

Part 2: The Stronghold

SAM: Previously, on *Family Ghosts*...

[music bed]

DARRON: Timothy Meaher was a loud mouth. And he bet this guy in a bar that he could get slaves here.

BEN: There was a lot of you should let sleeping dogs lie. You should quit looking for that ship.

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

LORNA: maybe some 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.

JOYCELYN: 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.

[music bed fades]

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

[music: FG Theme]

SAM: Back in 2014, the city of Mobile won a \$1.65 million dollar grant from Bloomberg Philanthropies to “find creative solutions to the challenges of neighborhood revitalization.” One of the neighborhood in question was Africatown, the community founded by a group of formerly enslaved people who’d been illegally smuggled into Mobile by Timothy Meaher.

The Bloomberg study, which was run by a team of people with no connection to the neighborhood, only one of whom was African American -- ended after two years. Their findings declared Africatown to have the highest concentration of blight in all of Mobile.

Which is ironic, because according to a community leader named Joe Womack, much of the blighted land in Africatown belongs to the Meaher family. He told our producer, Vera Carothers, about it last summer.

VERA: If you want a tour of Africatown, Joe Womack is your guy. Africatown through Joe's eyes is nothing like what I see. Where I see an old house or an overgrown lawn, he sees the many layers of history.

JOE: This was the actual slave quarters. Those houses have been rebuilt maybe about three times, but this was the actual slave quarters

Joe is wearing a straw hat and a white t-shirt that reads, "Africatown: An American Success Story." He runs a local environmental justice organization called CHESS (Clean Healthy Educated Safe & Sustainable). He's in his late 60s, and was born and raised here. We drive down narrow streets in his truck, passing rows of one-story houses painted blue, lilac, yellow, and orange. A woman wearing big rhinestone sunglasses waves us down as we pass a blue house with a white lacquered gate. She asks Joe about his mom.

*Anna Marie: How's your mama doing? [tape]
[inaudible]*

JOE: She's doing great. I'll be going over there as soon as I finish here. She's doing good. Okay.

Anna Marie: You have a good day.

JOE: That's Anna Marie. She's one of the Queens of the school years ago, she's a, she's about eighty now.

Joe moved out of the neighborhood in the 70's, after returning from a stint in the military. But he still knows everyone here. And his mother still lives here...

JOE: You know, and uh, you know, she was born here in 1930, and I can probably count on both hands and feet the number of times she's been out of the community.

She's the one that got him into community organizing. Over the years, a number of corporations have bought land in Africatown to build plants and run pipelines through the neighborhood.

JOE: She told me, she said, uh, uh, go out there and, and, and, and, and, and attend that meeting. Let me know what they're doing. But don't you let them take my damn land.

The industrial development in Africatown stands in stark contrast to the almost total lack of investment in the neighborhood on the part of the Mobile city government. In the past fifty years, only one municipal building has been constructed in Africatown: a community center that residents pushed for back in the 80s. They also had to fight for sidewalks and a streetlight.

Water surrounds Africatown on three sides. Joe stops his truck, and walks me over to a spit of land called Hog Bayou.

JOE: You've got the river here and then you got Chickasaw river runs off the Mobile river and then Hog Bayou runs off the Chickasaw river back off.

Joe is standing with his back to the river, facing a metallic skyline of spires, smokestacks, and machinery. Hog Bayou has been a heavy industrial zone since the 50's, when two paper companies-- Scott Paper and International Paper Company took over the area. When Joe was growing up, the smokestacks blew two or three times a day. He remembers ash blowing through the schoolyard where he played.

JOE: It was like snow in July...It was like dirt coming out the air. Nobody ever told us it was toxic. We stayed out there and continued to play ball, you know. We, stuff get on our

skin and brush it off. If, if you got a sandwich out there, and you eating and it get on your sandwich, you'd just brush it off cause you ain't getting another sandwich.

