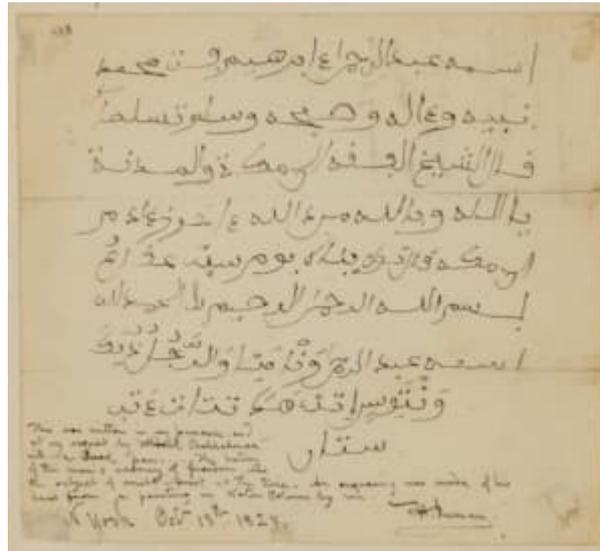


# AMIR MOHTASHEMI



**Folio written by the Former Slave Abdul Rahman Ibrahima Sori**

New York, October 15th, 1828

Ink on paper

18 cm high, 20 cm wide

Stock no.: A5514

Provenance: Henry Inman, artist;

Presented to Robert Gilmor, Esq. in 1833;

Captain Dr Frank Lester Pleadwell (1872–1957), physician, author and editor of medical texts, bibliophile and collector (according to label);

The Pleadwell Collection, Honolulu.

This shakily-written Arabic text was written by Abdulrahman Ibrahima Ibn Sori, a West African Muslim prince who was enslaved in America. His remarkable story, which was recorded contemporaneously by the abolitionist the Reverend Thomas Gallaudet (1787–1851), has inspired books and a film. According to Gallaudet, Ibrahima ibn Sori was born in Timbuktu in 1762, to the king of the Fula people. His father conquered the neighbouring Susu people, founding the city of Timbo. The family moved to Timbo, now in Guinea, where his father became the Almamy (leader) of the Fula people.<sup>1</sup>

Ibrahima was highly educated. He was sent away to Timbuktu to further his studies at the age of 12. By this time, he had already read the Qur'an several times and copied it at least once.<sup>2</sup> Ibrahima spoke at

least four local languages, in addition to his knowledge of Arabic and English, which he had learned from an American named John Coates Cox. In 1781, Cox, a surgeon on an English ship along the West African coast, had become separated from his crew whilst hunting on shore.<sup>3</sup> He had fallen sick, possibly with malaria, and was taken in by the Fula people. He spent six months convalescing in the Sori household, and may even have married Ibrahima's sister.<sup>4</sup>

In 1788, whilst at the head of his father's army, Ibrahima was captured by an army described by Gallaudet as 'Hebohs', an as-yet-unidentified group of non-Muslim Africans. They sold Ibrahima and his soldiers to the Mande people, who, in turn, sold him to a slave-ship captain at the mouth of the Gambia. He was then transported to the West Indies, where he was sold to a plantation owner named Thomas Foster in Natchez, Mississippi.<sup>5</sup>

Remarkably, after 16 or 18 years of slavery, he had a chance encounter with Dr. John Coates Cox whilst at the market in Washington.<sup>6</sup> Cox spent the remaining 20 years of his life campaigning for Ibrahima's freedom, even offering to buy him from Foster. His son, William Cox, continued the campaign. He met with the newspaper editor Andrew Marschalk in the 1820s, whose articles drew the attention of the Secretary of State, Henry Clay. Clay petitioned Thomas Foster to free Ibrahima, and Foster agreed in 1827 or 1828, on the condition that Ibrahima leave the United States.<sup>7</sup> In order to raise money to buy the freedom of his wife and children, Ibrahima toured northern cities, often dressed as a Muslim Prince. Ibrahima produced pages of writing in Arabic as gifts for prominent abolitionists on these occasions, including this page. The English inscription at the bottom of the page reads:

