

AFRICATOWN

Africatown is a small Mobile, Alabama neighborhood established by many of the people who arrived on the *Clotilda*, the last documented slave ship to reach the United States. Co-founder Cudjo Lewis achieved notoriety when he was interviewed about his experiences in Africa, his journey to Mobile on the ship, and his life after he regained his freedom. The Africatown settlement (formerly called African Town) is located north of the city on a hill by the Alabama River in the area known as Plateau and Magazine Point.

African Town consisted of two sections: a large one of about 50 acres and a smaller one of seven acres located two miles west of the other. The smaller section was called Lewis Quarters after Cudjo Lewis (Oluale was his Yoruba name), one of the founders of the compound. In the 1890s, African Town consisted of about 30 houses set in a clearing in a pine forest. The residents appointed Gumpa, a Fon relative of King Ghezo known as Peter Lee or African Peter, as their chief. They also established a judicial system for the town based on their own laws, which were administered by two judges, Jaba Shade—well versed in herbal medicine—and Ossa Keeby. They also built the first school in the area to provide their children with better opportunities. Their schoolteacher was a young African American woman.

Although the residents of African Town owned land, had become U.S. citizens in 1868, and enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy, they never ceased to long for their families and homelands back in Africa.

By the 1880s, African Town was home to a second generation that had never been to Africa but had been told repeatedly by their parents that it was a land of abundance and beauty. Many of the youngsters had both an American and a West African name, knew the geography of their parents' homelands, and, among those who had two African parents, also spoke their indigenous languages.

In 1869, the residents, who thus far had continued to practice their traditional religions, largely converted to Christianity. They built the first church in the neighborhood, Old Landmark Baptist Church, in 1872 (it was rebuilt in bricks in the early twentieth century) and opened a graveyard in 1876. Over time, several couples, including Cudjo and Abile Lewis, and Ossa and Annie Keeby, bought additional land, and the settlement expanded.

The Africa Town Community Mobilization Project was formed in February 1997 with the purpose of establishing an Africa Town Historical District and encouraging the historical restoration and development of the site.