Now, his friends and family are dying of cancer - an epidemic that seems to be related to the toxins the paper factories introduced into the environment. There are no official numbers, but in a questionnaire that a local pastor sent to 150 church members, 100 of them said that they or a family member had cancer. Joe says he's buried more friends and family than he can count.

JOE: My class - we just had our 50th reunion. We had 300 to graduate and over half of us are gone, and at least another 30 is in bad shape.

International Paper finally closed operations in 2000. When they left, they didn't do much to clean up the mess they'd made.

JOE: What they did, International Paper, was bulldoze the top. Everything under the ground is still there, and they used diox-- dioxane, that was one of the chief chemicals that they used. It's been proven that dioxane causes heart problems, respiratory problems, and cancer.

To make matters worse, a number of industrial sites still operate in the area. It's common for trains carrying huge storage containers of toxic waste to idle here for several hours during the day. Gallons and gallons of waste have been left behind. Recently, an entire new industrial site popped up without the neighborhood's permission. The company didn't even have a permit. But when the residents protested, the city ignored it.

JOE: And nobody ever come back here and check and been no complaint and never fined him or nothing it's just, it's just a complete mess back here.

In spite of all this, Joe Womack is optimistic about Africatown's future. As we drive down backstreets along industrial sites and train tracks, we drive by what looks like a brackish swamp and he sees a future spot for outdoor dining and live music. I struggle to reconcile what I see with what Joe envisions. He says they just need to cut the grass so the snakes don't bite people.

JOE: Somebody come in here put up a shopping center, or something. Right on the water. I'd like to get an Applebee's right there where the guy held the pellet company on the, on the water back there, put up an Applebee's there and uh people, people, could come - they'll come out here.

As we drove through Africatown in Joe's truck, he pointed out the window as we passed various overgrown plots. All of them shared the same owner.

JOE: But look what they do to their grass. The Meaher family, they just let it grow up and the city don't do nothing with them. This is blight. This is real blight here.

We pass a plot with the word "MEASHER" engraved in all caps on a stone marker.

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.

It was almost comical how predictable the pattern became. Uncut lawn: Meaher family. With one notable exception:

JOE: Now this land here you see cut? You see this is probably only Meaher property that's cut. So you say, well why is it cut? Well our church lease it from him just to keep it cut. But that's why it's cut. The church cuts it.

It's not just residential plots the Meahers own. All those industrial plants Joe showed me? Those were built on land leased from the Meahers.

[music in]

Like many such places throughout the US, the land in Africatown still holds the history of the atrocities its founders survived.

JOE: All this is Meaher property, all this Meaher property [...] So we're surrounded.

SAM: From Spoke Media and WALT, you're listening to *Family Ghosts*. I'm Sam Dingman, and this is the second episode in our series on the descendants of

survivors of the Clotilda, the last known slave ship to enter the United States. This is part two: *The Stronghold*. We'll be right back.

[AD BREAK 1]

VERA: Joycelyn Davis lives in the house she was raised in - it's in Prichard, right off of Telegraph Road, which runs all the way from the state docks to downtown Mobile to the northern suburbs. It's also where the Meaher family had their plantation in the 1800s.

In her neighborhood, there are traces of the Meaher family everywhere: like these FOR LEASE signs on properties up and down Telegraph Road. They are red and white and say "FOR LEASE: CHIPPEWA LAKES, LLC" - that's the name of the Meaher family's real estate company.

JOYCELYN: They own a lot of land here. Prichard, Africa town, and they do not sell their property. Everything is leased so you can't buy anything from them. THAT's their family when you see the signs that say Chippewa Lake

On her drive home from work, Joycelyn can count up to twenty of them--

JOYCELYN: So we're gonna count one.

So that's two.

There's three.

Um, okay, four. You have to keep count with me.

JOYCELYN: All right. That's five.

VERA: Do you even like notice them when you drive by?

JOYCELYN: All the time. All the time. All the time. All the time.

They are all over. Needless to say.

