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Brent D. Singleton

California State University, San Bernardino, bsinglet@csusb.edu

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# Minarets in Dixie: Proposals to Introduce Islam in the American South

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**BRENT D. SINGLETON**

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## *Abstract*

*In May 1893, Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb, an American convert to Islam, communicated with landowners in Florida, Georgia, and Alabama to purchase property in order to establish colonies of Muslim Indian immigrants. A month earlier, Julius Chambers, a New York newspaper editor, put forth a call to convert the masses of African Americans in the South to Islam. This essay describes the two Islamization schemes, their interrelation, and their ultimate demise. Drawing mainly from Southern newspapers, the resultant press reaction both in support of and in opposition to Webb's immigration plan is also presented. The essay is a starting point for further investigation into early American Muslim history.*

## **Introduction**

During the last days of May 1893, the Southern press was focused on the journey of exhumed Confederate President Jefferson Davis' funeral train from New Orleans to his final resting place in Richmond, Virginia. A week later, newspapers began to cover the opening of the Lizzie Borden murder trial as well as the death of Edwin Booth, famed actor and brother of John Wilkes Booth. Among the various accounts of these and other news events appeared several curious articles concerning Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb, an American Muslim, and his proposed scheme to establish large colonies of Indian Muslims in the South. The audacious plan made local and national headlines, but extraordinarily it was not the first Islamization scheme to come to light that year. The preceding month Julius Chambers, a Northern newspaper editor, put forth a call to "...advance the condition..." of the masses of African American Southerners through conversion to Islam. Ultimately, neither scheme came to fruition, but the momentary excitement they brought about offers an interesting study of these forgotten episodes in Southern history.

## **Webb's Scheme**

Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb was a native New Yorker, who by 1877 had made his way to St. Louis, Missouri, where he established himself as reporter for several papers and later as assistant city editor for the *St. Louis Republic*.<sup>1</sup> During the early 1880s Webb delved into the study of Asian religious systems, leading him to join the Pioneer Theosophical Society in St. Louis. Webb quickly became absorbed in his studies spending up to six hours per day engaged in reading and researching the finer points of Buddhism and other religions. In 1886, he came across an advertisement by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian, India,

founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement, challenging anyone to find fault with even a single one of his 300 arguments in favor of the authenticity of the Qur'an and Muhammad's prophetic mission. Until this time Webb had given little attention to Islam, but now he was intrigued and wanted to learn more and thus started a correspondence with Ahmad.

A year later, Webb decided that to truly study Islam and the other Eastern religions he needed to travel to Asia and be among the believers of those faiths. Through the assistance of friends and associates, President Cleveland's administration appointed Webb to the post of United States Consul for the Philippine Islands. He had intended being located in Singapore or India, but there were no openings at that time. When offered the post in Manila he decided to accept, with the idea of transferring to a more favorable location when a position was available. After several years in Manila engaged in reading tracts written by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, Webb had increased his knowledge but still was not in contact with other Muslims. Around 1891 his prospects brightened when he came in contact with a Parsee trader from Bombay. Although not a Muslim himself, the gentleman agreed to take a letter of introduction from Webb to Bombay businessman and politician, Budruddin Abdulla Kur. Over the next few months, the two men corresponded about Islamic doctrine and other Muslim religious matters, and Kur sent further Islamic readings and reference sources for Webb's study. It is unclear exactly when Webb converted to Islam, but there is enough evidence to assume that by this time he was a Muslim and Kur was excited about the prospects of encountering a well-positioned American believer. With Webb's permission Kur had several of their letters reproduced in prominent Bombay newspapers.

The letters caused great excitement among the Indian Muslims and quickly caught the eye of Hajee Abdulla Arab, a trader and philanthropist, who was struck with the idea of sending an Islamic mission to the United States. Arab and other Indian Muslims had been captivated by the success of the Moslem Institute in Liverpool, England. Under the direction of Abdullah William Quilliam, a British convert to Islam, the Institute had attracted over 200 converts in a short period of time. The Indians saw the Moslem Institute as a model Islamic mission to the West. Hajee Abdulla Arab traveled to Manila in the spring of 1892 and upon being convinced of Webb's sincerity toward Islam, inquired about his interest in establishing a mission to America. Webb immediately agreed to the proposition and signed a three-year contract, with an immediate two-year extension, to run what was coined the American Islamic Propaganda.

