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MURDER OF MONTEVALLO PHYSICIAN SHOCKS THE COMMUNITY

*By Marshal Roy Cunningham
for the Montevallo Historical Society*

Dr. Mitchell A. Porter's death on the 10th of October 1825 was one of Montevallo's first great tragedies. He was spending Sunday at his home near the intersection of Island and Shelby Street when his father in law, Mr. Reuben Wade, wanted him to look at some land for sale. Dr. Porter, being a devout Methodist, did not want to go, saying that nothing of a business nature should transpire on Sunday. An argument ensued, and Mr. Wade stabbed his son-in-law with a knife. Dr. Porter died the next day, a month before his 28th birthday.

His wife, Mary Margaret Porter, was the only witness to the murder. Feelings around the town were so intense that the trial was moved to Jefferson County. Mrs. Porter gave such an emotional account of the event, pleading for the life of her father, and yet, at the same time, defending her husband for his participation in the fight. Her testimony led to her father's acquittal. According to her son's obituary, she and her children moved to Jefferson County three months after the event. Mr. Wade was defended by Shelby County lawyer Daniel Watrous, who was paid an enormous fee for his services.

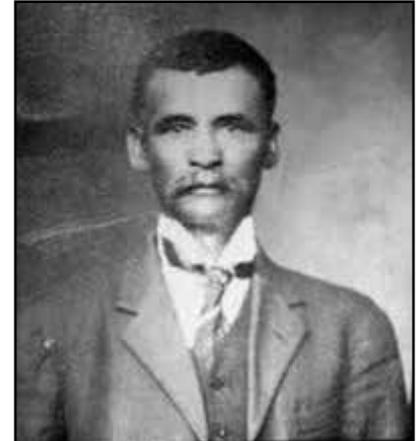
Dr. Porter had come to the wilderness of Montevallo to join his uncle, Rev. Dr. Joshua West, to learn the medical profession. Dr. Porter's parents were Mitchell Porter and wife Penelope West Porter, of Sevier County, Tennessee, and personal friends of Bishop Francis Asbury who came to America to spread the Methodist religion.

Dr. Joshua West and his wife Hannah Prentice West had left Sevier County in the winter of 1816 when the Methodist Church sent him to Shelby County to "ride the circuit" in what was then the Mississippi Territory. With them were Mrs. West's brother, John Prentice and his wife Rhoda Lovelady Prentice. John Prentice is the namesake of the Prentice family of Montevallo today.

John Prentice's ancestry is traced back to the early days of Williamsburg, Virginia. His ancestor William Prentice came to America as an orphan, and was indentured to a merchant. He married the merchant's daughter, and the family prospered. John and Rhoda Prentice are buried with



Pictured left: Judge Mitchell T. Porter of Jefferson County, son of Dr. Mitchell and Mary Wade Porter of Montevallo. Nephew of Rev. Dr. Joshua West and wife Hannah Prentice.



Pictured right: Rev. Joseph Prentice, Montevallo's beloved minister and advocate of education for all citizens.

tombstones next to the block building in the Montevallo Cemetery. The white Prentice men moved after the Civil War to Texas and to Rome, Georgia; the Prentice girls married here and their descendants (including myself) are still to be found.

One outstanding member of the African American Prentice family was Rev. Joseph (sometimes Josire) Prentice, for whom Prentice High School was named in the early 1950's. He was an early advocate of education for Montevallo's African American citizens. I do not know much of his personal history and achievements, but there are those in our community who do, and his story and life's work should not be forgotten. When the Federal government abolished the dual school system, the name Prentice High School was lost and the building became Montevallo Middle School.

For some years now, I have been suggesting to anyone who would listen that the Prentice name should be restored to the location, and Montevallo Middle School should bear the name Prentice Middle School. I feel there would be no greater justice to the African American educators and students of Montevallo than to bring back the original name of someone who did so much to further the cause of education in our community. I believe a return to the name "Prentice Middle School" would be a step in the right direction.