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FEATURED

## Descendants applaud Africatown Heritage House preview

BY KYLE HAMRICK

Jul 7, 2023



Clotilda Descendants Association President Jeremy Ellis speaks at a reception for Clotilda descendants and Africatown supporters Thursday night ahead of the Africatown Heritage House's Saturday opening.

Staff photo

People do not often walk through museums and see their families' stories told out loud. Ahead of the Africatown Heritage House's grand opening on Saturday, July 8, descendants and families of the 110 enslaved Africans toured the museum first on Thursday.

Many of them mixed with local elected officials and community leaders at a reception Thursday night held in the History Museum of Mobile. Many spoke of “Clotilda: The Exhibition” with gratitude that their personal history was acknowledged in such a public way, and with optimism Africatown’s story is not over yet.

“I’m still processing all my emotions about it,” said Veda Robbins, whose ancestors arrived in Mobile in chains on the Clotilda in 1860 and helped found Africatown five years later. “The part that really got to me is just knowing that’s my family being exhibited. My family. I was just blown away by that.”

She took her time reading the panels, listening to oral histories recorded by community members and viewing pieces recovered from Clotilda’s wreck. Robbins described “Clotilda: The Exhibition” as beautiful, with plenty of material to inspire learning, reflection and understanding.



The History Museum of Mobile hosted a reception for Clotilda descendants and Africatown supporters Thursday night.  
Staff photo

“The Heritage House spent most of the time on the people, and that’s where it needs to be,” she said. “We got to know the people, and not the ship. I think that’s the important thing.”

What excites her is the possibility of more artifacts and stories joining the exhibit as the community moves forward.

“I’m looking forward to more being added to be able to tell the story more completely,” Robbins said. “But I do think it was good. It’s a start.”

Garry Lumbers, the great-great grandson of Cudjoe Lewis, said he enjoyed the exhibit, and though he also looked forward to the museum expanding, he said the fact people “got it started” is worthy of recognition. More than that, he said the Heritage House has a lesson for everyone, not just people in Africatown and Mobile.

“It’s not just my history,” Lumbers said. “It’s your history. It’s everybody’s history, because everybody’s forefathers paid a price to come here. It’s not just my story, it’s everybody’s story.”

#### **Heritage House manager talks history and opening weekend at community meeting**

Lorna Woods, 75, who has collected and curated Africatown’s traditions and histories for years, said the history and stories contained inside are bigger than the museum and the community itself.

“Africatown is not that big, but the story is so big it’s outgrown the city limits,” she said. “It’s big enough for the world to learn from.”

The exhibit was “more than [she] expected,” Woods said. It is a testament to the African’s survival and continued effort to keep their story alive.

“Don’t think of just slavery,” she said. “The people that know history and know the feeling of what you learned when you were a child, you didn't think it was going to be opened to the world. It's now opened to the world to see how they made it. They made it, and they survived.”

Jeremy Ellis, the president of the Clotilda Descendants Association (CDA), thanked History Museum of Mobile Director Meg Fowler, Ph.D., Mobile County Commissioner Merceria Ludgood and others for their work making the idea of a Clotilda descendants museum a reality.

“It is the most beautiful, thorough, well done exhibit I have seen,” he said. “You all just have no idea.”

Ellis called on the descendants and community to be “memory keepers” telling the true past.

“As memory keepers we have the opportunity to tell the story from our own narrative, and that’s what we’re going to continue to do,” he said. “That’s exactly what the Clotilda exhibit does.”

Closing the evening, Heritage House Manager Jessica Fairley called on everyone to join “the Africatown movement,” using every resource available to uplift Africatown and its people.

“I’m calling upon you to be born for a time such as this, to pick up your sticks, pick up anything you can do and come and fight with us to build this community, to make it something beautiful,” she said. “Educate yourself, take up the challenge.”

The museum will be dedicated with a ceremony Friday morning and will open to the public with a community day on Saturday.

Email comments and news tips to [kyle@lagniappemobile.com](mailto:kyle@lagniappemobile.com)

**MORE INFORMATION**

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A look inside the Africatown Heritage House

Kyle Hamrick