

## **Part 1: The Descendants**

SAM: Hi everyone - Sam here. Before we begin, a quick warning: this story contains upsetting depictions of the inhumane history of slavery in the United States. And additionally, while we've worked diligently to avoid them, I would like to formally acknowledge the potential for blind spots in our work. I'm a white person, and Vera, who did the principal reporting for this story, is white and Latinx. While we worked with a diverse team of collaborators on this project, I know this history is impossible to fully comprehend for those of us whose families do not bear the direct impact of the evils of slavery. We would never presume to offer a definitive narrative about slavery; but we've done our best to present this particular story of the families affected by slavery's legacy, with deep gratitude that they wanted to share it with us. We are grateful for the opportunity, and hope our work can contribute to the ongoing project of reckoning with the hideous ghost that haunts the entire American family.

*[Spoke audio logo]*

SAM: Hello, Ghost Family. Welcome to *Family Ghosts*.

*[MUSIC: Family Ghosts Theme]*

*Lorna: This is our little neighborhood and we try to preserve it so the history can be passed down to our other generations that's come along who don't really know...*

That's the voice of Lorna Woods. Lorna's in her seventies, and she lives in a neighborhood in Mobile, Alabama called Africatown. Africatown was established by formerly enslaved people after the Civil War, and has been fighting for survival virtually ever since. Lorna is a family historian, and she also runs a community history museum in Africatown called The Den. This past summer, our producer Vera Carothers paid Lorna a visit.

VERA: The Den is windowless and quiet. Low, circular tables create the air of a banquet hall set up in a school gymnasium. Africatown memorabilia overflows from tables and onto the bright white cinderblock walls: a hand-drawn family tree, handsewn quilts, cutouts of newspapers advertising “Negroes for sale,” a copy of a KKK poster warning black people not to vote, and collages of prominent black Americans. One section is devoted entirely to images of Obama. Lorna moves slowly between the displays. This whole place is her baby. For decades now, she’s lovingly clipped and pasted collages, scoured yard sales for artifacts and given tours for visitors to the Den.

*LORNA: ...they'll be able to put their hands and touch a part of the history that was made right here on with people hands and hard works.*

That’s important to Lorna, because outside of Africatown, the history of her community has been overlooked for generations.

SAM: The story of Africatown begins with a crime. According to local legend, one night in 1860, a wealthy businessman and steamboat captain was at a bar in Mobile, drinking with his wealthy businessman friends. This man’s name was Timothy Meaher, and on this particular night, he was bragging about a scheme he’d cooked up. It was still a few years before the Civil War - but the laws governing the slave trade in the US were already starting to change. Owning slaves was still allowed, but at this point it had been illegal to import new slaves for about fifty years. But Timothy Meaher didn’t care. In the years leading up to the Civil War, tensions were high in the South - businessmen like Timothy were getting nervous about the abolitionist fervor in the North. And Meaher was a staunch anti-federalist. He wanted to stick it to the government.

So that night in the bar, he came up with this plan to smuggle slaves into Alabama.

*[music in]*

Timothy enlisted his friend William Foster as a co-conspirator. Foster was a ship captain who had built a schooner called the Clotilda. Logging was a huge industry in those days, and so Foster and Meaher piled the Clotilda high with lumber to disguise the purpose of their trip. And they built human-sized slats in the hold of the ship, where they planned to hide the enslaved people.

Captain Foster sailed the Clotilda out around Cuba, and headed across the Atlantic. When he reached the west coast of Africa, Foster purchased more than a hundred enslaved people from the King of Dahomey, which is now Benin. Foster loaded them into the Clotilda, and set sail back to Alabama.