In September of 1892, Webb resigned his consulship to begin his mission. As part of the contract Webb had freely agreed that his return to America would include a tour of India and stops in Egypt, Turkey, and Liverpool, England. His circuitous journey through India brought him to all of the country's major cities where he encountered potential subscribers to his mission and gave lectures on Islam. Webb met many of the wealthy and powerful Muslims in India at that time, including scholars and politicians such as Moulvi Cheragh Ali, Khuda Buksh, Badruddin Tyabji, Khan Bahadur Kazi Shahabudin, and Nawab Mohsin-ul-Mulk, as well as several princes and other high officials within the colonial government and government of the Nizam of Hyderabad. The journey through India lasted roughly two-and-a-half months not including several weeks spent in Singapore and Rangoon on the voyage from Manila. An additional month-and-a-half were spent visiting the Middle East and England.

After five-and-a-half months of travel, Webb arrived in New York City on 16 February 1893. News of Webb's conversion had been reported in the papers since he announced his resignation, and upon his arrival he was an instant media sensation. He initially gave several interviews to newspapers and engaged in a handful of lectures and receptions, but shortly thereafter Webb withdrew from the public eye so that he could concentrate on building the infrastructure of his propaganda mission. Within the first three months he was able to publish his book, *Islam in America*, and establish the mission's

newspaper, *The Moslem World*, but much to his chagrin, news was leaked to the press that he had embarked on a colonization scheme involving large numbers of Indian Muslims immigrating to America. He was disappointed on two counts, the news was a major distraction from his efforts in building the Propaganda's institutions and secondly he had hoped that the land required for the proposed colonies would have been purchased prior to any announcement of their formation. Articles concerning Webb's scheme began appearing on 29 May 1893, after the story was picked up by the Associated Press and telegraphed nationally.

In response to the news leak Webb tried to be as forthcoming as possible with regard to the immigration scheme, although many specific details were never revealed to the public. According to Webb, Indian Muslims from the higher classes had long been admirers of the United States and were familiar with the American political structure and right of religious freedom.<sup>2</sup> They had considered immigrating for a number of years but failed to do so because of the lack of established American Islamic cultural and religious institutions. The absence of immigration of any kind from India is borne out by the total population of foreign-born Indians in the United States during the late nineteenth century. In 1890 there were 2,143 individuals listed as having been born in India and this number decreased to 2,031 by 1900. It must be kept in mind that these numbers were irrespective of race and solely based on country of birth, which would have included Englishmen born in India.<sup>3</sup> The religious background of each of these immigrants is not known, but many Parsee merchants were in America at the time and in the waning years of the nineteenth century Sikhs came to the West Coast of America through Canada.<sup>4</sup>

During Webb's travels many of his Indian hosts had approached him concerning a desire among the brethren to reconsider immigration now that Webb was laying the groundwork for Islam in America. However, while in India the discussions never included establishment of colonies, but rather individuals spoke of immigrating for personal interests or to assist the Propaganda. Until the press release concerning the colonies was published neither Webb or his associates wrote publicly of the scheme. After the announcement Webb claimed that the main impetus for the Indians' desire to immigrate was not missionary in nature, but rather social and economic; many were businessmen and traders trying to escape the high taxation of the British colonial regime. Furthermore, the Muslim elite believed that they had not garnered the social position they felt entitled to in a country dominated by the colonial government and the vast Hindu majority. Although some in the press thought the British might balk at letting some of India's wealthiest citizens immigrate, Webb was convinced that there would be little opposition to their departure. This would have been particularly true for certain Indians that the British saw as agitators or a threat in any form.

Webb was in contact with large landowners in Jacksonville and Pensacola, Florida, as well as Augusta, Georgia and eastern Alabama. The landowners were likely a combination of railroad companies, real estate developers, and basic land speculators. Often each state and county had officials involved with attracting newcomers to the region. Because the race question was already a festering issue in the South most of the promotion for immigration sought American whites or Europeans, one pamphlet from the time stated, "We want immigrants of kindred races, that we may be a homogenous people."<sup>5</sup> However, by the late nineteenth century states such as Florida were desperate for an increase in population in order to maintain progress in social and economic development, and were more amenable to any plan that might facilitate expansion.

Webb secured an option on a 25,000-acre-tract in Georgia and claimed to have options on seven or eight similarly sized properties among the other proposed locations. The South was selected as the most suitable location since the climate approximated the tropical weather to which the Indians were accustomed and was conducive to their performance of

ablutions for the five daily prayers. Webb envisioned 500 to 1,000 Muslims immigrating per year for five years until the first colony was well established and the Indian syndicate had already laid out the arrangement of towns and farms within the colonies. Even the construction materials used for the mosques were planned ahead of time. Webb believed that the first mosques would be made of cheap materials, which would eventually be replaced with the traditional inspiring edifices of the East once the colonies had grown large enough to support them.

