

CULTURE DESK

# RECKONING WITH THE SLAVE SHIP CLOTILDA

*A new documentary tells the story of the last known slave ship to enter the United States and takes on the difficult question of how to memorialize America's history of racial violence.*

**By Vera Carothers**

September 21, 2022



*A still from "Descendant," a documentary about a Black community that has long fought to preserve its history in the face of erasure. Photograph from Netflix*

In Margaret Brown's documentary "Descendant," a man named Anderson Flen walks through the streets of Montgomery, Alabama, and wonders aloud about the people who walked there before him, people who had less freedom and fewer opportunities. He's from Africatown, a freed Black settlement on the Gulf Coast, founded by people who were brought over on the Clotilda, the last known slave ship to reach the United States. Flen, who is seventy-two, is working with community members and preservationists to transform Africatown into a tourist destination that honors the legacy of enslaved Black people. The purpose of his trip to Montgomery is to visit the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, widely known as the national lynching memorial, which was opened in 2018 by the civil-rights lawyer and activist Bryan Stevenson and is an important reference point for Africatown's efforts.

The imposing memorial features hundreds of hanging steel rectangles, representing the more than four thousand African Americans who were lynched during the Jim Crow era. (The count is based on research done by the Equal Justice Initiative.) After touring the six-acre site, Flen seems to lose the spring in his step. He looks away from the camera and sighs. He says, "The real test a lot of times is not in coming. It's what do you do when you leave? . . . Most of the people who come here, I'm sure, have been blessed beyond imagination. This is just a blip in their lives, a few seconds." He worries that the memorial will become "another form of entertainment."

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Preservationists and historians and institutional leaders have seized on the surge of racial uproar in recent years by creating dozens of museum exhibits, monuments, and memorials that grapple with racism in the U.S. The opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, in 2016, helped lead this renaissance. Yet, as Flen senses in Montgomery, key questions remain unanswered: What is the best way to memorialize the history of racial violence? Can focussing on the past change our present? And what is owed specifically to the families of those who endured these crimes against humanity? Those questions are central to “Descendant,” which debuted at Sundance in January. It was acquired by Netflix and Higher Ground, the Obamas’ production company, and will be released in October after showing at the New York Film Festival.

Brown, in her early fifties, grew up white in Mobile, Alabama, whose center is three miles from Africatown. She is the daughter of a reluctant débutante mother and a Jewish songwriter father. A sensitive child, she was frightened when her father pointed out houses owned by K.K.K. members, warning her to be careful and know her place as a Jew. But she had blue eyes and told me that she was “invisibly Jewish.” Her 2008 documentary, “The Order of Myths,” examined the fraught racial and class dynamics of Mardi Gras in Mobile. Her subsequent films focussed on the devastating effects of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon spill on working-class Gulf Coast communities, as well as the voter-suppression efforts directed at rural African Americans in Alabama’s Black Belt. While shooting the Mardi Gras film, she was exposed more deeply to the story of the Clotilda and the origins of Africatown—she didn’t remember learning it in school. A decade later, Brown set out to tell this story from the perspectives

of descendants from both Black and white sides, but, when she approached the family of the white man who'd paid for the voyage, they refused to speak to her.

In "Descendant," the present-day Black descendants of those enslaved on the Clotilda fight to preserve the stories of their ancestors in the face of historical erasure. The most well-known ancestor is Cudjo Lewis, who helped found Africatown, where many Clotilda descendants still live. In 1928, Zora Neale Hurston spoke to Cudjo for an oral history, which would later become the book "Barracoon: The Story of the Last 'Black Cargo.'" The film is interspersed with excerpts from this interview, read by descendants in the places that Cudjo lived and worked. Publishers rejected Hurston's manuscript, objecting to her choice to phonetically render his Black vernacular speech, a rich mix of Yoruba and English. The manuscript remained unpublished until 2018, the same year that Brown started shooting her film.

In "Barracoon," Cudjo recounts the story of the Clotilda. It is often said that in the run-up to the Civil War a wealthy businessman named Timothy Meaher made a bet that he could bring a ship full of Africans to Mobile and not be caught. The federal government had outlawed the importation of human cargo some fifty years prior, and Meaher and his friends were eager to prove that they could flout national regulations, according to Sylviane Diouf, a leading historian of the Clotilda. Meaher bought a schooner for a voyage to Ouidah, in the kingdom of Dahomey, in modern-day Benin, where he funded the purchase of a hundred and ten young men and women. When the Africans arrived in Alabama, they were forced off the ship and made to hide in the swamplands. The schooner was burned and scuttled to destroy evidence of the voyage; Meaher would have faced the death penalty if discovered. The captives were enslaved and put to work locally or sent to plantations farther away. Five years later, at the end of the Civil War, these men and women gained their freedom, but Meaher refused to give them land. Instead, he and others sold many of them small parcels on which they founded Africatown, an autonomous

community where they grew food, ran businesses, and taught the next generation their customs and languages. They built a cemetery that faced east, toward Africa. The Meaher family is still one of the biggest landowners in Mobile, and over the years they have leased their land to industrial plants that have polluted the land and contributed to a public-health crisis in the community, according to research done by the Mobile Environmental Justice Action Coalition. They have never apologized for the Clotilda voyage.

In 2019, marine scientists confirmed the discovery of the Clotilda's remains, in a remote stretch of the Mobile river, near land belonging to the Meaher family. The discovery provided the Africatown community with scientific validation of their story. (Researchers said last year that the ship was remarkably well preserved and may contain DNA traces.) Following the find, Africatown held a bell-ringing ceremony attended by local politicians and members of national news outlets, including this reporter, who appears briefly in the documentary. In a scene from "Descendant," once the event has ended, Veda Tunstall, a former real-estate agent whose lineage stems from the Clotilda, reacts to the sudden influx of attention. She fears that her community's history will "be taken the same way our people were taken." Of the nascent efforts to build a museum in Africatown and to redevelop the area, she says, "I don't want to be a *part* of it, I want to *be* it."