As he approached the Mobile Bay, Foster feared that government officials might be laying in wait, so he sailed the Clotilda north of Mobile, to Chickasaw Creek. There, at Timothy's command, he ordered everyone off the boat, and set it on fire, to destroy the evidence. The Clotilda sank, and the passengers were forced to hide in the swamp for several weeks, desperate and confused. Once the legal heat died down, Timothy Meaher returned to the swamp and claimed them as his property. The survivors were split up; some were discreetly sold to Meaher's local acquaintances, some were sent as far away as St. Louis and Selma, and a third of them stayed in Mobile, where they were enslaved by Meaher himself.

Meaher and Foster were never prosecuted for any of this. Meaher was arrested, but released after paying some minor fines. Federal authorities tried to prosecute Captain Foster, but by the time the trial rolled around, Alabama had seceded from the union. So they got away with it.

*[music out]*

Then the Civil War happened, and after emancipation, the freed slaves from the Clotilda founded their own community, which they called Africatown - where many of their descendants still live today.

The history of the Clotilda has long been tacitly acknowledged in Mobile, but it's rarely discussed outside Africatown. For a long time, Africatown residents were aggressively silenced by the white community in Mobile when they tried to tell their family's stories - people would threaten to burn down their homes. Even now, many people in the white community would prefer to as they put it "let sleeping dogs lie." The descendants of Timothy Meaher still own much of the land in Africatown, and to this day, they have never publicly acknowledged their family's responsibility for smuggling the last known ship of enslaved people into the United States.

And so, the story has been kept alive for generations by people like Lorna Woods. But this is more than just the history of Lorna's community. It's also her family's story. For Timothy Meaher, the Clotilda voyage was a prank. But for Lorna's great-great grandfather and the other enslaved people trapped in the hold of the ship, it was a nightmare.

*Lorna: Not to be able to go to the bathroom when you want to go to the bathroom, not to have water when you want needed a drink. Not to have on on proper clothes to secure your body.*

To Lorna and her fellow descendants, the Meaher family's ongoing silence is personal.

*Lorna: Maybe one day they conscience won't let them go to sleep and they'll up one morning and say, I'm gonna call the newspaper and tell them that we sorry for what happened to those Africans that came on the Clotilda.*

SAM: From Spoke Media, and WALT, you're listening to *Family Ghosts*. Today, we begin our third season with a three-part series about the Clotilda, a ghost that haunts many families in Africatown - the ones who refuse to acknowledge it ever happened, and the ones who won't let them forget that it did. This is Part 1: *The Descendants*. We'll be right back.

**[AD BREAK 1]**

SAM: When the enslaved people who were brought to Mobile on the Clotilda were emancipated after the civil war, they banded together to forge their own community. One of their leaders was a man named Cudjo Lewis.

*LORNA: This is Uncle Cudjo. Everybody said I look like Uncle Cudjo that's my uncle. my great, great Granddady's brother.*

Last summer, Lorna Woods shared the story of Cudjo and his fellow survivors with our producer, Vera.

VERA: Lorna's lived in Africatown her entire life. She grew up not far from the Den, in a four room tin-top house with no running water.

*LORNA: That little house with the small yard and the small back hill I played, we played on the back and on front. But this little house had so many memories in it.*

Lorna has done more than anyone in Africatown to keep the Clotilda story alive over the years. She started learning her family's history when she was a child. Her grandmother would tell her stories. She read to Lorna from a book called *Historic Sketches of the South* by Emma Langdon Roche. Roche collected oral histories with Clotilda descendants in the 1910's. When it was finally published, Roche gave everyone she interviewed a copy of her book - some members of Lorna's family still have their copies.

But not all the ancestors talked about the history.

*LORNA: my Grandmama used to say they kept a lot of stuff under their hat. Everybody didn't want to hear about that story and ... probably told them that you better not tell anybody.*

*[music in]*

Before Africatown was even founded, Cudjo Lewis and the other survivors had a different plan: they wanted to go home. They approached Timothy Meaher, and

asked for passage back to Africa. But Meaher refused. He offered only to sell them land, which they would need to pay off with years of labor. So they took the deal - they bought the land and founded a community they called Africatown. They built their own school, and a church that faced east, towards Africa.

