

Clotilda: Last US slave ship discovered among gators, snakes

May 24 2019, by Jay Reeves



In this undated image released by SEARCH Inc. in May 2019, archaeologists examine a loose piece of the wrecked Gulf schooner Clotilda, in delta waters north of Mobile Bay, Ala. The old wooden ship hull didn't look like much when researchers first saw it: just broken, waterlogged boards and a few pieces of rusted metal, all stuck in the muddy bottom of a bug-infested Alabama bayou where an alligator and poisonous water moccasins swam nearby. (Daniel Fiore/SEARCH, Inc. via AP)

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Months later, after hundreds of hours of study and testing, historians say the wreck is the Clotilda , the last ship known to transport African captives to the American South for enslavement.

The question now becomes what to do with the remnants of a ghostly vessel that's a testament to the horror of human bondage.

Some have suggested raising the ship and putting it in a museum. Others want it to become the centerpiece of a national memorial to the slave trade. Leaving the remains in the Mobile River and marking the area reverently is another possibility.

Joycelyn Davis, a descendant of one of the Africans held captive aboard the ship, said she wants to somehow honor both the ship's human cargo and the hard work of them and their descendants in forming Africatown USA , a coastal community where the Africans settled when they were freed from slavery after the Civil War.

"I got chills when it heard it," said Davis, who still lives in the area.

James Delgado, a maritime archaeologist who helped lead the team that verified the wreck as the *Clotilda*, said Thursday that the ship's remains are delicate but the potential for both research and inspiration are enormous.



In this undated image released by SEARCH Inc. in May 2019, archaeological survey teams work to locate the slave ship *Clotilda*, in delta waters north of Mobile Bay, Ala. Remains of the schooner were identified and verified near Mobile after months of assessment, a statement by the Alabama Historical Commission said. (Daniel Fiore/SEARCH, Inc. via AP)

"Nobody has ever found one of these this intact and been able to dig it up, and that is now possible," said Delgado, of the Florida-based SEARCH Inc.

Officials with the Alabama Historical Commission will meet next week with residents in Africatown, just a few miles north of downtown Mobile, to detail the discovery and begin a discussion about the next steps.

The Clotilda's unique dimensions made it a one-of-a-kind Gulf Coast schooner, and it made multiple cargo trips in the region before plantation owner Timothy Meaher of Mobile hired it in 1860 for an illegal trip to Africa to gather slaves, Delgado said.

Importation of slaves had been banned in 1808 and was punishable by death, so the Clotilda's captain, William Foster, burned the vessel in a river bayou north of Mobile after unloading about 110 captives on to a steamboat.

Foster kept a detailed log of everything he did, Delgado said, and that helped lead to the discovery of the wreck.



In this undated image released by SEARCH Inc., maritime archaeologist Kyle Lent examines a wooden plank from the hull of Clotilda, in delta waters north of Mobile Bay, Ala. Remains of the Gulf schooner Clotilda were identified and verified near Mobile after months of assessment, a statement by the Alabama Historical Commission said. (Daniel Fiore/SEARCH, Inc. via AP)

A Mobile-area reporter, Ben Raines, spurred fresh interest in the Clotilda last year by publishing a detailed account of a wreck that could have been the Clotilda but turned out to be that of another wooden ship. The publicity resulted in a new search that led researchers to the spot where a wreck was found. A team descended on the wooden hulk to take measurements and gather a few loose pieces for analysis.

Using detailed archival records of more than 1,500 ship registries,

researchers determined the half-buried ship was the exact size and shape of the Clotilda. It was also in the same spot and the same depth of water where the captain wrote of scuttling the vessel to hide evidence after its one and only voyage as a slaver, Delgado said.

"About half of the ship rises above the river bottom," he said. "The hull is there, burned down to the waterline and above it in a few places."

