

Uncovering the Hidden Lives of Last *Clotilda* Survivor Matilda McCrear and Her Family

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Abstract: This article uncovers for the first time the life story of Matilda McCrear (1857 or 1858–1940), the last survivor of the *Clotilda*, the last U.S. slave ship. Drawing on a newspaper interview with McCrear alongside genealogical data, this study charts her experiences from slavery to the Great Depression, and sheds light not only on McCrear’s life but also the lives of her mother Gracie, stepfather Guy, sister Sallie and two other unnamed sisters, who were all survivors of the slave ship *Clotilda*. The article has two key aims: to construct one of the most complete biographical accounts yet available of a female transatlantic slave trade survivor and, equally significantly, to create the first composite portrait of a family’s experience of the Middle Passage and its aftermath. The article highlights the lifelong injustices that McCrear and her family endured, but it also uncovers the sometimes surprising ways in which McCrear resisted the social and economic limitations of her place, as an African-born woman, in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century U.S. South.

Keywords: *Clotilda*; last Middle Passage survivor; African kidnapping narratives; Matilda McCrear; Alabama; Selma

A week before Christmas in 1931, a woman in her mid-70s arrived at Dallas County Courthouse in Selma, Alabama to request an appointment with the probate judge. Matilda McCrear (1857 or 1858–1940) had travelled 15 miles from her rural cabin along dirt roads to reach the courthouse. For she wanted to tell the court that she was a survivor of the *Clotilda*, the last U.S. slave ship, which docked in Mobile Bay, Alabama in July 1860 with approximately 108 West African children and adults on board. Such was McCrear's determination to prove her origins that she had already undertaken a far longer journey with an even older woman. Earlier that month, McCrear and fellow *Clotilda* survivor Sally 'Redoshi' Smith (ca. 1848–1936) embarked on a 300-mile round trip from their homes in rural Dallas County to Africatown near Mobile to visit yet another *Clotilda* survivor, Cudjo 'Kossola' Lewis (ca. 1840–1935). Kossola had recently been the focus of a charity benefit that sought to provide financial support to the man regarded by his friends and supporters to be the U.S.'s last African-born slavery survivor. But Kossola acknowledged upon meeting McCrear and Redoshi that he could remember them as young girls on board the *Clotilda*. Armed with formal acceptance of her identity and aware of the financial help that Kossola had received for being the last known Middle Passage survivor, McCrear arrived at the courthouse hoping that the judge would grant monetary support to her and Redoshi too. Even without Kossola's words of recognition, McCrear knew that she could prove her West African origins. For she bore a mark on her cheek that had been made by a specially trained Yorùbá surgeon shortly after her birth

McCrear's appearance at the courthouse was highly significant, since she revealed herself to be one of just three people still living who were known to have endured the Middle Passage. Moreover, she arrived at the court at the height of the Great Depression; as a black tenant farmer from the Black Belt, Alabama's major cotton producing region, her financial circumstances must have been desperate. Yet McCrear's compelling evidence that she was an African-born woman who had been stolen across the Atlantic as a small child and should be compensated for her experiences had no effect on the judge and her financial plea to the court was quickly dismissed. McCrear's status as a *Clotilda* went unrecognised and she ultimately died in impoverished obscurity.

McCrear's dismissal in life and neglect in the 80 years since her death exemplify the historical marginalisation of female survivors of the transatlantic slave trade. There are only a handful of first-hand accounts of the Middle Passage and just a tiny number of these accounts were left by women. With the exception of recently excavated archival materials about Redoshi that together reveal significant information about her life, the vast majority of these female narratives are extremely brief and, as Jon Sensbach notes, 'scarcely provide enough material for a full biographical study'.

Consequently, Saidiya Hartman condemns the archive for silencing enslaved women by reducing them to ‘an asterisk in the grand narrative of history’ and for providing ‘no picture of the everyday life, no pathway to [their] thoughts’. Yet this study identifies a number of archival sources in which McCrear appeared to show that, while disregarded and at times wilfully obscured, a meaningful picture of this particular female Middle Passage survivor’s life and how she responded to her circumstances can begin to be uncovered. Most notably, McCrear’s courthouse visit generated sufficient attention that *Selma Times-Journal* reporter Octavia Wynn took the time to interview her. Moreover, the account that McCrear gave to Wynn sheds light not only on McCrear’s experiences but also those of her mother Gracie, stepfather Guy, sister Sallie and two other unnamed sisters, who were all survivors of the slave ship *Clotilda*. Census and genealogical data that back up McCrear’s claim to be a *Clotilda* survivor and reveal additional information about her family can also be located. Remarkably, such data establish that McCrear died in January 1940, four and a half years after Kossola, and more than three years after Redoshi, which means that she should now be recognised as the last documented Middle Passage survivor.

