



2022 AFRICATOWN LANTERN WALK

**A PROJECT OF REPAIR FOR THE DESCENDENTS AND
SURVIVORS OF AFRICATOWN, ALABAMA**

AFRICAN AMERICAN REDRESS NETWORK

JUNE 2023



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ABSTRACT

Africatown, also called Plateau or Magazine Point, was a thriving self-governed community from 1865-1960. The resilience and persistence of the community was remarkable, as the founders of the community arrived in Alabama as enslaved peoples in 1860. In 1960, the surrounding county of Mobile incorporated Africatown, bringing it under county government control. This incorporation resulted in devastating cultural and environmental loss as Mobile's County government proceeded to zone Africatown as commercial and industrial land. More than 60 years later, the community continues to grapple with how to heal and restore their environmental and cultural well-being. The 2022 Africatown Lantern Walk set out to achieve just that. Africatown members sought to restore a revered tradition, the Lantern Walk, as a comprehensive form of repair. This evaluation report outlines the steps taken to plan and implement the 2022 Lantern Walk, including research efforts, site visits, community collaborations, and more. It is our hope that the information and analysis contained in this report will support the Africatown community in sustaining the event for generations to come.



We were contained in very unique ways [...]. This connectedness and strength . . . was just unbelievable.”

- Anderson Flen, Africatown Community Leader, MCTS Alumni '52

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INTRODUCTION

Africatown is located three miles north of Mobile, Alabama. In 1860, an illegal shipment of enslaved peoples arrived on its shores aboard the Clotilda. Following emancipation, survivors of the Clotilda founded and self-governed Africatown. The new community established itself by referencing the origins of its founders; it included a governance structure that echoed the West African towns and villages they were captured from, with a chief selected based on his Dahomey noble heritage. They instilled the importance of origin with their descendants, giving one English and one native-language name to each child. They erected the Union Missionary Baptist Church, the Plateau Cemetery, and their descendants later founded the Mobile County Training School (MCTS). They advocated for their rights and fought to vote even as their former captors put obstacles in their way. Several members even sought reparations for injuries or as pensions for freed people.

After 100 years of self-governing, the town agreed to incorporate into Mobile County to gain access to running water and sewage. Upon incorporation, Mobile County began to rezone much of the land, leading to significant commercial and industrial development, and with it, industrial waste that heavily polluted the water, soil, and air. The cultural, environmental, and economic consequences were devastating. Over the next 70 years, Africatown's population shrank from 12,000 to 2,000. The industrial encroachment toxified the ecosystem, destroying all but a few indigenous plants. As the land and water became unusable and the population declined, revered cultural traditions, such as the historic Africatown Lantern Walk, also dissolved. In the words of one community leader, Mr. Anderson Flen, "All [of Africatown's cultural traditions] have been pretty much wiped out. I mean, there has just been so much erasure of Black culture in that community, in that city."

Early in the town's history, the annual Lantern Walks marked a significant occasion for locals. At the close of every school year, students would walk together with the community on the Lantern Walk to pay homage to the ancestors of Africatown, and to remind the town's young adults of their place in the town's long history of resilience. Students from the then-segregated MCTS would walk through the town holding a lantern to light the way to the final destination, Africatown's Plateau Cemetery.

Memories from the Last (1952) Lantern Walk

Initially, the Lantern Walk was one of the activities that was centered around commencement, usually held after Baccalaureate on that Sunday, in the afternoon, when the graduates moved from the campus into the community shining their light []. During my era, ... we would say our farewells to particular [community] members emphasizing what impact they had on us as students.

- Isaiah Pinkney, Africatown Community Leader, MCTS Alumni '52

Africatown residents have long sought recognition and reparation for the harms their ancestors and they have experienced—from kidnapping and enslavement in the mid-1800s to environmental and economic decimation in recent years. At the turn of the 21st century, community groups began to take shape and collaborate to advance justice efforts that addressed environmental harms and



recalled the town’s legacy and unique culture. Working together, these groups returned the Lantern Walk to Africatown in 2022, capturing both community goals and yielding important lessons for the future generations on how to build community buy-in and organize for meaningful and captivating reparations projects.

REIGNITING THE LANTERN WALK

In 2021, members of Clean Healthy Educated Safe and Sustainable Community (C.H.E.S.S.), the Mobile County Training School Alumni Association (MCTSAA) and the African American Redress Network (AARN) launched discussions on reigniting the historic Africatown Lantern Walk. This collaboration was rooted in decades of local organizing which sought to bring attention to the town’s important history and shed light on its degradation from industrial waste. Community members also advocated for a program that would inspire hope and help residents imagine a better future for the town. In resurrecting a tradition that was last honored in 1952 when the town was independent, community organizers saw a way to repair historical harm by regenerating the environment and restoring cultural traditions.

And so, we look at it now, we want to bring back and instill in the middle school students, as well as the community, those traditions that were held so dear to us

- Isaiah Pinkney, Africatown Community Leader, MCTS Alumni

The Path: Retracing and Honoring History with the 2022 Lantern Walk

Over a period of 18 months, community organizations including C.H.E.S.S. MCTSAA, current MCTS staff and students, local Africatown churches, and external organizations including the AARN, the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), and Birmingham-Southern College (BSC) worked together to put a plan in motion for the Lantern Walk’s return.

Organizers designed the 2022 Lantern Walk to pay tribute to the community’s institutions that held local significance in Africatown’s history of sovereignty. The walk’s path was also planned to weave through the community, inviting residents to join, not only for the important day, but for the larger fight against decades of injustice. Akin to historic Lantern Walks, the revived version started at Mobile County Training School with stops at six sites that represented the spirit of the walk, ending at the grave of Kossola “Cudjoe” Lewis, one of the longest-living Clotilda ancestors. The other sites selected for the 2022 Lantern Walk included the Africatown Heritage House, First Hopewell Baptist Church, Our Mother of Mercy Catholic Church, Yorktown Baptist Church, and Union M. Baptist Church and the Old Plateau Cemetery.





Figure 1 Map of the 2022 Lantern Walk stops, 2022 AUUT Studios, RJ Ramsey

The Commencement of the 2022 Lantern Walk: Mobile County Training School and the Liberty Bell

On Saturday, November 19, 2022, in the midafternoon, organizers stepped out with more than 100 walkers on the first Lantern Walk since 1952, starting from the MCTS.

