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Montevallo

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(This article was written three years ago and is published on account of the School's interest in the history of Montevallo.)

Montevallo is very near the center of the State of Alabama, in Shelby County. Record evidence of its early history is entirely lacking, and facts handed down by its first citizens are meagre.

Among its first settlers were the Wilson family, from whom it was called "Wilson's Hill." Doubtless it had been a favorite locality with the aborigines, on account of its beautiful and abundant springs and its then nut-bearing forests, replete with game. Many arrow heads, and bits of pottery are yet to be found in the vicinity, and tradition tells of a famous play ground, which the Indians periodically visited, about three miles from the town, on what has been known as the Dison Place.

Congress, in the Act admitting the State of Alabama into the Union, in 1819, made a munificent grant of public lands (72 sections, 46,080 acres), to the State, in trust for a University to be established. All the public lands about Montevallo were selected under this grant; but it seems that at least Edmund King and Edmund Powell, two extensive early proprietors, anticipated the commissioners to the extent of selection of their homesteads, in 1821; probably two years before the University fixed upon its lands. The first President of the University of Alabama, Rev. Alva Woods, D. D., selected this place for the University, the particular site being the hill afterwards occupied by the residence of Burwell B. Lewis, later owned by Jno. D. McMath, and now attached to the property of the Alabama Girls' Industrial School. The town was laid off by the University authorities, which accounts for the streets running at right angles—an unusual thing for the oldest towns. The place was rechristened, Montevallo, by the President of the University. The suggestiveness and appropriateness of this Italian name is very readily appreciated, when we translate it: "On a mound, in a valley." Fortune has shown her fickleness many times to the little town, and began by moving the site of the University before the structural work was begun, to Tuscaloosa, where it remains. Lots in the town were sold by the University, as early as 1823, according to memoranda on the county roads.

In the course of its history, many notable men have been identified with Montevallo. In good citizenship, culture, refinement and the spirit of progressiveness, her people compare favorably with any other. In the lead of these stands the name of Edmund King, already spoken of as one of the first proprietors. We find evidences on every hand that he, at all times, stood for progressiveness, stability, generosity and good morals; materially, educationally and religiously, he initiated, or co-operated in, every forward movement. His "Mansion House" was the first brick structure erected in Shelby County. It is a two-story building, following the architecture of the time. The bricks were made on the bank of Shoal Creek, within the town limits, and its massive walls attest the good workmanship of the builders, although for long years the building was sadly neglected and abused. Col. King donated the land for the Baptist Church, for two school buildings, and for various highways, and took a prominent part in their building. He was looked upon as a safe and able adviser in County affairs, and in many of its enterprises acted as commissioner. In all the characteristics which seemed to have marked him as a public-spirited man, his antithesis existed in his neighbor, Edmund Powell. At one time it was proposed to continue Main Street to a section line, and thence along the section line northward, making the "Ashville Road". This was the line between the properties of King and Powell. Powell peremptorily refused to donate any portion of the land, and hence there was a divergence at the extremity of Main Street, so as to throw the road entirely upon the land of the generous King. The oft repetition of this and other incidents of like character, by the old slaves of Col. King, to demonstrate their superiority over the "Powell niggers," emphasized their vanity, and the feeling of feud that must have existed between these old families. King's "Mansion" was a refuge for young men, otherwise without home, and of whom he seems to have constituted himself gratuitous guardian, and all of whom, doubtless, in their turns are now dead. Among these were the trio of Lewises and French Nabors, who never tired of lauding the good qualities of their Foster-father. Two of Col. King's sons became lawyers and one a preacher. His daughter married Geo. D. Shortridge, who became a circuit Judge, and, as Know Nothing candidate for Governor, was defeated by John Anthony Winston. A grand-daughter, daughter of Judge Shortridge, married Chief Justice R. R. Gaines, of the Supreme Court of Texas, an Alabamian by birth, and another grand-daughter, Miss Grace King has gained distinction in New Orleans, as a writer, principally for magazines. Col. King

was a Baptist in faith. He died in 1863, and was buried near his "Mansion House," in his family burial ground.

Edmund Powell occupied a colonial, two-story house, on the site of the new Presbyterian Church, which was destroyed by the cyclone of 1874. He, likewise, was buried in his family graveyard, in the eastern portion of town.