This study examines Wynn’s interview with McCrear alongside census and other genealogical records to piece together McCrear and her family’s experiences. The project has two key aims: to construct one of the most complete biographical accounts yet available of a female transatlantic slave trade survivor and, equally significantly, to create the first composite portrait of a family’s experience of the Middle Passage and its aftermath. The article highlights

the lifelong injustices that McCrear and her family endured, but it also uncovers the sometimes surprising ways in which McCrear resisted the social and economic limitations of her place, as an African-born woman, in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century U.S. South. Astonishingly for a woman of her background and social status, McCrear formed and

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maintained for decades a common-law marriage with a white German-born man, to whom she bore 14 children. Equally remarkably, McCrear's 15-mile journey to Dallas County Courthouse in search of reparations for her transatlantic kidnapping and enslavement can be read as an early act in the fight for civil rights in the South that anticipated by 33 years the Selma Voting Rights campaign, whose activities began at the same building.

In contrast to Kossola and Redoshi, there is no film footage of McCrear. She does not appear to have been mentioned in any books. Nor were any obituaries published to mark her death. In short, McCrear was afforded far fewer opportunities than were Kossola and Redoshi to tell her story. Consequently, McCrear and her family's experiences are even more difficult to uncover than the recently excavated life of Redoshi, which was reconstructed by this author using materials that are 'fragmentary, frequently contradictory, and consequently often raise more questions than they answer'. Moreover, those records of McCrear's life that do exist were filtered through the perspectives of a white Southern journalist and census takers who at times appeared to downplay and even to distort her life experiences. Much like the material that features Redoshi, 'Each source is a mediated document' of McCrear's life 'that reveals as much about its author's biases and the wider political and social concerns that led to its conception as about its subject'.

To counter these archival gaps and distortions, this study adopts an analytical

framework employed previously by this author in her article on Redoshi, which responded to Sensbach's call to 'redefine the very concept of narrative to include the kinds of archival fragments by and about African American women', given that, 'these kinds of shards, assembled into some kind of narrative coherence, can open up women's lives to literary archaeology . . . These relatively few lives can speak volumes about the many'.

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In turn, the study is indebted to a method for analysing Barbadian colonial records developed by Marisa Fuentes, who has shown that, 'By changing the perspective of a document's author to that of an enslaved subject, questioning the archives' veracity and filling out miniscule fragmentary mentions or the absence of evidence with spatial and historical context our historical interpretation shifts to the enslaved viewpoint in important ways'. By comparing and contextualising the surviving documents of McCrear's life, some of their shortcomings can be addressed and McCrear and her family's voices can begin to be located across these texts.

Much like the fragmentary records of Redoshi's life, piecing together and interrogating Wynn's newspaper interview alongside census and other historical records reveals a vital personal account of transatlantic slavery and its aftermath. Just like Redoshi's remembrances, McCrear's story records across a single lifetime the horrors of the Middle Passage and enslavement, the abuses of the U.S. South's sharecropping system, the injustices of segregation and the suffering of black farmers during the Great Depression. Close scrutiny of these materials therefore provides a deeper understanding of specific traumas that Middle Passage survivors endured and how they responded psychologically to such traumas and sought to adapt to life in the Americas. Despite the limitations of archival material, careful unpacking of

adapt to life in the Americas. Despite the limitations of archival material, careful unpacking of such material makes it possible to show how McCrear interpreted her experiences as a Middle Passage survivor and how she resisted her mistreatment and marginalisation in the United States.

