



# CLOTILDA

## (SLAVE SHIP)

The two-masted schooner Clotilda was the last known U.S. slave ship to bring captives from Africa to the United States, arriving at Mobile Bay, with 110 kidnapped African's.

After the voyage, the ship was burned and scuttled in Mobile Bay in an attempt to destroy the evidence.

After the Civil War, Cudjo Kazoola Lewis and thirty-one other formerly enslaved people founded Africatown on the north side of Mobile, Alabama. They were joined by other continental Africans and formed a community that continued to practice many of their West African traditions and Yoruba language for decades.

A spokesman for the community, Cudjo Lewis lived until 1935 and was one of the last survivors from the Clotilda. Redoshi, another captive on the Clotilda, was sold to a planter in Dallas County, Alabama, where she became known also as Sally Smith. She married, had a daughter, and lived to 1937 in Bogue Chitto. She was long thought to have been the last survivor of the Clotilda. Research published in 2020 indicated that another survivor, Matilda McCrear, lived until 1940.

Some 100 descendants of the Clotilda enslaved people still live in Africatown, and others are around the country. After World War II, the neighborhood was absorbed by the city of Mobile. A memorial bust of Lewis was placed in front of the historic Union Missionary Baptist Church.[2] The Africatown historic district was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2012. In May 2019, the Alabama Historical Commission announced that remnants of a ship found along the Mobile River, near 12 Mile Island and just north of the Mobile Bay delta, were confirmed as the Clotilda. The wreck site was listed on the National Register in 2021.

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The schooner Clotilda, under the command of Captain William Foster and carrying a cargo of 110 Africans, arrived in Mobile Bay, Alabama, in July 1860. Captain Foster was working for Timothy Meaher, a wealthy Mobile shipyard owner and steamboat captain, who in 1855 or 1856 had built Clotilda, a two-masted schooner 86 feet (26 m) long with a beam of 23 feet (7.0 m) and a copper-sheathed hull, designed for the lumber trade.

Meaher had learned that West African tribes were at war and that the King of Dahomey (now Benin) was willing to sell enemy prisoners as slaves. Dahomey's forces had been raiding communities in the interior, bringing captives to the large slave market at the port of Whydah. Meaher was said to have wagered another wealthy gentleman from New Orleans, that he could successfully smuggle Africans into the US despite the 1807 Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves.

Departing on March 4, 1860, Foster sailed from Mobile with a crew of 12, including himself, carrying \$9,000 in gold to purchase Africans. He arrived in Whydah on May 15, 1860, where he had the ship outfitted to carry Africans, using materials he had transported. He offered to buy 125 Africans in Whydah for \$100 each, said to be mostly of the "Tarkbar" tribe, taken in a raid near Tamale in present-day Ghana. Research in the 21st century suggests that they were actually Takpa people, a band of Yoruba people from the interior of present-day Nigeria.

He described meeting an African prince and being taken to the king's court. Foster wrote in his journal in 1860, "Having agreeably transacted affairs with the Prince we went to the warehouse where they had in confinement four thousand captives in a state of nudity from which they gave me liberty to select one hundred and twenty-five as mine offering to brand them for me, from which I preemptorily [sic] forbid; commenced taking on cargo of negroes, successfully securing on board one hundred and ten."

Foster's journal recorded that he anchored Clotilda on July 9 off Point of Pines in Grand Bay, Mississippi (likely referring to Point Aux Pins on Grand Bay in Alabama, near the Mississippi state line). He traveled overland by horse and buggy to Mobile to meet with Meaher. Fearful of criminal charges, Captain Foster brought the schooner into the Port of Mobile at night and had it towed up the Spanish River to the Alabama River at Twelve Mile Island. He transferred the African captives to a river steamboat, then burned Clotilda "to the water's edge" before sinking it. He paid off the crew and told them to return North.

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The African captives were mostly distributed to the financial backers of the Clotilda venture, with Timothy Meaher retaining 30 captives on his property north of Mobile, including Cudjo (aka Cudjoe) Lewis, known as Kossoula or Kazoola. Despite the racial hierarchy of the Deep South, the Africans from Clotilda could not be legally registered as slaves because they were smuggled in; however, they were treated as chattel. Some of the captives were sold farther away, including Redoshi (later known also as Sally Smith) and a man later known as William or Billy, who were sold to Washington Smith, a planter in Dallas County, Alabama. They later married and had a daughter.

In 1861, the federal government prosecuted Meaher and Foster in Mobile for illegal slave importation, but the case was dismissed for lack of evidence from the ship or its manifest, and perhaps because of the outbreak of the Civil War.

Because Captain Foster reported he burned and sank Clotilda in the delta north of Mobile Bay, archaeological searches have continued into the 21st century for the wreck. Several visible wrecks have been referred to by locals as the slave ship. Wreckage from Clotilda was allegedly found in 2018, but the Alabama Historical Commission ruled out the findings because of "major differences between the two vessels," and apparent lack of any fire damage. In May 2019, the Alabama Historical Commission announced the wreck had finally been found by researcher Ben Raines, showing "physical and forensic evidence [that] powerfully suggests that this is the Clotilda."

