarily as labor for the large plantations that had existed throughout the continent of North America, mainly in the South. The time period in which Bilali lived as a slave was the era in which the United States was a new nation. This refers to the end of the eighteenth century as the American Revolution erupted and created the document that would proclaim the United States as an independent nation in 1776 until the Civil War. It was known as Antebellum America. The role the plantation played in regards to the economy of the South, was the mass production of agricultural products such as cotton, rice, and sugar, just to name a few. Although the plantation in regards to the economic practices of the United States is not the central focus for this paper, it is important that a basic understanding of the economic practices of the early nineteenth century in the South is provided. It is established and accepted that Bilali was indeed member of this large scale plantation economy of the South, but as an individual only viewed as labor, or what it is called a slave.

**Historiography**

Without the “Bilali Document”, the historian might not have the known the existence of the Bilali Muhammad. If weren’t for the translation of this primary source, I would be able to read and comprehend their written works. The first piece of literature of Islamic work to be discovered and analyzed in the United States is the Bilali

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2 Thomas Lewis, “Transatlantic Slave Trade,” Encyclopedia Britannica
Document, which is a thirteen page manuscript of Qur’anic verses written down by Bilali Muhammad himself. I, as a student of historical research, am grateful that the first work of Islamic law in which is translated was able to reach my possession. Muhammad Abdullah Al-Ahari and his small book *Bilali Muhammad: Muslim Jurisprudist in Antebellum Georgia* provides the translation of the Arabic Document, and it is proof of the literacy of Bilali. It is still unknown whether this document was brought with him from Africa or if he had written it while living as a slave on Sapelo Island. It has yet to be discovered.

Written by B.G Martin, *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* published an extremely useful source on Bilali Muhammad called *Sapelo Island's Arabic Document: The "Bilali Diary" in Context*. This source provides somewhat of a biography of Bilali and presents to the reader as much information about Bilali as possible. It provides important information about Biali such as the birthplace of Bilali to the number of slaves Thomas Spalding. In addition to the actual thirteen page manuscript, this source was the most useful in regards to the already limited knowledge of the life of Bilali Muhammad.

Al-Islam.org was the main source that I used to discuss and religion of Islam with the context of this research paper. This source provided all that was needed to understand the religion of Islam and its history as well. This is one the most detailed websites regarding a religion that I have access. Many of the authors of this page are Islamic scholar themselves and even hold Phds. So, this source to my knowledge was the most reliable in regards to understand the religion of Islam. This source provided a component of my research that was very important with analyzing the life of Bilali and Omar, and that concept jihad. This source was appropriate in presenting the concept of
jihad to the reader because it describes this term in accordance to Islam and the actual definition of the word, which is “struggle.”

Although not mentioned very much throughout this paper, I was able to understand the ethnic origins of Bilali by accessing the source, “The Wander-Lust Nature of the Fula People.” The reason why it was worth mentioning the Fula people was because these were the very first people in the region of West Africa to officially adopt the religion of Islam. It was also interesting to find out that the Fula people inhabited a region where rice was a common crop that was produced, which meant Bilali as well was familiar with working on farms and with agricultural products.

Occasional Papers of the Sapelo Island NERR, Vol. 1, 2010 produced a work called The Historical Buildings of Sapelo: A 200 Year Architectural Legacy. This source served the purpose of understanding the political and economic aspects that the plantation aristocracy made. This source created an image in one’s mind of what the Spalding’s plantation looked like. It also presented the important of plantation aristocracy in regards to the powerful agricultural practices of the South.

The Georgia Writer’s Project published an incredible book called Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coast Negroes. What this source does is provide information about the life of Bilali Muhammad as Katie Brown and Shad Hall, the great-granddaughter and the great-grandson of Bilali, are both interviewed, and provide information about the patriarch of their family tree. This information will be discussed and analyzed in this research paper.

