

THE

STORIES AND LESSONS

WORLD

FROM AMERICA'S UNSUNG

WE

ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

NEED

EDITED BY AUDREA LIM

Tar Sands in Africatown: Mobile Environmental Justice Action Coalition

Nick Tabor

The Mobile Environmental Justice Action Coalition was formed in 2013 to defend the right to clean air, water, soil, health, and safety for the most threatened communities in Mobile, Alabama.

JOE WOMACK GREW UP IN AFRICATOWN, A BLACK NEIGHBORHOOD on the outskirts of Mobile, Alabama. The place was idyllic, in a rugged way unique to the bayou regions of the Gulf Coast. It was surrounded on all sides by pine forests, and separated from the city by a creek. Oysters clustered in the mud and the marshes. Often on Sundays, Womack and his grandfather went out and caught crabs to make gumbo for dinner. He swam and fished with his friends in the waterways, which were as lush as the Everglades.

But Africatown also had an ugly, not to say disconcerting, industrial element. Two enormous paper mills, which made use of the local lumber, were visible from many front porches. The towering smokestacks frequently turned the sky gray, and some afternoons, ash rained down on the families' roofs. New cars had to be washed constantly; otherwise they rusted over within just a few years. The chemical odors could get so putrid that no one wanted to be outside.

The factories had been installed in the 1920s and '30s, at a time when Africatown's residents had no political representation. But hardly anyone complained, because the neighborhood economy was built on paper-mill jobs. "They said, 'As long as you live in the community, we'll hire you,'" Womack told me. "As long as you can walk and breathe." The local Elks Lodge, Africatown's main watering hole, was packed at

the end of every shift. There were grocery stores on every corner, plus a motel and a movie theater. At the same time, it lacked basic amenities, because it was outside Mobile's city limits. Womack's family and their neighbors got their water from wells, used outhouses instead of flushing toilets, and drove exclusively on dirt roads.

Africatown was founded in the late 1860s by the last group of enslaved people brought over from Africa, making it the first American town "continuously controlled by blacks, the only one run by Africans," as the historian Sylviane Diouf has written. Freed in 1865, after just five years in Mobile, the Africans spoke no English and had no ties to local society. Since they could not return home, they carved out a spot in a remote area and created an independent society, appointing their own leaders and judges. They established churches and a school, bringing in an American-born Black teacher to help their kids adapt to the new culture. Even there, they weren't immune to exploitation by Mobile's white business leaders. Some of the surrounding land belonged to Timothy Meaher, the plantation owner who had brought them to America. The first factory opened in 1929, before Womack was born, and many more have followed. However, in recent years, the founders' descendants have imitated their tenacity and resourcefulness, mobilizing to stop the oil and gas industries from encroaching any further.

Womack, now seventy years old, has an expansive memory and an easygoing temperament—except when he's seized by righteous anger, which is not uncommon. He favors T-shirts and wide-brimmed hats. His woolly black hair is shaped in a faint widow's peak, and his skin has deep vertical creases from his nose to his jaw. After he moved away from Africatown in 1968—first for college in Virginia, then the Marine Corps—he returned to Mobile in 1974, found an apartment across town, and over the next fifteen years worked as an accountant at the Shell chemical factory north of Mobile. He was there for the transition from paper spreadsheets to punch cards, and later to clunky laptops. He remembers those years fondly. "Shell had all this extra money they just didn't know what to do with"—oil prices were soaring—"so they just gave people raises." Womack was a natural leader, and he became the first African American to get a promotion at the company.

But he became restless there, and in his mid-forties he started a second career as a truck driver, which he stuck to for eleven years. (Heart problems forced him to retire at age fifty-seven.) For nineteen years, he also worked with the Marine Corps Reserves, ultimately being discharged with the rank of major.

Throughout adulthood, as he visited his old neighborhood for church services and to see his mother, he watched it go through a slow decline.