Montevallo was first incorporated by the Legislature, in 1847, the form of government being very simple, with very limited powers. No records of the public administrations can now be found. This form of government continued up to about 1873, when the town calaboose was burned, cremating a prisoner, when it went into disuetude. There was no municipal organization again until January, 1901, a new charter having been granted by the Legislature, and since which time the "Town of Montevallo" has been governed by a Mayor and four Councilmen, elected by the qualified electors.*

In spite of an enlightened citizenship, for many years, saloons prevailed and thrived. Resulting casualties were frequent, and many violent deaths were recorded. Gambling and cock-fighting, for which "pits" were provided, were favorite amusements with the sports of the community who congregated here. After alternating between open saloons and prohibition, under local option laws, the temperance sentiment finally became influential enough, in 1886, to secure the enactment of an absolute prohibition statute for the precinct. Later, in 1897, another more stringent law was enacted, prohibiting liquor traffic within ten miles of the Girls' Industrial School—excepting Calera—under the operation of which, it has become precarious for a "blind tiger," even, to do business; so that a drunken man is a very rare sight; a condition that contrasts delightfully with what formerly obtained. (In 1908 the prohibition law went into effect for the whole of Shelby County.)

In 1853, the Alabama & Tennessee Rivers Railroad, afterwards the Selma, Rome and Dalton, and East Tennessee, Virginia & Georgia, respectively, and now the Southern Railway, originally projected to run from Selma, on the Alabama, to Tuscumbia, on the Tennessee River, but which, during construction, veered to the eastward, was completed to Montevallo, which event was celebrated, in due form, by a great barbecue and accompanying oratory, and towards the accomplishment of which, Edmund King and his coterie of well-to-do Montevallo men, among whom were Daniel E. Watrous, Jno. S. Storrs, Geo. D. Shortridge, Wm. P. Browne, Alexander Nelson, and Daniel and Wm. L. Prentice, contributed. For several years Montevallo remained the northern terminus of the railroad, and, during this period, her commerce

flourished as at no other time. The products of Tuscaloosa, Jefferson, Blount, Walker, St. Clair, Talladega, and even Calhoun (then Benton) Counties, sought market or transportation here, and here was delivered exchange products for their people. Stage and Caravan lines ramified in all directions, and business was at its best. Besides the native merchants, Meroney of Tennessee, Storrs of Vermont, the Butlers, Rowley and Lyman of Connecticut, the McConaughys of Delaware, Steele from Lake Champlain region and his son-in-law and partner, Vandegrift, lately deceased, from St. Clair County, are still mentioned by the older farmers of all the region, as the merchants of Montevallo, with whom they liked to deal.

The extension of the railroad northward; the subsequent building of the South and North Alabama Railroad from Montgomery to Decatur, thus opening the way for the founding of Birmingham; the hardships of relentless war, marked the downfall of Montevallo's commercial glory, which steadily waned until the establishment of the Alabama Girls' Industrial School there, when it revived to some extent. Her merchants, including some young men, whose fathers were among the merchants of early times, have exceptional qualifications, and still succeed in drawing some trade from competitive points, and keep up the reputation the town has always held as a cotton market.

The environs of the town seem to be all that are desirable to make of it a manufacturing center. It is bordered by inexhaustible coal fields, iron ore and limestone deposits and cotton fields, and purest water, with ever undiminished flow, gushes from its very hills.

Owing, doubtless, to lack of capital, and the peculiar depressing conditions of the times, the few manufacturing enterprises projected by its citizens, being a foundry, a tannery, and a yarn mill, did not long flourish.

The South and North Alabama Railroad, now a part of the Louisville & Nashville Railroad system, was originally surveyed via Montevallo, and, doubtless, would have been located by this route, but for the arrest and prosecution of members of the surveying party for some minor violation of the laws, and their consequent prejudices, through which, they were led to leave the place some seven miles to the west of the line. This is accounted the second great lost opportunity of the place, through no fault of its own. Quite recently, through the lack of confidence, or, as it may have been looked upon, adventuresomeness on the part of its business men, a magnificent cotton mill was allowed to go to another community, with fewer natural advantages.

November 23, 1874, an unusually sultry day was the unheeded harbinger of a fearful cyclone, which, with great force swept up the channel of Shoal Creek, about midnight, demolishing everything in its path, with few exceptions, and, by a strange caprice, plucking the Methodist Church and an unfinished store building, from the very heart of the town. Only three people were killed: William Young, an aged man; his grand-daughter, Mamie Morrow, a beautiful girl of about fourteen years of age, who occupied a house with other members of the family, just in front of the Episcopal Church; and a negro man who lived on the east side of Main Street, near the present foot-bridge. Many miraculous escapes were recounted. So appalling did the disaster seem that a commission was sent East to solicit donations for the sufferers, who met everywhere with generous reception and contributions.