*LORNA: They, they gave it their all, they sacrifice, they did whatever it took to keep their families together.*

Later, when the founders of Africatown tried to vote in the first election after the Civil War, Timothy Meaher showed up on his horse to block their path. They went to a second site and he blocked them again, telling the officials that they weren't citizens of the US. They went to a *third* site - the furthest they could get to, where they were informed they had to pay a dollar each to vote - the equivalent of twelve hours worth of work. They cast their ballots anyway.

*LORNA: they might've endured more than we think, but they made it. And I'm the living testimony of that where there's a will there's a way, and that will was that we were going to make ourselves a home.*

Preserving her family's history has become Lorna's purpose in life. She says her ancestors' sacrifices are worth it six generations later, because it's finally safe to talk about the story.

*LORNA: I do believe they did the best they could cause I feel now I'm sitting and talking to you. I never knew you. You never knew me. But we're able to talk about this in a language that I don't have to be afraid of nobody coming through the door and saying, y'all stop talking about that history or else you're going to be killed or burned out of home.*

Still, Lorna told me, even if it's easier to tell the story now, nothing can erase the horror of what her ancestors experienced.

*LORNA: What they endured coming across there...that was inhumane [...]*

Meanwhile, for the last 160 years, it seemed like the rest of Alabama was happy to avoid acknowledging this particular chapter in its history. Africatown, a truly remarkable American success story, is just two miles from downtown Mobile, but it isn't exactly a highlight of the tourist brochures. And because Timothy Meaher and Captain Foster burned and sank the Clotilda after the voyage, people who want to deny the shameful history of the Clotilda have always had a way to deny it actually happened. The descendants of the enslaved people who survived the voyage have tried to keep their story alive ever since - but they've been missing that critical piece of evidence.

Until a few years ago, when a local journalist named Ben Raines got a call from a friend.

*BEN: And he said, why don't you look for the Clotilda? And I said, that's a great idea.*

*[music in]*

People had looked for the ship before, but no one had ever found it. And that was convenient for the old monied set, many of whom called it an old wives tale. And when Ben started digging... they got upset. People would call him or come up to him on the street.

*BEN: There was a lot of "You should let sleeping dogs lie - you should quit looking for that ship." There was a lot of that kind of sentiment. "You're just stirring people up."*

Ben's yearlong search was filled with false starts and misinformation, but he had constant encouragement from the community in Africatown. Then, in 2018, Ben was searching the Mobile Bay, and he spotted a log pile. When he got closer, he saw a piece of lumber with square nails in it, which he knew was common in 19th century boats. He'd finally found a clue. A team of marine archaeologists spent a year examining Ben's findings, and verified the origins of the wood. After 160 years, the Clotilda went from local legend to front-page news.

*NEWS MONTAGE:*

*NEWSCASTER 1: Now to a truly historic discovery in southern Alabama, where the last known slave ship to arrive in the United States has been found*

*NEWSCASTER 2: Today a historic moment for the Africatown community - nearly 160 years after the Clotilda sank...*

*NEWSCASTER 3: The wreckage of the boat was found in Alabama's Mobile River. The schooner Clotilda brought 110 Africans to US shores in 1860.*

*NEWSCASTER 4: After the captives were brought ashore, the ship was burned, the evidence destroyed, and ever since, people have tried to find it.*

After generations of silence, the world is discovering a history that Lorna and her fellow descendants' families have carried their entire lives.

And for Lorna's cousin Joycelyn, the discovery of the Clotilda changes everything.

*JOYCELYN: It's our time. It's our, it's our turn.*

SAM: *Family Ghosts* will continue in a moment.

**[AD BREAK 2]**

VERA: As exciting as the discovery of Clotilda has been for the residents of Africatown, it has also revived anger and frustration with the Meaher family's ongoing silence about their role in the illegal slave trade. Aside from Timothy Meaher bragging about his crimes to a local newspaper in 1890, no one from their family has ever spoken publicly about the Clotilda story. Even now that the ship has been found, so far there hasn't been any indication that the Meaher family will break their silence.

