

Representation Matters



In 1860 110+ slaves were illegally brought to Mobile, Alabama to be sold off, enslaved, and separated from the only life that they knew. Yearning to go back from whence they came, the mindset was to one day make it back home to Africa. Coming from different tribes, many of the slaves did not speak the same language, in addition to there being some slaves that held high positions within their individual tribes. Sold, purchased, and forcibly brought to the land of the free, the freedom that they once knew looked nothing like the home that they now lived in.

Any dreams of Africa, aspirations to see family and friends, or the desire to feel familiar soil under their feet was stifled upon being told that, though slavery had ended, they would not be assisted by their slave owner in returning home amongst their own people. As we now know, several of the slaves poignantly came together and created a community that we know as Africatown, located in Magazine Point, Alabama. As a replica of their homeland, Africatown was a representation and symbolic effort for them to *Never Forget* how they were illegally brought on the slave ship, Clotilda, and taken from their native home to arrive in Mobile Bay. The slaves, collaboratively, created a community where the representation of who they were and where they came from absolutely mattered.

Previously being captives and their voices on mute, the slaves developed friendships and extended families that were created not only for survival, but for representation. Cudjo Lewis, unmuted and selected as the voice for the slaves in speaking to the slave master, shared with his family and the whole world, remarkable stories of survival from being captured, sitting in the barracoon, and traveling on a slave ship that was intentionally crafted to carry them away from everything that they knew. It was Cudjo that shared how various tribes and languages were represented and brought into Mobile Bay, while never forgetting the thoughts of the treachery that led to his capture from Benin, with no estimated date of return. Never diminished from within, Cudjo used his voice and remained steady in sharing not just the painful journey, but also of his constant desire and longing for home. Even with the love of his family, here in America, Cudjo still longed to be back in his homeland of Benin.

With his impeccable and compelling story, we are left with a deep hole in our hearts that stings with the reality that there is no place like home. The continuation of legacy, truth, and storytelling means so much and while living an unfathomable nightmare, many of the slaves did continue living, thriving, and displaying a courage that so many of us now stand by and admire.

In the year 2020, the admiration and desire to pay homage to her great-great grandfather led to Cassandra Lewis creating, patenting, and trademarking a *Descendants Flag* to recognize her great-great grandfather and the slaves that were brought to America, alongside him. This Descendants Flag was created from love and for symbolic representations:



The dove is flying away from Africa: this represents the slaves that did not make it back to their homeland in Africa and that their slave spirit is with God.

Yellow represents the yellow color in the Benin flag.

Purple represents royalty.

Red represents the blood that was shed in their homeland and in the United States.

Black represents the struggle.

Blue represents the water that the Clotilda ship carried them across in their journey to the United States.

Green represents the African land that the slaves were taken from to be brought to the United States.

Ms. Lewis' work and recognition for her great-great grandfather's plight does not end with the *Descendants Flag*, for Cudjo Lewis family of 5th generation descendants and beyond, are now ready to share with the world the continuation of his legacy and truth. The fifth generation, which is now the oldest living generation from Cudjo Lewis, not only has come forward to share stories passed down, but in the winter of 2022, a few of them had the opportunity to travel back to Cudjo's homeland of Benin, Africa, to pay homage to their infamous patriarch. Fifth generation descendants Garry Lumbers, Cassandra Lewis, as well as sixth generational descendant, Altevese Rosario, traveled with National Geographic and provided their great-great grandfather with his wish: to go back home. Forcibly being taken from his village, when speaking with Zora Neale Hurston, Cudjo was able to map out how he was removed and journeyed to the barracoons.

Now, with his family being given the opportunity to place their feet on the very soil that their great-great grandfather longed for, the miraculous feat of Ms. Lewis being able to bend down and draw the very same map of how to get back *into* the tribe, was unexplainable and a joyous moment for all. This feat by Ms. Lewis, operating on memory, with no books or maps present to copy from, allowed the family and tribesman to witness the results of Cudjo's passing down of knowledge to his very own. Cudjo's spirit could be felt and with him being returned from whence he came, the family and the Descendants Flag was received with such joy and open arms.

With a bust of Cudjo Lewis already in his village of Bente' and the celebratory activities of Black History Month here in America, on February 9, 2023, Cudjo's tribe symbolically raised the Descendants Flag inside their village alongside his bust. Pride, tears of joy, cheering, and elation were felt not only for his fellow countrymen, but also for Cudjo Lewis' family to have been provided the opportunity to have a Descendants Flag, created by his very own, flown high within his homeland. The children within the tribe ran for miles once they got out of school, just to be part of the historical moment where they could celebrate their native Oluale Kossola. Forever recognized and celebrated, Cudjo Lewis and his plight, along with the other 110+ slaves, is a prime example of how representation really does matter.

No longer will Cudjo's people have only the mental imagery of slaves that were chained and lying in the belly of a ship, but they will have a beautiful representation, the Descendants Flag, now flying high above the ocean with the symbolism and meaning that shows how he and 110+ other slaves rose above their circumstances to survive and tell the world to *Never Forget*.

Full Circle

*Once carried on a ship with Clotilda being her name,
One hundred and ten plus slaves unwillingly on a journey to never be the same,
Many, many miles across an unfamiliar sea,
Men, women, and children with gut wrenching and unimaginable pleas,
Battered, ignored, laughed at, and surely demeaned,
With only God to comfort them and their futures unforeseen,
Comforted and protected they were amongst one another,
They likened themselves as family and deemed as sisters and brothers,
Enduring beatings, bloodshed, and struggle, many still survived,
Creating love and community within their hearts, their spirits were revived,
Their plight to live and Cudjo's ability to share his story,
All so amazing as he continued to give God the glory.
Now, a part of Cudjo is back home in Afficky where he longed to be,
Along with a Descendants Flag for the whole world to see.
It has been a full circle for Oluale Kossola and we are thankful.*

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