A month prior to the announcement of the proposed colonies, the economy of the United States was affected by the first stages of the Panic of 1893 and the resultant four-year depression. Over the next several months, businesses began failing with alarming regularity, unemployment soared, and gold and silver were hoarded for fear that the government was abandoning the gold standard.<sup>6</sup> In this milieu, looking to ameliorate local support for the scheme Webb expounded on what he believed were the economic benefits of the immigrants. He indicated that the Indians would use their substantial financial holdings to help the local economies by purchasing farm implements, seed, livestock, household goods, and other products from the surrounding communities, and "...will make liberal expenditures for schools."<sup>7</sup> He also noted that the Indians were industrious and represented skilled labor in many trades, including a particular group of Indian Muslims who were negotiating to run a steamer line between Bombay and New York to facilitate immigration and trade. In trying to further allay fears he stated, "Americans will not find the Mohammedans beggars or charity seekers... You may be sure that the Mohammedans will earn their own living in America."<sup>8</sup> If that failed to convince local communities of the economic benefits to be gained in hosting the immigrants, Webb revealed that he estimated that the Indian syndicate behind the venture represented \$10,000,000 in assets, a good portion of which would presumably be brought to America.

By the second week of June 1892 few details were forthcoming regarding progress of the plan. In early July it was reported that Webb had submitted his findings to the Indian syndicate and was awaiting a response. It had been agreed that once a suitable price for land was settled upon, a committee of Indians would travel to America to view the property before the final purchase could take place. Even though the scheme originated with, and would be mostly funded by Indians, it was believed that immigrants from other Muslim countries would join the colonies as well. One figure interested in Arab immigration was Abdurrahim Effendi, an Egyptian missionary, who was touring America and assisting Webb at this time. Regarding America Abdurrahim stated, "In Europe the Moslem faith is making great strides and in America progress not dreamed of by those unacquainted with the subject is rapid. America is a great country. In Egypt we look upon the United States as the prospective ruler of the world, although our people find it difficult to understand your system of government."<sup>9</sup> Publicly both men were enthusiastic about the prospects for establishing the colonies.

It is interesting to note that Webb never mentioned the colonization scheme in *The Moslem World*, which was first issued the same month the scheme became public. Even after he had spoken with the media and described the colonies he chose to never mention them in his Propaganda's official publication. Occasionally, *The Moslem World* reprinted articles or correspondence that referred indirectly to the proposed Muslim immigration, but there was never an article or direct comment from Webb. This presumably stemmed from distrust of his Indian partners. While in India, he was often frustrated by the lack of follow through among his Muslim brethren. In his travel journals he wrote frequently about "...promises easily made and soon broken" and that the Indians were "...prompt to promise but slow to fulfill."<sup>10</sup> Although he put forth a positive face and expressed confidence in his Indian backers for public consumption, his private feelings were that many Indians were undependable. This may have been the reason why Webb was originally disgusted when news of the colonies had

leaked to the press before the properties were purchased and immigrants were on their way. Webb may have disagreed with this analysis if confronted, but as time wore on he was likely of the same opinion as the *Washington Post*, which wrote that the colonies are, "...not likely to materialize to any great extent or at any great rate of speed...if they come at all..."<sup>11</sup>

News of the colonies had halted for nearly two months when in late August it was reported that Webb had begun looking for land outside of the United States. The land that Webb had secured options on in the South was unsuitable to the syndicate, most likely due to price, but possibly for other considerations. Based on this rejection there was little hope that colonies would be coming to America, but mindful of his contractual commitments, Webb made inquiries about property in Mexico to be used for the same purpose. The site was some 300 miles from Mexico City in the state of Chiapas, a three-day boat ride up the Grijalva River from the gulf port of Frontera.<sup>12</sup> This was simply an exercise in futility, a remote colony in Mexico would not have adhered to the Indian Muslims' previously stated desire to live in a country where Islamic institutions were being established and constitutional freedoms held sway.

