



Untold Stories

OF BLACK MONTEVALLO



Everybody's stories matter. It's not just a matter of nostalgia, it powers us into the present and the future. -- Barack Obama

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IN PRAISE OF THE POCKET WATCH: ALDRICH'S TIME-PIECE (PART 2)

Last month we began the story of a Black-edited paper published every Friday beginning in 1895 in the nearby coal-mining community of Aldrich. *Alabama Time-Piece* was one of nearly 100 African American newspapers circulating at the turn of the century but the only one originating in our area. It brings into view a vibrant community in Aldrich's Old Camp, a Black settlement within a racially mixed village not two miles from downtown Montevallo.

The *Time-Piece's* masthead is dominated by the image of a pocket watch with the motto "One Size" designed specifically for the paper. It reflects a key message its editor, B. L. "Booker" Lester, wanted to communicate. This is our time, he insists, we must take advantage of the times. "If you want to keep Time with the Times, the Time-Piece is the TIMELY and TIMIEST TIMES" ("Dear Reader"). How best to keep time with the times? Learn to "live more economically, get homes, save time, means and money, and educate our children" ("Editorial Notes," 14 Oct 1898).

The pocket watch in the newspaper's title and on its masthead may symbolize the role the newspaper played in promoting self-sufficiency and prosperity among its readers, many of them members of the first-freed generation. Pocket watches were luxury items, beautifully crafted and expensive. They were markers of wealth and status. . . and during the period of enslavement they were beyond the reach of most people of color.



How wonderful then to find a pocket watch as the logo of an African American paper! A paper bought and read by formerly enslaved persons and their children. How fitting that a paper promoting Black prosperity as a tool of racial advancement would adopt the time-piece for its title. The motto "one size" just might point toward ideals -- equality, unity, self-ownership -- to which *Time-Piece* readers might aspire.

During the Reconstruction period the African American community that took up residence at Old Camp began its collective freedom journey. Epsibeth (originally Hepzibah), the first of four Baptist churches to be established in Aldrich, was started in 1873 by former slaves. Like other Black churches that sprang up in the 1870s, it enabled newly emancipated people to worship as they pleased. (By turn of the century Epsibeth boasted 165 members.) Men and women could now raise children without fear of family separations. Formerly enslaved men could count on regular wages for their labor in the mines. Because coal mining was to some extent seasonal, they could continue to farm during the summer months, many on land they owned. (*Time-Piece* repeatedly urged smart farming practices. Don't grow cotton! Don't sharecrop! Purchase your own land!)

The Old Camp community in Aldrich quickly developed a reputation for high-quality education under the leadership of Selma-educated Baptist preacher-teachers. One in particular, the Rev. D. L. Prentice (no known relation to Rev. Joseph Prentice), was lauded for "very effective work in the school room." His strenuous "pedagogic labors" invigorated the whole community, wrote historian C. O. Boothe in 1895 (*Cyclopedia*). Such vigor persuaded the likes of Booker Lester to cast his lot with a network of educational activists in Aldrich. The *Time-Piece* and the Negro Grammar School, which he guided as principal, were sites of his activism.

Alabama Time-Piece is a crucial piece of an inspiring story. The pocket watch proudly brandished on the front page and masthead of this "TIMELY and TIMIEST" paper tells a small part of a great transformation, a local moment in the up-from-slavery journey of four million African Americans. People went from being owned to being owners, from being property to being persons. Persons at liberty to subscribe to a *Time-Piece* of their own.

Images from microfilm in Samford University Special Collections. Submitted by Kathy King & Anitka Stewart Sims. Contact us at Movaltrail@gmail.com. We want to hear your stories and welcome correction of any errors of fact or interpretation.