International Paper and Scott Paper wound down their operations in the 1990s and shut down altogether by 2000, eliminating most of the neighborhood's jobs. The Meaher family, the slave importer's descendants, still owned much of the surrounding property, and they leased it to new factories. An asphalt manufacturer, a pipe manufacturer, a metal fabricator, a welding shop, and chemical and power plants all moved in. There were enough to encircle the whole residential zone. But these factories did most of their hiring from outside, and Africatown's younger residents moved away to find work.

At the same time, the pollution was taking its toll. Among all those emissions there had been vast amounts of toxic chemicals, including chloroform and benzene. Dozens of Womack's old neighbors, sometimes two or three in a single family, were being felled by cancer. His own sister died in 2005. Africatown's population dropped to 2,000, down from 15,000 during Womack's childhood, and the service industry collapsed in turn. Houses emptied out, and their fences began bending with rust. Moss spilled down from the gutters, and vines wound across the windowpanes.

By the mid-2000s, most Mobilians thought of Africatown only as an industrial hub; many people didn't even realize it still housed an active neighborhood. So in 2008, when a trucking company, Boyd Bros. Transportation, wanted some of Africatown's residential property rezoned for its new headquarters, the local government was eager to cooperate. But the company's proposed depot would have been close to Womack's mother's house. "She knew that I had been in the trucking business, so she asked me to find out what was going on," Womack recalled. "And then the last thing she said was, 'Don't let them take my property.'"

He drew on his military experience, envisioning a defensive perimeter strategy. "In my mind, my mother's house was the headquarters, so in order to keep it safe, I got to keep my neighbors safe, I got to keep people a mile away safe, I got to keep everybody safe. I couldn't give up an inch."

He went to the public hearing. "I could sense the mood when I got there," he said— people were agitated and suspicious about the rezoning proposal. "But there wasn't a real leader in the room for the community." Most of the people who had fought these projects when he was younger had died, and no one had stepped up to replace them. So when the floor was opened for public comment, he spoke up. The company wasn't telling them about the downsides, he said: trucks wearing down the streets, polluting the air even more with their diesel fumes, and bringing drugs and prostitution, like he had seen in his years on the road. Womack's comments were met with claps and cheers. Others took

turns at the front, making similar complaints. The trucks would kick up dirt and dust, and keep them up at night, and for all the people knew, they could be carrying hazardous chemicals. At the end of the meeting, Boyd Bros. withdrew its proposal, saying it wouldn't go where it wasn't welcome.

* * *

WOMACK DIDN'T REALIZE IT, but a much greater threat to the neighborhood was on the horizon. Circa 2010, the oil industry nominated Africatown to become one of North America's hubs for extracting oil out of tar sands, those petroleum-rich clusters of sand and clay made famous by the Keystone XL pipeline debacle. The companies Arc Terminals and Canadian National were planning to build a rail terminal in downtown Mobile so they could ship the oil all the way from Western Canada to the Gulf. Arc Terminals also wanted to build thirty to sixty new oil-storage tanks along the bay, a few miles downriver from Africatown. There were also plans in the works to install thirty-two oil-storage tanks on a site inside the neighborhood, owned by investors who had incorporated under the name Hydrocarbon of Mobile. Environmentalists believed it was all connected to land speculation that was happening in the northern part of the state, where a secretive company called MS Industries II was hoping to tap a vast geological formation for additional tar-sands oil.

By the spring of 2013, the companies had gotten deep into the development process without triggering any public scrutiny. But that changed when the news of a separate pipeline expansion caught the attention of Mobile's white environmentalists. The company Plains All American Pipeline wanted to begin shipping oil from a terminal it owned in Mobile County to the Chevron Oil Refinery in Mississippi, routing it through South Alabama's only drinking-water reservoir.