After the report in August, the press lost interest in the scheme when it was clear that no further information was forthcoming and that Webb had abandoned the plan. If the Indian syndicate had been serious about working with Webb to purchase land in the South it could have been accomplished relatively easily. However, the trust between Webb and his backers was waning, and despite the contract signed in Manila, in November 1893, Webb received the last of the promised funding from Hajee Abdulla Arab. Arab became disheartened by the lack of immediate results in the United States and more importantly rumors of financial impropriety within the American Islamic Propaganda.<sup>13</sup> Webb accused John A. Lant, a former member of the American Moslem Brotherhood, of working in cahoots with Hamid Snow, an Indian newspaper editor, to sow seeds of dissension within the Indian committee supporting Webb. Lant had been disassociated from Webb's group when it was found that he had previously served several prison terms.<sup>14</sup>

Lant and Webb's Indian detractors were successful in their venture to discredit the mission and even though Webb was later exonerated of any financial wrongdoing, the damage to his name in India and his mission in America was complete. He never regained the contractual funding from Arab and was forced to cease publication of *The Moslem World* in November 1893. The constraints of diminished resources and negative press in India doomed whatever hope of establishing colonies that may have remained. Without Webb the Indians could not implement the immigration scheme and without funding Webb was unable to operate effectively. Webb was able to retain some financial support from a handful of trusted colleagues in India and Rangoon, but the donated amounts were never much more than enough to keep the Propaganda from withering away completely. Moulvi Hassan Ali, Webb's travel companion during his Indian tour, later remarked about the demise of the mission saying, "The Muslims were ready to spend millions on un-Islamic pursuits but gave nothing for this important task."<sup>15</sup>

## **Chambers' Scheme**

A month prior to the announcement of Webb's scheme, Julius Chambers wrote an editorial for the *New York Recorder* on 12 April 1893, entitled "Are We to Have a Religious Solution to the Southern Negro Problem?"<sup>16</sup> Like Webb, Chambers was a traveler and longtime newspaperman who was editor of several New York newspapers.<sup>17</sup> The editorial ran in the weekly column, "Timely Topic," a space in which many pressing issues of the day were discussed. It was inspired by reports of Webb's missionary activities and advocated the

wholesale conversion to Islam of the large African American population of the South. Beyond its content, the article was significant because it had traction outside of New York and over several months was republished in newspapers across the country.<sup>18</sup>

The article contained both serious and lighthearted commentary, and began by stating, “A very amiable and loveable man, Mr. Mohammed Webb, is in this country looking over the field to decide whether or not the United States is a promising field for the exploiting of the Mohammedan faith.” As the article progressed it was clear that Chambers’ view of Islam was somewhat ignorant and stereotypical, putting forth claims such as the religion “...winks at polygamy...” and is “...a thoroughly practical religion for the races that lead nomadic lives, and one pre-eminently calculated for propagation at the sword’s point.” His assessment of the Southern African-American population was far worse and wholly shaded with racist paternalism. Chambers believed that Islam was inherently of little interest to the white population of America, but alone or with possibly a few basic tenets of Buddhism mixed in, the faith presented a simple solution to uplift the masses of ex-slaves and their descendants. Chambers was particularly impressed by the Islamic prohibition of alcohol, he stated, “Among the features that ought to commend Mohammedanism to a large proportion of our citizens is its staunch devotion to abstention from strong drink.” As well, he was struck by the Muslim belief in one God, and the simple tenets of faith required for practice of the religion.

Ultimately Chambers’ desire for the spread of Islam among African Americans in the South was summed up in his following paragraphs:

There is just one field in this country for the introduction of the simple and trusting faiths of the east, and that is the great Negro population of the South. The hearts of the lowest types of the colored races are receptive and naturally religious; and any faith new to them that will supplant Voodooism ought to be welcomed by the staunchest Christian. There are to-day one million and a half of believers in that strange and disgusting mysticism.

If the millions of Negroes in the gulf states, who are today in the grossest intellectual and moral ignorance, could have formulated for their use a new creed uniting some of the beautiful teachings of Gautama and Mohammed, they might be guided in the direction of purer and nobler lives. Christianity could come later, if they felt the need of it, but we do not believe that any man or woman who knows the facts regarding the class to which we refer will deny that Mohammedanism or Buddhism, properly introduced and preached, would advance the condition of that part of the Negro race. Great schools like the Vanderbilt and Lincoln Universities and the institution at Raleigh do not reach the rice fields of South Carolina or the swamps of Mississippi and Louisiana.

It appears that Chambers’ enthusiasm for Islam to be adopted by African Americans was less an endorsement of the virtues and values he saw in the religion, than an indication of his utter disdain for the uneducated African American masses in the South.

