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# Lewis, Cudjo ( Cudjo Kossola Lewis )

(1841–26 July 1935),

Timothy M. Broughton

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slave and freeperson, storyteller, and community organizer, was born in what is now Benin, Africa. He was smuggled into Mobile, Alabama, aboard the schooner *Clotilda* in July 1860, over fifty years after the abolition of the North Atlantic slave trade in the United States. The *Clotilda* was the last known slave ship, and Lewis and the others were the last known Africans brought to America as slaves. Although Lewis's grandfather owned land, livestock, and a few slaves in Africa, his father Oluale and mother Nyfond-lo-loo lived humble lives. Nyfond-lo-loo was Oluale's second wife and Lewis their second child. Nyfond-lo-loo had five other children. Oluale also had nine by his first wife and three by his third wife.

As a young boy, Lewis enjoyed playing with his siblings and playing the drums. At the age of fourteen he began training to become a soldier, learning how to track, hunt, camp, shoot arrows, and throw spears. Lewis claimed that the goal of this training was to protect the community, not to attack others. As an adolescent Lewis was initiated into the *oro*, the secret society for Yoruba men that was in charge of policing the community. His duties included disposing of criminals, which could include selling them into slavery or having them executed, accusing sorcerers and witches, administering justice, and invoking spiritual forces for the protection of the community. By the time he was nineteen, Lewis began showing interest in a young woman, but before he could marry her he was swept up by a Dahomey raid and sold into American slavery.

The raid that captured Lewis and 109 other Africans occurred on or around 16 February 1860. Due to colonial countries declaring the slave trade illegal, the number of slaves transported across the Atlantic from Dahomey declined from 20,000 in the 1600s to around 12,000 in the early 1800s. Instrumental in the trade was King Ghezo, who ruled Dahomey from 1818 to 1856. Although pressure from Great Britain had forced Ghezo to sign a treaty to end his state's foreign slave trade activities in 1852, he nevertheless continued to participate in the trade. Ghezo had threatened to attack Lewis's town because it had refused to pay tribute to the Dahomey king. When Ghezo was killed in 1858 while returning from a military campaign, his son Badohun, who took the name Glele, carried out the attack. Lewis told Zora Neale Hurston, who spent two months interviewing him in Mobile in 1928, that the Africans were marched to the coast and were forced to look at the decapitated heads of their relatives and friends. Lewis and the others were held in a slave pen, or barracoon, in Ouidah for three weeks and eventually sold for \$100 each.

The voyage from West Africa to Mobile lasted around forty-five days. By the time the ship docked, word of the Africans' arrival had spread throughout Mobile. The spark that had launched the *Clotilda*'s journey had been a wager made by Timothy Meaher, a shipbuilder who owned several lumber mills and cotton plantations. In 1859 Meaher bet “a thousand dollars that I myself can bring a ship full of niggers

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right into Mobile Bay under the Officers' noses" (Pettaway, 27). Meaher used wood processed by his lumber mills to build the ship. Now, to hide the evidence of the schooner, the *Clotilda's* captain set it on fire in nearby Bayou Canot; Sylviane Diouf noted that the ribs of the *Clotilda* remained visible at low tide for the next 75 years.

Upon arrival in Mobile, the Africans were scattered. Of the 110 Africans aboard the *Clotilda*, sixteen males and sixteen females became the property of Timothy Meaher. Burns Meaher, Timothy's brother, received ten couples. His other brother, James, received eight slaves, one of whom was Lewis. Eighteen Africans went to live with William Foster, the ship's captain, and Thomas Buford received seven Africans. The others were sold to slave dealers outside the Mobile area. The name "Cudjo Lewis" was a result of the slave owner's inability to pronounce his African name, Kossola Oluale. When James Meaher had a problem calling him Kossola, Lewis asked Meaher to start calling him Cudjo, which means, "born on a Monday." Kodjo was a common boy's name in Benin. Oluale, the name of his father, was the name Cudjo would most likely have inherited had he remained in Africa. Because his name sounded like the English "lu," his last name became "Lewis."

After the Civil War freed all slaves in the United States, many of the *Clotilda* Africans hoped that the Meaher brothers would give them the resources to return to Africa. However, they soon realized that they would have to provide for themselves. Lewis and other former slaves organized a community they called African Town (later Africantown) in 1868. Lewis approached Timothy Meaher about providing them with the land to build their community. The Meahers refused, and Timothy became incensed when Lewis broached the idea. For several years the Africans rented the land. However, by 1870, they had saved enough money to buy several acres. Lewis purchased almost two acres in 1872 for \$100 from Meaher.