The MCTS has played a distinct role in Africatown’s history. In 1880, after the survivors of the Clotilda formed their community, they erected the Mobile County Training School. Like Africatown’s governance structure, MCTS was also led by those it served: the students. Students were empowered to oversee their own disciplinary measures and to mentor other youth. The community took pride in educational outcomes from MCTS. Their success represented the town’s success at independent self-governance and self-sufficiency, yet another testament to the ability of survivors and descendants to thrive with few resources and a wealth of challenges. Launching the 2022 Lantern Walk from, the MCTS underscored the

The School's '5 Wells'

It took students from the first grade to the 12th grade almost. And they exposed them to a variety of experiences that brought who and what they were. And by doing that, by the time they became seniors, they had transformed individuals into almost a ready-made person to go out into the world and do things across [the schools focus on] the five wells...And those five wells being: well read, well spoken, well-traveled, well balanced, [well-dressed mentioned a little later].

- Mr. Anderson Flen, Africatown Community Leader, MCTS Alumni '68



community's deep reverence for the school, and its role in shaping Africatown's identity and history.

Choosing to start the 2022 Lantern Walk at MCTS was also a reference to the community's collective pride in preserving and uplifting its landmarks and storied institutions. Soon after they were emancipated, the shipmates from the Clotilda formed a school, housed in one of its churches. In the 1900s, they constructed a building nearby and called it Mobile County Training School. It was destroyed by a fire in those early days but was quickly rebuilt. In 1934, MCTS received accreditation from Mobile County as a training school, the term used for schools that educated African American students. Yet another marker of the community's trailblazing, it was the first public high school for Black students in Mobile (Womack, 2017). In the 1960s, the *Brown v. Board* ruling desegregated MCTS and other schools in the area, leading to teacher layoffs, a decline in enrollment, and a breakdown of the community-centered curricula.

Despite these hurdles, MCTS still stands as the oldest county training school in Alabama and continues to serve as a middle school, educating local youth on the surrounding history.

As the crowd quieted to begin the festivities, a Reverend from Birmingham, Alabama gave a blessing. All eyes then turned to Mr. Isaiah Pinkney (MCTS '52), who stood alongside the town's Liberty Bell, a symbol and artifact from the town's founding. According to oral histories, the Liberty Bell was salvaged from the Clotilda by the enslaved peoples and was positioned centrally in the community for decades, first in the Union Baptist Church, and then at the MCTS campus (Womack, 2015). In 1985, the Mobile Public School System removed the bell for repair and never returned it. The MCTS Alumni secured a replica that now stands at the school.

Neglected Education

I think that our educational system has been horribly neglected and abused in ways that have been historical. And talking with, even going back to when desegregation supposedly took place, some of the best African American teachers, some of the best African American cultures were denied opportunities to lead and had to continue to fight. So, I think that when you begin to look at the kind of damage across the board that has affected this community as in others, but especially this community, because it holds one of the oldest academic institutions for primary education. It's been atrocious.

- Mr. Anderson Flen, Africatown Community Leader, MCTS Alumni '68

Ringin' in a New and Old Tradition

The bell was also a significant part of the campus. And the bell was something that would ring whenever football games or basketball games had been won. It would also ring five minutes before it was time for classes to take in, and either you were in the class in your seat at that particular time or you were late and had to go back home and get a parent to bring you back to school. So, with that in mind, most of the students made an extreme effort to get to school on time. But we will say that the Lantern Walk itself was a culminating activity for the seniors. It signified that they were ready to go out into the world and to make their mark in whatever chosen profession they had.

- Mr. Washington Taylor, Africatown Community Leader, MCTS Alumni '68



When considering who would ring the Liberty Bell to launch the Lantern Walk, the organizers made an intentional selection with Mr. Pinkney. Mr. Pinkney walked the Lantern Walk in 1952; the following year, the tradition was discontinued. Seventy years later, Mr. Pinkney raised his arm solemnly to sound the Bell, marking the momentous occasion. As the crowd exclaimed gleefully, the Lantern Walk began anew.

Africatown's Heritage House

Members of the MCTS Alumni Association (MCTSAA) selected The Heritage House as the second site on the walk. The Heritage House is a new facility located across the street from MCTS that will showcase the Clotilda's history and raise awareness to the often-silenced stories of Africatown and its founders. The Heritage House is set to open in July 2023 alongside the Clotilda Descendants Association's planned Landing Day activities.

Starting in 2022, Birmingham-Southern College's Southern Environmental Center (SEC) began working alongside MCTS students

to create an outdoor classroom/medicinal garden located at the Heritage House. The SEC work is part of a multi-year grant to support STEMMing the Tide, an interdisciplinary project which will introduce locally relevant environmental justice and climate change teaching modules to Africatown middle school students (STEMMING the Tide Annual Report, 2022). In 2023, SEC will collaborate with the African American Redress Network for the Africatown Lantern Walk to add more historic stops and invest in walkways with tree and plant diversity.



Figure 2 Mr. Isaiah Pinkney (MCTS '52) ringing the Liberty Bell at MCTS to mark the beginning of the 2022 Lantern Walk, November 2022, AARN



Figure 3 Heritage House, November 2022, AARN

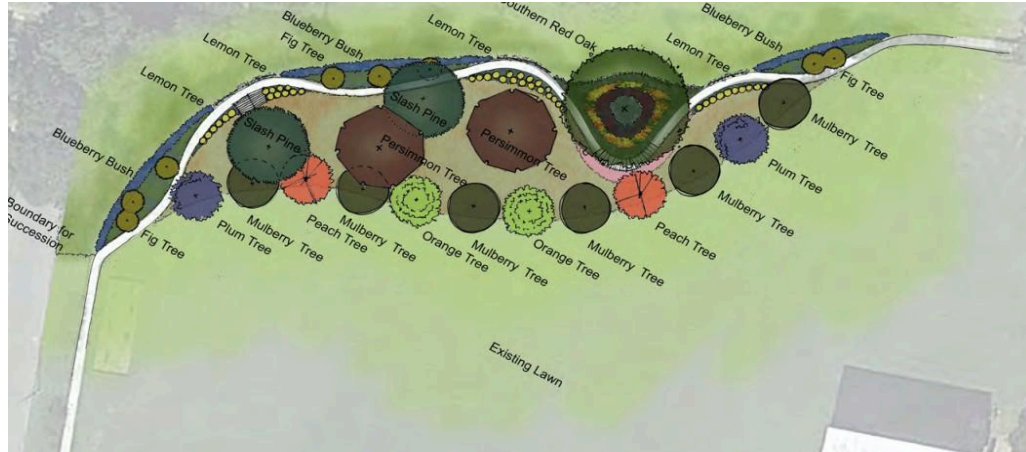


Figure 4 Birmingham Southern College Medicinal Garden Plans, 2022, Roald Hazellhoff

