It’s Just 110 Days Until the Long-Awaited Opening of Africatown Heritage House in Mobile, Alabama

Mobile, Alabama (March 20, 2023) — Today marks 110 days until the July 8 opening of Africatown Heritage House, a community building that will house “Clotilda: The Exhibition” and share the long-untold story of the last known slave ship to arrive in the United States.

The number 110 is incredibly significant, as it represents one day for each person whose life was forever changed when they were taken from West Africa and illegally brought into the United States aboard the Clotilda.

A story that was shared in secret for more than 150 years will finally take the global stage as the descendants of those 110 people and the incredible community they developed — called Africatown — acknowledge “The Landing” on July 8, the 163rd anniversary of the date their ancestors arrived in the United States … in shackles and against their will.

This is a brief history of the Clotilda and its survivors:

Under the cover of night in the summer of 1860, a ship carrying 110 Africans slipped into Mobile Bay. The Clotilda, the last known U.S. slave ship, made its illegal voyage 52 years after the international slave trade had been outlawed. (Though it was illegal to bring enslaved people into the United States, domestic slavery itself remained legal until 1865.)

Upon arrival in Alabama, the captives were offloaded into the marshes along the Mobile River. In an attempt to conceal the crime, Timothy Meaher, the man who arranged the transfer, ordered the boat burned and sunk. After surviving the wilds of the Mobile Delta, some captives remained in Mobile, enslaved by the Meaher family; a few were given to the ship’s captain as part of his payment; and others were sold to Alabama plantations north of Mobile.
When slavery was abolished in 1865, the survivors dreamed of returning to Africa but did not have the financial means to make that happen. Instead, many of them pooled their limited resources to purchase land from the Meahers and turn it into the independent community known as “Africatown.” There they maintained their African identities, continued to speak their own languages, established their own set of laws and — in the early years — even had a chief. They built churches, schools and businesses based on what they knew from their homeland, and they effectively created their own world on the northern end of Mobile.

In 2019, it was verified that the shipwreck of the Clotilda rested at the bottom of the Mobile River, providing a tangible link to the names and stories that have been passed down through generations of descendants.

Credit: History Museum of Mobile

“Clotilda: The Exhibition” will focus on 110 men, women and children, whose stories will be shared through a combination of interpretive text panels, documents and artifacts, including some pieces of the sunken ship scientifically verified to be the Clotilda.

The ship and its survivors have been the subject of several recent news articles and television documentaries, including a 2022 Netflix film that was co-produced by musician Questlove, who learned just a few years ago through genealogical research in conjunction with the PBS series “Finding Your Roots” that he is, in fact, a descendant of the 110.

Africatown Heritage House will open to the public on July 8. Its operating hours will be Tuesdays through Saturdays, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. The exhibition will have limited capacity, so
tickets will be sold in time-block increments and should be purchased in advance. Tickets will be available online in a few months.

The facility was built by the Mobile County Commission but is a collaborative project that involves several entities working in partnership with the community. This includes the Alabama Historical Commission, which is leading the scientific efforts surrounding the search for, authentication and protection of the ship Clotilda and related artifacts; the History Museum of Mobile, which curated, constructed and funded “Clotilda: The Exhibition” with generous support from other local organizations; Visit Mobile, which is helping the community welcome visitors and share its many stories; and several organizations that represent the descendants and Africatown.

For more information about the facility and the exhibition, please visit Clotilda.com. The website is managed by the History Museum of Mobile, which will operate Africatown Heritage House when it opens this summer.

For a growing set of press materials about the facility and the 110 people who will be honored there, please refer to this Media Packet.

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