MAGAZINE

America's last slave ship stole them from home. It couldn't steal their identities.

In 1860, an illegal bet brought the last known captive Africans to U.S. shores aboard *Clotilda*. Their story is one of tragedy and resilience.

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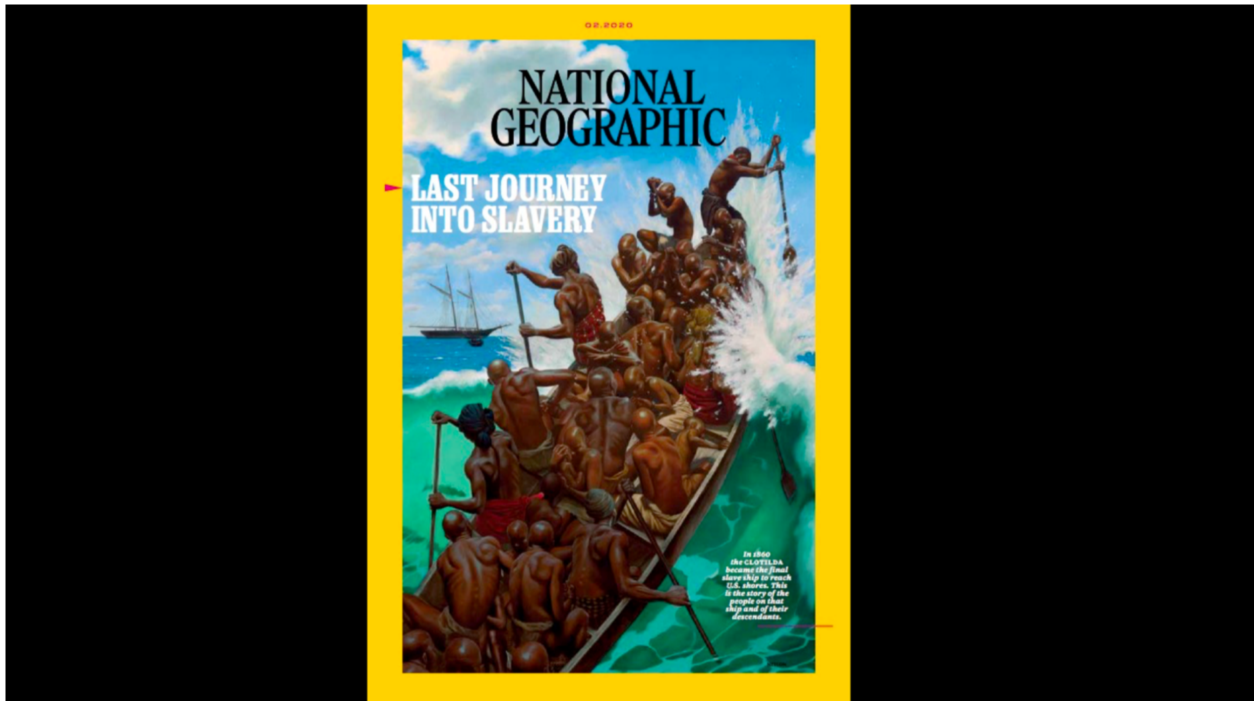


Last May, **400 years** after shackled Africans first set foot in the English colony of Virginia, a team of underwater archaeologists announced that the charred, sunken remains of the *Clotilda*, the last known slave ship to reach U.S. shores, had been discovered near Mobile, Alabama.

In 1860—52 years after the United States had banned the import of slaves—a wealthy landowner hired the schooner and its captain to smuggle more than a hundred African captives into Alabama, a crime punishable by hanging. Once the nefarious mission was accomplished, the ship was set ablaze to destroy the evidence. The captives were the last of an estimated

307,000 Africans delivered into bondage in mainland America from the early 1600s to 1860, making the *Clotilda* an infamous bookend to what has long been called "America's original sin."