JOYCELYN: I always like to say ever present.

VERA: Joycelyn is 42, and she's lived near Africatown her entire life. Which means that for as long as she can remember, everywhere she goes, the legend of Timothy Meaher follows her - right down to the street names.

VERA: This is--?

JOYCELYN: Meaher.

VERA: Meaher Street, AV?

JOYCELYN: Meaher Avenue.

There's also "Timothy Avenue."

For most of her life, Joycelyn didn't connect the signs with the Clotilda story. Finally, when she was about 20...

JOYCELYN: Someone was like, "Well, you know, Meaher street, is named after, you know, the people that brought your family over. Like his name was Timothy Meaher,"

Joycelyn grew up knowing that the Meahers still owned land in Prichard and Africatown. But once she connected the ubiquitous red and white real estate signs with their family, she realized just how *much* of the area still belongs to them.

JOYCELYN: I was like, oh my God. I see them everywhere.

Joycelyn thinks about the Meaher family every time she drives up or down Telegraph Road to go to work at a local elementary school. Often, on her way home, she wonders about the Meaher plantation. She looks for clues about where it was.

JOYCELYN: I think about this big space right here.

The area Joycelyn is pointing to is an empty lot with a few trees. Lodged in the gravel is a stone marker engraved with “Meaher.” It’s spray painted red, and that’s what caught her attention.

JOYCELYN: That’s what I envisioned where they lived. I don’t know, because I saw that concrete thing in their name and it’s spray painted. -Is there, is there something significant about this space right here that they, that is spray painted? I don't know why, but I just feel like that this may be a sacred place for them.

She’s never met anyone from the Meaher family. But living so close to this history brings up a lot of questions for Joycelyn.

JOYCELYN: You still have land in very low income areas. Like why not just sell it? Um, are you profiting off of anything? Because it's in some of these places you don't see anything on it. It's nothing there. They still have this stronghold over the community - they still have the land.

The Meaher name may be visible all over the community, but in a way, Africatown is also haunted by their absence. The Meaher family has steadfastly refused to address their role in the Clotilda story for over a hundred years. They’ve never said a word to Joycelyn or any of the other descendants about Timothy’s crime, or acknowledged its lasting impact on their community.

That night in Joycelyn’s car, Joycelyn and I actually tried to make contact with the Meahers - I found a number for one of them online, and we called - but when the woman on the other end picked up, her tone was curt and dismissive. She basically hung up on us.

After driving by the 20 Chippewa Lakes signs, we pulled into a parking lot on a hill across from the Africatown cemetery. There’s a small memorial to the Clotilda ancestors here - two golden busts on an altar of red brick. Both have been vandalized - a few years ago, somebody knocked the heads off with baseball bats.

Joycelyn and I sat listening to the cicadas for a while.

JOYCELYN: We called and you were in the nicest voice that there was and it just sounded like, you know, aggression and anger. I don't want to make it seem like I'm taking myself back into the 60s and seventies my mindset of, Oh, I'm afraid of this family. Like, I just want to sleep at night. But you know, just even going to sleep at night - you and I riding around seeing all those signs. It's like they made me sick to my stomach. It just, it just makes me sick to my stomach. And me just sitting across from my grandmother, my great grandmother over there that will give the Meaheer family the business, they wouldn't get sick on their stomach at all, they would not get sick on their stomach at all.

SAM: Our story continues, after the break.

[AD BREAK 2]

VERA: Like Joycelyn, Darron Patterson is one of the leaders of the Clotilda Descendants Association. They talk often about how to break the Meaheer's grip on the story of Africatown. And Darron has a plan.

Every time I spoke to Darron during my visit to Africatown, he brought up the same name: Augustine Meaheer. Augustine is a prominent lawyer in town, and he's around the same age as Darron.

Darron's plan varied slightly every time he told me about it, but it was always basically the same. He goes to Augustine's law office. He knocks on the door. And when Augustine answers, Darron speaks.

