



# UNDERGROUND RAILROAD FREE PRESS®

Independent reporting for today's Underground Railroad community

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## Matilda McCrear Identified as Last Survivor of Slaves Imported Into US

The prohibition of importation of slaves into the United States began with legislation by the United States in Congress Assembled, the original United States government chartered by the Articles of Confederation in 1781. In 1787 as part of creating the Northwest Territory, the Congress enacted a provision that the importation of slaves would be permitted for another 20 years and then outlawed in 1808. When the first government created the second by convening the Constitution Convention in 1787, the prohibition was carried intact into law when the second United States government came into being in 1789. In 1808, importation of slaves into the United States became illegal but rogue ships still occasionally continued the trade across the Atlantic until 1860 when the *Clotilda*, a two-masted 86-foot schooner under the command of Captain William Foster, put in at Mobile Bay, Alabama, with 116 slaves aboard. The *Clotilda* was the last known ship to bring enslaved people from Africa to the United States.

On the ship were Oluale Kossola, who later took the name Cudjo Lewis, Redoshi whose original last name remains unknown, and a two-year-


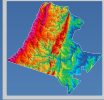




Matilda McCrear in the 1930s

old who would come to be known as Matilda McCrear. The three would live into their eighties and become the last American survivors of enslaved people brought from Africa.

From the 1930s until well into the 21st century, it was thought that Cudjo Lewis (1841-1935) had been the sole remaining survivor of the *Clotilda*. Lewis, along with some number of other *Clotilda* survivors, settled in the community of Africatown which they founded near where the *Clotilda* had

### IN THIS ISSUE

The nation's last surviving enslaved person brought from Africa has been identified. She lived until 1940.

Waterford, Virginia, looks virtually the same today as it did in Underground Railroad days.

Corona virus claims the life of a Canadian Underground Railroad icon.

Write one. Let us and, if you choose, *Free Press* readers know what is on your mind.

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landed. Lewis adopted Christianity, became the sexton of his church and, beginning in the early 20th century, began sitting for interviews by anthropologists and others.

In 2019, Dr. Hannah Durkin of Newcastle University's School of English Literature began researching *Clotilda* survivors and found that Redoshi, later

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## Waterford, Virginia's Quaker Underground Railroad Village

One of an occasional series of Underground Railroad sites and people

In wandering into remote Waterford, Virginia, one steps through the looking glass back into the 1700s, the 1800s at the latest.

With nearly all of its original architecture, street layout and many of its ancient trees intact, Waterford is one of the nation's most authentic time trips. The best time to visit is during the annual Waterford Fair held on the first weekend of October.

Unlike many other very old places that show off by becoming kitschy — think Key West or Mystic, Connecticut, or Old Town San Diego — Waterford's relative remoteness has left it just as sleepy as when in 1732 a community of Quakers led by the Janney family burrowed as

deeply into the woods as they could get to escape the growing hullabaloo of colonial powerhouse Virginia. One of the main routes to Waterford today is as it was then, the old dirt road up the side of Furnace Mountain.

Populated today with preservationists, Waterford carefully husbands its ancient look, keeping virtually the entire village in period.

Significant buildings include Janney's Mill (circa 1750), Arch House Row (circa 1750), Camelot School (circa 1800), the Hague-Hough house, which is Waterford's oldest (circa 1740), and the 1882 Presbyterian church.

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## Coronavirus Fells Wilma Morrison, Prize-winning Preservationist

Wilma Morrison, winner of the Free Press Prize for Preservation, died April 24 of complications from corona virus at St. Catherine's Hospital in St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada. She was 91. Her passing was announced by Canada's Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries.

Morrison's citation in winning the 2010 prize recognized her "For her six decades of work preserving the Nathaniel Dett Chapel in Ontario, Canada, and promoting Canada's Black history."

Free Press extends heartfelt condolences to Ms. Morrison's family, colleagues and friends. Excerpted below is her obituary from Canada's *Niagara Falls Review*.

She was a Niagara Falls icon.

Wilma Morrison may have appeared small in stature, but looks can be deceiving. She was a titan of a woman often recognized and honoured for her tireless advocacy of Niagara's Black history for decades.

The 91-year-old died Thursday at St. Catharines General Hospital after a battle with covid-19. But those who knew the modest and unassuming Morrison don't want her to be remembered as a pandemic statistic. Instead, they want to remember her for bringing Niagara's Black history to the forefront, for a life well lived.

"Definitely in her case, big things came in small packages," said Niagara Falls Mayor Jim Diodati. "She was a ball of fire — full of really great energy." He said the first time he met Morrison was 10 years ago when he first ran for mayor. "I was going door-to-door and I liked her right away. She just had a real, likeable way about her. She was a tireless advocate for Black history and a great lady."

Recently retired Niagara Falls city historian Sherman Zavitz said while Morrison's personality displayed "copious amounts of warmth and wit, she also had a firm resolve to educate people about the story of Niagara's Black history. That mission was successful. She has gone from our midst but leaves an important, immense and permanent legacy." He described Morrison as a "very capable, intelligent woman. A gentle woman, but hard, too, when she had to be, in a gentle sort of way. She was firm when she was on a cause or working for a cause and knew it



was the right way to do things. I admired her very much."

Morrison fought to save the BME Church in Niagara Falls from demolition in the 1990s. The Peer Street church is where many former slaves congregated after fleeing the U.S. via Niagara's Underground Railroad. Thanks to Morrison, it was declared a heritage site in 2000.