In 1865 President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed that the Civil War that had devastated the nation was the Almighty's judgment on that sin. After the war ended and slavery was abolished, the displaced Africans from the *Clotilda* put down roots as free Americans, but they didn't relinquish their African identities. Settling among the woods and marshes upriver from Mobile, they built simple homes, planted gardens, tended livestock, hunted, fished, and farmed. They founded a church and built their own school. And they created a tight-knit, self-reliant community that came to be known as Africatown.

Many of their descendants still live there today. The story of these extraordinary people—their trials and triumphs, their suffering and resilience—is one the people of Africatown are proud to remember, and a legacy they are fighting to save.

Chapter 1

CRUEL COMMERCE

By Joel K. Bourne, Jr.

By 1860 enslaved people were the foundation of the American economy, more valuable than all the capital invested in manufacturing, railroads, and banks combined. Cotton accounted for 35 to 40 percent of U.S. exports, says Joshua Rothman, a historian of slavery at the University of Alabama.

"Banks in the U.S. and around the world were pouring money into Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, investing in plantations, southern banks, and enslaved people, who could be mortgaged," Rothman says.

Importing slaves into the United States had been outlawed since 1808, and by 1859 the price of domestic slaves had soared, cutting deeply into planters' profits and spurring some to clamor for reopening the trade.

One fiery proponent was Timothy Meaher. Born in Maine to Irish immigrants, Meaher and several of his siblings had moved to Alabama and amassed fortunes as shipbuilders, riverboat captains, and lumber magnates. They also owned vast tracts of land worked by slaves.

During a heated argument with a group of northern businessmen, Meaher made a bold wager: He would bring a cargo of African captives into Mobile, right under the noses of federal authorities.

Meaher had little trouble getting investors for his illegal scheme. His friend and fellow shipwright William Foster had built a sleek, speedy schooner named *Clotilda* a few years earlier

to haul lumber and other cargo around the Gulf of Mexico. Meaher chartered the boat for $35,000 and enlisted Foster as captain.

In late February or early March 1860, Foster and his crew set sail for the notorious slave port of Ouidah, in present-day Benin. So began one of the best documented slave voyages to the United States.

Foster left a handwritten account of the trip, while Meaher and several of the Africans later told their stories to journalists and writers. Two of the former slaves who lived into the 1930s appeared in short films.

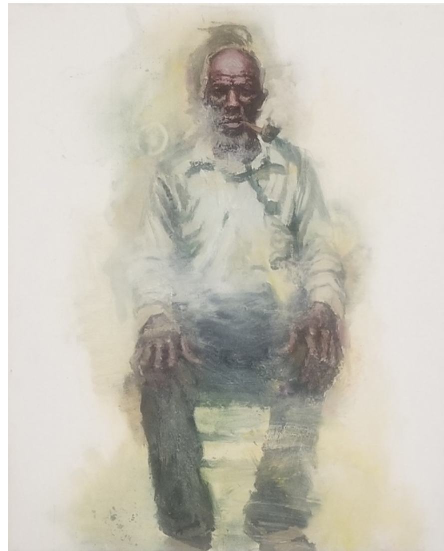
Chapter 2

JOURNEY OF NO RETURN

By Sylviane Diouf

The 110 young men, women, and children who boarded the *Clotilda* in May 1860 came from Bantè, Dahomey, Kebbi, Atakora, and other regions of Benin and Nigeria. Among them were people from the Yoruba, Isha, Dendi, Nupe, and Fon ethnic groups. Their parents had named them Kossola, Kupollee, Abile, Abache, Gumpa.

Some were long-distance traders, likely carrying salt, copper, and fabric. They may have produced iron. Others may have woven cloth, harvested yams, or made palm oil. Some women were married and had children; they likely worked as farmers or market traders.