Which means the Clotilda descendants are left to navigate this complex and painful moment on their own. And of all the people I met on my trip to Africatown, no one experiences this dilemma more acutely than Joycelyn Davis.

Like her cousin Lorna, Joycelyn has been surrounded by this history her whole life.



*JOYCELYN: Hi, my name is Joycelyn Davis and we are in Lewis's quarters.*

*[ambi of lawn mower cuts]*

We're sitting in the backyard of a tidy yellow shotgun house under a canopy of oak, pecan and magnolia trees. It's Joycelyn's uncle's house - he's just finished mowing the lawn.

*[ambi of wind in the trees]*

*JOYCELYN: I love coming here. It's a, it's a quiet place. Um, I feel like that, um, I connect closer to my ancestors when I'm here.*

Lewis' Quarters was established in 1870 by Joycelyn's great-great grandfather, Charlie Lewis - the brother of Cudjo Lewis. Charlie was brought to Mobile on the Clotilda with Cudjo, and he bought the land from his former owner, Colonel Beaufort, after the Civil War freed him from slavery. It's been in Joycelyn's family ever since.

*JOYCELYN: this area is all of my cousins, it's like no strange neighbor anything. We're all family, and my mom will say, oh, it will be uncle, this uncle, Uncle Jeff, Uncle Cletus, Uncle Percy, Aunt Goldie, Aunt Ferrie.*

The mosquitos, the heat, even the smell of pollen and fresh cut grass, which make her sneeze - all of this, Joycelyn told me, makes her feel at home. She's been visiting here since she was a little girl.

Growing up, Joycelyn knew a little bit about the Clotilda story, but not much. But then, one day in ninth grade history class, she saw a picture of Cudjo in a book.

*JOYCELYN: I turned the page and then I was like, wow, you know, because even that shameful thing I was, I mean, it was crazy and weird because I kind of looked around. It's like, man, did anybody see me? You know? Did anybody notice my reaction?*

Today, Joycelyn is in her forties - she's lived her whole life near Africatown. She's next in line - after her cousin Lorna - to be the family historian. But that day back in ninth grade, she wasn't so sure she wanted to be associated with the Clotilda.

*JOYCELYN: Because you know, kids, you know, kids can be cruel. I didn't want anyone to make a joke about it. So, um, I didn't, um, I just, I didn't tell anyone.*

*[ambi of Lewis' quarters]*

But outside of school, little by little, Joycelyn was learning more about her family's history. Every Saturday, Joycelyn's mother took her to visit her great-grandmother, Eugenia Lewis Barnes.

*JOYCELYN: I always called her Mama because, simply because my grandmother continued to call her mama, and she was just Mama. And this is her house.*

She points to a small white house with forest green trim. This is where Joycelyn spent Saturdays with Mama and her daughter Medea - Joycelyn's grandmother.

*JOYCELYN: They were pistol packing women that, um, you could come in this area at night, like you would get shot, you know, if you are trespassers. So they didn't have a problem with it.*

Joycelyn has vivid memories of life with Medea.

*JOYCELYN: She was a little different. She used to like to drink beer. And she would make a fire - she used to call it a "smoke" - for the mosquitoes. And every Saturday she would make a fire, and have her beer, and play her blues all day. And that was her Saturday.*

Over the years, the family made their living as grave diggers, hunters, fishermen, barbers, and carpenters. Mama and Medea fed them with gumbo made from squirrels, raccoons, and possums they hunted themselves.

*JOYCELYN: They could cook anything. They made quilts, just, uh, self-reliant women that, um, persevere without the luxuries that we have today. I'm just proud that I came from her lineage, because she was a strong woman.*

Joycelyn learned how to be independent from her grandmother and her great-grandmother. But she learned the story of the Clotilda from her father.