Chambers was not the first to advocate the adoption of Islam by African Americans. In prior years, Edward Wilmot Blyden, a West Indian born pioneer of Pan-Africanism, had been promoting a return to Africa and saw Islam as a possible unifying religion for the African Diaspora and the returnees. In 1887, Blyden published a compilation of essays entitled *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, which extolled the historical advances African Muslims had made and castigated Christianity for its failure to strengthen Africans and the African Diaspora. This challenge to Christianity was conducted in the guise of a professed Christian trying to move Christianity forward, but Blyden’s writings and later

activities implicitly favored Islam. He became more convinced that African Islam was productive and at the very worst a benign influence, while he saw Christianity as a destructive presence in Africa where progress of the faith was measured in how closely Africans imitated European manners and customs.<sup>19</sup>

Although Blyden extolled Islam's effect on Africans long before Chambers, the latter appears to have been the first white man with such a disposition to focus solely on African Americans. The *raison d'être* behind their calls for the Islamization of African Americans were philosophically different and rooted in diametrically opposed racial and religious views. Chambers concluded that Islam would provide a basic civilizing force for the recalcitrant "...colored races..." that required "...a religion of pure credulity, with plenty of rewards and the mildest possible punishments." Blyden also considered Islam a civilizing force, but moreover, he saw the religion as a catalyst for unity, upliftment, and the regeneration of the latent intellectual and cultural spirit of Africans worldwide.<sup>20</sup> Blyden saw Christianized Africans as servile and believed the hallmark of African Islam was self-reliance and independence.

Regardless of Chambers' and Blyden's calls for the Islamization of African Americans, Webb never actively pursued missionary activities among African Americans in the North or South. He failed to consider them as a viable target for his message, even though there was an obvious historical connection between Islam and many of the enslaved Africans brought to America. Islam was making strides in Africa during this period, but Webb rarely used this fact as a point of reference when presenting evidence concerning the viability of Islam in his contemporary world. He failed to cite Blyden in written works or speeches even though Blyden was well known in missionary circles and Webb, more than anything, liked to use examples of Christians defending Islam. Furthermore, Webb did not meet with Blyden during the latter's 1895 trip to America, nor did he mention Blyden's presence in New York in his newspaper *The Moslem World and Voice of Islam*.

Webb's social and political beliefs must be mentioned to fully understand why he failed to see African Americans as potential converts. He was a staunch Reconstruction era Democrat who held most of the same racial biases that other white men of privilege held in late 19<sup>th</sup> century America. Many of his closest confidants during his years in St. Louis were Confederate Civil War veterans such as, Col. Celsus Price and Dr. Sylvester Nidelet, who may have further influenced his racial views.<sup>21</sup> While in India Webb often disparaged the local people and referred to certain dark-skinned individuals with racial epithets usually reserved for African Americans in the United States. His bigotry notwithstanding, Webb did speak out against unbridled racist violence and often condemned lynchings and other acts of racial hatred. But, based upon the tone and content of his condemnations of these events he appeared to be using them as examples to reinforce his argument that Christian society was hypocritical, rather than to rail against the brutal acts themselves.

In July 1893, Webb republished portions of Chambers' article in *The Moslem World*. Webb responded to the article by asserting, "Some day Mr. Chambers will learn that Islam is not a religion 'preeminently calculated for propagation at the sword's point;' that the sword was never used to enforce its propagation, and that it is adapted to the spiritual needs of the intensely educated as well as to those of the Negro. As he evidently tries to be fair we would like to see what he has to write about Islam when he has learned these, and a few other things."<sup>22</sup> In practice, Webb was disinterested in presenting Islam to the masses of any race, he honestly believed that the uneducated population lacked the capacity to understand and practice the religion in its true unadulterated form. Instead, he preferred to engage in philosophical and religious discussions among a small group of intellectuals, most of who were not Muslims and in the end only adopted a superficial interest in Islam.



## Press Reaction

Although Chambers' article received wide publication, there appears to have been little substantive response in the press to his call to convert African Americans to Islam. On the other hand, quite a bit of commentary was generated by news of Webb's scheme. Some headlines from the time included: "Invasion," "Mohammedans Coming," "Mahomet in the South," "Do We Want 'Em?" "Coming in Allah's Name," "No Heathen Need Apply," and "Pensacola Threatened With Mohammedanism."<sup>23</sup> Provocative headlines notwithstanding, most of the editorial commentaries reviewed his plans with relative objectivity. Some local Southern papers openly welcomed the opportunity to host wealthy Indian Muslims who might generate needed commerce in their region.