One man, Kupollee, had a small hoop in each ear, which meant he had been initiated in an *ile-orisa*—house of the god—into the religion of the Yoruba. Ossa Keeby came from Kebbi in Nigeria, a kingdom renowned for its professional fishermen. Like 19-year-old Kossola (later

known as Cudjo Lewis), several were victims of a raid by the slave-trading kingdom of Dahomey. Kossola said he came from modest means, but his grandfather was an officer of a Bantè king. At 14 he trained as a soldier and later began initiation into the Yoruba *oro,* the male secret society. A young girl, Kěhounco (Lottie Dennison), was kidnapped, as were many others. Their forced journeys ended in a slave pen in Ouidah.

Amid the sheer horror and misery, the captives found support and solidarity, until foreign slavers irreparably tore their newfound community apart. According to newspaper interviews and oral histories given by the survivors over the years and detailed in my book *Dreams of Africa in Alabama: The Slave Ship Clotilda and the Story of the Last Africans Brought to America,* when Clotilda captain Foster entered the grounds, people were ordered to form circles of 10. After inspecting their skin, teeth, hands, feet, legs, and arms, he selected 125 individuals. In the evening they were told they would leave the next day. Many spent the night crying. They had no idea what loomed ahead and did not want to be separated from their loved ones.

In the morning the dejected group waded neck-deep across a lagoon to reach the beach, where canoes transported them over the dangerous, sometimes deadly, surf to the *Clotilda*. What happened next haunted them forever. They were forced to remove their clothes. The Africans' total nakedness was a rule of the slave trade, officially—although quite ineffectively—to maintain cleanliness. The last *Clotilda* survivors still bristled years later at the humiliation of being called naked savages by Americans who believed nudity was "African."

Before the transfer was over, Foster saw steamers approaching. Afraid he would be caught, he sailed away, leaving 15 people on the beach. For the first 13 days at sea, every captive remained confined in the hold. Decades later, in 1906, when Abache (Clara Turner) talked of the filth, the darkness, the heat, the chains, and the thirst to a writer from *Harper's* magazine, "her eyes were burning, her soul inexpressibly agitated at the memory." Despair, agony, and horror were compounded for powerless parents unable to alleviate their children's fears and suffering. One woman, later known as Gracie, had four daughters on board; the youngest, Matilda, was about two years old. The lack of water was torture, and the meals—molasses and mush—did not help. The sugary foods only intensified their thirst. "One swallow" twice a day was all they got, and it tasted like vinegar. The rain they caught in their mouths and hands was a fleeting relief. There was sickness, and two people died.

Slave ships were places of unspeakable misery. Solidarity was vital, and those who suffered together forged lifelong relationships that sometimes spanned generations—if they were not separated again. On the *Clotilda,* over a month and a half, such a community was born.

On July 8 the shipmates glimpsed land in the distance. They heard a noise they likened to a swarm of bees. It was the sound of a tugboat towing the *Clotilda* up Mobile Bay. They were transferred to a steamboat owned by Timothy Meaher's brother Burns and taken upriver to John Dabney's plantation while Foster took his ship to Twelve Mile Island. There was no hiding the squalid remnants of a slaving voyage, and Foster risked the death penalty if caught. He lit loose wood or perhaps lantern oil, and the ship he

Short of workers for their developing plantations, slaveholders in the Deep South had for years bought people from the upper South at prices they found outrageous. With the international slave trade illegal, some turned to smuggling. In Alabama, despite Foster and Meaher's precautions, the "secret" arrival was all over town and in the press within a day or two. Meanwhile, the young Africans had disembarked into the desolate, mosquito-infested canebrakes of Dabney's Clarke County plantation. Moved from one place to another to avoid detection, they were fed meat and cornmeal that made them sick. They welcomed the rags, pieces of cornsacks, and skins they were given in lieu of clothes. When federal authorities sent a crew led by a U.S. marshal to find them, the Africans had already been moved to Burns's plantation. They "almost grieved themselves to death," they confided half a century later.

