

My New Year's Resolution: Justices for the 110

In June 2020, [Al.com](https://www.al.com) published an article I wrote making the case for reparations for descendants of the 110 enslaved Africans aboard the slave ship Clotilda: it is time for reparations. This is the sequel to that piece: it is also time to hold all responsible for this egregious crime accountable. As we move into 2022, the US federal court system should initiate that process.

The February 2020 edition of National Geographic, entitled "Last Journey Into Slavery" featured a story about my ancestors and other survivors of the Clotilda voyage. For those unfamiliar with my story, Kupollee "Pollee" Allen and Rosalie "Rose" Allen, my sixth-generation paternal grandparents were two of the Clotilda's passengers. In the epilogue of the feature, "Owning the Past," Robert Meaher, the great-grandson of co-conspirator Timothy Meaher, questioned whether the May 2019 discovery of Clotilda was actually found. In addition, he made it clear "that his ancestor was never convicted of any crime, and he points to the involvement of other responsible parties, like the people of Benin who sold the slaves and [co-conspirator Captain] William Foster, who captained the ship."

It is my belief that the decisions made in response to charges brought against co-conspirators Timothy Meaher, Captain William Foster, John Dabney, Burns (Byrnes) Meaher and all other responsible parties are indicative of the moral compass of the times. Only a few months after the dismissal of each court case, the Civil War would begin and many of the judicial parties involved would work for the confederate states. Considering the circumstances, these cases should be reopened.

Lives stolen; injustices committed

The trans-Atlantic slave trade was one of the deadliest and most inhumane systems in world history. While over 12.5 million began the voyage, two million Africans died along the way. In 1807, President Thomas Jefferson and Congress wrote legislation that abolished the transatlantic slave trade. This legislation became law on January 1, 1808. In addition, the Piracy Act of 1819 was amended in 1820 declaring participation in the transatlantic slave trade an act piracy and punishable by death.

Around March 1860, 52 years after the abolishment of the transatlantic slave trade and 40 years after amending the Piracy Act of 1819, Captain William Foster, funded by his co-conspirator, Timothy Meaher, set sail for Africa. Foster would set sail with 110 of the Africans he had purchased aboard the Clotilda. Upon his return to Mobile, he avoided customs agents, towed the Clotilda up the river, and put the enslaved Africans on the Steamboat Czar, owned by Timothy's brother, Byrnes (aka Burns) Meaher. The enslaved Africans would then be transported to John Dabney's Mount Vernon plantation and hidden in the swamp. Timothy Meaher, his brothers Byrnes and James, John Dabney and Foster were all given enslaved people from the Clotilda. Timothy Meaher and his co-conspirators used a sophisticated plan to hide the Africans who were on board, moving them from plantation to plantation while burning the Clotilda.

Within two weeks of their arrival in America and over the next several months, court cases were opened (e.g., U.S. vs. William Foster and Richard Sheridan, U.S. vs William Foster, U.S. vs. Burns (Byrnes) Meaher, U.S. vs. John Dabney, etc.). In her book *Dreams of Africa in Alabama*:

My New Year's Resolution: Justices for the 110

The Slave Ship Clotilda and the Last Africans Brought to America, Diouf details the events leading up to these cases including the sophisticated plot to hide these illegal actions. We know that Timothy Meaher was arrested and accused of having “illegally imported negroes.” However, the presiding Judge over the case, William G. Jones was a friend of Timothy Meaher. Diouf writes, “Judge William G. Jones was such a friend that Meaher had given his name to one of his steamers. Everyone knew that when it came to importers of Africans Judge Jones was as lenient as he possibly could be.” This leniency is evident in other related rulings during the same time period. Also, the U.S. Attorney for the southern district of Alabama, Augustus Julian “A.J.” would become an attorney of the Confederate states and a confederate poet. Despite the evidence, Jones cleared Timothy Meaher of all charges.

In addition, the courts were after Foster, not because he was a pirate, but because he avoided customs officials upon arrival from his voyage. Judge William G. Jones also issued orders to have Byrnes Meaher and Dabney appear at the next regular term of his court. On January 10, 1861, the U.S. vs. Burns Meaher and the U.S vs. John Dabney were dismissed by Judge Jones. Since the 110 Africans could not be found, no crime could be proven. On January 12, 1861 only two days after his ruling, Judge Jones resigned. Alabama broke away from the Union, and Judge Jones would eventually serve as a judge of the confederate district court for the district of Alabama from 1861 to 1865. Finally, Foster's case would eventually be thrown out too. Records for several of the cases mentioned above reside at the National Archives in Atlanta and provide an account of the times.

Injustices Reconciled

In May of 2019, Search Inc. prepared a report “Archaeological Investigations of 1Ba704” for the Alabama Historical Commission summarizing their findings from the discovery of Clotilda. They confirm they have located the Clotilda and provide an investigative report that lays out the case for how the U.S. government turned a blind eye to the Meahers, Foster and all parties involved. It also draws the conclusion that “US government officials were perhaps less than diligent in seeking to find the Clotilda or the people brought aboard it against their will...” And just this month, the National Geographic released an article entitled “[America's Last Slave Ship is More Intact Than Anyone Thought](#).” In that article, Vice President of Search Inc., Jim Delgado, stated “this is the most intact slave ship known to exist in the archeological record anywhere. There's actual direct physical evidence not just of the ship and its use, but also of the changes done by Foster and his crew to make it a slave ship.” Over 160 years later, evidence of the crime has now been uncovered.

The cover-up of illegal activity is as bad as the smuggling crime. The finding of Clotilda should initiate an investigation into previous court cases and new cases should be opened where warranted. In the words of William Goldstone “Justice delayed is justice denied”, and we deserve justice. Crimes were committed and all involved should be held accountable. It is my responsibility to make sure the story of the 110 is told, lives are honored, and injustices reconciled.