A connection was never established between the Canadian tar-sands project and the Plains All American development, but some local advocates still believe one existed. "What came to be clear was that there was a master plan for all of this," said Tom Hutchings, a Mobile-based consultant who studied the matter on behalf of the local Sierra Club. It would have been possible for Plains All American to use its infrastructure for tar-sands oil if it ever chose to—by moving it through an already-existing pipeline in the heart of Africatown. The company wouldn't have even needed a separate permit. "Regulations on pipelines are almost nonexistent," Hutchings explained. By the time Mobilians heard about any of this, the Plains All American pipeline had already been approved by the state.

Ramsey Sprague, a then thirty-year-old activist who would become a critical ally to Africatown, was living at the time in Nacogdoches, in East Texas. Sprague had made connections in Alabama while working with veterans' groups that opposed the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In his teenage years, Sprague had been radicalized while listening to punk and industrial music, but as he grew older, his activism increasingly dovetailed with his Indigenous heritage—he belongs to the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe, who are native to the Gulf Coast. In 2012 and 2013, he worked with a group that did radical demonstrations against the Keystone XL Pipeline in Texas, including encampments and occupations to block construction.

A member of Mobile's Sierra Club had contacted him in 2013 to tell him about the tar-sands projects. Sprague's interest was piqued when his acquaintance mentioned Africatown. He had heard about the neighborhood during his prior Alabama travels and had felt a quick connection.

Sprague and Womack first crossed paths at a meeting of the Sierra Club in July of 2013, where some three hundred others, from all over Mobile County, were present: city officials, college students, environmentalists, even Tea Party members fretting about property rights. Information was being presented on all the proposed tanks and pipelines. Tom Hutchings showed aerial photographs of the Plains Southcap Pipeline's projected route. A member of the county legislature expressed hope that the state's Public Service Commission would agree to a "realignment" that would move the pipe away from the watershed.

Mobile's drinking water was the main issue that night, and the storage tanks were clearly an afterthought for most speakers. But as more was revealed about the physical dangers the oil tanks would pose—Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill both being recent memories—it was obvious to Womack that his old neighborhood faced more risk than the others. "It didn't take long for me to put the pieces together," he said. He worried about emissions as well as the threat of an explosion or a spill.

Sprague was one of the last to take the microphone. "I understand very intimately what it means to systematically lose your traditional way of life," he told the crowd, gesturing toward his chest. He wore jeans and a pale green T-shirt with the sleeves cut off, and his dark hair was shaved on the sides and pulled back in a braid down the middle. "I can't let it happen," he added. "I'm here to help."

In the weeks that followed, dozens of residents from all over Mobile—some appearing under the banner of ad hoc groups like Alabama Gulf Coast United and Tar Sands Oil Mobile—turned out for

strategy meetings organized by Hutchings and the Sierra Club. Womack dragged along old friends from Africatown. At the end of July, the coalition packed a meeting of the water utility, then a meeting of the city council. The press took notice. “You had never seen that type of collaboration before,” Womack said. “It was powerful, when we went down to the city council—you see a bunch of people supporting each other.”

The Africatown contingent also began meeting independently. In August, the group invited Sprague and his friends back to give a training session on nonviolent direct action. The activists demonstrated how to de-escalate conflicts, how to avoid provoking the police, how to communicate as a group while under pressure. “He said, ‘Do *not* hit back,’” recalled Ruth Ballard, an eighty-three-year-old Africatown native. To practice their new skills, the residents planned a demonstration on September 21, 2013, a day when the environmental organization 350.org was calling for protests nationwide against the tar-sands industry. Allies from elsewhere in Mobile joined them downtown on a rainy Saturday morning. Holding protest signs in one hand and umbrellas in the other, they marched to a rail depot on the waterfront where chemical tanker cars were frequently parked. They chanted, “Pipelines leak! Trains crash! Keep your tar sands off our tracks!”

