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Profiles in Patriotism: Muslims and the Civil War

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Profiles in Patriotism: Muslims and the Civil War

Abstract

While many minority groups have had their contributions and accomplishments during the Civil War recognized, one group of Americans has received little attention. Muslim Americans are rarely the focus of Civil War scholars and are typically viewed as a demographic relevant only to more modern history. This should not be the case. In fact, Muslim Americans have served in virtually every armed conflict in United States history and left their mark on every era, including the Civil War. A simple search using the [Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System](#) (CWSS) reveals several names associated with Islam, including two Mahomets, two Hasans, three Rahmans, three Alis, 17 Saids, and 58 Hassans. In his *Muslim Veterans of American Wars*, Amir N. Muhammad theorized that as many as 292 Muslim last names appear in muster roles. Additionally, as many as 15% of African slaves brought to America are believed to have practiced Islam. While these summary statistics provide an overview of the scope of Muslim American involvement in the Civil War Era, their personal stories truly show their importance in shaping America.

Keywords

Muslim Americans, Civil War, Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System, Amir N. Muhammad, African Americans

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Profiles in Patriotism: Muslims and the Civil War

By [Jeffrey Lauck '18](#)

While many minority groups have had their contributions and accomplishments during the Civil War recognized, one group of Americans has received little attention. Muslim Americans are rarely the focus of Civil War scholars and are typically viewed as a demographic relevant only to more modern history. This should not be the case. In fact, Muslim Americans have served in virtually every armed conflict in United States history and left their mark on every era, including the Civil War. A simple search using the [Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System](#) (CWSS) reveals several names associated with Islam, including two Mahomets, two Hasans, three Rahmans, three Alis, 17 Saids, and 58 Hassans. In his *Muslim Veterans of American Wars*, Amir N. Muhammad theorized that as many as 292 Muslim last names appear in muster roles. Additionally, as many as 15% of African slaves brought to America are believed to have practiced Islam. While these summary statistics provide an overview of the scope of Muslim American involvement in the Civil War Era, their personal stories truly show their importance in shaping America.



The 55th Massachusetts marches through the streets of Charleston in February of 1865. Published in the March 18, 1865 edition of *Harper's Weekly*. Courtesy of [Library of Congress](#).

Hajji Ali, an Ottoman camel driver, landed in Indianola, Texas aboard the USS *Supply* in 1856. Recruited by the U.S. government, he was to take part in one of the oddest military experiments in the pre-Civil War Era. A year earlier, Secretary of War Jefferson Davis convinced Congress to create the Camel Military Corps to patrol the newly acquired lands in the desert Southwest. When the camels arrived from the Ottoman Empire, they were met with awe and amazement from locals. The U.S. soldiers assigned to the new Camel Corps were equally bewildered and were unable to manage the exotic beasts. Enter Hajji Ali, nicknamed Hi Jolly by his American comrades. The first mission for the camels was to bring Lt. Edward Beale on an expedition searching for a possible Southern route for the transcontinental railroad. Sadly, and indeed ironically given the mastermind behind the creation of the Corps, the Civil War dashed any hopes for the future of the Camel Corps. Hi Jolly lived on, and became [a local legend along with the dozens of camels that roamed the Southwest for years.](#)

Muslims and the religion of Islam were largely influential in the abolition of slavery. Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner—famous for his caning on the Senate floor at the hands of South Carolina Senator Preston Brookes—even quoted the Qur’an on several occasions during his speeches attacking slavery. While not alive during the Civil War, Senegal-born slave Ayuba Suleiman Diallo (better known as Job Ben Solomon) played a major role in exposing the horrors of slavery in his many slave narratives. In 1864, New England abolitionist Theodore Dwight used Diallo’s story for an article titled “Condition and Character of Negroes in Africa.” Written only a year after President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, the republication of Diallo’s story was instrumental in helping to convince Northern public opinion in getting behind the war to erase slavery from the American landscape. Other Muslims also helped advocate for the end of slavery. In 1864, Hussein Pasha—Tunisian General and president of the Tunis Municipal Council—sent a letter to United States Secretary of State William Seward calling on the United States to eliminate slavery “in the name of humanity.” The letter sparked a correspondence between the Tunisian and United States government and was eventually included in a list of influential executive documents published by the House of Representatives.

Some former slaves even fought to end slavery in the service of the United States Colored Troops. One such was Mohammed Ali ben Said, also known as Nicholas Said. Said was born in the Kingdom of Bornou, located in present day Libya, Chad, and Sudan, and enslaved after being kidnapped as a teenager. Serving Arab, Turkish, and Russian masters, he travelled the world before being manumitted in England in 1859. Said travelled to Canada and worked as a servant before immigrating to the United States in 1862 and becoming a school teacher in Detroit, Michigan. The following year, Said enlisted as a private in Company I, 55th Massachusetts Infantry. Said and the 55th Massachusetts fought in the battles of James Island and Honey Hill. After the war, he settled in the South and started schools for black children during Reconstruction.

All of these Muslims contributed to the shaping of the United States during the Civil War era. Despite this, as a group they have received little to no recognition. This

omission runs the risk of suggesting that Muslims did not actually play a role or even exist in the United States at the time. As we as a nation grapple with our relationship with the religion of Islam, it is imperative that we keep in mind the role Muslim Americans had in creating that nation.

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