*JOYCELYN: He was the one I can say that he would say, Jocelyn, you are a direct descendant. You know, you're not just a descendant, you are a direct descendant.*

While her dad loved to tell the story, he was not a descendant himself. Her mother and grandmother were, but they preferred not to talk about it. That left Joycelyn with a lot of questions.

*JOYCELYN: Should I just be quiet about it? Should I just, you know, be happy about it, what would my friends say?*

As she got older, Joycelyn began reading everything she could find about the story. Lorna encouraged her to become the next family historian. They sat together on Saturdays in The Den, where Joycelyn studied Lorna's history exhibits. The more Joycelyn learned, the more connected she felt. And now, with Lorna getting older and a spotlight on Africatown...

*JOYCELYN: Um, I just think it's my time, and I don't know how people feel about spirits or their ancestors, but I just feel like, you know, my grandmother, my great grandmother are pushing me to be the next in line.*

Joycelyn told me she remembers the day at the city archive when she found her great-great grandfather Charlie Lewis's name in the logs of Captain Foster, Timothy Meaher's co-conspirator. It made the story feel more real. Her whole life, people had said it was a myth, and even though she always believed it was true, seeing it in writing was a relief. She wondered what other documents might exist that could fill in the gaps about her family's past. And she wondered what version of the story was passed down in the Meaher family.

But after all these years, even with proof of their family's crimes splashed all across the news, their silence persists.

*JOYCELYN: Just imagine that trying to talk to somebody, trying to reach them and trying to, you know, like, Hey, you know, and someone's just not answering you. Like why won't they answer me? Why won't they talk to me? But they will not, and they're right here in Mobile. That's the, sickening part of it.*

After the discovery of the ship, Clotilda descendants formed the Clotilda Descendants Association, a group dedicated to preserving the history and promoting the well-being of Africatown.

Joycelyn is one of the leaders of the group, along with Darron Patterson.

*DARRON: The finding of the Clotilda slave ship means that is no, no longer a myth or a uh, a uh, puff of smoke. It's real.*

And Darron is done putting up with the Meaher family's silence.

*DARRON: We cannot keep up this charade. We cannot keep this up. It's not healthy for our families. It's not healthy for our grandchildren. It's not healthy for their children to have something that they're forbidden to talk about. Nobody should be forbidden to talk about anything!*

SAM: Our story continues after the break.

### **[AD BREAK 3]**

Darron Patterson's great great grandfather Pollee Allen was brought to Mobile on the Clotilda. When the ship was discovered, Darron went to visit the spot where Pollee came ashore.

*DARRON: I'm like, man, this is where they told him, get off the ship, get off, run through the bushes, try not to get bit by moccasins. Try not to get mauled by bears. Try not to get eaten by alligators. Get off the ship, 'cause we gotta burn this thing. You have to believe*

*that some of them held out some hope that they were going back home. And to see that ship scurrulled, had to be harrowing for them. To go, well how are we going to get back on now?*

Darron wears a necklace that symbolizes Sankofa - the concept of going forward without forgetting where you're from. The necklace's pendant is a bird with an egg in his mouth. The bird is looking over his shoulder to the past even as he holds onto the future. Darron told me that's how he feels about the Clotilda story.

*DARRON: All I want is somebody to say, sorry, that wasn't right.*

*VERA: And why hasn't that happened?*

*DARRON: I think that the country doesn't want to remember this. I don't think they want to embrace this. They don't want to embrace the fact that what happened with the slaves was not a good part of our history. But it's our history, Vera.*

Darron believes it's important for both sides - the descendants and the Meaher family - to talk about the past so they can move forward.

But just because Darron is ready for sankofa, that doesn't mean it's going to happen.

Joycelyn and Darron talk on the phone most nights, and they spend a lot of time trying to figure out what to do about the situation with the Meaher family.

