

Historical Backgrounder

What is the *Clotilda*?

Under the cover of night in the summer of 1860, a ship carrying 110 Africans slipped into Mobile Bay. The *Clotilda*, the last known U.S. slave ship, made its illegal voyage 52 years after the international slave trade had been outlawed. (Though it was illegal to bring enslaved people into the United States, domestic slavery itself remained legal until 1865.)

Timothy Meaher, a prominent Mobile businessman, made a bet that he could smuggle a shipload of Africans into the United States and into enslavement. He and the ship's captain, William Foster, secretly outfitted the schooner *Clotilda* to carry human cargo and planned a covert trip to West Africa.

The ship sailed to what was then known as the Kingdom of Dahomey (modern-day Benin) and returned with 110 Africans who had been captured in tribal warfare.

Upon arrival in Alabama, the captives were offloaded into the marshes along the Mobile River. In an attempt to conceal the crime, Meaher ordered the boat burned and sunk. Some captives remained in Mobile, enslaved by the Meaher family, and others were sold to Alabama plantations north of Mobile.



This mural of the schooner *Clotilda* appears in Mobile's Africatown community.

Credit: Visit Mobile

What became of the ship's survivors?

More than five decades had elapsed from the time slave trade was made illegal to when the *Clotilda* arrived. As a result, the ship's survivors were very different from many of the other enslaved people living in Alabama at the time, who had been born into slavery and were familiar with each other, the American landscape and the English language. The *Clotilda* survivors demonstrated remarkable resiliency as they adapted to their new surroundings, but they also worked hard to maintain their own customs and language.

When slavery was abolished in 1865, the survivors dreamed of returning to Africa, but they didn't have the financial means to make that happen. Instead, many of them pooled their limited resources to purchase land from the Meahers and turned the property into the independent community known as "Africatown." There they maintained their African identities, continued to speak their languages, established their own set of laws and - in the early years - even had a chief. They built churches, schools and businesses based on what

they knew from their homeland, and established their “African Town” on the northern end of Mobile.

Though not all residents of Africatown were *Clotilda* survivors and their descendants, that is who was at the heart of this unique community. A leader among the group was a man named Cudjo Lewis (born Kossola), who was among the last living survivors. In 1927 - eight years before his death - he was interviewed by Zora Neale Hurston, a Black author and anthropologist, who wrote a book called *Barracoon: The Story of the Last “Black Cargo.”* Excerpts of the book were finally released in 2003, and the full book was published in 2018, which is when so much of the rest of the world finally learned the truly human side of this story.

What happened to the *Clotilda*?

Generations of residents in Africatown heard family members and friends tell the story of the burning and sinking of the *Clotilda*, but it was not something that was publicly discussed outside the community. It was always suspected that the vessel rested at the bottom of the Mobile River, though, and in 2018 divers found what they thought was the ship’s remnants.

In May 2019, that shipwreck was officially verified, providing a tangible link to the names and stories that had been passed down through all those generations. Though a few artifacts were brought to the surface, they must remain preserved in water. That is how they will be viewed in “*Clotilda: The Exhibition*” at Africatown Heritage House.

The ship appears to be remarkably intact underwater, but it has broken into a few large pieces. Items that have rested underwater for more than 150 years have been protected in nature’s unique ways. Research is being conducted now to determine whether the ship can be excavated; meanwhile, the site is only accessible by water. Public boat tours to the general location are being planned and further details about these opportunities will be released as they become available.



*Credit: Alabama Historical Commission

What’s next for the descendants and Africatown?

With the verification of the *Clotilda*’s location, the descendants of the ship’s survivors - whether they live in Africatown or not - finally have a tangible tie to their ancestors’ life stories. In this way, they have something that descendants of other enslaved people often do not ... an indisputable trail back to their African roots. A huge percentage of them know where their families came from, exactly when they arrived in the United States, and what happened to them from there.

For that reason, it is thought that Africatown Heritage House may become a gathering place for countless Americans of African descent, giving them a tie to someone’s story ... even if it is not their own. This is a place where stories that had long been whispered can finally be exclaimed.

*Three disarticulated pieces of the *Clotilda*. All pieces have been placed back inside the wreck and protected by sandbags.