Paradoxically, much of the most virulent response to the immigration scheme came from Northern editors. The *Detroit Advertiser* wrote that immigrants "...who will not amalgamate with our nation, who will always remain alien in race and religion, had better stay away from our shores."<sup>24</sup> The *Washington Post*, after extolling the virtues of Muslim industriousness, piety, and general habits, wondered if the Indian immigrants could ever assimilate into American culture and politics and then concluded, "On the whole, we cannot confess to any great enthusiasm in favor of our friend Webb's project."<sup>25</sup> The *Los Angeles Times* attacked Webb personally, referring to his mission and scheme as "Religious fanaticism..." and castigated him for having what they termed a "...Quixotic brain..."<sup>26</sup> The *Indiana County Gazette* was hostile to the news of the proposed colonies and Webb's mission in general, printing the following comments, "It is probable that Mr. Webb is planting the seeds of his religion in soil too rich for its growth. Christianity...has been especially beneficent to the Land of the Free and cannot be supplanted..."<sup>27</sup>

Webb did garner support for the Muslim immigration from some editors and individuals, many of who were ardent prohibitionists. Writing in *The Moslem World*, Horace B. Durant of Philadelphia stated, "If the prohibition of the liquor traffic were as sure of the aid of other immigrants to our shores, after becoming voting citizens, as it may hope to be of the Moslem voter, the safety and perpetuity of our country would be greatly enhanced...we should welcome all friendly, saving influences; amongst which Moslem immigration and citizenship would certainly not be the least...we should have nothing to fear from the Moslem."<sup>28</sup> The *San Francisco Argonaut* very liberally noted, "There can be only theological objections either to the propaganda of which Mr. Webb is the leader or to the immigration that he promises, and the generality of Americans are not deeply concerned about theology. If the newcomers shall be as sober and industrious as Webb pledges, and agree to practice polygamy only after the Christian mode, they will be welcome."<sup>29</sup> *The Moslem World* had published other articles from the *Argonaut*, which defended Webb's right to promulgate Islam in America.

The Southern press' response to the scheme was often more genteel than that of their Northern colleagues, if not patronizing. The editors frequently expressed the notion that if the Muslims must come, it may present an opportunity to convert them to Christianity. These sentiments were articulated by the *Richmond Times*, "The South will welcome these immigrants, and while allowing them freedom of conscience will do its best to bring them to the true faith."<sup>30</sup> The *Atlanta Constitution* reported that Major Glessner, the immigration agent for the Georgia Southern and Florida railroad, had not been contacted by Webb, but said that the company would sell land to the Muslims if they were interested in buying. After which, the *Constitution* wrote, "There is no strong desire to encourage Turks to settle in the state, but it is suggested that it might be a good way to convert them to the Christian faith."<sup>31</sup> Looking at the colonies from a different perspective and with irony, the *Thomasville Times* quipped, "And now we are to have a colony of Mohammedans in Georgia. Well, what is the

world coming to? We are sending missionaries abroad to convert Mohammedans and they are coming here to convert Christians.”<sup>32</sup>

Other Georgia editors were less ambiguous in their disdain for the plan, for instance the *Sparta Ishmaelite* stated that, “If it would not be especially distressing to Alexander Russell Webb, Georgia would prefer his location of his Mohammedan colony elsewhere. Georgia doesn’t need any Mohammedans at all. She has her full complement of heathen.”<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the *Tifton Gazette* wrote, “...a number of the state exchanges express the opinion, to which we fully agree, that Georgia has already a full complement of heathens.” *The Madisonian* mixed contempt for both the plan and a populist gubernatorial candidate, writing, “If Georgia is to be afflicted with Mohammedanism and Tom Watson runs for governor, the world’s fair will not be in it at all—neither will Mr. Watson.” Finally, the *Henry County Weekly* simply stated, “It is said that Georgia is to be reinforced with a colony of Mohammedans...May the good Lord deliver us.”<sup>34</sup>

Oddly enough, the response in Augusta, the proposed site of one of the colonies was the most optimistic in Georgia. The *Augusta Chronicle* reproduced two lengthy Associated Press articles without further comment. When the editors made commentary it was relatively positive, opining: “If Mulluman [sic] Webb really wants to colonize a few wealthy Mohammedans in or near Augusta, why, we will take the danger of being proselyted, for the sake of Augusta.”<sup>35</sup> While cities far from Augusta moralized and bristled at the thought of Muslim immigration, Augusta realized that this was an opportunity they should be pleased to obtain.

