

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

"Teaching ourselves how to rise the next day": Untold Stories from the Era of Bondage

The history of Africans in America is brutal, but we have made art out of pain, sustaining our spirits with sunbursts of beauty, teaching ourselves how to rise the next day.
-- Tiya Miles, *All That She Carried* (12)

Stories from the era of bondage? Many people prefer not to think about the history of slavery in America, to say nothing of the way the slave system worked here in Shelby county. Understandably. The pain, grief, brutality, and inhumanity can seem too much to bear.

Still, we must. Enslaved persons of African descent have been a crucial part of Montevallo's history from the early pioneer days. Their experiences were long covered up by fantasies about "child-like contented slaves" and "faithful servants," however, and little is known about their actual experience. We need better stories -- real-life stories of everyday persons who, against almost impossible odds, found ways to live on their own terms, now and then, outside the brutalities of the system.

Take Jacob, for example. He heads a long line of Black preachers in our area who used the beauty of the Bible and its promise of deliverance to sustain the spirits of oppressed African Americans.

Jacob was owned by Edmund King, the wealthy farmer and slaveholder who, in 1823, used enslaved labor to build King House. The smallest plantation house still stands at the center of the UM campus. Its central place in the King plantation's slavery system is not often noted.

King family tradition has it that in 1817 Edmund removed his household from Georgia to Alabama territory. They traveled with "two covered wagons filled with family possessions, a family carriage, and fifteen slaves." Jacob was likely one of them. The fifteen walked the distance under the watchful eye of men on horseback who "checked frequently for any danger" (Johnson, *Kingswood*, 6). One of those dangers might have been the risk of runaway slaves.

Jacob was an early member of the oldest Baptist church in our county, Shoal Creek Baptist Church, a racially mixed church that from 1819 or 1820 worshipped at a meeting house at the NE corner of what is today Shoal Creek Park. Jacob's oratorical power and biblical knowledge must have been impressive. In 1822 the church's White leadership authorized him and another King "servant," Nelson, to "express their gift" once a month. No account of Jacob's preaching has survived, but it says something that in 1826 the leadership reaffirmed his authority to preach. His passing is registered in the church minutes for February 1832: "Jacob a member of the Church died this day."

If Jacob deserves recognition as one of our town's pioneers, Edmund and Susan Moss should be honored as enterprising

members of the first-freed generation. Their amazing story, from the Civil War era, can be pieced together from papers filed in 1873 in the Southern Claims Commission. Edmund had applied for compensation for property losses he sustained in Montevallo during Wilson's Raid, nearly a decade earlier.



No photograph of Susan Moss is known to exist. Susie King Taylor, pictured here, nursed wounded Union soldiers in the Civil War. The photo is from ca. 1902.

Edmund Moss was a skilled tanner owned by John Storrs until "the surrender." While still enslaved he shrewdly invested his time and money. "I worked at the tan yard, and for a good many years I hired my time and had my master's tan yard under control. I bought a town lot in Montevallo for \$125 when [it was] cheap and afterwards when the railroad came through sold it for nine hundred and seventy-five dollars and all I made over my time [working for Storrs in the tannery], was mine to keep." By the mid-1840s he had saved enough to buy his wife Susan for \$250. (She too had belonged to Edmund King.) Freed from bondage, Susan Moss "kept a sort of confectionary and candy shop in Montevallo."

Susan is notable for her brief and perhaps unwelcome service nursing one of Wilson's raiders. She had no reason to love the Union troops encamped nearby. They basically sacked the Moss dairy and smoke house, making off with corn meal, molasses, sugar, honey, coffee, sacks of corn and flour. Edmund estimated their losses at \$226.25.

It fell to Susan to tend to the wounds of the badly injured soldier and his other bodily needs. She received neither pay nor compensation. Edmund tells the story: "We kept a soldier (wounded) at our house five or six days and fed and took care of him. . . The soldiers buried him, but we found the burying clothes, clean sheets, two of them. . . We made chicken soup, gruel, whatever the doctor said he should have and tended on him and fixed his wounds. He bled through a feather bed and almost spoiled it. He was wounded in the head and shoulders. The doctor knew my wife was a good nurse for sick people and the man was brought to our house by his directions." Told that \$27 would cover the expenses of tending to and properly burying the man, Edmund made a claim for that amount with slim hope of compensation. "You see a colored man didn't have much chance no how."

Jacob, Edmund Moss, Susan Moss. Like untold others these enslaved individuals of African descent were not *slaves* but *persons* robbed of their freedom. Their existence was harsh and filled with "not much chance no how." But they rose each day. This Untold Story honors their humanity.

Submitted by Kathy King and Anitka Stewart Sims.

Grateful acknowledgement is due to Marty Everse. Our reinterpretation of these lives draws heavily on research he conducted and wrote up for presentation by the Montevallo Historical Society in earlier Chamber Chatters. For background on the King family we relied on Golda W. Johnson, *The Lives and Times of Kingswood in Alabama, 1817-1890* (1976). Contact us at MontevalloLegacy@gmail.com. We want to hear your stories and welcome corrections of errors of fact or interpretation.