Africatown's Faith-Based Institutions

Departing from the Heritage House, the 2022 Lantern Walk proceeded to Africatown's four historic churches: First Hopewell Baptist Church, Our Mother of Mercy Catholic Church, Yorktown Baptist Church, and Union M. Baptist Church. These churches played a foundational role in Africatown's formations and continue to offer community members places of worship and education.

In addition to their weekly worship services, the churches of Africatown are responsible for enriching the community with a culture of unity and perseverance.

The First Hopewell Baptist Church. The third stop, and the first among the community's four churches, was the First Hopewell Baptist Church. The First Hopewell Baptist Church is a bedrock institution with a long history of influence in the Africatown community. It has been home to a strong congregation since it was first built in the 1900s and has been a home for celebration and worship over the years. In February 2023, the Church hosted the grand opening of the First Hopewell Event Hall. The creation of the Event Hall was led by Pastor Lamar Brady who envisioned the church as a gathering place for residents to eat, socialize, and share in Christian fun.

Faith as a Pillar of Community

As many know, we've talked about the Clotilda, and we've talked about in some ways one church in this community, Union Baptist, which is rightfully so, but there are other churches in this community that played significant roles in the...public educational venue, in civil rights... It's important for us, as African Americans in particular, to make sure that we understand and appreciate our collective roots and how those roots affect us.

- Mr. Anderson Flen, Africatown Community Leader, MCTS Alumni '68

Churches: The Spirit of the Day

The Inaugural 2022 Lantern Walk, in terms of the procession, started at the school. However, prior to that, activities were happening at the churches. The churches provided food and refreshments for individuals as people stopped at each church site. It was important that everybody visit the churches... We have this strong family, church, [and] school support system. There was this consistency in fundamental foundation that was, there was no ambiguity about it.

- Mr. Anderson Flen, Africatown Community Leader, MCTS Alumni '68



Figure 5 First Hopewell Baptist Church, Official Facebook page, October 2013

Our Mother of Mercy Catholic Church. Built in 1926, our Mother of Mercy Catholic Church was the second church stop for the 2022 Lantern Walk. Mother of Mercy Catholic Church played an important role educating young people in Africatown. It established a private school and a kindergarten program in the Masonic Hall soon after it was built (Bridge the Gulf Project, 2015).

Yorktown Baptist Church. Founded in 1883, the Yorktown Baptist Church has strong ties with MCTS and the Africatown community at large. When the MCTS was destroyed by the 1915 fire, the Yorktown Baptist Church hosted classes so the students' education could continue without interruption. Following another fire in 1939, the Church also allowed MCTS students in grades five, six, and seven to move their classes to its grounds.



Figure 6 Yorktown Baptist Church, Official Facebook Page

Union Missionary Baptist Church. The Union Missionary Baptist Church, a core institution in the founding of Africatown, was the final faith-based stop on the 2022 Lantern Walk. This church was originally founded by survivors and descendants of the Clotilda in the late 1800s and was rebuilt in 1918 and again in 1955. According to oral history, it was also the original home of the Liberty Bell. The church's long-standing role in the town's history is underscored by the

Plaque

of African and Yoruba Names situated in front of the church, where the original names of Africatown's founders are commemorated.



Figure 7 Union Missionary Baptist Church, Wikimedia Commons

Old Plateau Cemetery

The final stop of the 2022 Lantern Walk was Old Plateau Cemetery, also known as Africatown Graveyard. It was founded in 1876. The cemetery serves as the resting ground for many of the survivors, founders, and community leaders of Africatown. While it holds over 136 years of city history and national importance, the cemetery has been neglected. Like much of Africatown, it lies on land only slightly above the nearby Mobile River and has been subjected to flooding and a rising water table over the years. In the 2010s, a group of archaeologists began working with the community on preserving the site and implementing conservation efforts. As part of their process in mapping gravesites and developing conservation plans, archaeologists identified more than a thousand unmarked graves using ground-penetrating radar and sub-surface probing. It remains an important landmark to residents and community leaders who know its significance.



Figure 8 Old Plateau Cemetery (Africatown Graveyard), November 2022, AARN

Planting for the Future: The Lantern Walk’s Environmental Repair

As organizers developed the scope for the walk’s recreation, the community asked that the walk also center environmental justice in its activities and symbolism. Even before it was incorporated into Mobile County, Africatown constantly fought to preserve and maintain the land as industry was deliberately constructed close by. In the early 1900s, the International Paper Company started operating a mill on property leased by the former owner of the Clotilda, adjacent to the town (Lee, 2021). It was a hint of the environmental racism that was to come following Africatown’s incorporation into the county (Tabor, 2021).



Figure 9 Planting in the Lantern Walk, November 2022, AARN

By 1960, International Paper had ballooned in size and Scott Paper had set up one of the largest operations in the world nearby. In addition to the two major polluting sites, Africatown became home to a water treatment center and oil storage tanks. Effluent

contaminated ground water, and soot and ash rained from the sky, polluting soil used by locals to grow crops and feed cattle (Lee, 2021). Two formerly thriving neighborhoods, Hog Bayou, and Lewis Quarters were lost to industrial encroachment. In the 1990s, the town was divided by Interstate 165 and the Cochrane-Africatown bridge. The increase in truck traffic, toxic air pollution, and safety risks threatened the health of residents and drove people from the town. In a 2020 environmental analysis, researchers found soil pollution levels to be 300-3,000 times above safe (Womack, Davis, Packer, 2020).