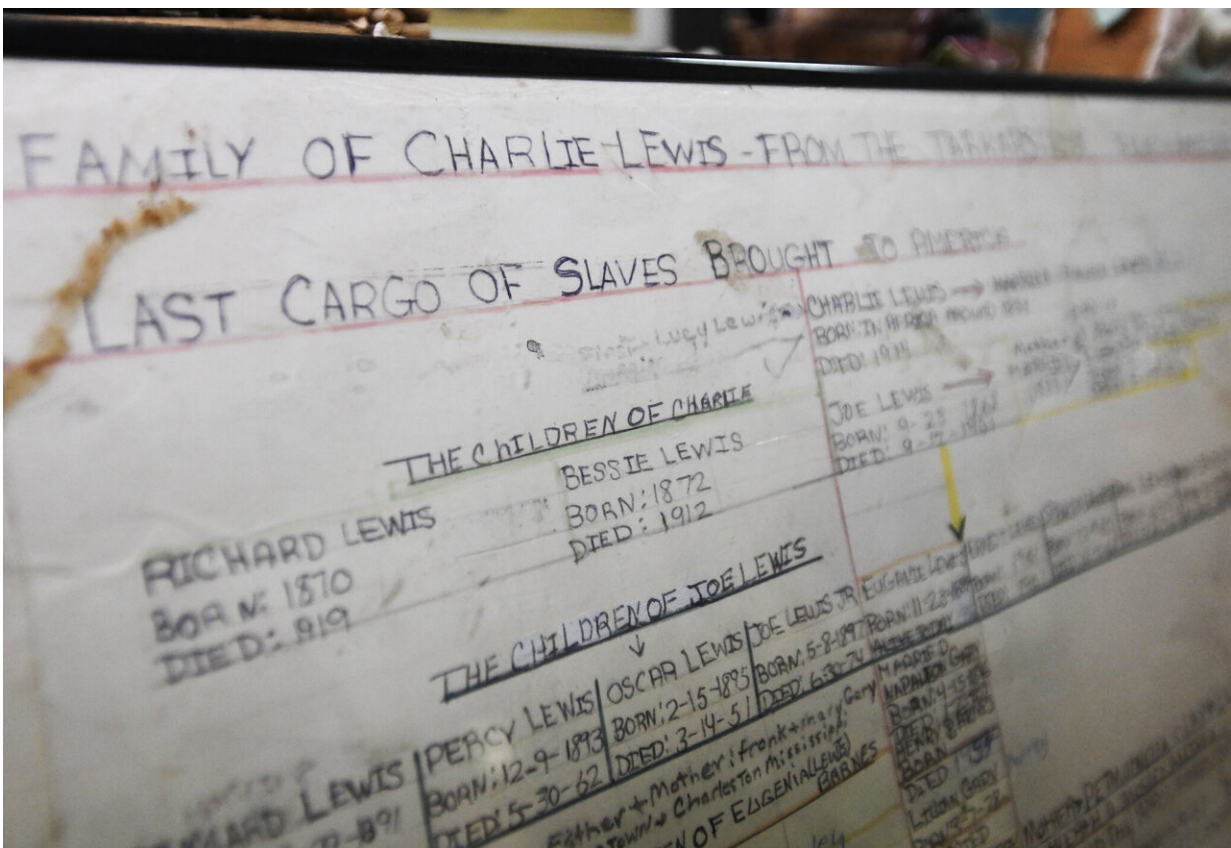
With a gator living nearby and snakes everywhere, research divers descended into the brackish, muddy coastal water to determine what remained. Visibility was virtually zero, and one diver standing in the hull nearly impaled herself on a broken plank, Delgado said.

"It is not a place anyone would want to dive," he said.



In this Tuesday, Jan. 29, 2019, file photo, the flags of the nations of Benin and Togo, the west African homes of the survivors of the slave ship Clotilda, remain

on display on a monument at what was the Africatown Welcome Center in Mobile, Ala. The center was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and hasn't been rebuilt. On Wednesday, May 22, 2019, authorities said that researchers have located the wreck of Clotilda, the last ship known to bring enslaved people from Africa to the United States. (AP Photo/Julie Bennett, File)



This Tuesday, Jan. 29, 2019, file photo, shows the family tree of Lorna Gail Woods, a direct descendant of slave ship Clotilda survivor Charlie Lewis, in Africatown in Mobile, Ala. Woods grew up in Africatown and keeps a makeshift museum of the area's history. On Wednesday, May 22, 2019, authorities said that researchers have located the wreck of Clotilda, the last ship known to bring enslaved people from Africa to the United States. (AP Photo/Julie Bennett, File)



In this Tuesday, Jan. 29, 2019, file photo, Old Plateau Cemetery, the final resting place for many who spent their lives in Africatown, stands in need of upkeep near Mobile, Ala. Many of the survivors of the slave ship Clotilda's voyage are buried here among the trees. On Wednesday, May 22, 2019, authorities said that researchers have located the wreck of Clotilda, the last ship known to bring enslaved people from Africa to the United States. (AP Photo/Julie Bennett, File)



In this undated image released by SEARCH Inc. in May 2019, artifacts recovered from the shipwreck of Gulf schooner Clotilda are bagged, in delta waters north of Mobile Bay, Ala. Laboratory analysis showed the spike to be made of pure iron common to pre-1870s iron working. (Daniel Fiore/SEARCH, Inc. via AP)



In this Tuesday, Jan. 29, 2019, file photo, Joycelyn Davis, a direct descendant of slave ship Clotilda survivor Charlie Lewis, stands for a portrait at the community center in Africatown in Mobile, Ala. On Wednesday, May 22, 2019, authorities said that researchers have located the wreck of Clotilda, the last ship known to bring enslaved people from Africa to the United States. (AP Photo/Julie Bennett, File)

But teams were able to gather a few loose planks and pieces of metal, Delgado said, and [forensic analysis](#) showed they matched materials that detailed records showed were used in the Clotilda's construction.

One big question is what might be inside the still-unexcavated hold, where the African captives were kept. Delgado said the area could contain casks or food buckets or even manacles, but further excavation work is required.

While there are no known photographs of the Clotilda, Labarron Lewis

of Mobile painted a giant roadside mural depicting the ship along a busy road through Africatown two years ago. The announcement of the ship's discovery came as he was planning to touch up the painting, which was based on an image he found on the internet.

It also left Lewis wondering whether he is a descendant of the Clotilda's last surviving African, Cudjo Lewis, who died in 1935 and was featured in the best-selling book "Barracoon" by the late Zora Neale Hurston, released last year.

"My granddaddy's brother looked just like Cudjo Lewis," the painter said.

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