

OLUALE KOSSOLA aka CUDJO LEWIS



Cudjo Lewis, Courtesy Erik Overbey Collection,
University of South Alabama Archives

- Cudjo Lewis was considered for years to be the last survivor of the last slave ship to enter the United States. Born around 1841 to a Yoruba family in the Banté region of Dahomey (today Benin), he was given the name Oluale Kossola (Kazoola).
- A member of the Yoruba people, he was only 19 years old when members of the neighboring Dahomian tribe invaded his village, captured him along with others, and marched them to the coast. There, he and about 120 others were sold into slavery and crammed onto the Clotilda, the last slave ship to reach the continental United States.
- The Clotilda brought its captives to Alabama in 1860, just a year before the outbreak of the Civil War. Even though slavery was legal at that time in the U.S., the international slave trade was not, and hadn't been for over 50 years. Along with many European nations, the U.S. had outlawed the practice in 1807, but Lewis' journey is an example of how slave traders went around the law to continue bringing over human cargo.

OLUALE KOSSOLA

aka CUDJO LEWIS

- To avoid detection, Lewis' captors snuck him and the other survivors into Alabama at night and made them hide in a swamp for several days. To hide the evidence of their crime, the 86-foot sailboat was then set ablaze on the banks of the Mobile-Tensaw Delta (its remains may have been uncovered in January 2018).
- Upon entering the Mississippi Sound on July 9, 1860, Kossola and seven other bondsmen were transferred to James Meaher, brother of Timothy Meaher. When James Meaher could not pronounce Kossola's name, Kossola told Meaher to call him "Cudjo." Cudjo worked on a steamship and was subject to overwork and poor living conditions for five years. On April 12, 1865, Union soldiers informed Cudjo and other slave workers on the steamboat that they were free.
- More than 60 years after the abolition of slavery, anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston made an incredible connection: She located one of the last survivors of the last slave ship to bring captive Africans to the United States, and went on to tell his story.
- Upon emancipation, Cudjo left James Meaher's plantation and took the name Lewis. Desiring to return to Africa, he and his Clotilda captives attempted to acquire reparations in the form of repatriation or land. In 1872, after failing to receive either, Cudjo and the Mobile Africans pooled their resources and purchased land from the Meahers and other wealthy whites to form a settlement, which they named Africa Town. Cudjo resided in Africa Town for the remainder of his life. He became a citizen of the United States in 1868 and a Baptist in 1869.
- In 1880, Lewis legally married Celia (Abile), a fellow Clotilda capture who had lived with Cudjo since 1866. Together they had five sons and one daughter. Cudjo worked as a shingle maker until 1902, when he was injured in a train accident. He then became the church sexton for Africa Town.
- Cudjo Lewis was thought for many years to have survived his fellow Clotilda companions, leaving him the last survivor of the last slave ship to enter the United States, though this was later proven untrue. He died on July 26, 1935 at the estimated age of 94.