Recognizing the added attention that environmental repair could have if initiated during the walk itself, organizers proposed to plant indigenous trees at every historical site along the way. With the guidance of Prof. Bob Brzuszek, from the Department of Landscape Architecture at Mississippi State University, and Prof. Roald Hazelhoff, from the Southern Environmental Center at Birmingham-Southern College, trees were selected for their ecological value and their ability to withstand the damaged soil and increasing threats from a changing climate. The trees also referenced the town’s agricultural heritage. Community members from each site were given a list of trees and invited to select the option that best captured the spirit of repair. Together,

- | Trees with Meaning |
|---|
| • Pecan tree at Yorktown Baptist Church |
| • Pecan tree at Union Baptist Church |
| • Live Oak tree at the Mobile County Training School |
| • Live Oak tree at Hopewell Church |
| • Shumard Oak tree at Mother of Mercy Church |
| • Sassafras, Swamp Chestnut, and Black Gum trees at the Hope Community Center |

community members, MCTS staff, and the AARN/ICTJ team planted eight trees, as walkers wended their way along the Lantern Walk route.



Figure 10 Africatown Residents, AARN, and ICTJ Members planting indigenous trees together, November 2022, AARN



Figure 11 Africatown Residents and AARN Team picking pecans, November 2022, AARN

A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO COMMUNITY REPAIR

Like many communities founded by freedmen, Africatown has been deeply engaged in self-emancipatory praxis for more than a century. For external actors to responsibly support these efforts, it is essential to collaborate closely with the community to ensure they achieve sustainable reparative justice that is meaningful by their design. By recognizing Africatown community members as local knowledge experts, organizations like AARN aim to decolonize their work by utilizing a desire-based research agenda. Desire-based research brings triumph, resilience, and brilliance of impacted communities as they fight erasure into sharp focus. This approach ensures first, that all work is community driven, and second, that the impacted community plays a central role in shaping local redress efforts and regional conversations about reparations. To truly benefit those who seek repair, advocates must understand racial justice as a tangible, community-led process that covers judicial redress, legislative reform, and other measures centered around victims' unique lived experiences and needs (Gahmen et al, 2020). Through an extensive pre- planning and planning process, collaborators brought this theory into practice to work alongside community members to make the Lantern Walk a reality, and to lay a map for future organizers and advocates to follow.

Pre-Planning

Over a period of 18 months, representatives from AARN and the ICTJ met with community leaders Mr. Anderson Flen (MCTS '68) and Major Joe Womack (MCTS '68). Mr. Flen and Major Womack were both founders of C.H.E.S.S. when it launched in 2017, and held various leadership positions with the MCTS Alumni Association, Africatown Heritage Preservation Foundation, and other community-based organizations. Collaborators and community members

held bi-weekly Zoom meetings to discuss their vision and goals for the walk's rebirth. Initial meetings explored

residents' shared knowledge and reflections of important Africatown sites, trailblazers, and the history of the tradition. Initially, the community named 20 possible stops for the walk. With additional input from community partners, the list narrowed to 10-12 important locations before finally landing on the six sites discussed in the previous section, Reigniting the Lantern Walk.

March 2022 Site Visit

In preparation for the program, Mr. Flen and Major Womack invited AARN and the ICTJ for a site visit and a personal tour led by Major Womack. The goal of the visit was to develop a deeper understanding of the community. The visit also offered an opportunity for collaborators to weave oral history into the project through interviews and stories with descendants and residents. Notable Africatown elders such as Ms. Valena McCants (MCTS, '41), Ms. Ruth Ballard (MCTS, '53), and Mr. Isaiah Pinkney (MCTS '52) provided testimony to the early MCTS years and the Lantern Walk.

At the age of 98, Ms. McCants provided a full account of her experience as an MCTS teacher and her recollection of the historic Lantern Walk. Ms. McCants was beloved by the community and her students. With strict encouragement, she was unknown to instill students with the confidence that with effort came success. In conversation with AARN, she shared a story about a student whose unexpected pregnancy threatened to interrupt her education. Ms. McCants rallied the community to support the student so she could complete her coursework to graduate. She also discussed at length the segregated years at MCTS and the integration of public schools in the wake of *Brown v. Board* (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954). From Ms. McCants' point of view, the incorporation of Africatown into Mobile County, the rezoning of land for industrial use, and the integration of schools resulted in significant community loss.

The Impact of Integration

When integration hit the state of Alabama [and] especially Mobile, the school board actually began to pluck out some of the teachers at the county like Ms. Gilyard, Ms. Edna Rhodes, and a few others. Along with the exemplar, they plucked out the band director, EB Coleman, and they put them all in the white schools. But when they put them in those schools, they took a lot of power away from some of them [teachers], coaches and band directors.

- Ms. Ruth Ballard, MCTS Alumni '53

During an almost two-hour interview with Ms. Ruth Ballard (MCTS, '53) and Mr. Isaiah Pinkney (MCTS '52), members of AARN and ICTJ learned more about the challenges faced by MCTS over the years.

Ms. Ballard and Mr. Pinkney both reminisced about their time as students. Mr. Pinkney remarked, “It was pretty much an open enrollment, and students came to Mobile County Training School from all over the city because of its prestige.” The conversation turned boisterous when Ms. Ballard and Mr. Pinkney serenaded the AARN and ICTJ team with the school song. At one point, Ms. Ballard disappeared into her back room, reemerging with school memorabilia and the famous statue of the school’s mascot, a whippet dog. Mr. Pinkney commented, “When we came to Mobile County Training School, we all became one big family of whippets.” Ms. Ballard, a member of the MCTSAA, also shared page after page of historic documents from the school and town.

Both alumni told stories of living in Africatown prior to its incorporation with Mobile County. They described a community rich with local resources and businesses including restaurants and a dance hall. They described the many faith-based organizations that centered the Africatown community. The conversation took a sad turn as they commented on the environmental hazards that plagued the communities and the high cancer rate among residents.

