

Hillary, George Washington, and Islam

by Hugh Fitzgerald

In the second Presidential debate, Hillary Clinton made a curious claim about Islam's place in the history of America: "We've had Muslims in America since George Washington." Many in the television audience of tens of millions must have thought that surely she had evidence for this, and quietly accepted her statement, while others, better prepared, and thus less easily fooled, were not inclined to swallow this latest example of *nunc-pro-tunc* backdating of Muslims in American history.

Let's start with Mount Vernon itself. Is there proof of Muslims among Washington's slaves? The Mount Vernon historian Mary Thompson writes that "the evidence" for the practice of Islam is to be found in the "names of some of the slaves." That is a peculiar way to state that **the only** evidence, if it is indeed to be taken as evidence, is that provided by three proper names of four of the slaves (two of them had the same name), out of a total of 318. No evidence of any other kind for Islam at Mt. Vernon is presented. There are no surviving Qur'ans, or the slightest evidence that there ever were any, no records of anyone, slave or master, having seen a "Muslim" slave prostrate and facing Meccawards, praying five times – or even once – a day, not a single report of the recital of the Shehada.

What we get instead is this:

*Much of the evidence for the presence of Muslim slaves at Mount Vernon comes from naming practices as well as individual histories. The names of at least three female slaves at Mount Vernon **indicate an Islamic influence on the***

Estate, if not the actual practice of Islam, over a period of roughly thirty years. Two women, presumably a mother and daughter, named "Fatimer" and "Little Fatimer" were included on a 1774 tithables list at Mount Vernon, a document prepared for local authorities listing the people whom George Washington was responsible to pay taxes for. These names appear to be a variation of the popular Muslim woman's name Fatima, meaning "Shining One" in Arabic, and the name of the Prophet Mohammed's daughter.

But the name "Fatima" is the slenderest evidence of some Muslim connection, given that the names slaves bore were often given by their owners, or by the men who ran the slave-markets, or by those who brought the slaves over from Africa by ship. Many slaves in America were given Biblical names, or names associated with ancient Rome, but that is hardly evidence of these slaves having any connection to the ancient Israelites or to ancient Rome.

And when the Mt. Vernon historian Mary Thompson refers to "an Islamic influence on the Estate, if not the actual practice of Islam," this is so vague as to be meaningless. What kind of "Islamic influence" was detected? Expressed how? Why not tell us more? Or is it merely a way of asserting what is not susceptible of proof: to wit, that the name "Fatimer" should be taken as evidence of an "Islamic influence" because "Fatima" is an Arabic name? It might well reflect nothing more than a name some slave-master found appealing.

The second name that is adduced as "evidence" for "some knowledge of Islamic tradition or a familiarity with Arabic" near (but not at) Mt. Vernon is just as unconvincing:

Late in 1800 a young, unmarried mixed race woman named Letty who lived at Washington's Muddy Hole Farm gave birth to a girl she called "Nila." This name is a known variant of an Islamic woman's name "Naailah," which means "someone who

acquires something” or “someone who gets what they want.” [“Nila” is also a name once popular among non-Muslims, and both Hebrew and Indian, but not Arabic, origins for the name are given.] Even if no one was actually practicing Islam at Mount Vernon by this time, this child’s name provides evidence that some knowledge of Islamic tradition or a familiarity with Arabic could still be found in the larger African-American community in Fairfax County or [Alexandria](#), if not at Mount Vernon itself, at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

A slave child’s name, without more, is hardly evidence of a “knowledge of Islamic tradition.” Letty might merely have found the name “Nila” appealing and given it to her daughter. Since there is no evidence at all for the name “Letty” being Muslim, isn’t that more plausible than claiming that “Nila” here must be a shortened form of an Arab name Naailah (unproven) and therefore must have an Islamic significance (also unproven)?