In important ways, McCrear's experiences were untypical of a transatlantic slavery survivor. She was two years old when she was kidnapped and was unable to recall the Middle Passage or her West African homeland. She remained with her mother during and after her bondage, unlike her two brothers, who were not sold across the Atlantic, and two of her three

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sisters, who were sold away from their family immediately after arriving in the United States. Equally unusually for a transatlantic slavery survivor, McCrear was liberated from slavery while still a very small child. These observations are not meant to downplay the traumas of a childhood that was marked by spatial dislocation and family separation followed by a lifetime of racial oppression and poverty, but rather to underscore that McCrear's knowledge of her early experiences was inherited from Gracie. The second-hand information that McCrear conveyed to Wynn meant that unlike Kossola and Redoshi, she gave voice not just to her own remembrances but also those of her mother. Consequently, McCrear's account of her life makes it possible to document for the first time an entire West African family group's experience of kidnap, separation, the Middle Passage and bondage, including a woman's loss of her husband and four of her children. McCrear's life story sheds light on the Middle Passage and enslavement not just as an individual experience but as a collective, multi-generational trauma.

Wynn's interview with McCrear is the most extensive biographical fragment of McCrear and her family's lives. Alongside S. L. Flock's 1932 *Montgomery Advertiser*

interview with Redoshi, the 1,000-word document is the only known full-length newspaper interview with a female Middle Passage survivor. The article establishes that McCrear was sold immediately after arriving in the United States along with her mother, one of her sisters and the man who was to become her stepfather to Memorable Creagh, a wealthy South Carolina-born plantation owner who had recently served as a Representative for Marengo County in the Alabama Legislature. Creagh spent three years in Perry County before moving to a plantation near Prairie Bluff in Wilcox County in 1858 and he remained there until after the U.S. Civil War. McCrear and her family were living less than 20 miles away from Prairie Bluff in 1870, which suggests that they were sent to and spent their captivity at this plantation.

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Wynn's interview with McCrear must be approached with tremendous care given the stark social contrast between interviewer and subject. Not only was Wynn a white woman, but she was also a member of Selma's high society. She lived in a 'proper residence on the banks of the Alabama River' in Old Town (later Old Town Historic District), an area whose buildings are renowned for their grandiosity, and she began her career at the *Selma Times-Journal* as a society news writer. Even more troublingly, Wynn was a member of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, an organisation that played a key role in reframing the Civil War not as an ideological conflict about slavery but as a glorious fight between heroic white men. Consequently, and as this study will demonstrate, Wynn's interview reveals a paternalistic attitude to McCrear that elides much of her family's suffering and appears wilfully to downplay the economic and social challenges that she continued to endure in Depression-era Alabama.

Yet despite these extensive shortcomings, Wynn's article contains key biographical information about McCrear and her family, including that they were from the same town as

Kossola and Redoshi, and McCrear's recollection of her family's experiences matches other *Clotilda* survivors' accounts. Just like Kossola and Redoshi, McCrear describes a Yorùbá community that was 'practically annihilated by the savage Dahomeys, who killed the aged and sold the young to slave traders on the west coast of Africa'. Like interviewers of Kossola before her, Wynn refers to McCrear's community as the 'Tarkar tribe'.

Equally significantly, Wynn's article contains a highly personal, albeit brief, account of family separation that is particularly unusual for its disclosures of an enslaved mother's loss. Although McCrear was two years old when she endured the Middle Passage and has no memory of the journey, Wynn makes clear that 'she remembers the stories from her mother', and the article alludes to the apparent endlessness and claustrophobia of the family's transatlantic journey as well as the uncertainty and threat of separation that hung over them

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during this period by noting that McCrear and her sister Sallie 'were among the terrified little blacks who clung to their mother, Gracie, whimpering softly for hours at a time in the dark hold'.

Disturbingly, the article acknowledges that McCrear's mother lost child family members on three occasions during their forced journey from West Africa to Alabama. Wynn records that, 'Two of Gracie's sons were left in Africa. She never knew what became of them'. Although the allusion to separation is fleeting, this statement provides rare insight into the Middle Passage as a site of maternal loss, and its emotional potency is underlined not only by the permanence of the family's estrangement, but also by the likelihood that the boys were no more than nine years old given that McCrear and Sallie were then aged two and ten. Although he is not mentioned in Wynn's article, Gracie probably also endured the loss of her husband

when she was kidnapped. According to Emma Langdon Roche, although some of the ‘most stalwart men’ were captured, those out working in the fields were killed in the Dahomeyan raid on their town.

