

EXPLORING THE HISTORY AND LEGACY OF THE ORIGINAL AFRICATOWN

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By Jose Gutierrez Jr.

As Africatown (aka The Central District)-Seattle enters an era of redevelopment, while maintaining and enriching its identity, cultural roots and future prospects - famous are the names of other ethnic enclaves in the United States; you've heard of Chinatown, Koreatown, Japantown, Little Italy, Germantown, etc. Guess which town came before them all - except the Germantowns and Chinatowns (founded in various states beginning in 1683 and 1840s respectively)? Africatown.

Exactly. A nation founded and enriched upon the physically taxing (to physically and mentally disabling) strength, workmanship, knowledge and endurance on African and African-American labor - established Africatown in Alabama - about three miles from Mobile, in 1860. It truly was an Africatown, established not by African-Americans who had been in the Americas for generations at this point, but instead by newly arrived Africans who were captives of the illegal slave trade more than 50

years after the importation of any slave was outlawed (1807) in the United States.

Formed by 32 West Africans (reportedly members of the Yoruba and Fon people) who were held by the Kingdom of Dahomey, Africatown's founders were victims of a smuggling effort on the slaveship, Catilda. The criminals who engineered the illegal plan, Timothy Meaher, his brother Byrnes (also spelled Burns), John Dabey and others deliberately pursued the sinister endeavor. The successful smugglers burnt and scuttled the ship as to evade capture and legal consequences. In popular discussion on race, it is not uncommon hear people discuss the 'end of slavery' and 'racism', but this factual account defies the myth of the U.S. slave trade ending in 1807 and it is well detailed that slavery and slave importation legally continued in other places such as Brazil into the late 1880's, if not beyond. The slavers would never be brought to justice. Although forms of slavery continue in modern times, there has been no record or account of the severe brutality and dehumanization in any era on Earth that has remotely compared to the scale and breadth of brutality endured by the people extracted from the continent of Africa.

Once arrived in the United States, it is reported that the newcomers - speaking different languages, practicing different customs and likely traumatized and dehumanized en route to the western hemisphere and upon arrival, were not only subjugated by their European/White captors and owners, but were not readily accepted by the, comparatively more, Americanized African-Americans. The newly arrived Africans would form their own community within the community - it would be called Africatown - and most of the survivors would work the land of the Meaher family through emancipation into the era of sharecropping. Over time, the Africans would maintain many of their customs and keep their names in conjunction with their newly assigned 'slave names', but on a brighter note - the Africans and African-Americans would acknowledge the obvious common ground on which they stood, and would intermingle in daily life.

Notably, there were many outstanding people in the group, but one is of particular legend. His name is Cudjoe Kazoola Lewis (his Yoruba name: Kazoola or Kossola) and he lived to be that lone survivor of the last documented slave ship of the United States/Africa slave trade, until his death in 1935. He was said to have been of great knowledge and wisdom and also a chief of his African community back home. The people of Africatown did their best to avoid the hostile White/European people of that time and place and developed a unique and necessary self-contained way of life. Establishing community institutions such as the Union Missionary Baptist Church, the Old Plateau Cemetery aka The Africatown Graveyard and in 1880, the Mobile County Technical School, demonstrated their relentless yearn and desire for upliftment. The amazing story of survival and perseverance of the original Africatown is a testament to the willingness, courage, suffrage and determination of a people to survive and inspire amidst the hellish inhumanities, of which words are inadequate to convey. Born from the memory and example of Africatown-USA in Alabama, Africatown-Seattle, with monumental steps like the Liberty Bank Building, adopts the mantle of self-help, self-sufficiency, teamwork, vision, dedication, leadership and commitment to community building... A legacy well-worth living and leaving as a future example for the Africatowns to come and others in search of liberty, justice and growth.