In addition to the interviews, AARN and ICTJ team members spent an entire afternoon with Major Joe Womack touring Africatown. As the team walked past vacant and rundown lots, Major Womack described neighborhoods like Morris Street and Hog Bayou that no longer exist. The environmental degradation was visible all around, and there were empty industrial sites with leaking oil tanks scattered throughout the Plateau. At one-point, Major Womack paused and remarked, “That's all pollution, poisoning, it slowly kills

you. And industrial intrusion means people forcing you off your land and taking your land.”

During the site visit, community members recommended that the AARN and ICTJ teams visit the Equal Justice Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and



Figure 12 Whippet Statue, Ms. Ballard's Home, March 2022, AARN

Figure 13 Vacant Home in the Heart of Africatown's

Financial Gain at a Cost

Many of the people in the area worked at International [Paper Company]. And working there—it had its drawbacks because of the chemicals and what it subjected us to. And I cannot say it for a fact, but International and Scott Paper had car washes because if you had a car, within a couple of years, the car had rusted out because of the chemicals.

- Ms. Ruth Ballard, MCTS Alumni '53

Residential Community, March 2022, AARN

Justice in Montgomery, Alabama as well as the Oakland Cemetery in Atlanta, Georgia. Members

of Africatown believed these two sites offered a vision of their long-term goals to develop a museum and preserve the Africatown (Plateau) cemetery. Both sites gave the team and organizers ideas for how to highlight history in a way that uplifts the community, educates the public, and draws a sustained stream of visitors who could drive local economic growth.

The Oakland Cemetery provided an example on how to make history come alive through different visitor programs. In Oakland, volunteer tour guides lead walks around the cemetery focusing on a range of themes: Atlanta's African American history, Pioneers of Atlanta, We Shall Overcome: African American Stories from Civil War to Civil Rights, The Women of Oakland, and Black Magnolias. A few times each year, the cemetery is opened at night for special events and live reenactments. These storytelling events provide visitors with a deeper understanding of those who were laid to rest in the cemetery. The Historic Oakland Foundation manages the cemetery and described it as an "outdoor museum of Atlanta's history with over 70,000 stories to tell."

Defining Objectives

From the March 2022 site visit and conversations with community members, the organizing team identified the following objectives of the Lantern Walk project:

- The 2022 Lantern Walk should be a part of Africatown's vision for community restoration.
- The 2022 Lantern Walk should embody the importance of commemorating, treasuring, and honoring sacred places and the people associated with them.
- Participating community members should have an opportunity to meditate on and appreciate (1) the sacrifices that were made for them, (2) the responsibility to help other community members, and (3) the importance of educating people on the obligations to the past, present, and future.
- The 2022 Lantern Walk should empower participants to (1) appreciate those who came before them, (2) acknowledge what has been given to them, and (3) celebrate and reconnect with local history and heritage.
- The 2022 Lantern Walk should symbolize an opportunity for people to share their personal strengths and talents and honoring the fact

A Vision for the Past and Future

So, the Lantern Walk hopefully will give people an opportunity to see this community come together as a community because the Lantern Walk is an activity for the community, by the community, and with the community participation in it in terms of our major stakeholders, the schools, the churches. And ultimately, we will end up at the cemetery...We want to make sure people understand that the spaces in this community are spaces where people made a difference in the lives of so many people. And we need to know that history.

- Mr. Andersen Flen, Alumni '68

that your “fire” is lit by someone who came before you.

- Inspired by the Oakland cemetery, the Africatown Lantern Walk should include audio clips of interviews with members of Africatown residents that would highlight community trailblazers, traditions, and stories.

Community Fellows

Following the site visit, MCTSAA identified community fellows who chose to remain anonymous but to lead coordination and implementation of the walk. For the 2022 Lantern Walk, Africatown residents served as the citizen scientists and historians who led reparative efforts to address their lived experiences of harm. AARN and ICTJ worked closely with many other community organizations who drive local work in Africatown and the surrounding Mobile area. The engagement with Africatown leaders demonstrated the extensive community efforts to advance historical preservation and memorialization with the objective of fighting against cultural erasure.

Identifying Collaborators

Over the planning period and the day of, many Africatown residents worked with organizers and collaborators to help the 2022 Lantern Walk take shape and sustainably renew the tradition. Community members were supported by a growing network of local organizations devoted to uplifting Africatown’s stories, and to cementing the town’s role in the annals of national history. A well-known international organization stepped with expertise in transitional justice. A host of academic institutions provided various modes of support including research and advice on environmental stewardship. Finally, the community benefited from government support, a critical element to ensuring the legacy of the Lantern Walk, which is formally honored in city records.

Collaborators on the 2022 Africatown Lantern Walk
Community Members

Mr. Anderson Flen (community lead, interviewee, MCTS alumni '68)
Major Joe Womack (C.H.E.S.S; interviewee, MCTS alumni '68)
Mr. Lamar Howard (Caesars, Africatown Freedom Tours, MCTSAA, Africatown Community Teach and Outreach)
Ms. Ruth Ballard (MCTSAA, lantern shipment; interviewee, MCTS alumni '53)
Mr. Washington "Wash" Taylor (MCTSAA, interviewee, MCTS alumni '49)
Mr. Isaiah Pinkney (MCTSAA, interviewee, MCTS alumni '52)
Ms. Valena McCants (interviewee, MCTS alumni '41)
Ms. Jocelyn Davis (Clotilda Descendant Association, C.H.E.S.S., interviewee)
Mr. John Flen (interviewee, MCTS alumni '65)
Mr. Gary Simpson Jr. (interviewee)
Mr. Tim Andrews (interviewee)
Mr. Bill Green (Clotilda Descendant Association, interviewee)
Mr. Damian Marks (transportation; trees)
Mr. Robert Moore (T. Moore Trucking)
Mr. Ted Atkinson (son-in-law to Ruth Ballard)
Ms. Geraldine Giles Hunter (collaborator)