The civil rights activist, banker, and historian Malcolm Bell Jr. is a credible and appreciated individual in regards to this research paper because his photography skills
enable him to take pictures of Katie Brown and Shad Hall. These two photographs of Bilali’s great-grandchildren show us the physical characteristics of people of African descent. In fact, these two photographs are presented in Allen Austin’s *African Muslims in the Antebellum South* as well as *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coast Negroes*

**Bilali Muhammad: The Patriarch of Sapelo Island,**

**Georgia**

From LostIslamicHistory.com, Bilali Muhammad’s thirteen-page manuscript of verses from the Qur’an is presented. It was written in Arabic, particularly the Maghribi script, which was the form of Arabic used in North Africa as well as West Africa. The actual document is preserved in the Georgia State Library.

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3 Firas Alkateeb “The First Muslim-American Scholar Bilali Muhammad,” *Lost Islamic History*. Last modified February 24, 2014
Bilali Muhammad was born near the year 1770 in the city of Timbo, which is located in the modern African nation of Guinea. Bilali belonged to the African ethnic group which inhabits large portions of the region of West Africa, known as Fulbe tribe, or Fula, which, next to Arabic, is the primary language spoken by the Fulbe people. Bilali was a very highly educated man as he was an Islamic scholar, which meant he was an expert in all aspects of Islam, which includes the Qur’an, Sharia, which is also known as Islamic law or divine law, and the Hadith, which refers to the life of the prophet Muhammad. In addition to possessing high quality education in Islam, Bilai was bilingual as he was able to speak Arabic, the language of his faith, and the language of his ethnicity, Fula. We are dealing with a bilingual man with excessive knowledge about Islam. The Fulbe people were the first people to convert to Islam. Unfortunately for Bilali as well as for his family and friends, he was abducted from his homeland and brought to the United States. The way in which he was abducted is still not certain to this day, but he was brought to Sapelo Island, during the opening of the nineteenth century, in the year 1802.

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Sapelo Island, Georgia

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http://libguides.ccga.edu/muslims
Fortunately for Bilali, he was brought to a very large plantation owned by a man who was very wealthy and a member of the plantation aristocracy known as Thomas Spalding. Spalding, roughly four years senior to Bilali, was born in the year 1774. He was the most influential planter and politician, and had actually bought the entire Sapelo Island in order to create his plantation empire\(^7\). Not limited to just agrarian practices, since the South’s economy revolved mainly around agriculture, Spalding added infrastructure to his plantation empire economy by the construction of sugar mill, made solely out of tabby, which refers to a type of cement that is composed of oyster shells\(^8\). This sugar mill was known as the Long Tabby. In addition to this, Spalding would expand his innovative practices with the construction of the main headquarters and household of his plantation empire, which is referred to as the “South End House,” which was completed by the year 1810.

It is estimated that Spalding owned four-hundred to one thousand slaves\(^9\). In addition to working for an aristocratic planter, Bilali was in the right place at the right time as Spalding was notorious for treating his slaves well, as compared to the majority of planters or slave owners who did no treat their subjects well. Allan D. Austin’s book, *African Muslims in Antebellum South*, notes that Spalding treated his slaves not like actual slaves, but as serfs. A serf, by definition, is a laborer on a plantation who works on a specific spot on the land, but is treated more humanely as compared to a slave. A serf is viewed as a worker, whereas a slave is also viewed as worker, but at the same

time being perceived as just property. Basically, a serf enjoyed a little more freedom and independence as compared to a slave. Some of the freedoms, as Austin claims, that those slaves who worked for Spalding was a limited work day of just six hours and the ability to practice Islam, as Bilali was not the only Muslim slave. In addition to allowing these freedoms to his slaves. Spalding sanctioned the policy of task systems which refers to the practice in which slaves worked on a specific plot of land, maintained their own communities, and were allowed their own free time after their day of working on the plantation was completed, which was used wisely by Bilali.

