



# ALABAMA HISTORICAL COMMISSION

468 South Perry Street  
Montgomery, Alabama 36130-0900  
334-242-3184 / Fax: 334-240-3477

Lisa D. Jones  
Executive Director  
State Historic Preservation Officer



**Alabama Historical Commission, Marketing & Public Relations Manager:**  
Jacquelyn Kirkland, 334-230-2645 or [jacquelyn.kirkland@ahc.alabama.gov](mailto:jacquelyn.kirkland@ahc.alabama.gov)

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### ALABAMA HISTORICAL COMMISSION CONCLUDES WEEK-LONG SURVEY

On July 13, 2018, the Alabama Historical Commission (AHC) and its partners concluded a week-long survey of submerged portions of the Mobile River in Mobile County, Alabama, to begin a comprehensive shipwreck inventory and to possibly discover Clotilda, the last known ship to bring enslaved Africans to the United States.

The survey and the resulting underwater dives to examine potential cultural resources was conducted under contract with the Alabama Historical Commission, and with the support of the National Geographic Society, by SEARCH, Inc., a highly experienced cultural resources company that works throughout the United States and internationally.

Funding and support for the project was provided by the National Geographic Society, whose field team was led by archaeologist Dr. Fredrik Hiebert. Also participating in the survey was the Alabama Historical Commission's State Archaeologist Stacye Hathorn, who also co-directed the March project.

Also joining the effort was Kamau Sadiki of the Slave Wrecks Project, a joint initiative of the George Washington University, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History, and the National Park Service. In March, Mr. Sadiki was also a member of the team that assessed the wreck originally thought to be Clotilda.

"I'm honored as a representative of the Slave Wrecks Project to participate in this important work that has great potential for healing from Alabama to Africa. Searching



*Survey crew: Kamau Sadiki of the Slave Wrecks Project, SEARCH archaeologists Alex DeCaro and Joseph Grimman, and Stacye Hathorn, AHC State Archaeologist. Courtesy of SEARCH, Inc.*

for the Clotilda is a significant step in restoring historical memory, and reconnecting the descendent communities of Africatown and Benin,” says Kamau Sadiki of Diving with a Purpose.

The Historical Commission’s other partners include the Alabama Department of Conservation & Natural Resources, the City of Mobile, and the Mobile County Commission.

“The Historical Commission was excited to collaborate with National Geographic as well as with state and local organizations,” said Major General Walter Givhan, Chairman, Alabama Historical Commission. “The National Geographic Society brings 130 years of experience and a well-deserved reputation for excellence to this project. This organization is a global leader in harnessing breakthrough technologies, such as the maritime equipment utilized during this investigation.”

“Our partners have a vested interest in documenting cultural resources in portions of the Mobile River as well as reconnecting the story of Clotilda to a national and international audience,” said Lisa D. Jones, Executive Director, Alabama Historical Commission. “This is a story with profound meaning in Alabama, and especially to the descendant community of Africatown.”

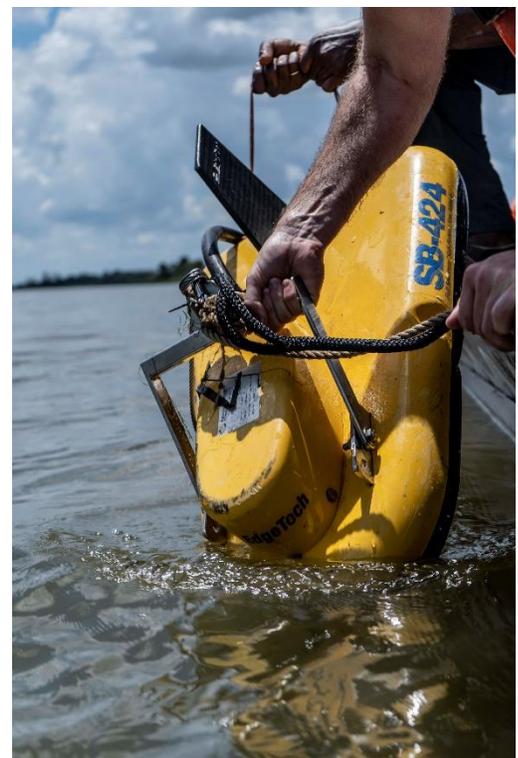
The Alabama Historical Commission gives special thanks to John Sledge, Senior Architectural Historian for the Mobile Historic Development Commission, and Harbor Master Terry Gilbreath for their efforts and support during this project.

In May, the Historical Commission [contracted with SEARCH](#) to complete the Phase I remote-sensing survey to locate significant submerged cultural resources. SEARCH previously volunteered staff, a boat, and expertise to examine a wreck initially thought to be Clotilda, and helped lead the examination of that wreck in March of this year.

In July, the four-mile section of river was mapped with overlapping survey lines that together total more than seventy miles of boat runs. The mapping of the river was assisted by an earlier survey conducted by Southern Mississippi University. Their collegiate sharing of data allowed SEARCH to augment its survey to not miss potential resources that lay in the murky waters of the river or beneath its muddy bottom.