The initial response from Jacksonville, Florida was similar to other locales, the *Florida Times-Union* declared, “If Webb Pasha wants to Mohammedanize Jacksonville, we can refer him to several localities which he could improve by settling his oriental immigrants in them.”<sup>36</sup> However, when more information was garnered about the scheme the editors of that paper softened their views somewhat, stating:

The scheme looks like a rather visionary one but, if Webb and his associates really have Jacksonville “on their list” as one of the points of the new colonization, we will welcome these strangers and do our best to make good citizens of them...if we are to have an invasion of Moslemic hordes Major Muhammed Webb has selected the proper spot for them—the dreamy, semi-Oriental, hash-heeshish happy-go-lucky South, where the ‘possum abides and the Senegambian waxeth fat and slothful...The Islamic colony, if nothing else, will furnish an added attraction to the winter tourists—so we say to the Osmanli, “Come on!”<sup>37</sup>

In Pensacola the response was more thought provoking with the editors of the *Daily News* pondering, “These people are industrious and frugal. So are the Chinese. It is surely a paradox that we should welcome these just as we are trying to get rid of the followers of Confucius. Shall they vote? Can our republican institutions sustain the weight now being put upon them? We must now practically demonstrate that we are sound enough in body and wise enough in policy to become in truth and in fact “the refuge of the nations, the asylum of the world.”<sup>38</sup>

Many Southern newspapers simply chose to ignore the scheme and altogether failed to print news concerning the proposed colonies. Others, such as the *Mobile Daily Register*, reprinted abbreviated versions of the Associated Press articles without further commentary.<sup>39</sup> This can also be said of most Northern newspapers, which either ignored the reports of the proposed colonies or republished articles without editorializing. In some cases, the Associated Press articles were rewritten or summarized in such a way that the reports bore

little resemblance to the originals. There were repeatedly sarcastic or disparaging terms substituted for the benign language used by the Associated Press. Some versions of articles included details that did not appear in any other version of the same articles and seem to be fabricated. For instance, the Hagerstown, Maryland, *Herald and Torch Light*, quoted Webb as purportedly having said, "...the syndicate is enabled within 36 hours after the cable announcing the purchase of the lands to ship the first one thousand colonists..."<sup>40</sup> The lone appearance of this quote in a small-town newspaper seems suspicious with regard to its authenticity.

## Conclusion

Although neither Webb nor Chambers succeeded in implementing their respective plans, the schemes became national news. Had either proposal been successful the modern American worldview of Islam may have been quite different than it is today. Perhaps, African American history would have been fundamentally altered and the 20<sup>th</sup> century Civil Rights movement framed in a completely different paradigm. The press reaction to the proposed colonies, both in the North and South, was generally neutral and occasionally supportive, especially in the regions that were suggested sites for the proposed colonies. The few negative commentaries consisted mainly of paternalistic religious bigotry and fearful intolerance. Several works concerning Webb and his American mission are in the process of being published; hopefully this work and the others will provide a foundation for further research into the early Islamic movements in America and in the West in general.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The preceding and succeeding background information concerning Webb and his mission come from: "Biographical Introduction," in Brent D. Singleton (ed.), *Yankee Muslim: The Travels of Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb in Asia (1892)*, forthcoming.

<sup>2</sup> The general description and details of Webb's immigration scheme are drawn from: "Colonies May Come Here," *Washington Post*, May 29, 1893, p. 1; and "A New Attraction, Perhaps," *Florida Times-Union*, June 6, 1893, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. 1999. *Region and Country or Area of Birth of the Foreign-Born Population*, available online at: <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0029/tab04.html> (accessed April 26, 2005). Earlier Indian-born population statistics were even lower, 1880 - 1,707 and 1870 - 586; there are no census records available concerning Indian immigration prior to 1870. In the 1930s a steady increase occurred, but significant numbers from India did not begin to immigrate until immigration quotas were lifted in the mid-1960's.

<sup>4</sup> Ann Morning, "South Asia," in *Encyclopedia of American Immigration*, ed. James Cimet; Armonk, N.Y.: Sharpe Reference, 2001, pp. 1207-1214; Philip Thomas, "East Indian Experience in the United States and in Augusta," *Richmond County History*, Vols. 19-20, 1987-89, pp. 22-23.

<sup>5</sup> John M. Spivak, "Paradise Awaits: A Sampling and Brief Analysis of Late Nineteenth Century Promotional Pamphlets on Florida," *Southern Studies*, Vol. 21, 1982, p. 432.

<sup>6</sup> Gerald T. White, *The United States and the Problem of Recovery After 1893*, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1982, pp. 1-4.

<sup>7</sup> "The Prophet's People," *Frederick News* (Md.), May 29, 1893, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> "Mohammedan Colonists," *New York Press*, May 29, 1893.