So what role did Bilali’s practice of Islam and literacy play in regards to his already high standard of living as a slave? Like all orthodox Muslims, Bilali prayed five times a day, fasted during the month of Ramadan, and did what Muslims are supposed to do which is to spread the message of Islam. He did this by producing a thirteen page manuscript comprised of verses from the Qur’an, which was mentioned earlier in the historiography section. The first example of Bilali using the traditions and practices of Islam for the well-being of the Sapelo itself came to be during the War of 1812. The War of 1812 was a war between the United States and the British Empire, in which the United States declared war on the British for their support of local Native American tribes and their disruption of American trade with the French. In his book, Austin claims that during the war, Spalding had left the plantation, assumedly to join the militia to fight against the British. Austin reports that he had promoted Bilali to the overseer or head driver of the plantation, which is the second high position next to the owner, which was Spalding himself. However, the absence of Spalding made it clear that Bilali was to be in charge of the plantation. It is reported that Spalding had given Bilali and the rest of
his slaves over eighty-five muskets. What this signals was that Spalding put the entire estate to be in the control of one man. Since there is no evidence to suggest that Bilali and the slaves fled the plantation to seek refuge from the British navy, it can be confirmed that Bilali and the slave community did in fact stay on the island and on the plantation during the war, and did indeed follow the instructions commanded by Spalding. However, the question is, why?

The answer to that question can be answered by understanding certain principles of Islam that are the only motive for explaining why a slave would stay on the plantation while his owner was absent, and not attempting to escape. The main concept of Islam that will be argued was the reason for protecting the plantation Bilali must have followed and understood since he was an Orthodox Muslim is the concept of Jihad. In Islam, the term jihad can mean a have a few different meanings. It can either mean holy war, or just simply a struggle, which is what jihad actually means in the Arabic language. How exactly was the concept of jihad used by Bilali as he was put in charge of the plantation and was expected to protect it? In Islam, a jihad is supposed to be declared when there is a danger to Muslim, or a Muslim community. It is declared when Islam is interrupted or about to be interrupted. A jihad does not necessarily have to be declared against non-Muslims. It can be declared against fellow Muslims, if those Muslims are a threat to those Muslims who declared the jihad. Now, since Bilali was living and working in a region where he was able to practice Islam, it can be implied that an invasion and occupation by the British navy of the Island of Sapelo and then the

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plantation itself would disrupt Biali and his slaves’ practice of Islam. An occupation of the island by the British would constitute a danger to Islam since Spalding did allow Bilali to freely practice. Since Bilali was the administrator of the plantation, it would be unacceptable for him as a Muslim not to defend the plantation, since he was also protecting his way of life, and the last thing a Muslim leader would do would to allow a non-Muslim military force, the British, to invade the plantation, or Islam itself, since it was present within the fields of the plantation.

During a jihad, it is the duty of the Muslims to defend the faith, but is also the duty of Muslims to protect what the Qur’an calls, “the people of the book.” These people are commonly referred to as the Christians and the Jews, people which are recognized and are supposed to be protected by Muslims who live amongst them. What this being understood, it is the duty of the Muslim to protect the non-Muslim. Here is a portion of a letter sent by the Prophet Muhammad to the Monks of St. Catherine Monastery in the year 628 A.D;

“This is a message from Muhammad ibn Abdullah, as a covenant to those who adopt Christianity, near and far, we are with them.
Verily I, the servants, the helpers, and my followers defend them, because Christians are my citizens; and by Allah! I hold out against anything that displeases them.
No compulsion is to be on them”11. “Since the Prophet said himself that Muslims are to respect and protect those who practice Christianity, Bilali’s acceptance as the head of the plantation meant he was in charge of protecting all of human life within the plantation, whether it was Muslim slaves or Christian slaves. What Bilali performed during the War

of 1812 in regards to the plantation was the Prophet’s exact commands, which was to protect the practice of Islam and non-Muslims.

This is considered to have been a praise house. It was used by both Muslims as well as Christians on Sapelo Island. The bell signals it was used by Christians, as a bell is used for the call to prayer. In Islam, the call to prayer occurs by reciting out loud; “There is only one God and Muhammad is his Messenger.”

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12 Michele Johnson, “Muslims in Antebellum Georgia: An Introduction, Coastal Pines Technical College.”
Although in Islam Muslims are obligated to protect the faith of Christians and Jews, it cannot be one-hundred percent guaranteed that Bilali would have allowed non-Muslim slaves to fight alongside him and other Muslim slaves or even if he would actually protect them if a British naval invasion to occur. This seems to be the case because Bilali is reported to have said to Spalding; “I will not protect the Christian dogs that you own.”