Timothy Meaher, eager to quickly settle his affairs, organized a sale. As their new family was separated once again, the shipmates cried and sang a farewell song, wishing one another "no danger on the road." While about 80 were taken to Mobile, the *Mercury* newspaper of July 23, 1860, reported, "some negroes who never learned to talk English, went up the Railroad the other day ... There were twenty-five of them, apparently all of the pure, unadulterated African stock." As the group was walking, a circus passed by, and when the Africans heard an elephant, they screamed, *"Ile, ile, ajanaku, ajanaku,"* ("home," "elephant," in Yoruba and Fon). They spent the rest of their lives scattered across the Black Belt of Alabama. Gracie was sold along with two of her daughters, but agonizingly, she never knew what happened to her other two.

Timothy Meaher was arrested, released on bail, tried, and cleared of all charges. Federal cases against Burns Meaher and Dabney were dismissed because "said negroes" were never found. Foster was fined $1,000 for failing to pay the duties on his "imports." Timothy Meaher awarded himself 16 males and 16 females; Burns took 20 of the captives, including Kėhounco; and James Meaher took Kossola and seven of his companions. Foster received 16 individuals, among them Abile (Celia Lewis). Each person bought for $100 in Ouidah was now worth $1,000, and once acclimated could be sold for $2,000, or $60,000 in today's dollars.

BONDS OF KINSHIP

The next phase of the shipmates' tribulation was their entry into the savage plantation world inhabited by black and white strangers. Up to then they had been Yoruba, Dendi, Nupe, or Fon, with different languages and cultures. At that moment they became Africans. Identifying with a continent was as alien to them as it was to Europeans. But they embraced their new identity with pride, regardless of others' contempt. Noah Hart, enslaved on Timothy Meaher's plantation, recalled that they looked fierce, yet they never threatened the African Americans on the plantation or quarreled among themselves. Acting as a group, they "wouldn't stand a lick" from whites or blacks. Several times they engaged in collective acts of resistance, unafraid of the consequences.

When Meaher's cook, Polly, slapped one of the young girls, she screamed like a "wild cat in the darkness," Hart said. Her shipmates came running from the fields with rakes, spades, and sticks in hand. Polly darted up the stairs to Mary Meaher's room. They followed her and banged on the door. Polly quit. One day Burns's overseer tried to whip a young woman. They all

jumped on him, grabbed the lash, and beat him up. He never tried to brutalize them again. One of the Africans, Sakarago, argued with a white man and was unconcerned by the high price he could pay for his audacity. But it appears that where the shipmates were isolated, just two or three to a plantation, they were poorly treated. Redoshi (Sallie Smith) told civil rights activist Amelia Boynton Robinson that “the slave masters and overseers beat us for every little thing when we didn’t understand American talk.”

The Africans largely kept to themselves and maintained practices they had grown up with. The people from Atakora, in present-day Benin, buried their dead in deep graves, the corpses wrapped in bark. The Yoruba plunged their newborns into a creek, looking for signs of vitality. One Fon couple tattooed their son’s chest with the image of a snake biting its tail, a sacred symbol of the kingdom of Dahomey.

For five years the shipmates labored in the cotton, rice, and sugarcane fields. In Mobile several men worked on the river ships, firing the furnaces with tons of timber, loading and unloading bales of cotton. During the Civil War, forced to build the city’s fortifications, they lived in abject conditions.

At last, on April 12, 1865, freedom came when the Union Army entered the city. The Africans celebrated to the beat of a drum.

FOUNDING FATHERS AND MOTHERS

The men found work in Mobile’s lumber and gunpowder mills and at the rail yards. The women grew vegetables and sold their produce door-to-door. To structure their recomposed community, they chose a chief, Gumpa (Peter Lee), a nobleman related to the king of Dahomey, and two judges, Charlie Lewis and Jabe Shade, who was an herbalist and a doctor. And, as any family would do, they reconnected with their shipmates, about 150 miles away in Dallas County.