DARRON: Hi, I'm Darron. You're Augustine Meaheer, you're Timothy Meaheer's great-great grandson. I'm Pollee Allen's great, great grandson. Let's go to lunch, man.

In the fantasy, Darron asks Augustine to walk down the street with him to a local bar called O'Hara's.

DARRON: I just want to go have a beer with this guy.[...] 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.

There's this other story Darron told me over and over. At the peak of the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to visit a nearby county. But local officials turned him away. They claimed that black people in the area were quote "good negroes" - meaning they had no desire to agitate for civil rights. I encountered a similar attitude among the white people I talked to in Mobile, many of whom described an idealized vision of race relations in the city. But that vision isn't shared by any of the black people I met.

For Darron, the only way forward through this history is truth and reconciliation. And a conversation between him and the Meahers would be an important first step.

DARRON: Here's the great, great grandson of a wealthy slave owner and here's the great, great grandson of one of the slaves who this guy's great, great grandfather brought here and they're sitting down and they're talking and they're having lunch and they're saying, hey man, what can we do? What call can we do? Can we talk about this?

In Darron's mind, the impact of this conversation would reverberate way beyond Mobile.

DARRON: I feel if I can get to Augustine, we can heal not only Mobile, we heal the country.

But there's a hitch in Darron's plan. According to local rumor, the Meaher descendants have been sworn to secrecy. If any of them dares to speak up, they'll supposedly lose their share of the family's wealth.

DARRON: It's been passed down through the years... if this is true, don't talk about this or you will suffer the consequences - consequences probably financial, because the Meaher family is loaded...

There are other theories about why the Meahers won't talk. Most people I spoke to in Africatown brought up money: either Darron's claim that the Meahers have been threatened with losing their inheritance if they acknowledge the family's role in the story, or this other idea - that the Meahers suspect the descendants want reparations, and the Meahers don't think they owe the descendants anything.

I'd love to tell you what the Meaher's *actually* think about all this. But as you've probably guessed, no one from their family responded to my interview requests.

When the survivors of the Clotilda finally gained their freedom after the Civil War, they asked Timothy Meaher for passage back to Africa.

JOYCELYN: It was a joke to the Meaher family when they ask could they go back home. It was like a joke. You're not going home

In one of my conversations with Joycelyn about the Meaher's silence, she told me about a passage in a book about Africatown's history - *Dreams of Africa in Alabama* by Sylviane Diaouf.

JOYCELYN: I think I read in Sylvie Anne's book that, um, someone said, well, we'd given them land and we've given them, [...] it's Kinda like, well if we give you this spot and this spot and this spot, leave us alone.

The spot she's referring to is Africatown.

But the truth is that the Meahers didn't "give" the Clotilda survivors anything. Timothy Meaher offered to *sell* them a small piece of his land. But they didn't have the cash to buy it outright, which meant they'd have to spend years working the land to pay off the debt.

Which is why, while she wants to talk to the Meahers as much as Darron does, Joycelyn hates the implication that she or other descendants are asking for anything from them.

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.

After the Clotilda ship was found, Joycelyn hoped that would be the end of the Meahers' secrecy and suspicion. But when local and national journalists reached out to the Meahers, they hung up the phone. Joycelyn thought the family might at least reach out to the Descendants Association. But as the days and weeks passed after the discovery, the Meahers didn't say a word.

JOYCELYN: I don't really use bad words, but I just said forget them. I just said forget them.

[music in]

JOYCELYN: So what's powerful to me is whenever you visit our cemetery, that the old cemetery, I think it was built in 1876, it faces east towards Africa because they always wanted to go back home.

Instead of fixating on the Meahers, Joycelyn prefers to focus on the strength of her great-great-grandfather, Charlie Lewis.

JOYCELYN: Whenever I decide to complain, I have to think about Charlie being taken away from his home, being brought to a place that he didn't know anything about. Not even the language, not even being able to speak English.