In order to properly understand this statement infamously said by Bilali, it is important to understand Islam not just as a religion. In addition to the belief in the oneness of God, Islam is also a political system as well as an economic system. The role of non-Muslims within Islam is important to understand. In an Islamic society, non-Muslims, mainly Christians and Jews, are allowed to practice their religion, and are even given some form of autonomy from the main authority of the Islamic state, the caliph. Although Christians and Jews are allowed to practice their own faith and manage their affairs to some degree, they, to the modern-standard, would be considered second-class citizens. Based on this, Bilali must have believed that non-Muslims were inferior to Muslims. It is unknown what Bilali would have done in regards to the non-Muslim slaves if the British navy did indeed land on Sapelo Island. However, it does not seem logical that Bilali would have attempted to cause harm to non-Muslim slaves or hand them off as prisoners to the British. It is important to remember that Muslim and non-Muslim slaves coexisted with each other on Sapelo Island with Bilali himself the overseer, or administrator of hundreds of slaves. Although Bilali said that degrading


statement, as a man of trust and leadership, it does not seem likely he would have causes harm to those non-Muslim slaves. Since there is no evidence to suggest that British navy landed on Sapelo, it is still unknown the role non-Muslim slaves would play in ‘jihad.’”

In addition to the War of 1812, a situation occurred that does demonstrate Bilali’s leadership skills as well as his respect for human life.

In 1824, a hurricane erupted on Sapelo Island. Allen Austin’s *African Muslims in the Antebellum South* claims that during the hurricane, Bilali saved the lives of hundreds of slaves by directing them to shelter in a tabby mill. What does this action by Bilali demonstrate about his character? By directing hundreds of slaves to safety during a hurricane, Biali was putting his own life at risk by leading hundreds of people to safety, which meant him or any of the hundreds of slaves could have easily perished during the hurricane. This specific situation shows that Biali was an effective leader as he was successfully able to direct himself as well as hundreds of slaves to safety without perishing during the storm. As an administrator of Spalding’s plantation, Biali’s ability to perform this duty can arguably demonstrate his bravery and most important, his faith in God.

We know Bilali Muhammad was a Muslim from a political state called the Imamate of Futa Jallon. He was born in a small town within this state known as Timbo. The town of Timbo is located in the modern nation of Guniea. Although *Sapelo Island's Arabic Document: The "Bilali Diary" in Context. Vol 78 of the Georgia Historical Quarterly. Georgia Historical Society* notes that Biali, along with his wife Phoebe may

have been slaves on the British West Indies before being purchased by Thomas Spalding, it is still not definite that Bilali was present there. However, it is confirmed that Bilali was a slave on Thomas Spalding’s Plantation on Sapelo Island as the overseer of the rest of the slaves Spalding owned. We know Bilali was literate as is demonstrated through the Biali Document. Since he was a practicing Muslim, it can be also be confirmed that Bilali prayed five times a day, fasted during the month of Ramadan and must have owned a Qur’an. In addition to this, what else do we know about Biali? Well, fortunately, Drums and Shadows gives more information about Biali through the words of two of his great-grandchildren in the late 1930s.

Katie Brown and Shad Hall tell the stories about their grandmothers, Margaret, the daughter of Bilali and grandmother of Katie, and Hester, another daughter of Biali and the grandmother of Shad.
Shad Hall, the great-grandson of Bilali Muhammad and grandson of Hester. This photo was taken by Malcolm Bell Jr and is presented in *Drums and Shadows* and *African Muslims in Antebellum America*.

“At Hog Hammock we visited Shad Hall, 1 another Belali Mohomet descendant, who came to the door of his neat cottage clad in blue denim. Delighted to have visitors, Shad was eager for conversation. With a few polite words of thanks for the pipe tobacco, he began to talk of the old days.”

As Shad showed hospitality toward his interviewer in the Hog Hammock Community, he begins to discuss his ancestors. Shad is speaking on behalf of his grandmother Hester, as it was she who is the primary source for the knowledge of Biali. Shad describes the

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patriarch of his family tree, Bilali, as a tall man with dark skin like coal. He notes that Hester was indeed a practicing Muslim.