Surviving on meager rations, they saved all they could, longing to return home, but it was not enough. So they settled on a new strategy, as Kossola explained to Meaher. “Captain Tim,” he said, “you brought us from our country where we had land and home. You made us slaves. Now we are free, without country, land, or home. Why don’t you give us a piece of this land and let us build for ourselves an African Town?” They were asking for reparations. Meaher was incensed.

Far from giving up, the community intensified its efforts and succeeded in buying land, including from the Meahers. Pooling their money, four families put down roots on seven acres known to this day as Lewis Quarters, named for Charlie Lewis. Two miles away, the largest settlement of 50 acres was nestled amid pine trees, cypresses, and junipers. As they would have done at home, the new

landowners built their three dozen wood houses collectively. Surrounded by flowers, each had a vegetable garden and fruit trees. They later built a school and church. Old Landmark Baptist

Church was adjacent to Abile and Kossola's land and faced east toward Africa. Close by was their own graveyard. They called their hamlet African Town. Africa was where they wanted to be, but they were in Mobile to stay.

The progressive policies of Reconstruction helped freed people, but that was about to change. In the run-up to the 1874 congressional elections, the *Mobile Daily Register* called on whites to "answer to the roll call of white supremacy."

Timothy Meaher had pressured the African men, who had been naturalized in 1868, to vote Democrat, the pro-slavery party. But he doubted they would, so on Election Day, he told the polling station clerks they were foreigners. Charlie, Pollee, and Cudjo were turned away. Meaher jumped on his horse and prevented them from voting at two other locations. The men walked to Mobile, five miles away. They were told to pay a dollar each, almost a full day's wages, to vote. They did. Each received a piece of paper attesting he had voted. They kept them for decades.

Ke̋hounco and her husband, North Carolinian James Dennison, joined the first reparations movement. When James died, Ke̋hounco continued to petition for his Union Army military pension. In Dallas County, 72-year-old Matilda walked 15 miles to see the probate judge in Selma and inquire about compensation for Africans who had been torn from their homelands.

The Africans' habit of standing up for their rights took a new turn in 1902. Kossola was hit by a train and badly hurt; six months later, so was Gumpa. They sued the railroad companies. Gumpa passed away before his case was settled—his grandchildren received some money—and the following year, *Cudjo Lewis* v. *the Louisville and Nashville Railroad Company* went to court. Despite expectations, the jury awarded him $650 ($19,000 in today's dollars). But the L&N appealed to the Alabama Supreme Court and won.

By the early 1900s, the shipmates had spent more time in America than in their homelands. Most had taken American surnames and converted to Christianity; several married African Americans. They had adopted local ways while maintaining the cultures that they loved. The children, who went to school, grew up between these two worlds. Some American-born children spoke their parents' languages; Matilda interpreted for her mother. Each had an American name to use in the outside world, where they were often ostracized and called monkeys and savages. Their African name was for the extended family.

Helen Jackson, a granddaughter of Ossa Keeby, confided, "We were all one family. We were taught to call every other African our own age 'cousin.' We knew they were the same as us—and that we were all different from everyone else." The children felt safe. "We had land, we had family," said Olivette Howze, Abache's great-granddaughter, in a 2003 newspaper article. "We lived well. I'm glad I was raised there."

If their hometown was a nurturing haven, the African homelands were the idyllic places their mothers and fathers dreamed of. "They say it was good there," recalled Eva Allen Jones,

Kupollee's daughter. "I seen them sit down and shed tears. I see my father and Uncle Cudjo weep and shed tears talking about going home."

Kossola died in 1935, Redoshi the following year. Others may have lived a while longer. In slavery and freedom, from youth to adulthood, these men and women resisted oppression. They vigorously praised and defended their cultures, and passed on what they could to their children. Those who established African Town—which still exists—created a refuge from Americans, white and black. Their community adapted, but their success was clearly built on the fundamental African ethos of family and community first.