Prior to 1847, it is doubtful if there had been a school in the town proper. Children went to the country schools, some of which were most excellent. Particularly the ones at Salem, two and a half miles north of Montevallo, on the Elyton road, and which was attended by the Kings, Lewises and others who became prominent, and another at the cemetery, near Wilson's Branch, where, at one time, an eminently qualified professor named Lewis, taught, the details of whose history I have been unable to get. About the year 1846, H. R. Lyman, who came that year from Connecticut, taught school in the Cemetery school house, and afterwards, probably in 1847, continued teaching in the new Masonic building which was erected on the bluff at the foot of Main Street. In this building the several church organizations which had formerly worshipped at the cemetery building, held services, until otherwise provided with their church buildings. The Masonic building was destroyed in the cyclone of '74.

In 1851, The Montevallo Male Institute was incorporated, as a joint stock company, and erected what was then an imposing building on a lot donated by Edmund King, one of the stockholders and promoters. This building is now used as Chapel and class rooms by the Girls' Industrial School. Its architectural lines have been much changed, and not for the better appearance, perhaps, but necessarily, on account of decayed superstructure. The masonry is of the very best quality, and the bricks were made within a hundred feet of the building. It was erected by a Mr. Shelley, whose son, Gen. Chas. M. Shelley, who afterwards represented the famous Fourth District in Congress, for several terms, assisted in laying the bricks.

Doubtless many of the stockholders defaulted in payment of stock, as the records show that the carpenters obtained judgments

against the corporation, and prosecuted them to sale under execution, at which a few of the leading stockholders purchased. These soon sold the property to three leading Cumberland Presbyterians: Edward M. Carleton, James D. Neeley and James McAmis, evidently acting as Trustees for the Synod of their church, which had in view the establishment of schools of learning here. This denomination built the first church in the town, in 1853, which building still stands, though dilapidated and unused. February 6, 1858, an act of the Legislature was approved, entitled:

“ AN ACT

To incorporate the Montevallo Male and Female Collegiate Institutes of the Union Synod of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church of Alabama.”

The preamble of which reads:

“Whereas, The Union Synod of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church of Alabama have resolved to establish a male and female institution of learning, of a high and general character, within the limits of said Synod, and have in fact located the same at the town of Montevallo, in the County or Shelby, to be known as the Montevallo Male and Female Collegiate Institutes of the Union Synod of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church; Now, in order to give full and legal effect thereto.”

The building already alluded to being put to the use of female education, another was erected, in 1859, for the boys (being the building now occupied by E. S. Lyman as a residence); whether by the Cumberlands or not, it soon passed into their control and they conducted, with great success the dual institution, until interrupted by the war. (It is interesting and refreshing to note, by way of digression, that the Acts of Alabama, along about this period are beautifully strewn with creations of educational institutions, marking the period as a very high tide of interest in this great matter, throughout the State. The force of the blow it received by the shock of war can never be fully realized.) The lot for this second building, as already indicated, was carved from the estate of Edmund King. After the war, the Cumberlands were unable to carry on their great work. They turned over the Female College to one of their Ministers, Rev. W. H. Meredith, who, with members of his family, resided there and conducted a high grade school for two decades, during which it equipped many noble women for useful lives. The other building was alternately used for experimental schools for boys, and desecrated by their fusilades of stones until recently adapted for a dwelling. A long period of desolation prevailed at both institutions, prior to the crowning achievement of Montevallo in securing the location of