*DARRON: And I really believe that we're going to get an invitation Jocelyn, to talk to these people very soon.*

*JOYCELYN: Um, I'm not going to their house.*

*DARRON: Well I'm not going to their house either. You think I'm crazy?*

*[Joycelyn loud laughter]*

*DARRON: know it. And I ain't going go, ain't going and you know, I ain't gonna let nobody bother you. So we go out there and take your shoes off. Pull your skirt up, take earrings off and let's run.*

*JOYCELYN: I mean, we could joke about the pain. We could joke about. It's good cause I needed to laugh.*

And if a hypothetical invitation to meet the Meahers is hard to process, a real one is an even bigger question.

*[music in]*

One day four years ago, Joycelyn was at the gym. She met a man who said his wife was friends with the Meahers. Joycelyn explained her connection to the family and he offered to put them in touch. She was excited. She'd finally get to ask some questions. But then something he said made her stop short.

*JOYCELYN: He said, now be realistic. Now when you meet them or when you talk to them, what are you going to say?*

This question, what are you going to say? Stopped her in her tracks. She kind of froze.

*JOYCELYN: I was like, ah, I don't know. I was like well, I didn't think about that.*

*[music]*

SAM: Next time on *Family Ghosts*, our series on the Clotilda continues with a deeper look at the Meaher's pervasive influence in Africatown, 160 years after Timothy's original crime.

*JOYCELYN: Someone was like, "well, you know, Meaher Street is named after the people that brought your family over - like, his name was Timothy Meaher."*

*JOE: You see that marker right there? What does that say? [Vera: Oh my gosh, "Meaher". So ominous] Make no mistake about who own that property now.*

*JOYCELYN: This thing right here, stop marker you see "Meaher" in red, they spray painted it red.*

*JOE: All this Meaher property, all this Meaher property. So we're surrounded.*

*JOYCELYN: They still have this stronghold over the community...they still have the land.*

And Joycelyn and Darron try to figure out if they'll ever get answers from the Maehers.

*JOYCELYN: They probably think, oh that family wants money. You know, I don't want a dime from them. I don't want a dime from them.*

*DARRON: I just want to go have a beer with this guy, tap on his door and say "Hi, I'm Darron. You're Timothy Meaheer's great-great grandson. I'm Pollee Allen's great, great grandson." I just want somebody to say, you know what happened back then was not good and it wasn't right and we're sorry for that. We didn't have anything to do with that. We're sorry for that.*

*JOYCELYN: This is like a soap opera, a southern soap opera.*

That's all coming up next time on *Family Ghosts*, in part two of our Clotilda series.

**SAM:** *Family Ghosts* is hosted and produced by me, Sam Dingman, with Vera Carothers, Soraya Shockley, Sally Helm, Odelia Rubin, Jenna Hannum, and Janielle Kastner. This episode was reported by Vera, with additional reporting from Soraya. Our story editor is Micaela Blei. Our production assistant is Julia Press. This episode was mixed by Evan Arnett, and featured original music by Ashley Phillips. Our theme music is by Luis Guera. Fact checking by Greta Rainbow. Executive producers for Season Three are myself, along with Keith Reynolds and Alia Tavakolian at Spoke Media. Special thanks this week to Kirya Traber, Carson McCain, and also to the Kindred Spirits - our supporters on Patreon who help make our work possible. In addition to ad-free episodes and exclusive bonus content, Kindred Spirits actually already heard this episode - they get to listen to everything we make before anyone else. This week, Kindred Spirits are also hearing a bonus interview with another Clotilda descendant named Vernetta Henson. If that sounds good to you, and you have the means, please consider becoming a member for just five dollars a month at [patreon.com/familyghosts](https://patreon.com/familyghosts). We are proud creative partners of Spoke Media - find more great podcasts at [spokemedia.io](https://spokemedia.io). Season Three continues next week - we'll talk to you then, and thank you for listening to *Family Ghosts*, where every house is haunted.