The SEARCH survey utilized a magnetometer, which measures the magnetic intensity of objects; a high-resolution side-scan sonar that maps the river bed and what is above the riverbed with sound; and two sub-bottom profilers, sound-based instruments used to look beneath the river bottom to discern what might lie buried there. One of the sub-bottom profilers was provided and operated by a team from the National Geographic Society. The National Geographic team included Arthur Clarke, Sr. Electronics Technologist, Asha Stuart, photographer and videographer, and writer Joel Bourne.

The survey, conducted by SEARCH archaeologists Alex DeCaro, Joseph Grinnan, Kyle Lent and Deborah Marx, located many “targets” that includes previously recorded shipwrecks as well as now newly discovered shipwrecks in the river. Daniel Fiore, SEARCH Creative Designer, captured the discovery process on film.



*Sub-bottom profiler utilized by SEARCH. Courtesy of SEARCH, Inc.*



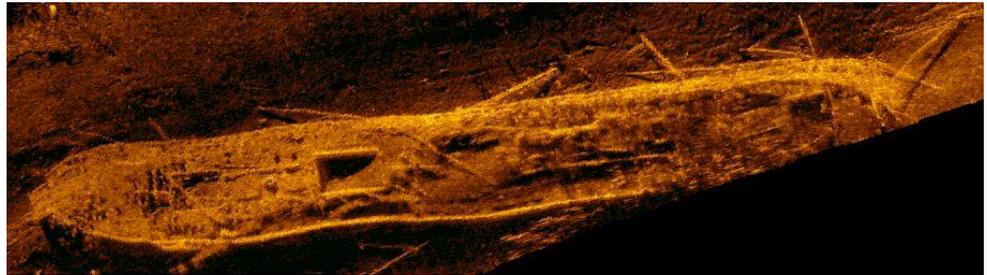
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This section of the river, known historically as a “ship graveyard,” holds the remains of several vessels. Some are century-old iron barges, while others, like the wreck examined in March, are wooden-hulled schooners. One of the unexpected finds, is an iron



*Sonar image of shipwreck in Mobile River, courtesy of SEARCH, Inc. This wreck, measuring some 230 feet long, could prove to be an iron or steel-hulled sailing vessel or steamship.*

or steel hulled sailing ship of the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. SEARCH archaeologist Alex DeCaro, who made the dive into the dark water, discovered the dramatic sweeping bow of the ship rising out of the mud some five feet off the bottom. Ships like this, many built in Great Britain, sailed the world’s routes carrying a variety of cargoes until the rise of steamships pushed them into decline.

It is possible that one of the wrecks, either exposed or buried, is Clotilda. Further analysis of the survey results may provide more clues, as will samples of timber removed from some of the sites. SEARCH Senior Vice President Dr. James Delgado, who led the SEARCH effort, cautions: “Making a positive identification of a wreck is a difficult if not tricky process not unlike solving a CSI case. Finding an identity involves detailed study, collecting forensic evidence, and then systematically and aggressively questioning not why a wreck might be a certain ship but why it cannot be. Finding Clotilda is one goal of this survey, which is focused on documenting everything we can find that has come to rest in this graveyard of ships, but it will take time to sift through the data, conduct laboratory study and do additional research before we can offer a scientific opinion on a possible Clotilda site. Further study, such as a detailed excavation, might be required. We know that some of the wreck sites found are not Clotilda, but even with that, we have yet to put a name to any of them.”

Lisa D. Jones, State Historic Preservation Officer and Executive Director of the AHC, directed SEARCH to map the nearby Civil War wrecks of CSS *Tuscaloosa* and CSS *Huntsville*, discovered by the late Sidney Schell in the 1980s. SEARCH also expanded the survey to examine nearby areas of the Mobile River, including the wreck of the 1847 steamer *Tuscaloosa*, which exploded and sank off the southern end of Twelve mile Island, killing as many as thirty people in one of the worse maritime disasters on the river.

“This project will ultimately result in a National Register Maritime Historic District,” said Lisa D. Jones. “This district will capture the span of the river’s use over the past two hundred years and the numerous ways human history has intertwined with the Mobile River.”

Anderson Flen, President of the Mobile County Training School Alumni Association, is one of the community leaders helping with sustaining the educational institutions and history of the Africatown community. “It is extremely exciting for me to be a part of this effort in my community with the many Local, State, National and

International players to locate the Clotilda,” said Mr. Flen. “It is also a revelation to learn that other ships have been found in the Mobile waters. Their stories need to be told. The level of involvement by so many top officials offers hope in the healing process of an enslaved people, a community and is an example to our nation on working together. Let this process be the shining light of hope on this dark past, that bring good hearts of love together to do the fair and right things.”

Future updates will be available on the AHC website at <http://ahc.alabama.gov/updates.aspx> and on AHC social media.

## **BACKGROUND**

In March 2018 the Alabama Historical Commission (AHC), in coordination with the National Park Service (NPS), the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, (NMAAHC), and SEARCH, completed the investigation of the shipwreck remains discovered in January 2018 in Baldwin County, Alabama. After thorough testing of the wreck’s architectural and construction features and using minimally invasive research methods, it was concluded that the [vessel was not the Clotilda](#).

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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](http://ahc.alabama.gov)*