The third bit of “evidence” for “Islam at Mount Vernon” concerns a male slave named Sambo:

*The documented history of an African-born carpenter at Mount Vernon known as [Sambo Anderson](#) suggests that he was a practicing Muslim...Sambo Anderson was described as having mahogany-colored skin, with high cheekbones, and a stout build. His face was marked by both tribal cuts **and tattooing**, and he wore gold rings in both ears. Interestingly, Sambo told several people that he was of royal birth, and that his father was a king.*

What is it about the “documented history” of Sambo Anderson that “suggests he was a practicing Muslim”? In fact, there is **nothing**, but the writer keeps up a patter, piling on irrelevant details to make you think some connection to Islam has been made. Of what relevance to being a Muslim is the

description of Sambo Anderson's mahogany-covered skin, high cheekbones, and stout build? Mary Thompson also claims the name "Sambo" must be related to the West African name "Sambou," and makes the further claim that that name was traditionally given to second sons by the Islamized Hausa tribe. But several authorities on names describe "Sambou" instead as a Hebrew diminutive of "Samuel." Whom should we believe? Furthermore, she describes Sambo Anderson as having a tattoo on his face; ordinarily that would be evidence not for, but *against* his being a Muslim, given that in Sunni Islam permanent tattooing is forbidden, *haram*.

On Sambo's *supposed* connection to Islam, Thompson says:

One of the things Sambo probably brought with him to Mount Vernon was Islam. The ethnic group from which he most likely came, the Hausa, was heavily influenced by both the Arabic language and Islamic religion, which spread to them from Mali beginning in the late fourteenth century.

Again, on what basis are these claims made: this "**probably-brought-with-him**" and "group from which he **most likely** came"? The tentative speculations presented as firm claims continue to disturb. Did anyone at the time see Sambo perform his ablutions (*wudu*), ever see him, even once, prostrate in prayer while turned Mecca-wards? Did anyone ever hear a syllable of Muslim doctrine from him, a recital of the Shehada, anything at all? Even just a mention of "Allah"? Don't you think if there had been any such evidence, a single report, say, by the slave-master or by a fellow slave, that "Sambo was seen prostrating himself in prayer" or "Sambo spoke of 'Allah'" or of "someone named 'Muhammad,'" then this Mt. Vernon historian would have adduced it?

So what we have is the flimsiest possible evidence for Islam at Mt. Vernon, all semidemihemi quavering suggestion and maybe-perhaps-might-be speculation:

1. **“Much of the evidence** for the practice of Islam is to be found in the names of some of the slaves” should read: “the **only** evidence for the practice of Islam is to be found in the names of a handful of slaves – four – out of 318 at Mt. Vernon – and even the supposed Islamic significance of all three names (with two of the three names being of likely Hebrew origin) – is doubtful.”
2. “These names [Fatimer, Little Fatimer] **indicate an Islamic influence on the Estate, if not the actual practice of Islam**, over a period of roughly thirty years.” What kind of Islamic influence? If there is no “actual practice” of Islam, then what is left? These names, without more, hardly constitute evidence of “an Islamic influence.” “Fatima” is not only a name of Muhammad’s daughter, but then became an Iberian toponym, that could have been chosen by non-Muslims, including slave-traders and slave-owners, for its mellifluousness alone... ..
3. **“Even if no one was actually practicing Islam at Mount Vernon by this time**, this child’s name provides evidence that some knowledge of Islamic tradition or a familiarity with Arabic” was to be found at Mount Vernon or in Fairfax County “at the beginning of the nineteenth century.” Again, there is the admission that “no one was actually practicing Islam,” but then comes the attempt to obliquely suggest it nonetheless by insisting that the name “Nila” provides “evidence” of “some knowledge of Islamic tradition,” when “Nila,” as noted above, has in the past been a popular name for girls among non-Muslims, and the name is believed to be not of Arabic but of Hebrew and, in a different line of lexical descent, Indian origin.
4. **“The documented history of an African-born carpenter at Mount Vernon known as [Sambo Anderson](#) suggests that he was a practicing Muslim.”** *Nothing*, in fact, about Sambo that this Mt. Vernon historian has provided convincingly “suggests” that he was a practicing Muslim. And it is a

confusing claim given that in the preceding paragraphs, Mary Thompson has repeatedly admitted that “no one was actually practicing Islam at Mount Vernon by this time.” So which is it? That “no one” was practicing Islam at Mount Vernon? Or that the “documented history suggests that Sambo Anderson was a practicing Muslim”? Both statements cannot be true.