Three years ago, Joycelyn faced some overwhelming odds of her own.

JOYCELYN: I don't like to wear this on my sleeve, but, um, this was where my port was, I'm a survivor.

Joycelyn was diagnosed with breast cancer four years ago. Doctors told her she doesn't carry the cancer gene. So it's not hard to imagine her sickness has

something to do with those chemical companies on the land leased from the Meahers.

Joycelyn told me it was a shock to get the disease so young. Before she went into each chemo treatment, she would call her ancestors to mind.

JOYCELYN: I would take them with me. I was like, okay, I need y'all with me because I'm about to, you know, take this treatment or, you know, it's gonna make me sick. But, um, throughout that, throughout my, um, my battle, I took them with me. Yeah. I took them with me.

It took Joycelyn a really long time and a lot of hard work to identify with the story of her ancestors in a positive way. When she first encountered the story in her ninth grade history book, she felt self-conscious.

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?

Joycelyn told me she worries that if she does get the chance to speak to the Meaher family, and they are dismissive or rude, if they deny the history or make her feel small, it'll be a trigger.

JOYCELYN: I'd be like, wow, I had the chance and they said this and now I feel like the little girl, you know, a little shameful girl again and now I've built myself up to this person who's proud of her heritage and then I don't want them to bring me back down to nothing.

As for Darron's plan to confront Augustine Meaher - there's another problem, beyond the Meaher family's alleged vow of silence. Knocking on Augustine's office door is easier said than done. I know this, because I tried. The office is in the Trustmark Building - a 34-story office tower housing some of the biggest banks and businesses in Mobile. There's a swanky restaurant on top, and layers of security. I couldn't even get past the elevator. And if I, a woman who presents as white and can enter most spaces relatively unchallenged, couldn't make it to

Augustine's office door, I can't imagine what it would feel like for a Black person from Africatown to try.

All of these layers of security made me think about the Meaher's refusal to publicly acknowledge their family's past, and how wealth and white privilege have allowed them to be protected. The Trustmark building, which towers over downtown, casts the shadow of their silence on all of Mobile.

Joycelyn and Darron often debate the best method to escape that shadow.

DARRON: My personality is more of a whoop ass. And Joycelyn [...] she's a sweet lady and her thing is just to diplomatically do these things.

JOYCELYN: I have to be surrounded by someone that's that radical. I'm not radical like that [...] Like, Darren doesn't care. You know, this is, this has gone on long enough, and he's just ready for it to end.

The thing is, as much as Darron says he's ready to go pound on Augustine Meaher's door, so far, something's stopped him from actually doing it.

And so, the stronghold persists.

And Joycelyn wonders what it might take to break it. She holds out hope that one of the Meahers will slip up one day.

JOYCELYN: ...one of those. I don't care about none of y'all, you know the drunk one at the Christmas party.

But now, thanks to her friendship with Ben Raines, the journalist who found the Clotilda, Joycelyn may be on the verge of getting her wish. While Darron is fixated on getting in touch with Augustine Meaher, Ben thinks Joycelyn should try Augustine's brother instead - Robert Meaher. Because Robert turns out to be a bit of a wild card.

JOYCELYN: He has to be the radical Meaher. I just called him the radical Meaher. I mean, you know, he has to be.

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

[AD BREAK 3]

VERA: Thirty years after the Clotilda voyage, Timothy Meaher bragged about it in a local newspaper. And then, when people started looking for the remains of the ship, he tried to throw them off the trail.

BEN: He lied and told everybody it was up in Bayou Canot, which is a different piece of water. Um, so I thought that was funny. [Laughs]

That's Ben Raines, the journalist who found the Clotilda. Ben told me that Timothy Meaher's story was basically an open secret in Mobile for more than a hundred years. But then, the movie *Amistad* came out in 1997.

[Amistad clip]

Amistad was one of the first mainstream movies to depict the transatlantic slave trade. And it made a big impact in Mobile. The Meaher family received angry phone calls, and even death threats. We know this because Ben Raines has actually been talking to one of the Meahers for a long time.