Once on board the *Clotilda*, McCrear claimed that her mother then witnessed the ‘bodies of her nephew and a fellow villager’s son carried from the hold to be thrown into the sea when they fell victim to an illness’. Redoshi also told Flock that two members of her community died of ill health on the ship and were thrown out to sea by the ship’s crew, although she identified the dead as a young girl and grown man. Regardless of the precise identities of the deceased, the fact that they are identified by their relationship to others – they are ‘her nephew’ and someone else’s ‘son’ – acknowledges how closely related were many of the *Clotilda*’s human cargo and thus how many families were destroyed prior to and during the voyage.

Finally, Wynn notes that Gracie’s two other children, ‘both girls, older than Sallie and

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Tildy, also were unaccounted for after they reached America’. Kossola described the pain of the *Clotilda* survivors’ separation on their arrival in the U.S., recalling that, ‘We seventy days cross de water from de Affica soil, and now dey part us from one ‘nother. Derefore we cry. We cain help but cry ... Our grief so heavy look lak we cain stand it’. Yet Gracie’s experiences reveal that this separation was more traumatic than even Kossola’s words expressed, for the group comprised not only friends who had formed a close bond through the shared horror and uncertainty of the Atlantic voyage, but also at least one mother and her children.

Other aspects of the family’s ordeal are downplayed or obscured in the article, however.

Gracie was sold upon her arrival in the United States as the wife of ‘Cuy’, a fellow *Clotilda*

Gracie was sold upon her arrival in the United States as the wife of Guy, a fellow *Clotilda* survivor. Wynn describes Guy as Gracie's 'new found mate on the voyage', which infers in crudely animalistic terms that the pair formed a loving partnership amidst the horrors of their transatlantic crossing. According to the logic of this narrative, Gracie and Guy became a couple prior to their sale in the United States. Yet Redoshi claimed to have been sold arbitrarily as the 'wife' of a much older man from a different ethnic group after she arrived in Alabama, which suggests that the sale together of Gracie and Guy was random and part of a wider practice of selling off *Clotilda* survivors as 'breeding pairs'. Redoshi also stated that she was just 12 years old when she was sold in this way, an assertion that is corroborated in Wynn's article by Kossola, who 'remembered [McCrear and Redoshi] both as small children among the crowd of captives who were herded aboard the *Clothilde*'.

Census data indicating that Guy came from a different part of Africa from Gracie adds weight to Redoshi's claim that *Clotilda* survivors were sold arbitrarily as breeding couples. The 1870 census specifies that Gracie was born in 'Africa', but that Guy was born in 'Africa Guinea'.

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The document thus appears to acknowledge that, like Redoshi and her husband Yawith, Gracie and Guy were from different regions of West Africa. Sylviane A. Diouf identifies 49 Guinea-born Africans across the 1870 and 1880 U.S. censuses and notes that, 'What Guinea exactly represented for each individual is difficult to ascertain, since the name was given to a wide stretch of land'. Yet she conjectures that such men and women 'may have meant the area just east of Senegambia, what is roughly Guinea today since numerous people from that particular zone are known to have been transported to these two states'. However, Guy is unlikely to have come from this region, which is approximately 1,000 miles away from

the slave port of Ouidah where the *Clotilda* survivors were sold. A more likely explanation is that the census taker lacked an understanding of different African ethnic groups and simply used the term 'Guinea' to account for why Guy did not bear the Yorùbá facial markings of Gracie and McCrear.

Despite its elusiveness about the circumstances of Gracie and Guy's pairing, Wynn's article nevertheless is frank about some of the dehumanising horrors that McCrear and her family endured following their arrival in Alabama. McCrear discusses her family's enslavement very briefly in the published article, but with enough detail to elucidate its cruelties and traumas. Although McCrear has no memory of the Middle Passage, she has a 'distinct recollection' of fleeing to the swamp with her sister in an attempt to escape her captors.

Wynn notes that McCrear was 'hardly more than three' during this episode, but that she still remembered hiding for 'several hours before the overseer's dogs scented them out'. That an 11- and three-year-old went to such lengths to escape captivity brings to light the miserable treatment that they endured even as young children and shows how profound was their sense of dislocation and desperation to return home. McCrear's account suggests that the Middle Passage was particularly disorienting for young children, who were unable to

comprehend the permanence of their estrangement and may have believed that they could find their way back home. Equally, McCrear's ability to recall such an early childhood memory so vividly hints at how terrifying both her escape attempt and her recapture must have been. The use of dogs to sniff out small children underscores the extent of slavery's brutalising effects. For their captors, McCrear and Sallie were regarded not as young children but rather as property that could be hunted down like animals.