The people of the *Clotilda* endured the separation from loved ones, the Middle Passage, slavery, the Civil War, Jim Crow, and for some, the Great Depression. They never recovered from the tragedy of their youth, but they preserved their dignity, unity, and pride in who they were and where they came from. Their story speaks of immense fortitude and accomplishments. But most of all, it speaks of irremediable loss. Several decades after stepping off the *Clotilda*, Ossa Keeby said, "I goes back to Africa every night, in my dreams."

Chapter 3

SAVING AFRICATOWN

By Joel K. Bourne, Jr.

The Africans were soon joined by a few African-American families who were moving off the farm to find work in the nearby mills and port. In 1910 the community built the Mobile County Training School, which over the next decades would graduate dozens of preachers, teachers, entrepreneurs, even some professional athletes. Most famously, alumni Cleon Jones and Tommie Agee helped win the 1969 World Series for New York's Miracle Mets.

By the 1960s two giant paper mills were running night and day, jobs were plentiful, and more than 12,000 people called Africatown home. Anderson Flen grew up during Africatown's heyday and remembers it as a place where children were sure to speak to elders sitting on their porches and where elders made sure no child went hungry.

As he shows me around town in his pickup truck, Flen tells me that they had a lot more access to the water when he was young. "We caught bream, croaker, mullet, catfish, flounder, blue crabs. There were fruit trees, berries, and fig trees all in here. It was a great place to grow up."

The training school was the heart and soul of the community, Flen says, its bell ringing for everything from football victories to house fires to funerals. Students wore uniform shirts and ties or dresses three days a week and were drilled in the "five wells": "Well dressed, well spoken, well read, well traveled, well balanced," says Flen, who was president of his senior class and now leads the school's alumni association.

Today Africatown is a shadow of its former self. Blocks of dilapidated shotgun houses are sprinkled with the occasional neat brick ranch with flowers in the yard. About half the homes are occupied; the rest are somewhere between vacant and condemned. A large public housing project built in the 1960s that residents called Happy Hills sits boarded up and slated for demolition. Heavy industries —including chemical plants, a petroleum tank farm, and one remaining paper mill—line the riverfront and encroach on the community. The four-lane Africatown Bridge, completed in 1991, was built over the heart of the business district. The busy Bay Bridge Road now bisects the community, separating the historic Union Missionary Baptist Church from the graveyard where several of its African founders are buried.

Environmental justice issues have long plagued the historic community, says Joe Womack, a retired Marine Corps major and founder of Clean, Healthy, Educated, Safe and Sustainable Community, a local group whose name mirrors its aspirations for Africatown. The industries that brought jobs turned out to be a double-edged sword, Womack says, by leaving a legacy of pollution and cancers that many residents think were caused by emissions from the paper mills and other heavy industries.

A few years ago Africatown residents helped forestall a plan to build another oil tank farm directly across from the Mobile County Training School. Residents are also suing International Paper for contaminating the air, soil, and water during its operation, and for failing to clean up polluted soil, which residents believe continues to contaminate the local groundwater and streams. Meanwhile, Mobile's chamber of commerce is seeking to attract more industry to the area, promoting it as part of the Alabama Gulf Coast Chemical Corridor.

"It's all part of their big-picture plan to build a two-billion-dollar bridge and take out the tunnels under the river so supertankers can get up here," Womack says. "The city has not taken care of the community because they want to industrialize the whole area. They just want to make money. But they could make money with tourism. We just have to bend them the right way."

Womack and other community leaders say the discovery of the *Clotilda* has created an impetus to heal old wounds and breathe new life into the area. The Africatown Connections Blueway project and other efforts are under way to reconnect communities to the river

and to each other. Plans include a proposed state park in the nearby community of Prichard—a sister city of Ouidah, Benin, since 1986.

The American Institute of Architects, the National Organization of Minority Architects, and Visit Mobile are sponsoring an international design competition for a new welcome center, a renovated school, and a museum and waterfront park where a replica of the *Clotilda* could be built. And officials at the Alabama Historical Commission and the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum

have suggested that Africatown could become home to a national slave ship memorial.