When they met again several days later, everyone still felt charged up from the demonstration. It seemed clear that Mobile needed a group like theirs: one that could bring in the voices of the poor, Black, and elderly, and amplify them to the local government and the broader environmental movement. They wanted to write letters to the press, file records requests, rally turnout for public hearings, and get grant money for sponsoring workshops. So around fifteen of them agreed to formalize their status, calling themselves MEJAC—the Mobile Environmental Justice Action Coalition—and electing officers. Womack became the vice president and recruiter-in-chief.

In December, under pressure from MEJAC and the other groups, Levon Manzie, the city councilman representing Africatown, proposed a six-month moratorium on new tanks while new health and environmental rules could be drafted. “My hopes are that we will take this time to really have an internal debate,” he told the *Mobile Press-Register*, “relative to the direction we want to go in as a city and the marriage between economic development and the quality of life.” The mayor, Sandy Stimpson, who had just taken office that fall, and whose family owned a lumber mill, warned that a moratorium might hurt Mobile’s economy. Though he was glad to facilitate a conversa-

tion, he told reporters, "We cannot deny any business the right to be here." But on New Year's Eve, the council approved a version of the temporary ban.

A committee was called to draft regulations. Though its ten members included a couple of environmental advocates, the majority came from local industry, including a marketing manager for a gas company, a retired chemical-company executive, and a public-relations manager whose firm represented many oil and gas clients. Stimpson personally appointed a coal-industry engineer for "balance" and told the press he still feared it was all a waste of time. Even so, the committee's recommendations that spring were surprisingly robust: they called for a 1,500-foot setback from any residential property or historic structure, vapor-control technology, review of the designs by an independent engineer, and stiff consequences for noncompliance.

But before the planning commission could vote on those recommendations, Stimpson replaced most of its members with new appointees who appeared to be more favorable to industry interests. The hearings were delayed into 2015. When the new planning commission finally came back with its own scheme, Womack and his allies found their proposal insulting. It amounted to stripping most of the regulatory measures, including the vapor control, and reducing the setback to 1,000 feet. The moratorium was extended, then extended again, while the arguments dragged on.

Womack and the other core MEJAC members showed up at every meeting. In the summer of 2015, their recruitment efforts got a boost from Arc Terminals itself, when its vice president admitted to the city council that the company had been storing sulfuric acid without permission. He claimed the company didn't know the rules and that it assumed the community was already aware.

* * *

NEAR THE END OF THAT YEAR, Africatown caught a break: the global price of oil collapsed, leading Arc Terminals and Canadian National to withdraw their plans. But the companies continued pushing the city to enshrine in the zoning code their right to install tanks there in the future. By then, Sprague had moved to Mobile and devoted himself to this project fully. In December, the activists persuaded the planning commission to have a public hearing in the evening, at an Africatown community center, to maximize turnout.

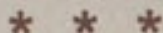
It was an unseasonably hot night. Roughly 150 people showed up, enough to fill all the folding chairs and most of the space on the periphery. When the floor was opened for comment, Womack approached the

front, wearing a loose-fitting blue button-up and a Panama hat. Before him were eight members of the planning commission, seated behind a long table; behind him, supporters fanned themselves with a handout that listed MEJAC's talking points.

"Do the right thing," he urged the panel. "Take those tanks somewhere else. Because this community, we really can't afford it. You see the old people here?" His arm swung in an arc. "There are young babies here too. They don't need that threat hanging over their heads." There were murmurs of assent behind him. "You ride to the Port of Chickasaw, you'll see it. You ride across the Africatown Bridge over here, you'll smell it! I know my mama don't like it! We don't want it. We don't need it. Mobile don't need it."

Behind him were murmurs of "Amen."

Four months later, in the spring of 2016, the city council finally approved a new regulatory scheme. It didn't grant everything Womack and the others had hoped for, but it mandated a setback of 1,500 feet and a certified engineer's report for any new tank project.