McCrear was one of the last people born in Africa to endure the Middle Passage and U.S. slavery, and she appears to be the youngest survivor of the transatlantic slave trade to have given an account of her life. Her story as recorded by Wynn therefore serves as a rare case study for understanding the experiences of babies and very young children who endured transatlantic slavery and for showing how these experiences differed from those of their parents and older siblings. McCrear did not have to navigate unfamiliar languages in the same way as Gracie and Guy, who never learned to communicate meaningfully in English and whose different ethnic backgrounds probably made communication even with each other difficult. Although McCrear 'learned English rapidly' due to the incredibly young age at which she was captured, by contrast 'Gracie and Guy never learned more than a few phrases'.

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Notably, when Emma Langdon Roche travelled to Africatown in 1914 to interview Kossola and other *Clotilda* survivors, she observed that, 'Their English is very broken and is not always intelligible even to those who have lived among them for many years'.

Gracie and Guy's inability to overcome language barriers highlights the identity assaults

and social exclusions that Middle Passage survivors faced in the Americas and the extreme foreignness of the societies that they were forced to call home. As noted elsewhere by this author, ‘Given that language plays a crucial role in shaping a person’s identity, its loss is symbolic of the geographical dislocation and dehumanisation that Middle Passage survivors endured’. The significance of language as a form of identity for Africans displaced in the Americas is confirmed by the actions of Redoshi, who placed such importance on her mother tongue that she continued to speak it until the end of her life and even passed it on to her daughter and some of her grandchildren. Gracie and Guy’s inability to communicate in English also speaks to the permanence of their geographical displacement as Middle Passage survivors. Once they reached Alabama, they were never again able to navigate meaningfully and enjoy a semblance of familiarity with and belonging in their environment.

Conversely, West Africa was a second-hand memory for McCrear. A child so young was spared remembrance of the destruction of her town, the murder of her kinsfolk, imprisonment in a barracoon and the Middle Passage’s horrors, but she was also denied first-hand recollections of her homeland and even of several family members, including her father and four of her siblings. Equally, McCrear’s Yorùbá identity was arrested before it could begin meaningfully to be formed. As McCrear’s experience demonstrates, babies and toddlers who were sold across the Atlantic were denied access to the world into which they had been born and consequently any immediate understanding of their ancestral heritage. Wynn records that Gracie and Guy’s inability to communicate in English also compelled McCrear to act as their

‘interpreter’ when they visited the local store, which highlights the forced maturity of black children in the ante- and post-bellum United States and speaks more generally to children’s access to childhood. McCrear took responsibility for her family’s material needs at a

slavery's assault on childhood. McCrear took responsibility for her family's material needs at a young age to ensure their survival.

Census data indicate that Gracie died in the 1880s or 1890s, roughly three decades after her arrival in Alabama, but McCrear claimed that her mother's communication in English extended merely to simple transactions with the local storekeeper. As Wynn notes, 'she relied greatly on the sign language to the end, to make her meaning clear'. The simplicity of Gracie's demands reflects the material poverty of her life in the United States and demonstrates how nominal was her transition from slavery to freedom. 'Two yards of calico; a plug of tobacco, some snuff, and meat and meal' were her shopping list. Equally, the transactions were based on 'trad[e]' rather than purchase. Although no longer enslaved, Gracie was not fiscally independent. The 1870 census confirms the family's social status. 'Tilda', Gracie and Guy are all listed as 'farm labourers' and therefore almost certainly were sharecroppers. They were tenants who produced a crop, most likely cotton, for the benefit of a landowner, and worked not for wages but for a share of this crop, a practice that meant that they were constantly indebted to the landowner. As Stephanie M. H. Camp observes, 'By keeping cash out of the hands of black farmers for generations and by forcing them into crippling debt to the landowners – from whom they purchased farming supplies and store-bought goods for their own use at a cost of 30 to 50 percent above retail – sharecropping very effectively bound black farmers to the land'.