the Alabama Girls' Industrial School, over some thirteen competing cities and towns. As originally provided for, it did not seem to promise what is being realized and developed. The appropriation for the first year was \$5,000.00, and for the next two, \$10,000.00, each, for all purposes. Relying upon the examples of rapid growth and popularity with the people, of similar institutions in neighboring States, and spurred on by the realization of the decaying condition of the town, educationally and otherwise, the citizens united in the effort to secure the school, as they never had on any proposition, and they succeeded. The inducements being the central, healthy location, and the donation of a magnificent site, including the old Synodical School building, and \$9,000.00 in cash. The Act creating the school was approved during the Session of 1892-3, by Governor, now United States Judge, Thomas G. Jones; having been introduced in the Senate, by Sol. D. Bloch, Senator from Wilcox County, who became one of the first, and still remains a Trustee. It took effect January 1st, 1895, soon after which Trustees were appointed by Governor Wm. C. Oates, himself being a member by the terms of the Act, and the President of the Board. The Trustees, first by committees, and then in a body, visited the different locations offered, finally settling upon Montevallo, during the summer; but with a condition, that certain real estate offered, and valued at \$9,000.00, be withdrawn from the proposition, and its cash value in money substituted, by January 1st, 1896. Heroic were the measures employed to raise this amount of money, which, in addition to other sums required to obtain the site and building, and to pay the expenses of committees, was a tremendous task for the little town. At the suggestion of the late W. S. Cary, application was made to the Commissioners Court of Shelby County, backed by numerous signed petitions from the citizens and tax-payers of the County, and which met with no opposition, from any source, to donate \$5,000.00 of the amount, and they readily responded. A committee of merchants was sent to near-by and distant cities—as far as Cincinnati—to solicit donations from those with whom they dealt, and which was successful beyond all expectations. On the first of January the Treasurer of the fund stood ready to deliver to the Treasurer of the Board of Trustees the full amount required, and all conveyances of title to the property donated, duly approved by the Attorney General of the State. Soon thereafter, the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees met here, and the transfer and delivery was made, and, for the first time during an eventful twelve months, crowded with efforts, doubts and dis-

appointments, the greatly exercised citizens breathed contentedly, and were completely happy.

The Act contemplated:

"The establishment and maintenance of a first class industrial school for the education of white girls in the State of Alabama in industrial and scientific branches, at which said girls may acquire a thorough normal school education, together with a knowledge of kindergarten instruction and music; also a knowledge of telegraphy, stenography, photography and phonography, type-writing, printing, book-keeping, indoor carpentry, electrical construction, clay modeling, architectural and mechanical drawing, sewing, dress-making, millinery, cooking, laundry, house, sign and fresco painting, home nursing, plumbing, and such other practical industries as, from time to time, to them (the Trustees) may be suggested by experience or tend to promote the general object of said Girls' Industrial School, to-wit: fitting and preparing such girls for the practical industries of the age."

Miss Julia S. Tutwiler, perhaps the foremost woman educator in the South, and of national reputation, had been unanimously elected President of the school, before the location; but the project seemed so dubious, considering the conditions, and limited provisions, that she and other educators realized, declined the proffered position. This presented a dilemma that looked like more adverse Fate, not only to the town; but to the State as well; but the man for the occasion was in our midst, and he met it with energy and business policies that successfully accomplished what the educators looked upon as improbable. Captain H. C. Reynolds had resided in Montevallo merchandising, most of the time, since the war. He had made a brilliant record as a scout under General Joseph Wheeler. He had taken a great interest, and the leading part in the location of the school; but no one had dreamed that he was the man destined to put it going.

Nevertheless, he was, upon the motion of Governor Oates, elected President and given almost plenary powers. With indefatigable energy and effort he prepared the old building, advertised the school, and opened at the appointed time, with something like 125 pupils from the different quarters of the State. An admirable faculty was secured. The institution at once found favor and became an assured success. Plans for a dormitory were selected, and during the following year the west wing of the building was erected, and accommodated about one hundred girls. Most of the homes in Montevallo had been opened to the girls, at nominal board, and the attendance steadily increased. During Captain

Reynolds' administration, and largely through his efforts, a grant of twenty-five thousand acres of public land in Alabama, mostly in the mineral region, was secured from the federal government, Booker T. Washington's school at Tuskegee, receiving a like grant. It has been concluded to hold the bulk of this land for future use or disposition, so that its benefits are not presently available. Some day it may prove to have been a rich endowment. At the end of the third year, the Trustees concluded to make a change in the Presidency, and the choice fell upon one of their members: Dr. Geo. B. Eager, an eminent Baptist pastor at Montgomery and a man of letters. After deliberation, he declined the honor, and, much to the regret of the Trustees and of the people at large, subsequently resigned his position as Trustee for the state-at-large, to accept a chair in the Theological Seminary at Louisville. The Presidency was then offered to Dr. John Massey of Tuskegee, a very successful educator of girls, and he, for some overpowering personal reasons declined. At his suggestion, the position was then offered to Prof. F. M. Peterson of the Southern University, at Greensboro, Ala., who, after careful investigation accepted. His administration has abundantly proven the wisdom, foresight and predictions of Dr. Massey, and the progress of the school has been steady. Much has been added to the building and plant; appropriations have increased; the attendance is all the accommodations will allow; the institution has taken the front rank in the educational system of Alabama, and its prospects are the brightest. The present enrollment exceeds four hundred. The annual appropriation is \$25,000. Reference has already been made to the building of the first church, by the Cumberland Presbyterians, in 1853, while this denomination was in control of the schools of the town. After the war, this denomination, by removals and otherwise, steadily declined, until unable longer to keep up an organization permanently.