*This was written in my presence, and at my request by "Abdul Rahhahman" with a reed pen. The history of this man's recovery of freedom was the subject of much interest at the time. An engraving was made of his head from a painting in watercolour by me. N. York. Oct 15th 1828. H. Inman.*

This page was written during a gathering of abolitionists at the Masonic Hall on Broadway, New York, arranged by the abolitionist Arthur Tappan.<sup>8</sup> On this occasion, the young artist Henry Inman, sketched the only known portrait of Ibrahima, an event described in Terry Alford's *Prince Among Slaves*.<sup>9</sup> Though the original sketch is lost, an engraving of it was made by Thomas Inman for *The Colonizationist and Journal of Freedom* (Boston: G.W. Light, 1834), which is now held in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (accession no. [20136455555](#)).

Three other extant examples of Arabic texts written by Ibrahima are known, two in private collections<sup>10</sup> and one in the Hesburgh Libraries at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana ([view online here](#)).<sup>11</sup> Of these, one, written 29th of December 1828 in Philadelphia, is identified in the English gloss as the Lord's Prayer, while the other two are identified as Ibrahima's autobiography. In fact, all three follow the format of a brief introduction followed by Quranic verses. These discrepancies may be due to the limits of Ibrahima's vocabulary, having only been educated in Arabic through study of the Qur'an,<sup>12</sup> or indeed the almost 40 years of enslavement, where the only opportunity to write was tracing letters in the sand.<sup>13</sup>

With the support of the African Colonization Society, Ibrahima, alongside his wife, emigrated to Liberia, where freed slaves were being settled.<sup>14</sup> They intended to travel onwards to settle in Guinea, but

Ibrahima neither lived to see his homeland nor his children freed.<sup>15</sup>

[1] Austin, Allan D. *African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles*. New York: Garland, 1984, p. 69.

[2] Alford, Terry. *Prince Among Slaves*. Oxford: OUP, 1977, p. 6.

[3] Dennis, Dawn. 'Ibrahima, Abdul-Rahman', in *The Mississippi Encyclopedia* (July 2017), retrieved online via <https://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/abdul-rahman-ibrahima/> on 23.04.2025.

[4] Arcin, André. *Histoire de la Guinée Française*. Paris : Augustin Challamel, 1911, in Alford. *Op. Cit.*, p. 18.

[5] Gallaudet, Thomas. *A Statement with Regard to the Moorish Prince, Abduhl Rahhahman*. New York: Daniel Fanshaw, 1828, p. 4.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[7] 'Fraser-Rahim, Muhammad. 'Enslaved and Freed African Muslims: Spiritual Wayfarers in the South and Lowcountry', *Lowcountry Digital History Initiative* (2018). Retrieved online via <https://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/african-muslims-in-the-south> on 22.04.2025.

[8] Alford. *Op. Cit.*, p. 161.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 162.

[10] See Bouzan, Ruba. 'African Muslim Slaves: Literacy and Arabic Narratives' [MA thesis], *Rhode Island College*, 2021. pp. 36 and 41.

[11] 'Manuscript. Arabic writing of Abd al-Rahman Ibrahima', *American Slavery Manuscript Collection*, Hesburgh Libraries. Retrieved online via [https://marble.nd.edu/item/aspacespace\\_8e3ba736a4173c8e90a394e46d3bee44](https://marble.nd.edu/item/aspacespace_8e3ba736a4173c8e90a394e46d3bee44) on 16.01.2026.

[12] Bouzan, *Op. Cit.*, p. 40.

[13] Alford, *Op. Cit.*, p. 57.

[14] Guyatt, Nicholas. 'The American Colonization Society', *African American Intellectual History Society* (2016), retrieved online via <https://www.aaihs.org/the-american-colonization-society-200-years-of-the-colonizing-trick/> on 22.04.2025.

[15] 'The African Homeland of Abdul Rahman Ibrahim', *National Humanities Center Resource Toolbox*. Retrieved online via <https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/freedom/text1/ibrahima.pdf> retrieved online on 10.04.2025.