She has received numerous awards for her dedication to Black history and her volunteer efforts, including the Lieutenant-Governor's Ontario Heritage Award, the Niagara Falls Arts & Culture Wall of Fame, and the Hamilton Black History Committee Award of Merit. In 2010, Morrison received an honorary degree from Brock University, recognizing her efforts in promoting and preserving Black history. In 2011, she received the Order of Ontario, the highest official honour the province can bestow.

"If it wasn't for Wilma, this church would not still be in existence," said Rev. Lois Dix, from Nathaniel Dett Memorial Chapel of the BME Church of Canada. "It's the only physical exhibition that this was a Black community around this area many years ago. It's the only remaining structure and she was the one responsible for everything — having it declared a heritage site and keeping it up and running."

Dix said Morrison, who turned 91 in February, was still going to the church until she started to feel unwell. "People in the congregation would pick her up and bring her into the church on Sundays. She was able to come most Sundays. Everybody is devastated. We'll definitely have a celebration of the life of this woman because it needs to be celebrated."

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## Last Survivor



Redoshi (Sally Smith)

Sally Smith (1848–1937), who had been enslaved on a farm near Bogue Chitto, Alabama, had outlived Lewis by two years. Redoshi had been captured from the same village in present-day Benin as had Cudjo Lewis.

No sooner had Durkin announced Sally Smith as the last survivor of the American slave trade than in early 2020 she came across a 1931 newspaper interview of Matilda McCrear in the *Selma Times-Journal*. McCrear had come to the county Courthouse in Selma to make an unsuccessful claim for compensation for herself and Redoshi as *Clotilda* survivors. McCrear had been emancipated in 1865 at age seven and lived until 1940. Given that she was only two when she arrived in the United States and lived until 80, it is doubtful that any other *Clotilda* survivor outlived Matilda McCrear.

Durkin began piecing together the life of this latest find through census and genealogical records, which led her to Matilda McCrear's 83-year-old grandson, Johnny Crear. Said Mr. Crear, "I had no idea she'd been on the *Clotilda*. It came as a real surprise. Her story gives me mixed emotions because if she hadn't been brought here, I wouldn't be here, but it's hard to read about what she experienced."

Research showed that Matilda had been brought to the U.S. with her mother Gracie, her three older sisters, and the man who would go on to be her stepfather, and that two brothers had been left in Africa. Matilda had a long marriage with a white German-born man. The couple had 14 children including the father of Johnny Crear.

Wrote Durkin, "On arrival in the USA, Matilda was bought by Memorable



Oluale Kossola (Cudjo Lewis)

Walker Creagh along with her ten-year-old sister Sallie and her mother Gracie. Gracie was forcibly paired with Guy, another *Clotilda* survivor, while her two oldest daughters were bought by another slave owner and never seen again. Even though Matilda left West Africa as a toddler, she appears throughout her life to have worn her hair in a traditional Yoruba style, presumably taught to her by her mother. She also changed her surname from Creagh — her former enslaver's spelling — to McCrear. In some ways Matilda was more fortunate than the vast majority of Middle Passage survivors. She got to stay with her mother and one of her sisters, and because she was only two when she was taken from Africa, she was still very young when she was emancipated. But make no mistake, her life was incredibly hard. The story of Matilda and her family highlights the horrors of slavery, the abuses of the US South's sharecropping system, the injustices of segregation and the suffering of black farmers during the Great Depression. Even more remarkably, McCrear's claim for compensation in Selma in 1931 preempted later work there by Civil Rights Movement campaigners and her death in 1940 reminds us just how recently the slave trade ended."

Amidst much press notice, the remains of the *Clotilda* were discovered in Alabama last year, not far from Africatown where many of its passengers had begun a new life after gaining their freedom five years after their arrival and the Civil War.

Readers interested in deeper information on these last survivors of the slave trade may refer to Dr. Durkin's research published in "Slavery and Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies."

## Correction

In our March, 2020 issue's article on the successful efforts to save New York City's Hopper-Gibbons House, we described James Sloan Gibbons and Abby Hopper as father and daughter. As preservationist Fern Luskin has pointed out, the two staunch abolitionists were actually husband and wife. We regret the error.

Professor Luskin adds that, in the long 13-year struggle to preserve Hopper-Gibbons House, the support of Carl Westmoreland and of the students at the Bronx Lab School "were incredibly helpful."

Dr. Westmoreland has long been active in the civil rights arena and in Underground Railroad promotion and preservation. He served for many years in senior positions at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center and was the 2010 winner of the Free Press Prize for Leadership in the international Underground Railroad community.

The Bronx Lab School is a New York City public school located in the city's Bronx Borough that specializes in "a rigorous, liberal arts, college preparatory experience." The school is noted for readying capable students from poor neighborhoods who otherwise would likely not realize their academic potential.

## Waterford

The Janneys and many of the other townsfolk being Quaker, most were abolitionists sympathetic to northern causes and freedom seekers. During the Civil War, local sympathies were Unionist and the area in fact mustered a unit of Union Army troops, the Loudoun Rangers, who staged guerilla raids on Confederates. In 1863 when Virginia's northwest counties broke away and formed West Virginia, Loudoun County, where Waterford is, voted to be included but Robert E. Lee deemed the county too important geographically and blocked its will.

Through the end of the Civil War, it was no secret that Waterford was the county hotbed of Underground Railroad activity. Accounts tell of escape routes from Waterford across the nearby Potomac River at Edwards' Ferry and the shallows at Point of Rocks.

Waterford and a significant portion of its surrounding countryside were declared a National Historic Landmark in 1970 in recognition of the town's well-preserved 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century architecture and landscape.