Other denominations continued to worship in the Masonic building until 1855, when the Methodists erected a church in the town proper, where the present church stands. This was destroyed by fire. The second one, built on the same spot, was utterly destroyed by the cyclone, and then the present building was immediately erected. Dr. Joshua West, a pioneer in Alabama Methodism, resided at Montevallo. He assisted in organizing here, in a house opposite the cemetery, on the Selma road, the first conference in this district, in 1823, and within a few hundred feet of this house he was buried. The inscription on his head-stone makes an interesting epitome of his record:

“DOCTOR JOSHUA WEST.

Was born in Rockingham Co., Va.
1771.

Was licensed a Methodist preacher
17th Oct. 1792.

Was ordained Deacon by Bishop Asberry
17th Oct. 1800.

Was licensed to practice Medicine
1812.

Was ordained Elder by Bishop Asberry
20th Oct. 1813.

He was a man of prayer and praise—
Having served his generation faithfully
as a preacher for nearly 68 years.

He died 8th January, 1860:
believing in every one of the doctrines
of the Methodist Church.

The graves of all His saints He blest,
and softened every bed;

Where shall the dying members rest,
But with their dying Head.

To him that overcometh will I give to Eat
of the tree of life that stands in the Midst
of the Paradise of God.

Aged 91 years.”

Montevallo was made a “Station” by the Conference in 1855. At the same time a galaxy of young men destined to become great preachers were licensed; among them Rev. F. J. T. Brandon, who became the first pastor to Montevallo station, and Rev. R. S. Woodward, who was located here during the war, and afterwards joined the Mississippi Conference, in which he died, one of its foremost ministers. The Methodist denomination has always had a good membership here, and remains one of the strongest and most influential.

The first Baptist Church in the town proper, was organized in 1860, and was composed of seven members, to-wit: Edmund King, Noah Haggard, his sister, Mrs. Fancher; Mrs. Alamothe Woods; H. R. Lyman, and S. J. Perry.

Some, if not most of these withdrew from Shoal Creek Baptist Church, located near the ford on the Asheville road (the Perry Place.) The remaining members of that church removed their membership to Dogwood Grove, and Shoal Creek Church was no more. The Montevallo members—Edmund King donating the lot

—erected a handsome brick building where the west wing of the Girls' Industrial School now stands. During the perfect calm of a summer day, about 1877, this building utterly collapsed, some hidden defect in the timbers of the steeple, probably, causing it to give way and fall back upon the roof, crushing it in, and causing the walls to tumble outwards. The present frame building was then erected on Main Street. This denomination has had here, some of the ablest pastors in Alabama, and it has a large membership.

About 1870 the Episcopalians organized the few adherents of their faith, which organization they have since kept up, with few accessions. The cyclone carried away their first building before it had been completed; but they at once rebuilt.

In 1902 the Old School Presbyterians, who had formerly cooperated with the Cumberlandians in their efforts to keep up an organization, took the remnant of that denomination under their wings and organized a new church, in which much interest is manifested, and have erected a very neat veneered brick edifice on the site of the old Powell residence.

The Catholics here are few in number and have never built a church. Occasionally they have a visitation from a priest and service at a private residence.

The negroes, until after the war, united with the white churches, the galleries being set apart for their accommodation. It was about 1875 when the A. M. E. Church was built in Montevallo, and the races parted company. Within the past few years Shiloh Baptist Church (colored) was established. One or other of these claim practically all the colored population.

(*My Lyman was unanimously nominated by a mass meeting of the citizens, in 1901, for Mayor of the City, and in subsequent elections received every vote cast for the office. The mass meeting was held in the Magnolia Hotel, which stands within a hundred feet of the site of the building in which he was born. With the exception of one term he has served continuously in this office, and is the present Mayor. He represented Shelby County in the Legislature 1903-1907, and was the author of the Bill increasing the appropriation of the school from \$15,000.00 to \$25,000.00. In May, 1907, he was elected Treasurer of the School.)

