



ALABAMA HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Clotilda added to National Register of Historic Places; Phase 3 archaeological exploration of ship and site underway

(Montgomery, AL) The submerged wreck of the *Clotilda*, located in waters near Mobile, Alabama, was officially listed in the National Register of Historic Places on November 8, 2021. Phase 3 of the archaeological survey of the ship and surrounding site is currently underway. The Phase 3 exploration and site evaluation was funded by the Alabama State Legislature with a \$1 million appropriation to the Alabama Historical Commission in its FY2021 budget.

The schooner *Clotilda* (IBA704) is a substantially intact, submerged and partially buried shipwreck and archaeological site that is the last vessel known to have transported captives from Africa to the United States to enslave them. The story of this vessel and its destruction to avoid prosecution, the resistance and resilience of the people forcibly brought to America in it to be enslaved, and their post-Civil War forming of Africatown, itself a National Register historic district of national significance, is an important touchpoint in collective memory.

The 19th- and 20th-century accounts of the surviving *Clotilda* captives in newspapers and magazines shared their story with a larger American audience, and the ongoing survival of Africatown holds great meaning. As such, pinpointing the exact location of *Clotilda*, the vessel that serves as the initial focus of the involuntary voyage that in time led to the creation of this African American community, takes on additional significance.

The wreck of *Clotilda*, identified in 2018-2019 as part of a thorough archaeological investigation, is of national significance under National Register Criteria A and D for its associations with the ethnogenesis of the African American community, especially through the voyage forcibly merging a diverse ethnic community of African captives into a community of "shipmates." That community, upon arrival in Mobile, was dispersed, but following the end of the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, one group of 32 women and men from *Clotilda* formed their own new community and identity in Africatown, on land bought and leased from their former enslaver. There, with determination, resilience, and adherence to their beliefs and cultures, they forged a legacy that was passed on to their descendants.

Africatown, a National Register historic district (NR#12000990) was listed on December 4, 2012. Among Africatown's many culturally significant distinctions, the community members have a direct link to *Clotilda* and the illegal voyage. The connection between a specific vessel and a living community, Africatown, is rare and highly significant. *Clotilda's* connections to and role in regional maritime trade and commerce, reflected through its form and construction, cargo and voyages, illustrate how integrally the maritime commerce of the region was linked to the use of enslaved labor in its trades, industries, and agriculture. *Clotilda's* entire maritime career is a microcosm of the maritime history of the Gulf of Mexico and its many ports of trade, including Cuba.

The nomination for *Clotilda* was funded by a Certified Local Government grant from the Alabama Historical Commission to the City of Mobile and was prepared by Dr. James Delgado, Kyle Lent, and Michael Brennan of SEARCH, Inc. The National Register of Historic Places is the nation's official list of cultural resources, 50 years or older, worthy of preservation. Authorized under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the National Register is part of a nationwide program to coordinate and support public and private efforts to identify, evaluate, and protect our historic and archaeological places.



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“It is a tremendous duty to ensure that Clotilda is protected, and the Alabama Historical Commission takes its role as the legal guardian of Clotilda very seriously,” said Lisa D. Jones, Executive Director of the Alabama Historical Commission and State Historic Preservation Officer. “The Clotilda is an essential historic artifact and stark reminder of what transpired during the Transatlantic slave trade. We are committed to our role in preserving this story for the world.”

In May 2019, after a comprehensive assessment and months of research, the Alabama Historical Commission announced experts determined the identity of the *Clotilda* through archaeological evidence. 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 made an effort to evade authorities and destroy evidence of their criminal voyage by sinking, burning, and abandoning the vessel and then dividing the kidnapped 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 which is known today as Africatown.

For more than 20 years, the Alabama Historical Commission – the State Historic Preservation Office – has been supporting the effort to find the *Clotilda*, issuing permits and grant funding to archaeologists and firms since 1997. Since its positive identification, the agency has undertaken a focused, methodical and deliberate effort to develop a management plan for the site, with all considerations for its preservation. Thanks to the support and funding from Governor Kay Ivey and the Alabama State Legislature, AHC is moving forward with Phase 3 of the process.

AHC has contracted with RESOLVE Marine, who has subcontracted with SEARCH, Inc. and Stantec for this phase of archaeological investigation, which will include 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, finally, a limited and targeted excavation to investigate the wreck itself.

The data collected in this phase of investigation will be used to develop a scientific, evidence-based plan to address and arrest effects of ongoing erosion and other natural processes, help to determine if stabilization of the site is necessary, and provide information to inform a preservation plan. As part of this evaluation, the engineering study also will examine the integrity of the riverbed for consideration of erecting a memorial on site.

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.

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