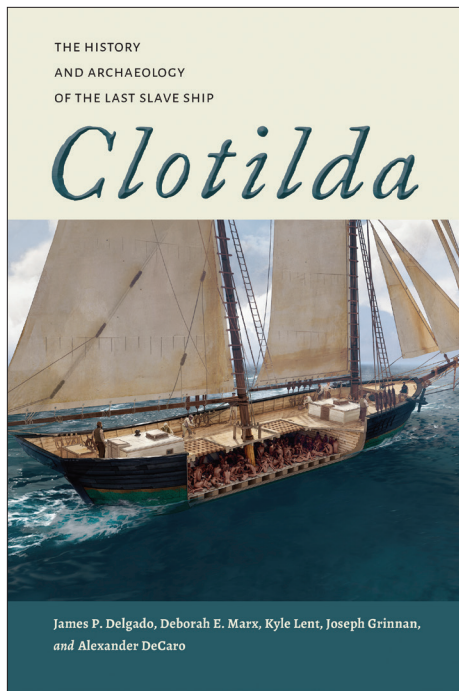




CLOTILDA: THE HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE LAST SLAVE SHIP

By James P. Delgado, Deborah E. Marx, Kyle Lent, Joseph Grinnan, and Alexander DeCaro, University of Alabama Press, 2023

Reviewed by Matthew Pawelski, Maritime Archaeologist

Under cover of darkness in the summer of 1860, the schooner *Clotilda* arrived in Mobile, Alabama, with an illegal cargo of human beings, brought to the US after a journey from Ouidah in what is now Benin. The journey was the result of a bet by *Clotilda's* captain, William Foster, its owner, Timothy Meaher, and other wealthy residents of the Mobile area regarding whether or not the vessel could make the trip without being caught. After unloading 110 enslaved people and part of the crew onto the steamer *Czar*, Foster took *Clotilda* into Bayou Canot where he burned and sank it. The enslaved people were brought fifty miles upriver to the Dabney Plantation, where they were split up and sold to the various parties behind the wager. The illegal slaving voyage quickly became common knowledge throughout the country, with publications throughout the United States containing news of the voyage, and it was even mentioned in an article published in London. Yet, despite this general knowledge, and in large part due to corruption and sympathetic attitudes to the institution of slavery, no one was ever convicted of a crime.

In this book on the modern search for *Clotilda*, the authors utilize a maritime archaeological framework, although they take care to establish the historical setting and background that sets the stage for the archaeological study. The book begins by taking Mobile as a port, city, and trading center and placing it in its context within the American South, the global cotton trade, and the institution of slavery. Slavery was thoroughly woven into the world in which *Clotilda* operated and in which its builders and owners lived. The schooner's entire commercial career and most, if not all, of its voyages were caught up within a slave economy. Indeed, the nature of cargo being transported to ports was so often the product of enslaved labor that there may never have been a time when *Clotilda* sailed without carrying onboard some connection to enslaved labor. The vessel itself was built in a yard owned by an enslaver, Foster, who likely had enslaved people working within the yard.

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In between chapters on Mobile and the construction and career of *Clotilda* itself, the second chapter focuses on the construction and archaeology of the nearby Twelvemile Island Wreck, a vessel in the same ship graveyard as *Clotilda* (a ship graveyard being an area with a high density of intentionally abandoned vessels). The Twelvemile Island Wreck was initially reported incorrectly as *Clotilda* and, as a result, required careful archaeological analysis in order to clarify and establish its identity as a different vessel: likely the twentieth-century schooner *Else*.

The authors explore the archaeological studies of both the Twelvemile Island Wreck and 1BA704 (later found to be *Clotilda*) with the understanding that shipwreck identifications of this type are often exceedingly difficult. Fieldwork in silty estuarine environments often involves blackwater diving with zero visibility, making work on-site more akin to archaeology by feel than archaeology by sight. Investigations of shipwrecks of the age and type of *Clotilda* are often incredibly challenging, on top of the difficult field environment, in an area filled with intentionally abandoned vessels, and firm answers to research questions are often elusive. Wooden vessels often lack construction plans, with vessels often being built according to regional trends and sometimes sculpted to the individual needs of an owner or shipwright. Once the vessel is wrecked and loses material both during abandonment and deterioration in the water, it begins to lack readily identifiable features. Archaeologists are often left with limited evidence of the manner of wrecking, and rarely does anything display a name or unique construction feature. In these types of projects, history and archaeology must complement each other in order to best identify a shipwreck.

The authors begin their analysis by discussing the types and construction of vessels reflected in historic marine insurance records and voyages in the Gulf reflected in historic newspaper accounts; they note a pattern of smaller vessels on regional

voyages. The authors then use these sources to focus on *Clotilda*'s uniquely large tonnage, atypical for the region, and its history as a vessel traveling farther and carrying larger cargos. Utilizing accounts of both its voyages and its abandonment, as well as showcasing timber measurements, period correct shipbuilding techniques, and evidence of burning, the authors build a strong case that site 1BA704 was an atypically large Gulf schooner of the correct dimensions and period that burned to the waterline in the correct location. *Clotilda* sits, periodically exposed and at other times covered with sediment, on the banks of Bayou Canot as site 1BA704.

The authors go a step further and relate the site to the broader human story of the people who were brought from Africa aboard *Clotilda*. The *Clotilda* survivors maintained a sense of community, and in 1870 they created the community of Africatown, north of Mobile. *Clotilda* was a central part of the identity of both Africatown and the descendant community, and its legacy is still acutely present. The authors circle back to *Clotilda*'s place within the descendant community and place *Clotilda* within a continuing context with a similar sensitivity. Oral histories were provided by survivors and their families to authors and researchers throughout the twentieth century, and these oral histories persist with the descendant community today. The identification of the vessel allows for further community participation, and the foundation laid in the fieldwork described by the authors has led to grant activity and community partnership for further study and exhibition of its story. In their approach to *Clotilda*, and with all the complications inherent in such a project, the authors lay out a compelling case study for what a shipwreck investigation can and should be.