Robert Meaher is the brother of Augustine Meaher - the lawyer whose office door Darron wants to knock on someday. Robert and Ben have been corresponding for seven years. It started because Robert was a fan of Ben's environmental reporting. He donated some money to an environmental non-profit Ben was running, the Weeks Bay Foundation. And then, Robert started writing Ben these long letters giving him story ideas about different conservation issues. He would never let Ben quote him - but as their friendship developed, Robert started to talk to Ben about more than just the environment. He told Ben that ever since *Amistad* came out, his

older brother Joe made all the Meahers promise to keep the family's name out of the media.

Still, Robert kept writing letters to Ben. And they even met in person a few times.

Which is why Joycelyn and I sat down with Ben, in the hopes that Ben would put us in touch with Robert. Because Robert might just be what Joycelyn's been hoping for:

JOYCELYN: He has to be the radical Meaher. I just called him the radical Meaher. I mean, you know, he has to be.

Ben told us that Robert is somewhat estranged from his two older brothers, Augustine and Joe - the one who swore the family to secrecy. And even more promising, when Ben was looking for the ship, Robert actually gave him a tip.

BEN: Robert said, uh, he said, "Well, I think you're looking too far north."

JOYCELYN: Mmmm.

Ben: Yeah, I think its further south.

JOYCELYN: Oh, Robert's in trouble. Unless he doesn't give, he don't care, Robert's in trouble. Oh man.

[music in]

The deeper Joycelyn gets drawn into all of this, the whole thing can start to feel a bit...well...

JOYCELYN: This is, um, this is like a soap opera, a southern soap opera:-

But that tip Robert Meaher gave Ben - that he was looking too far north for the Clotilda - it gives Joycelyn hope. Maybe Robert is the Meaher who will finally be willing to speak up, in spite of his family's objections.

JOYCELYN: I mean, can you imagine, and I always should imagine thing, can you imagine the kitchen conversation or breakfast conversation? You know, that Robert is talking to everyone and you know, we can't do anything with him. We've never been able to do anything with him. So, you know, Robert, you need to stop.

Ben Raines promised Joycelyn he would try to put her in touch with Robert.

BEN: I was just gonna call him up. [...] and see if we could facilitate a conversation. [...] I think he'd probably say yes.

Suddenly, Joycelyn finds herself closer than she's ever been to facing the Meahers.

But the thing is, some days Joycelyn feels ready to sit down with the Meahers, and other days the idea makes her really, really nervous. She has this recurring vision how the meeting might go.

JOYCELYN: And I just had in my mind thinking, ok we're in this room and they're walking in and they're in it. They gonna they introduce themselves and I just throw up, I just get so sick and I just throw up.

When it comes to the Meahers, this is the dilemma that Joycelyn lives with - face them or forget them.

[music in]

SAM: Next time on *Family Ghosts*, Africatown holds a ceremony in honor of its founders...

PASTOR: I hereby call the ancestors to be with us... we pour libations for our mothers and fathers who rest in the valley of the dead. Call out their names... Call out their names

And as Joycelyn waits to find out if Robert Meaher will speak to her, she holds out hope that someone from the Meaher family might attend the celebration.

JOYCELYN: We are giving them an open invitation to come and celebrate with us. We have always been open to them, for them to come forward, but I just feel like the walls would shake if they walked in...There may be someone that's going to apologize today, we don't know.

That's all coming up next week on the final episode of our series on the Clotilda, right here on *Family Ghosts*.

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, and 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 Asshley 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 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 getting to hear a behind-the-scenes interview with Vera and me about the development of this story. If that sounds good to you, and you have the means, please consider becoming a member for just five dollars a month at [patreon dot com slash family ghosts](https://www.patreon.com/slashfamilyghosts). We are proud creative partners of Spoke Media - find more great podcasts at [spokemedia.io](https://www.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.