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- <sup>9</sup> Quote from, "Comes to Spread the Moslem Faith," *Chicago Tribune*, July 3, 1893, p. 5; see also, "Colonies May Come," *Washington Post*, July 4, 1893, p. 1.
- <sup>10</sup> Alexander Russell Webb Journals, 1892. Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University. Entries from October 5 and November 1.
- <sup>11</sup> "Mahomet in the South," *Washington Post*, June 1, 1893, p. 4.
- <sup>12</sup> "Mohammedanism in Mexico," *Arizona Republican*, August 27, 1893, p. 8.
- <sup>13</sup> "To My Oriental Brothers," *Moslem World and Voice of Islam*, January 1895, p. 4.
- <sup>14</sup> "Fall of Islam in America," *New York Times*, December 1, 1895, p. 21.
- <sup>15</sup> Basharat Ahmad, *Mujaddid Azam*, trans. Hamid Rahman, p. 160, forthcoming.
- <sup>16</sup> "Timely Topics," *New York Recorder*, April 12, 1893, p. 6.
- <sup>17</sup> *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v. 'Chambers, James Julius.'
- <sup>18</sup> Reprints of the article appeared nationally from April to July 1893 under the title "Mohammedanism: A Religious Solution of the Southern Negro Problem." A sample include: *Marion Daily Star* (OH), April 26, 1893, p. 6; *Olean Democrat* (NY), May 2, 1893, p. 8; *Daily Nevada State Journal*, June 9, 1893, p. 1 and June 10, 1893, p. 1; *Woodland Daily Democrat* (CA), June 14, 1893, p. 1.
- <sup>19</sup> Edward E. Curtis IV, *Islam in Black America*, Albany: SUNY Press, 2002, pp. 30-33.
- <sup>20</sup> Richard B. Turner, "Pan-Africanism and the New American Islam: Edward Wilmot Blyden and Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb," in *Islam in the African-American Experience*, 2nd edn., Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003, pp. 47-67.
- <sup>21</sup> "The Land of Pagodas," *St. Louis Republic*, December 4, 1892, p. 10.
- <sup>22</sup> "Some Day He Will Know," *Moslem World*, July 1893, p. 16.
- <sup>23</sup> "Invasion," *Los Angeles Times*, May 29, 1893, p. 1; "Mohammedans Coming," *Augusta Chronicle*, May 29, 1893, p. 1; "Mahomet in the South," *Washington Post*, June 1, 1893, p. 4; "Do We Want 'Em?" *Pensacola Daily News*, June 1, 1893; "Coming in Allah's Name," *Mobile Daily Register*, June 1, 1893, p. 1; "No Heathen Need Apply," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 19, 1893, p. 4; "Pensacola Threatened With Mohammedanism," *Pensacola Daily News*, May 31, 1893, p. 4.
- <sup>24</sup> Excerpted in "News Notes," *Moslem World*, July 1893, p. 8.
- <sup>25</sup> "Mahomet in the South," *Washington Post*, June 1, 1893, p. 1.
- <sup>26</sup> Reference to Webb's "Quixotic brain" appeared in "News Notes," *Los Angeles Times*, June 8, 1893, p. 4.
- <sup>27</sup> "Mohammedanism in America," *Indiana County Gazette* (PA), June 7, 1893, p. 6.
- <sup>28</sup> "Favors Moslem Immigration," *Moslem World*, July 1893, p. 9.
- <sup>29</sup> "Indebted to Moslems," *Moslem World*, August 1893, p. 12.
- <sup>30</sup> "News Notes," *Richmond Times*, May 30, 1893, p. 4.
- <sup>31</sup> "No Encouragement," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 2, 1893, p. 2.
- <sup>32</sup> Excerpted in: "Enough Heathen Already," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 11, 1893, p. 14.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>34</sup> Three quotes excerpted in: "No Heathen Need Apply," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 19, 1893, p. 4.
- <sup>35</sup> "News Notes," *Augusta Chronicle*, May 30, 1893, p. 4.
- <sup>36</sup> "News Notes," *Florida Times-Union*, June 2, 1893, p. 4.
- <sup>37</sup> "A New Attraction, Perhaps," *Florida Times-Union*, June 6, 1893, p. 4. Osmanli is a reference to the Ottoman Turks.
- <sup>38</sup> "The Coming of Mahomet," *Pensacola Daily News*, June 1, 1893.
- <sup>39</sup> "A Big Colonization Scheme," *Mobile Daily Register*, May 30, 1893, p. 5.
- <sup>40</sup> "To Colonize Mussulmen," *Hagerstown Herald and Torch Light* (MD), June 8, 1893, p. 1.