Abile, the woman whom Lewis married after slavery had ended, had also been one of the *Clotilda* Africans. Lewis came to know Abile while on Meaher's plantation. When slavery ended, he proposed to her, and she accepted. Together they had six children (Aleck, James, Pollee Dahoo, David, Cudjo, and Celia Es-bew-O-see). The Lewis family endured many tragedies. All of the children died within fifteen years. Three children died within four months of each other. Celia became sick and died in August 1893. Cudjo Jr. was murdered in a melee when two deputies raided a craps (dice) game at the Lewis home in August 1902. In 1905 David was decapitated by a train, Pollee suddenly disappeared a short time after David's death, and James died of paralysis in November. Aleck, the eldest, died in December 1908, shortly after his mother. After over forty years of companionship, Abile died on 14 November 1908. Lewis believed that she had died of a broken heart over the tragic deaths of her children. Lewis never remarried.

After gaining their freedom, Lewis and his shipmates worked in Timothy Meaher's lumberyards. They worked eleven hours a day for one dollar a day. Although Meaher allowed them to work eleven hours a day for wages, he required each laborer to work an additional hour each day without wages. Lewis was a shingle maker, as was his eldest son. Much as they had in Africa, Lewis and the men in Africantown harvested their own corn, beans, yams, English peas, blackberries, figs, scuppernong, grapes, and peaches. They also hunted possum, raccoons, and rabbits, and they raised chickens, cows, and hogs. The women mostly worked as cooks, selling meals to people in surrounding communities.

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Lewis and four of his former shipmates became the governors of Africantown. Their rule was based on seniority and respect for the elders. The residents used African terms of respect when speaking to the elders. The people in Africantown called Lewis “Uncle Cudjo.” A man with a sense of purpose, Lewis valued hard work, community service, and dedication to family and God. He did not tolerate stealing and dishonesty, and often told folktales, such as the tale of the tortoise—an animal that Lewis saw as wise, disciplined, and frugal—to teach invaluable life lessons. Lewis was revered for his ability to share stories with people of his community. Blacks and whites would come just to hear him speak. Blessed with a remarkable memory, he kept the stories of his native Africa alive through his ability to tell “his story” from Africa to America.

Records show that although Lewis had been exposed to Christianity, he did not lose his respect for his native religious practices. After his arrival in Mobile, Lewis participated in religious ceremonies on the “Praying Grounds,” a wooded area used for communicating with the gods. It was not until 1869 that Lewis formally integrated his African religious traditions with Western Christianity when he joined Mobile's Stone Street Baptist Church, a black church that had been established before the Civil War. In 1872 Lewis and others formed the Old Baptist Church, which in 1903 became Union Baptist Church. This church was erected on the site of the “Praying Grounds.” After Lewis was injured by a train rail and became unable to work, the congregation of Union Baptist Church made him the church sexton. He faithfully rang the church bell every Sunday morning.

Lewis was one of only a few people to have been born in Africa and to live through slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow. He helped organize the only self-governing African settlement in Alabama. A man of enormous integrity and wit, one who was described as “dignified, lovable, and intelligent,” he was always proud of being African (*Mobile Press*, 2 Oct. 1977). His ultimate desire was to return to his native land to see old friends or their children. Perhaps the closest he would come to returning home was talking with Ellen Carter, a white Baptist missionary who spent eighteen months in Nigeria and who often conversed with him in his native language. His dying words were spoken in a whisper, but expressed sentiments that had been shared by millions of Africans who had been torn from their homeland: “Will you see that Cudjo gets back home?” (*Mobile Press*, 2 Oct 1977) In 1959 a bust of Lewis was unveiled in front of Union Baptist Church to commemorate his life and those of the original denizens of Africantown. In 1977 a bronze plaque was placed at Mobile's Bienville Square by the Amoco Foundation and the Association of Afro-American Life and History, Inc., to honor the memory of Lewis and of Africantown. In 1997 the African Town Community Mobilization Project was created to establish an Africantown historic district and to encourage the ongoing development of the site.

## Further Reading

Mobile Public Library Local History of Genealogy maintains most documents on *Clotilda*, Lewis and his shipmates, including personal interviews (Zora Neale Hurston's among them), ship records, personal notes, and letters of Timothy Meaher and Foster, newspaper articles, periodicals, and photographs.

Diouf, Sylviane. *Dreams of Africa in Alabama: The Slave Ship Clotilda and the Story of the Last Africans Brought to America* (2007)

Glennon, Robert M. *Kudjo: The Last Slave Voyage to America* (1999)

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Pettaway, Addie E. *Africantown USA: Some Aspects of Folklore and Material Culture of An Historic Landscape* (1985)

Roche, Emma Langdon. *Historical Sketches of the South* (1914).

**See also**

Hurston, Zora Neale <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-34472>>