“Muh gran Hestuh say she kin membuh duh house she lib in in Africa. She say it wuz cubbuh wid palmettuh an grass fuh roof, an duh walls wuz made uh mud. Dey make duh walls by takin up hanfuls uh mud an puttin it on sumpm firm, sticks put crossways so. I membuh some pots and cups dat she hab made uh clay. She brung deze frum Africa. She membuh wut dey eat in Africa too. Dey eat yam an shuguh cane an peanut an bananas. Dey eat okra too. Yes’m, das right, dey calls it gumbo. Dey dohn hab tuh wuk hahd wid plantin deah. Jis go in woods an dig, an git big yam. Dey eat udduh roots too. Dey ain no flo tuh house. Dey sleep on hahd.”

Shad claims that his grandmother Hester remembers Africa, but how is it possible that Hester was in Africa if Bilali was born around the year 1770 and was brought to Sapelo during the beginning of the 19th century. Well, Shad’s claim that Hester remembers Africa may in fact be proof that Bilali and his wife Phoebe could have been living in the British West Indies, as noted in Sapelo Island's Arabic Document: The "Bilali Diary" in Context. Vol 78 of the Georgia Historical Quarterly. Georgia Historical Society. The region in which Hester describes Africa could very well be the British West Indies, specifically the Bahamas. This source published by the Georgia Historical Society claims that Bilali along with his wife Phoebe and their children could have lived on the Bahamas before being sold to Thomas Spalding on Sapelo Island.

17 Georgia’s Writers Project. Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coast Negroes (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1940).
Katie Brown, the great-granddaughter of Bilali Muhammad and granddaughter of Margaret. This image is also presented in *Drums and Shadows* and *African Muslims in Antebellum America*

Katie Brown is noted with saying:

“Magret an uh daughtuh Cotto use tuh say dat Belali an he wife Phoebe pray on duh bead. Dey wuz bery puhticluh bout duh time dey pray an dey bery regluh bout duh hour. Wen duh sun come up, wen it straight obuh head an wen it set, das duh time dey pray. Dey bow tuh duh sun an hab lill mat tuh kneel on. Duh beads is on a long string. Belali he pull bead an he say, 'Belambi, Hakabara, Mahamadu.' Phoebe she say, 'Ameen, Ameen.’”
Based on Katie’s analysis of her great grandfather, it can be officially confirmed the fear of God Bilali possessed. It can also be confirmed how religious Bilali really was as he was very particular about the exact time as well as the position for prayer.

Bilali is believed to have passed away in the year 1859, which meant he was in his nineties. This man lived a long life. With the death of Bilali, what would happen to the slave community that existed on the island during the beginning of the nineteenth century? From the end of the Civil War to the present day, the slave community on the island would evolve into an ethnic group that is known as the Gullahs or Geechees. This ethnic community of people are to this present known for their agricultural practices, oyster harvesting, and timbering. There is less than one hundred Gullahs left as gentrification threatens their culture and way of life.

What can be understood about the known life of Bilali Muhammad? Based on the story that Bilali managed to save the lives of hundreds of slaves by directing them to shelter inside a tabby mill, it can be concluded that Bilali was a fearless man. What also can be concluded was the Bilali proved to be a well-organized administrator as he was promoted to the task of the overseer of Thomas Spalding’s plantation, which is the second highest administrative position, next to the planter himself, which was Thomas Spalding. What can also be concluded is that Bilali was literate as is proven by the thirteen-page manuscript of Qur’anic verses. Based on the testimony of Katie Brown, it can be concluded that Bilali Muhammad was an orthodox Muslim as he was particular about the time of day he prayed and the exact position he prayed. He may very well be considered a fundamentalist Muslim. The purpose this research paper was written was to

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understand and appreciate the presence and practice of Islam in the Antebellum South. I wanted to write about a religion that was practiced by a man who was not free. I wanted to explore how Islam was present in the Antebellum South and that many African-Muslims have origins of Islam within their family tree.

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