

Untold Stories

OF BLACK MONTEVALLO



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Ed. note: This is third in a series of Untold Stories that begin to remember the story of slavery in the Montevallo area. It is contributed by Melanie Morrison, author and social justice educator. A direct descendant of Edmund King, she is engaged in intensive research into her family history.

III. Sukey's Audacious Resistance and Resilience

Many untold stories lie waiting to be discovered on the shelves of the Shelby County Museum and Archives in Columbiana. In large clothbound deed books from the Antebellum era, there are fragments of intriguing narratives if you are patient enough to wade through legal jargon and unwavering in your effort to decipher the nineteenth century handwriting.

One of the most fascinating accounts I have come upon describes a highly unusual financial transaction.

On February 6, 1855, the wealthy Montevallo landowner, Edmund King, received \$1600 from a woman named Sukey, and one dollar from George Shortridge (married to King's daughter, Elizabeth). Deed books are rife with transactions between

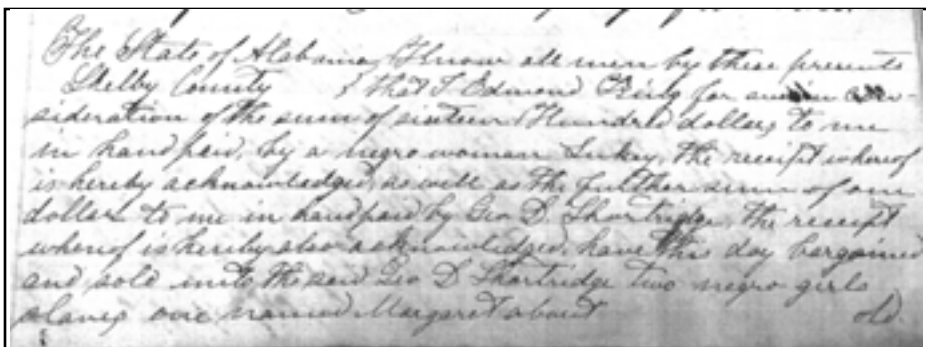
Montevallo enslavers like Edmund King and George Shortridge who were buying or selling land and property, including the people they enslaved. This deed is extraordinary because it says that \$1600 was given Edmund King not for an enslaved woman, but by a woman whom he enslaved. That woman was Sukey. (Deed Book L, 164-5).

At first glance, it might appear that Sukey was purchasing her freedom. But self-manumission was strictly prohibited in the Alabama Slave Codes. Closer inspection reveals that Sukey's intent with this payment was to keep her family intact. This deed recorded that Shortridge purchased Sukey's daughters, Margaret (22) and Ann (16), for one dollar and agreed to serve as their trustee. It also enumerated three conditions that placed strict limitations on Shortridge's ownership and protected Sukey's daughters: 1. He could not, under any circumstances, mortgage Margaret and Ann as collateral, or sell them to pay his debts; 2. Margaret and Ann were to have "the privilege of living with their mother," and; 3. If Shortridge should predecease Margaret or Ann, they were to have the privilege and power "to choose and select another Trustee."

Sukey's \$1600 purchased the guarantee that Margaret and Ann would not be sold away from her. That guarantee was a monumental achievement. Enslaved people lived with a

constant fear of being separated from the people they loved. When enslavers like King and Shortridge wanted to acquire more land, livestock, machinery, or slaves, they financed their purchases by using the slaves they already owned as collateral for loans. When they could not pay creditors, relinquishing those enslaved people was the means of settling the debt. Enslaved people were always at risk of being mortgaged or sold. Without warning, they could be separated from their family and community if their enslaver became overextended financially.

The restrictions on George Shortridge's ownership of Margaret and Ann proved prescient. In 1858, Shortridge was on the brink of insolvency. On May 4th of that year, he named nine of his enslaved people as collateral for "several debts...to various creditors" (Deed Book M, 802-1, 355). If he could not honor those debts, those nine people would be given to his creditors. Margaret and Ann may have overheard rumors about this indebtedness rumbling through the Shortridge household and insisted they be returned to the King Plantation—as was their right in the original deed of trust negotiated with Edmund King.



I Edmund King for . . . the sum of sixteen Hundred dollars, to me in hand paid, by a negro woman Sukey, the receipt whereof is hereby acknowledged, as well as the further sum of one dollar to me in hand paid by Geo. D. Shortridge . . . have this day bargained and sold unto the said Geo. D. Shortridge two negro girls slaves, one named Margaret . . .

In January 1859, George Shortridge filed a quit claim deed, transferring title to Margaret, Ann, and a young child of Margaret's, back to Edmund King "at the instance and request of a Negro girl Sukey of copper color about fifty years of age and Margaret a girl of Mullato color about twenty six years of age & her

increase and Anny of Mullato color about twenty years of age." (Deed Book N, 109.)

Once again, it is striking to read how Sukey exercised her agency, joined this time by Margaret and Ann (Anny).

These three deeds provide fragments of a remarkable story in the decade preceding emancipation. In an oppressive system that fostered the sexual exploitation of enslaved women, and robbed them of "social standing, political power, economic means, or cultural currency" (Miles), Sukey summoned extraordinary strength and courage to prevent the fracturing of her family and move three generations further down the road to freedom.

Sources: The phrase "audacious resistance and resilience" comes from Nikole Hannah-Jones, The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story (p. xxiii). The Deed Books are in the Shelby County Museum and Archives. Tiya Miles is quoted from All That She Carried, The Journey of Ashley's Sack, xiv. Submitted by Kathy King and Anita Stewart Sims on behalf of the Montevallo Legacy Project. Contact us at MontevalloLegacy@gmail.com.