The basis on which this assertion – “Sambo as a Muslim” – rests is that the name “Sambo” *might* have some connection to the name “Sambou,” although “Sambo” was widely used as a slave name, not to indicate a Muslim background, but for those of mixed – African and Indian – descent.

Again, this argument for the presence of Islam from three names is weak. As we have seen, among the favorite sources of slave names (often given by slave-traders or slave-masters) were those from the Old Testament, such as Moses and Samson and Delilah (which no one would adduce as evidence that the slaves were from some Wandering Tribe of Israelites) and, especially, from Roman history, as Pompey, Caesar, Cassius, Cato, Nero, Phoebe, Venus (which do not indicate any Roman descent).

“One of the things Sambo probably brought with him to Mount Vernon was Islam.” Why? This is simply asserted, demanding our adherence, followed by another unproven assertion about “the ethnic group *from which he most likely came.*” So he “**probably**” brought Islam, though there is not the slightest evidence for it, and he “**most likely came**” from the Hausa, though there is no evidence for that, either, and that is how this “history” of Islam at Mount Vernon proceeds, by asserting one unproven thing after another, and the reader is overwhelmed by a series of “**suggests**” and “**most likelies**” and “**indicates**” that these names show Islamic influence, though Mary Thompson repeats that there is “no evidence of anyone practicing Islam at the time.” The reader is left thoroughly bewildered, but inclined to think that why, yes, those slave names must mean something,

and it's only now that we're able to recognize the truth that had been suppressed for so long by those who have denied Islam its rightful place in the American story. At long last we have that pseudo-evidence – the names Fatima, Nila, and Sambo – to prove otherwise.

But it is not the lack of evidence that Islam was “present” at Mt. Vernon or in the young American Republic that is the main point. In fact, while exaggerated claims for their numbers need to be rejected, let's agree that there is evidence that a small number of slaves did have Muslim backgrounds. Without mosques, or Qur'ans, and living in an entirely Christian environment, however, they were soon Christianized.

What merits our attention and concern is the obvious attempt by so many in power (as Obama, and now Hillary Clinton) to convince us that Islam “has always been a part of the American story.” This attempt has been going on for some time. It began with a State Department spokesman, Phyllis McIntosh, who in a press release in 2004 entitled **“Islamic Influence Runs Deep in American Culture,”** which claimed that **“Islamic influences may date back to the very beginning of American history. It is likely that Christopher Columbus, who discovered America in 1492, charted his way across the Atlantic Ocean with the help of an Arab navigator.”**

Nota bene the absence of a definitive statement: **“May date back”...** **“It is likely that.”** There is **no evidence – none** – for this, but there is plenty of evidence of Christian prayers being said on board Columbus's ships, his deep Catholic faith, the claiming of his discoveries for the very Catholic Ferdinand and Isabella, *“los reyes catolicos”* (the Catholic king and queen). For it was Ferdinand and Isabella, who had successfully completed the Reconquista, driving the Muslims from Grenada, their last foothold in Spain, who were then willing to support the deeply Catholic Columbus in his attempt to find a sea route for the Christians of Europe to the Indies, given that Muslims had sealed off the land route from

Europe to Asia when they conquered Constantinople in May of 1453 (only in that sense should Muslims receive some credit for Columbus's voyage).