<p>Ms. Lister Portis (collaborator)</p> <p>Ms. Mary Ann Knight Wheat (collaborator)</p> <p>Ms. Barbara House (collaborator)</p> <p>Ms. Deborah Roberson (collaborator)</p> <p>Ms. Marian Lee (collaborator)</p> <p>Pastor Williams (Yorktown Baptist Church)</p> <p>Pastor Brady (First Hopewell Baptist Church) - Coordinated churches and food offerings</p>
<p>Community Organizations</p>
<p>Mobile County Training School Alumni Association</p> <p>Clean, Healthy, Educated, Safe, and Sustainable Organization</p> <p>Africatown Heritage Preservation Foundation</p> <p>Clotilda Descendants Association</p> <p>Mobile Environmental Justice Action Coalition</p> <p>Africatown Community Teach and Outreach, NPO</p>
<p>Churches</p>
<p>First Hopewell Baptist Church</p> <p>Union Baptist Church</p> <p>Yorktown Baptist Church</p> <p>Our Mother of Mercy Catholic Church</p>
<p>International Organizations</p>
<p>Virginie Ladisch, International Center for Transitional Justice</p>
<p>Universities</p>
<p>Howard University and Columbia Universities, African American Redress Network</p>
<p>Prof. Justin Hansford, Executive Director, Thurgood Marshall Civil Rights Center at Howard University School of Law, co-founder African American Redress Network, U.S. Member UN Permanent Forum on People of African Descent (PPPAD) 2022-2024</p> <p>Prof. Linda J. Mann, Adjunct Assistant Professor at Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs, co-founder African American Redress Network</p> <p>Prof. Elazar Barkan, Director, Human Rights Concentration at Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs</p> <p>Prof. Billi Wilkerson, Managing Director, Thurgood Marshall Civil Rights Center, Howard University School of Law</p> <p>AARN Research Team: Erica Ivins, Corey Shaw, James Lennox</p>
<p>Southern-Birmingham College, Southern Environmental Center</p>
<p>Prof. Roald Hazelhoff,</p> <p>Faculty and Graduate students</p>
<p>Oberlin College</p>
<p>Prof. Jay Fiskio, Associate Professor of Environmental Studies, and Comparative American Studies</p>
<p>University of South Alabama, Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence (Benin, West Africa)</p>
<p>Dr. Dieudonné Gnamankou</p>
<p>Mississippi State University, Department of Landscape Architecture</p>
<p>Prof. Bob Brzuszek, Director</p>
<p>Government Officials</p>
<p>Commissioner Merceria Ludgood, Attorney, civic leader, District One Mobile County Commissioner</p>



Oral Histories and Historical Harms

During the site visit, community fellows invited the AARN/ICTJ team to attend MCTSAA meetings in the months leading up to the November Lantern Walk. These meetings resulted in oral history interviews and focus group sessions with influential alumni. The interviews were designed to better understand their perspectives on reparative justice. These conversations revealed a bifurcated history: before incorporation and after. Members mourned the community loss citing the significant pollution and health impacts due to industrial encroachment. Mr. Taylor said, “the whole area is polluted... a lot of people have died of cancer and other things. A lot of people.”

MCTS alumni reminisced on Africatown’s richness prior to the community’s rezoning. They remembered a time when the land provided nutritional and economic sustenance for the community. After school berry picking and pecan picking came up several times as representative of the town’s former bounty. Mr. Andersen Flen remarked, “[...] We used to get up there to go pick blackberries. And I remember a particular lady and we sold black berries for 50 cents for a gallon of Blackberry. And she didn't want to pay us 50 cents. I will never forget that.”



Figure 14 Industry near Cudjoe Lewis’ home, November 2022, AARN

MCTS Alumni Involved in Oral History

- Ms. Ruth Ballard, MCTS '53
- Ms. Joycelyn Davis, Middle School graduate
- Mr. Anderson Flen, MCTS '68
- Mr. John Flen, MCTS '65
- Mr. Gary Simpson, Sr, MCTS '68
- Mr. Isaiah Pinkney, MCTS '52
- Mr. Washington Taylor, MCTS '49
- Ms. Valera McCants, MCTS '41
- Major Joe Womack, MCTS '68

Imagining a Green Future

If I had a magic wand, I'd wave it, and all industry would be gone. They ain't gonna help us...Leave us alone. Let us develop that land and turn it into residential land so we can get more kids, get more families in here, get more kids in the school, get more families in the churches, and revitalize the community.

- Major Joe Womack

3 Pillars: Church, School, Community

Well, we had three primary organizations in the community: we had the home, we had the church, and we had the school. Those three bodies were constantly in contact with each other. During the time that I was in school, even when I began teaching in the public school system in the fifties, [...] teachers were required to visit the home of every student in their homeroom a certain number of times each school year, so that was that contact. But the other thing about it was the fact that the school was not only emphasizing education, they were also emphasizing moral character.

- Mr. Washington Taylor



Leveraging Symbols for Lasting Impressions



Figure 15 Africatown Lantern Walk logo design, created, and adopted by community members, 2022.

To commemorate the return of the Lantern Walk, the community members designed a logo to be used for advertising and media purposes. The logo includes references to the walk’s final stop at the Africatown cemetery. The lantern’s position is designed to invite viewers to look ahead, while symbols of the past (headstones) reflect the light, illustrating the town’s emphasis on linkages between past and present as told through oral histories. The logo also includes the phrase, “head, heart, and hand.” Head, heart, and hand was used as the mission for MCTS and played off Booker T. Washington’s philosophy to educate the “head, heart, and hand.” This phrase emphasized the importance of teaching academics and trade but also cultivating the humanity of students.

Organizers also used the logo to create bronze plaques. They will be placed at each Lantern Walk site in 2023 and will serve as guides for Lantern Walks in years to come.



Figure 16 Bronze plaques for each Lantern Walk site.



The MCTS Alumni Association Den

In the days leading up to the 2022 Lantern Walk, organizers focused on preparing and organizing the lanterns, solidifying the details for the celebration and plan for refreshments at each church, and transportation, music, and speaker system setup. The MCTSAA Den, an event space, archive, and memorial site managed by the MCTSAA was offered up as a headquarters for organizers and collaborators.



Figure 17 AARN Intern James Lennox at the MCTSAA Den, November 2022, AARN



Figure 18 Assembling the lanterns for the 2022 walk at the Den, November 2022, AARN

Local Documentarians

To document the 2022 Lantern Walk, Montgomery-based creative agency Khari Creative filmed several of Africatown's trailblazers and MCTS alumni: Mr. Anderson Flen, Mr. Isaiah Pinkney, Ms. Ruth Ballard, and Mr. Washington "Wash" Taylor.