*Joycelyn Davis at the bell-ringing ceremony held in Africatown a few months after marine scientists confirmed the discovery of the Clotilda's remains, in 2019. Photograph courtesy the author*

At a community meeting in Africatown, an illustration, hidden underneath a piece of cloth, was revealed. It showed what the Clotilda may have looked like, including how the captives were packed into its hold. The moment after the cover is whisked off and a small burst of clapping peters out, the discomfort in the room is palpable as people take in the harrowing depiction of their ancestors lined up head-to-toe in coffinlike slats. Many of the attendees' faces appear filled with fear and regret. Finally, an older man speaks up. "The pain and suffering that my people have had to endure throughout this whole process is a tremendous burden," he says. He proposes that "some dollars" come to those related to the Clotilda's victims. Kamau Sadiki, one of the divers who helped confirm the ship's discovery, affirms the community's suffering and suggests, "You all should come up with what justice means to you."

It is a complicated question with a variety of answers. In the documentary,

Joycelyn Davis, a descendant of the Clotilda survivor Charlie Lewis, visits the Lincoln Memorial, in D.C., and dreams big about a similar monument in Africatown. “I hope that it could be appreciated like this,” she says. Emmett Lewis tells his young daughters stories about his great-great-great-grandfather Cudjo, because he wants them to know what he stood for. He says, “My only fear is for my people’s story not to be told.” Tunstall worries about Africatown residents getting priced out as the region becomes a tourist attraction, while expressing ambivalence about reparations. “As long as Timothy Meaher is not here, I don’t think there’s anybody to punish,” she says. Garry Lumbers, a member of the Clotilda Descendants Association, points out that, although news articles and books have come out about Africatown, the community is still suffering economically and socially. “It looks like a war,” he says.

These attempts to grapple with what justice might mean resonate well beyond Africatown. People around the country, and the world, are watching to see how America’s history of racial violence will be memorialized. Sheila Flanagan, the former director of programs at the History Museum of Mobile, states that most African Americans, unlike the descendants of the Clotilda, don’t know where their African ancestors came from. Now, she says, “the African American community for one time can say, ‘This is real. . . . We won’t have to wonder anymore. This actually happened.’ ”

Khalil Gibran Muhammad, a professor of history at the Harvard Kennedy School who studies truth and reconciliation efforts from Belfast to Rwanda, believes that memorializing victims of structural racism is an important part of a larger movement of racial reckoning in the U.S. but that memorials alone are “insufficient to the harder work of transforming a society.” These efforts don’t go far enough, he told me, because they are too “passive” and easy to skip. He cited the importance of Berlin’s Holocaust Memorial being placed in the heart of downtown, and said that memorials need to “confront the spatial segregation that exists” and “penetrate areas that people cannot avoid.” A museum in

Africatown, he worried, would allow people to “opt out” of learning about the history of the Clotilda.

Stevenson, the civil-rights lawyer and founder of the national lynching memorial, addressed this problem by adding a second set of steel rectangles to the memorial, each one representing a U.S. county where lynchings took place. He invited the respective counties to claim their monuments and to establish a memorial on their home ground to lynching victims. He also required each county to demonstrate that its community was taking steps toward economic and racial justice before acquiring its column. The unclaimed monuments that remain on display at the national lynching memorial serve as a reminder of the lack of redress across the country.

Muhammad also pointed out that there has been “no state-sponsored mechanism” to address the harms of slavery and the ongoing systemic racism in the U.S. That may be changing. In February, 2021, the congresspersons Barbara Lee and Cory Booker reintroduced legislation for the creation of a national commission to address “truth, racial healing, and transformation,” which was first presented by Representative Lee following George Floyd’s murder. This will surely be easier said than done. In the film, one Clotilda descendant says, “I still don’t know what my idea of justice is.” Lonnie Bunch, the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution and founding director of the N.M.A.A.H.C., told me that, for him, reparations would mean providing “educational opportunities for all,” as such opportunities would be what “would make so many of those enslaved ancestors smile.” Muhammad argued that school is the best channel for “acceptance and acknowledgment” to be disseminated in society. Yet the increased efforts to present schoolchildren with the truth about America’s racial history have resulted in laws limiting what can be taught passing or getting introduced in at least forty state legislatures. “Putting up a monument might actually be easier anywhere in this country than changing how we teach each other and our children about what happened,”



Muhammad said.

What justice, then, can a monument or museum bring? Brent Leggs, a preservationist and the director of the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund at the National Trust, told me that historic preservation is “a form of repair and a way to correct past injustice.” For Leggs, a historic site has the unique ability to reduce the gap between space and time. Brown said that the aim of her film was similar: to illustrate that “the past is in the present, always.” For decades, historic sites in the U.S. cemented a narrative that positioned whites as heroes and erased the contributions of Black people, among other groups. Leggs hopes that a “greater reverence for Black history” could lead to a “greater reverence for Black bodies and Black people.” Mary Elliott, the curator of American slavery at the N.M.A.A.H.C., described how, after visiting the museum, many people across racial, political, and class divides express frustration at not having been taught this history. “It’s all our stories,” she said.

Ultimately, “Descendant” is not only about justice but also about memory. How can we be better by facing the past, individually and as a society? As Americans struggle to come to terms with the atrocities of racial violence, these questions are contentious and uncomfortable. The only certain thing is that we cannot look away. ♦