"This is a major part of our history," says Lorna Gail Woods, a 70-year-old local historian and descendant of Africatown founder Charlie Lewis. *"Amistad, Titanic* got traveling exhibits, why not *Clotilda*? They built a whole building in Washington, D.C.," a reference to the African-American museum. "Why not something for *Clotilda*? We need these kids to have some closure. There's major history right here that needs to be told to the entire world!"

Anderson Flen agrees. "There's a lot of pain in this country right now. Until we address the substance of the race issue as opposed to the fluff of the matter, things will never heal. Until we address the pain."

Epilogue

OWNING THE PAST

By Chelsea Brasted

Robert Meaher has heard the stories of how his great-grandfather, Timothy Meaher, masterminded the last delivery of slaves to U.S. shores, and how the ship, the *Clotilda,* was scuttled near Mobile. But he questions whether the wreckage discovered in the murky waters of the Mobile River is the actual vessel, pointing to other claims of discovery made in past decades. He also underscores that his ancestor was never convicted of any crime, and he points to the involvement of other responsible parties, like the people in Benin who sold the slaves, and William Foster, who captained the ship.

"Slavery is wrong," Meaher says, but "if your brother killed somebody, it would not be your fault." Still, he says, "I'll apologize. Something like that, that was wrong."

Meaher, the only member of his family to respond to interview requests, says he has done his own investigating into the *Clotilda,* scraping together details about the ship and its cargo. He keeps a 1931 article from the *Mobile Register* about Cudjo Lewis, highlighting a quote in which Lewis said, "But after all I am glad that I am here, for when I was there I didn't know there was a God." For Meaher, a religious man, this is no small thing. His family's connection to the story, he says, has prompted them to donate church property in Africatown, land for a park, and money to a nonprofit that sends hospital ships around the world, including to Benin.

At 73, Meaher says he hasn't been part of his family's property management for about two decades, so he can't speak to plans for any of the land they own in and around Africatown. When asked whether he'd be interested in a meeting with descendants of those aboard the *Clotilda,* Meaher is clear: "I'm not open to it."

Joycelyn Davis, a descendant of *Clotilda* captive Charlie Lewis, lives near the intersection of Timothy and Meaher Avenues. She says she's probably seen members of the Meaher family in the grocery store, or stood in line with them while waiting for coffee. They've never talked, but she has thought about what she'd ask the Meahers if given the chance. "If they could just sit down and tell us the story of what was told to them, because it had to have been a story," she

says. Davis has also considered reaching out to Foster's descendants, or to the people in Benin whose ancestors sold hers to the slave traders. "It's so much more than about getting back at someone," she says. "It's so much more than being about money."

That kind of connection, in which the descendants of the most fraught racial divides in America's history have found reconciliation, is possible. In 2009 the descendants of Homer Plessy and Judge John Howard Ferguson, the namesakes of the infamous case that led

the U.S. Supreme Court to endorse racial segregation in 1896, formed a foundation to teach about the case's impact and modern-day relevance. The judge's great-great-granddaughter, Phoebe Ferguson, met Keith Plessy, whose great-grandfather was Homer Plessy's cousin, soon after she learned of her family's place in history.

"I was just speechless of the power of the symbolism of us being together without doing anything, really, except that we were friends," Ferguson says. "I knew it wasn't my fault, but it was my family's legacy. Being in the 21st century does not give us permission to not do anything about it."

It all has to start, Ferguson and Plessy say, with owning that history. "We are responsible for making things right in our time," Plessy says. African Americans have been "not welcome here, forced to labor, tortured, murdered, you name it. It was all done to us." Forgiveness, he says, begins with acknowledging and apologizing for those wrongs.

Joel K. Bourne, Jr., broke the news of the Clotilda's discovery in our May 2019 online story. Historian Sylviane Diouf is the author of Dreams of Africa in Alabama. Chelsea Brasted is a writer based in New Orleans. Elias Williams specializes in portraits of underrepresented people. Artist Sedrick Huckaby focuses on African-American family heritage.