IMPACT AND REFLECTIONS

The 2022 Lantern Walk attracted local and national media coverage, boosting the weight of the event's impact on the community, and helping organizers solidify interest in future repair efforts. That media coverage is presented below along with successes and challenges as collected by the organizers to help future event planning.

Figure 19 Africatown's Trailblazers, Ms. Ruth Ballard, Mr. Anderson Flen, Mr. Isaiah Pinkney, Mr. Wash Taylor (left to right), November 2022, AARN



News Coverage, Related Media, and Community Organizations

The 2022 Africatown Lantern Walk brought significant local and national attention to the community. According to Mr. Anderson Flen, the 2022 Lantern Walk brought more publicity to Africatown than any other recent event.

Many outlets covered the event, and some of their articles and reports are listed in the table below. Additional media coverage on Africatown’s founding and history, the recent discovery of the Clotilda, and the history of environmental and health hazards in the area are also included in the table.

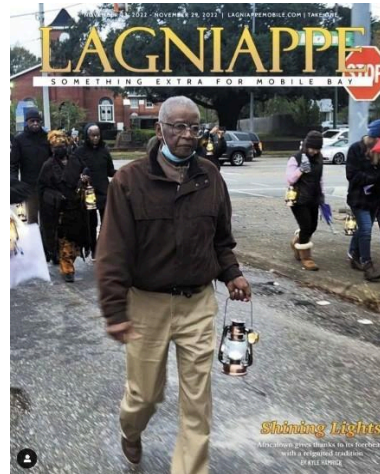


Figure 20 Front cover of the Lagniappe, Mr. Isaiah Pinkney (MCTS, '53), 2022

News Coverage, Related Media, and Community Organizations
News Coverage
<p>Africatown Lantern Walk on Saturday to Honor Community Ancestors Lawrence Specker, April 7, 2023, Alabama Life and Culture, AL.com Overview of the Lantern Walk schedule with commentary from Mr. Anderson Flen on the Lantern Walk’s importance to the community’s history.</p>
<p>Folks light the way on first Africatown Historical Lantern Walk Ashlyn Mitchell, November 19, 2022, Fox 10 News, fox10tv.com Reflection on the 2022 Lantern Walk event and its historical roots in Africatown’s inception along with the role it played as they community grew.</p>
<p>Organizers Re-Establish Annual Lantern Walk in Africatown Typhani Gray, November 20, 2022, WKRG 5 News, wkrg.com Description of the 2022 Lantern Walk with comments from participants and organizers on the event’s significance to them.</p>
<p>First Africatown Lantern Walk to be Held Saturday November 19 Keith Lane, November 15, 2022, NBC 15 News, mynbc15.com Summary of the 2022 Lantern Walk and its symbolism to residents of Africatown, supplemented by a list of organizations that collaborated to put the event together.</p>
<p>Folks Light the Way on First Africatown Historical Lantern Walk November 20, 2022, WALB 10 News, walb.com News segment (2:45) featuring brief interviews with community organizers and leaders and footage from the walk.</p>
<p>Organizers Re-establish Annual Lantern Walk in Africatown November 20, 2022, WKRG, youtube.com News segment (2:13) with reflections from community leaders and organizers of the Lantern Walk and clips showing scenes from along the route.</p>

[Folks Light the way on First Africatown Historical Walk](#)

November 20, 2022, KWQC, kwqc.com

News segment (2:54) with soundbites from community leaders and some of the Lantern Walk participants.

Related Media

[The Clotilda: Inside the Wreck of the Last Ship Known to Have Brought Enslaved Africans to America](#)

Anderson Cooper, 60 Minutes, November 29, 2022, CBS News

60 Minutes segment on Africatown's history and The Clotilda, the last ship known to have brought Africans to the United States. The segment discusses the Lantern Walk set against Africatown's evolution, from its founding by kidnapped Africans, to its growth as a thriving self-governed community, to its decline amid damaging zoning laws in the 1960s, to today's efforts to revitalize the town and remember its resilience.

[America's Cancerous Legacy for the Descendants of the Kidnapped Africans Who Arrived on the Last Slave Ship](#)

Kevin Lee, January 31, 2022, The Daily Beast, thedailybeast.com

In-depth coverage of the lasting effects of environmental harms wrought over a century of industrial development. The piece discusses residents' illnesses and the many sources of pollution that plague the town.

[The Clotilda, America's Last Slave Ship Stole Them from Home. It Couldn't Steal Their Identities.](#)

National Geographic, nationalgeographic.com

In-depth story of the Clotilda and the kidnapped Africans who made the marshy land into a prosperous town inhabited by a tight-knit community.

[ALDOT Responds to Africatown Concern Over Truck Toll](#)

Rachael Wilkerson, May 3, 2021, NBC 15 News, mynbc15.com

Reporting on plans by the Alabama Department of Transportation to introduce a truck toll bridge over Africatown to protect the community from diesel fumes released by large trucks driving through the town. The article captures the community's concerns that the proposed plan mirrors decades of harmful policymaking.

[Researcher Discovers Last Known Survivor of the Transatlantic Slave Trade](#)

Brigit Katz, March 27, 2020, Smithsonian Magazine, smithsonianmag.com

A deep dive into Matilda McCrear's experience as the last known survivor of Clotilda, and her unsuccessful attempt to seek formal recognition and compensation for enslavement.

[Ship of Horror: Discovery of the Last Slave Ship to America Brings New Hope to an Old Community](#)

Richard Fausset, May 26, 2019, The New York Times, nytimes.com

An article on the discovery of the Clotilda, the last known ship to have carried kidnapped Africans to the United States, a transport that was illegal at the time. The article discusses the impact the discovery had on the community, many of whom are direct descendants of the Africans smuggled in the ship's hull.

[From the Holds of the Clotilda to Africatown](#)

Sylviane A. Diouf, April 2019, UNESCO, en.unesco.org

Discussion of the Clotilda's journey, the shape of the community formed among the captured Africans once they arrived in the United States, and the town they built upon emancipation. The article chronicles generations of resilience and social justice, including an early effort to lead reparations for freed people.