AFTER THAT, EVERY ENCROACHMENT on the neighborhood was met with fierce resistance and indignation. In 2015, the Meaher family, the slave importer's descendants, wanted to rezone even more residential land and lease it to some local entrepreneurs so they could sell military hardware there. MEJAC talked the planning commission into delaying the process, and in the long run the entrepreneurs canceled their plans. And the following year, in response to grassroots efforts, the city approved a long-term plan for the community, calling for more trails and sidewalks, a farmers' market, and an end to further industrial encroachment.

Meanwhile, Africatown went on the offensive. Residents had long believed that International Paper's chemical pollution was responsible for a cancer epidemic. Nearly every longtime resident can recite a list of friends and family who died, often in their forties or fifties, from some variation of the disease: kidney cancer, spine cancer, brain cancer, leukemia. Ballard says both her parents and three of her siblings were killed by it. "We've had two and three funerals in a week," said Christopher Williams, a local pastor and close ally of MEJAC, in an interview. "When you go across Mobile, five miles from here, you won't find a house where more than three people have cancer. But here, it's everywhere. People expect it." There are no hard statistics available—the state only publishes figures on a county-wide basis—but Williams said he distributed a questionnaire around Africatown some years ago.

At least 100 people responded that they or a family member had had cancer.

Williams made many calls to Alabama law firms, looking for one that would sue International Paper. He managed to recruit Donald Stewart, a former state legislator who now practices law in Anniston. Stewart once sued the agricultural biotech company Monsanto for dumping chemicals in Anniston, as part of a class action that ultimately won as much as \$160 million in settlements. As of the fall of 2020, after three years of litigation, Williams said a settlement in the Africatown case seemed likely in the near future.

Womack, Sprague, and the rest of the MEJAC crew continue watching out for projects that could affect the neighborhood. In 2019, for instance, when the state wanted to impose a toll on a nearby highway, the activists organized a grassroots campaign to block it, pointing out that many drivers would dodge the toll by driving through Africatown instead—intensifying the car congestion in turn.

But Womack is pinning most of his hopes on the neighborhood's rich history. He imagines a future where the local economy is based on ecotourism. It would be an example of what's known in the environmental world as a "just transition": a shift away from dirty energy, away from industrial blight, toward a low-carbon model built on the area's endemic features. If this seemed outlandish a few years ago, it doesn't any longer.

A couple of events have given MEJAC's efforts a boost. A 1931 manuscript based on Zora Neale Hurston's interviews with Cudjo Lewis, the last surviving founder of Africatown, was finally published in 2018. The book, titled *Barracoon*, spent weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list. It depicts Lewis at age eighty-six, after his wife and all six of his children have died, leaving him mostly alone in a house beside his church. Hurston describes bringing gifts—one day Georgia peaches, another day a ham—and coaxing him into telling his life story, from his early years in West Africa to the day he was freed in Alabama to his recent hardships. There are poignant moments where he becomes utterly absorbed in his memories. He was "no longer on the porch with me," Hurston writes at the end of one encounter. "He was squatting about that fire in Dahomey. His face was twitching in abysmal pain." He seems to have forgotten her presence—"So I slipped away as quietly as possible and left him with his smoke pictures."

At the time of *Barracoon*'s publication, Womack was already working connections he'd made as an organizer to get a search underway for the wreckage of the *Clotilda*, the ship that had brought Africatown's founders to the United States back in 1860. William Foster, the captain, had burned it after his voyage to destroy the evidence. Womack quietly con-

sulted with the National Parks Service, the Smithsonian, and *National Geographic*. In the spring of 2019, the state announced that the ship had been found. Media outlets all over the world covered the discovery. Womack and most everyone else in Africatown was overjoyed.

"We're at war," he said, once again belying his military history. "And when you are at war, the first thing you've got to figure out is, what are your assets? What have you got to fight with? And our asset is that we are a historical place." But until recently, its significance remained obscure—even to many people in Mobile. "So one of my main objectives," he said, "is to make people aware of what they were trying to get rid of."

**DEFEND
OUR
HOMES**

13