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AHC Releases Clotilda Report for Phase 3 Investigation

Montgomery –The Alabama Historical Commission announces a preservation plan for the *Clotilda*, the last known vessel to bring enslaved persons to the United States. Following a comprehensive study and archaeological investigation, the Phase 3 exploration and site evaluation detailed in the report concludes with a recommended plan of *in situ preservation*, or in-place preservation, for the *Clotilda*.

In situ preservation includes the physical methods and management practices employed to protect and preserve underwater cultural heritage sites, such as the *Clotilda*, after identifying major physical, biological, chemical, human, and other threats to a shipwreck.

The Phase 3 investigation included a high-resolution sonar survey to provide updated and detailed imagery of the vessel and monitor ongoing erosion and other natural processes that may affect its preservation; a marine geological study to assess the composition, structure, and resistance of the sediment in and around the wreck and an engineering assessment to determine the stability of the site in its current context; a system to measure and monitor river current and water movement both in and around the wreck; a biological assessment to determine the degree to which the biological colonization of the wreck is causing decay; and a limited and targeted excavation to investigate the wreck itself.

“This phase of the investigation was vital in determining the next steps for the *Clotilda*,” said Chairman of the Alabama Historical Commission Eddie Griffith. “With this report, the Alabama Historical Commission can continue with its preservation plan and continue preserving this tremendous artifact and its history.”

The material evidence observed and investigated during this study provided data for understanding the condition of the *Clotilda* and some of the major risks threatening the wreck and the archaeological site. Based on the evidence gathered, *in situ preservation*, which involves physical protection of the wreck, is the scientifically responsible and least damaging method for the *Clotilda*. This process will include recovering exposed elements of the wreck with sediment to create a near-zero oxygen environment.

The material evidence assembled during this investigation revealed several key deteriorations that influenced the recommended preservation method:

- Corrosion of metal fasteners holding the wreck together ranges from moderate to severe and total loss.
- Damage to the wood is extensive with severe cracks and deep splits.

- Physical damage from floating objects, vandalism, looting, and severe weather continue to threaten the *Clotilda*. Loss of the deck from its original scuttling and displacement of the stern via mechanical impact is compromising the structural integrity and making it highly unlikely that the wreck could be raised intact using existing technology.
- The condition of the wreck in shallow, medium to high energy brackish water is causing continuous loss of sediment cover, scouring, erosion of the wood, corrosion, colonization from marine borers (wood boring organisms that attack timber in marine environments), and biological deterioration.

“Archaeological integrity and structural integrity are two different concepts,” said State Archaeologist Stacye Hathorn. “Archaeological integrity means that the vessel still has the ability to tell its story through careful scientific investigation. Structural integrity means that the structure of the vessel remains strong and intact. This study has demonstrated that while the *Clotilda* retains significant archaeological integrity, its structural integrity has been severely compromised by the original act of barratry and subsequent impacts, both natural and human, over the past 164 years.”

AHC extends its sincere appreciation to collaborators including U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, SEARCH Inc., RESOLVE Marine Group, and the research team for their continued efforts through this phase of investigation.

“The Alabama Historical Commission would like to thank Governor Kay Ivey and the Alabama Legislature for their unwavering support on each phase of the *Clotilda* investigation,” said Executive Director of the Alabama Historical Commission Lisa D. Jones. “We understand the enormous respect that should be given to this irreplaceable artifact and what it represents to thousands of individuals.”

The Alabama Historical Commission has been supporting the effort to identify the *Clotilda*, issuing permits and grant funding to archaeologists and firms since 1997. Now that Phase 3 of the archaeological investigation has been completed, the agency can focus on the long-term preservation plan for the *Clotilda*.

In May 2019, after a comprehensive assessment and months of research, the Alabama Historical Commission announced the identity of the *Clotilda*. The storied ship illegally transported 110 people from Benin, Africa to Mobile, Alabama in 1860, more than 50 years after the United States banned the importation of enslaved people to the country. Co-conspirators, Timothy Meaher and Captain William Foster tried to evade authorities and destroy evidence of their criminal voyage by sinking, burning, and abandoning the vessel and then dividing the Africans among their captors, where they remained in slavery until the end of the Civil War. A small band of the *Clotilda* passengers reunited post-war with the hopes of returning to Africa. When that dream was not realized, the survivors and their descendants established a new home for themselves in the Plateau area of Mobile – a community known today as Africatown.

The final report for the Phase 3 investigation was prepared by SEARCH Inc. with Dr. James Delgado, PhD, RPA as the principal investigator and author.

A full copy of the report can be found [here](#). For media purposes, a link to photos and videos from Phase 3 can be found [here](#).

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About the Alabama Historical Commission

Located in historic downtown Montgomery at 468 S. Perry Street, the Alabama Historical Commission is the state historic preservation agency for Alabama. The agency was created by an act of the state legislature in 1966 with a mission to protect, preserve and interpret Alabama's historic places. AHC works to accomplish its mission through two fields of endeavor: Preservation and promotion of state-owned historic sites as public attractions; and statewide programs to assist people, groups, towns, and cities with local preservation activities. For a complete list of programs and properties owned and operated by the AHC, hours of operation, and admission fees please visit ahc.alabama.gov