[Group Begins Work to Revitalize Africatown Community](#)

Associated Press, October 9, 2021, U.S. News and World Report, usnews.com

Early reporting on the formation of the Africatown Redevelopment Corporation which was formed by Africatown residents eager to capture attention brought to their home by the Clotilda's discovery and channel it toward repair and revitalization of their town.

Community Organizations

[Africatown C.H.E.S.S.](#)

Website of the Africatown C.H.E.S.S. organization, which stands for clean, healthy, educated, safe, and sustainable and seeks to uplift Africatown and make it a prosperous community.

[Africatown Heritage Preservation Foundation](#)

Website for the Africatown Heritage Preservation Foundation, which is focused on promoting stewardship and awareness raising of the historic, cultural, and economic legacy of Africatown.

[Mobile Environmental Justice Action Coalition](#)

Website for the Mobile Environmental Justice Action Coalition, which was formed in 2013 to improve air and water quality and bring public attention to the decades of harms the community has experienced as a result of industrial development.

The Successes

The 2022 Lantern Walk brought people together, from near and far, and its symbolism reflected the throughline of triumphs and harms that Africatown survivors and descendants experienced over the decades. It was truly a community led event, with broad support and attendance from outside allies. The walk’s success demonstrated Africatown’s efforts to revive and preserve its community while inviting younger residents to be mentored in leadership roles.

As planning got underway in 2022, many residents were reluctant to engage. Many community members did not know the history of the Clotilda or Africatown more generally. In Mr. Lamar Howard’s view, the Lantern Walk was a valuable opportunity to start community conversations and intergenerational dialogue about the history and future of Africatown. According to him, the Lantern Walk was a symbol of hope for the future, highlighting the importance of “knowing our history and keeping it going.” After the Walk, Mr. Howard was delighted to see the community buzzing with a renewed sense of identity and pride in their history. He noted, “a lot of people hide from painful history [but] it is still our history even if people don’t want to relive it.”



Figure 21 Tree at Yorktown, March 2023, Anderson Flen

The Lantern Walk created space for people to explore that painful history while also feeling pride. People who had shied away from community events for 20 years joined the walk. The widespread local collaboration, especially among the churches, was also seen as a success.

Finally, using the walk as an opportunity to build awareness around environmental injustice while promoting new growth deepened the walk's symbolism.

The Challenges

This was the first large-scale event in Africatown in a long time, and organizers ran into a range of challenges including outreach, timing, refreshments, transportation, and coordination. Overall,

the collaborators addressed the challenges as they came up, but they are listed below to guide future organizers as they plan for similar events.

Outreach

Despite efforts to get the word out through various channels, including information provided on brochures, flyers, and announcements at the Heritage House, churches, and community center, many people still did not learn about the Lantern Walk in time to attend. Since many members of the community do not have access to email or social media, organizers should go door-to-door a few weeks before the event and should create a flier to post in churches for maximum outreach.

Organizers should also involve youth more heavily in planning from an earlier stage and I publicizing the event. Young people can be given leadership positions to develop targeted outreach campaigns.

Timing

In addition to advance outreach, the timing of the day's events was a challenge for the 2022 Walk. Organizers allotted two hours for the whole route. Between the poor weather conditions and the crowd's heavy emotions as they reconnected, the walk started later than initially planned. Churches had been notified that they might need to be flexible on the timing of each stop, so their volunteers were prepared as people arrived later than expected. Unfortunately, the availability of the walk's police escort, commissioned to help walkers safely cross the street to the last site, was tightly bound to the two-hour period. Organizers had to speed walkers along so they could benefit from the escort within the two-hour window. For future Lantern Walks, it will be important to build in more flexibility, and to ask the police escort to stay for a longer period. For future walks, Mr. Howard suggested 30 minutes at each stop.

Role of the Churches: Activities and Refreshments

At each church, the congregation prepared to serve refreshments. Future walks should plan to ask one church to host the day's final event and community meal, following the last stop at the cemetery. Planning refreshments after the walk ends will allow the police escort to leave in a timely manner. Churches could create a rotating schedule so that each congregation has an opportunity to host the final event. During future Lantern Walks, and with more time and advance planning, each church could also incorporate choir music and songs about the Africatown community.

Transportation

When planning the one-mile walk, organizers considered all community members' physical abilities. Several walkers had limited mobility, including the guest of honor Genevieve M. Hubbard, who is 103! Organizers commissioned buses to transport walkers between the Lantern



Walk stops. The local Corvette Club hoped to add to the transport options, but the rain hampered their ability to participate. Although the buses provided significant relief for elderly walkers, organizers should do what they can to help people walk as much as possible to maximize the event experience. Printed maps and walking guides would also be beneficial for non-walkers. Shuttle services and any local transportation facilities like the Corvette Club should be reserved well in advance to ensure their availability for the entirety of the event.

In planning an outdoor event, the weather is always an unknown factor. The November weather was chilly and rainy. Fortunately, the shuttle bus system supported community participation during the inclement weather. Future organizers are recommended to invest again in a bus system as a contingency for future events.

Coordinating with the Mayor's Office and the County

Support from the mayor's office and the County Commissioner were key for the success of the 2022 Lantern Walk. To ensure a smooth event, organizers should meet several times with the county and city to make sure they are in lock step with each other in closing roads, planning for visitors from out of town, and rescheduling maintenance or roadwork in the area to avoid interrupting the event. They also need as much advance notice as possible.

For the 2022 Lantern Walk, Commissioner Ludgood and Ms. Keysha Brown, the Director of Community Affairs and City Council Liaison to the Mayor were incredible sources of support and helped make the event a reality. Ms. Brown filled out the permit for the walk and submitted it for approval to the mayor. Commissioner Ludgood paid the police escort to be stationed at the crosswalk. This essential security provision needs to be reserved ahead of time and budgeted for. The police rate is \$35/hour for each officer. There were six officers for three hours, but as noted above, that timeline turned out to be too tight and did not leave any margin for delays.

The mayor's office also sent out a press release about the event. The internal reviews and approvals for press releases take some time, so for future events organizers should share the press release with the County Commissioner and the mayor's office as soon as possible.



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