As for Phyllis McIntosh's claim that Columbus had the help of "an Arab navigator," this is simply pulled out of the air at Foggy Bottom. It is flatly untrue; there was one member of Columbus's crew who did know Arabic, but he was a Jewish convert to Christianity, not an Arab. After making her astonishing statement, Phyllis McIntosh fell silent – she never answered her critics, to whom she owed an apology for her travesty of history. For many who only read her original statement, and who would be inclined not to question authority – *gosh, the State Department must know whereof it speaks* – the damage had been done, the myth of Muslims in Columbus's crew now set in motion. It would not be surprising to see this fable resurrected in the future, with a putative stamp of authority: "as the State Department long ago recognized."

Obama, in his quite unnecessary paean to Islam in his 2009 Cairo speech (a speech that ought to be held up for dissection in history classes), said: **"I also know that Islam has always been a part of America's story."** It isn't true. Some "possible" Muslims, even thousands, have been convincingly reported among the millions of slaves, but they were swiftly Christianized. In what way were they an important "part of America's story"? Muslims played no visible role in the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the Civil War, the Battle of San Juan Hill, World War I. The first recorded mosque in this country dates from 1929 (a tiny building in Ross, North Dakota); the second, in Iowa, only from 1934. No Muslims contributed noticeably to the literature, art, or music of this country, to its scientific, medical, and technological achievements, or to its political institutions, until recent decades. Muslims played no role in the writing of our Constitution, and especially no role in composing the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments that in

every important respect – think of the First Amendment’s guarantee of freedom of speech and freedom of the press, and the free exercise and Establishment clauses – which the Sharia, the holy law of Islam, with its rules on blasphemy and apostasy, does not countenance. Freedom of thought and expression and religion, central to the American polity, are all flatly contradicted by the principles of Islam.

Islam punishes those Muslims who speak ill of Islam or appear to mock it. It punishes those who wish to leave Islam, either for another religion, or for none at all. Islam does not recognize the equality of the sexes. Islam does not recognize that non-Muslims are to be treated as equal to Muslims. How could Muslims be expected to do that, when the Qur’an, tells them that non-Muslims are the “vilest of creatures” and Muslims the “best of peoples”?

Yet this concerted effort to make us believe that Islam has “always been part of the American story” continues. In this counterfactual narrative, Muslims served on Columbus’s crew, were to be found among Washington’s slaves, were served the first Iftar Dinner by President Jefferson back in 1805 ([it was not an Iftar Dinner but a regular dinner](#), pushed ahead by a few hours to accommodate the wishes of the Muslim guest, an envoy from Tripoli.

This history makes much of the fact that Jefferson owned a Qur’an (which has been misleadingly taken to mean that he approved of its contents!), and relies on feelgood unsubstantiated claims that during two hundred years of history, from roughly 1800 to 2000, Muslims supposedly continued to be “part of the American story,” as Barack Obama likes to say, without actually making much of an appearance anywhere at all. It is only on September 11, 2001 that Islam really enters American history, with a series of exploding planes, two at each tower of the World Trade Center, one at the Pentagon, and a fourth on a Pennsylvania field. And in the fifteen years since 9/11, Muslims in America keep reminding us

of their existence in a way that Hillary and Obama would prefer we forget— at San Bernardino and Fort Hood, at Chattanooga and Orlando. That is certainly how Islam has put itself, but not in a good way, on the main stage of American history, as it is being made today.

The next time a politician claims that “Islam has always been part of America’s story” (out of office, Obama will take up this theme with a vengeance), don’t accept that assertion, nor pass over it in silence, but challenge that claim. Ask when the first Qur’an appeared in the New World, when the first mosque was built (and then the second), and what evidence there is that some of the African slaves had Muslim backgrounds and – if so – how many? Demand to know what the evidence is for Muslim contributions to “America’s story” since 1787, to its political and legal systems, its art, music, literature, science. Make the apologists think twice before they play fast and loose with our history. You will be helping defend against a propaganda campaign that has until now gone largely unchallenged. But there is, thank goodness, time to set the record straight. Islam, whatever else it is, has hardly ever until the last few decades, “been part of America’s story.”