

Untold Stories

OF BLACK MONTEVALLO



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Ed. note: The next three Untold Stories begin to remember the story of slavery in the Montevallo area. A piece of that past is still visible in King House on the UM campus, built in 1823 by enslaved labor. The series culminates in the story of Sukey, a woman enslaved by Edmund King who went to extraordinary lengths to keep the female side of her family whole.

I. REMEMBERING SLAVERY: THE KING PLANTATION

It's a touchy subject these days, slavery. "There are a lot of people who don't want to talk about it," remarks Black genealogist Peter Datcher. His work on family history in nearby Harpersville has gained wide recognition. He believes we have to talk about slavery. "Our ancestors who made it out of slavery are as close as we have to superheroes."

So let's talk about slavery right here on the campus of the University of Montevallo.

The small brick house on UM's quad known today as King House was originally the "big house" of a major slaveholding plantation. Surrounded by academic buildings, it sometimes goes unnoticed. But when completed in 1823, King House was known as Mansion House. Its wealthy white owner, Edmund King, was a leading figure in the local planter elite. His restored mansion is on the National Register of Historic Places. The structure bears a plaque honoring it as the first brick house in central Alabama and the first with glass windows.

Nothing is said about the enslaved people who made bricks from local clay to actually build the house.

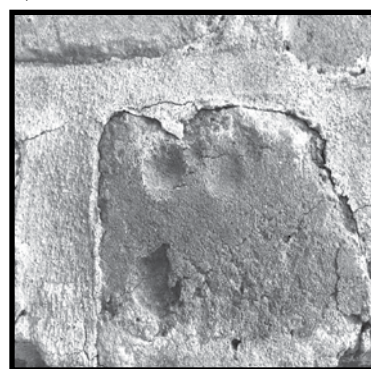
Between 1823 and 1863 King enslaved at least two generations of people of African descent, as many as fifty at any given time. Probably more. We cannot be sure of exact numbers and know only a few of the names. Until 1870 the US Census records enumerated enslaved persons as property, listed by age and sex only under the name of the owner.

An inventory of King's estate at his death in 1863 tells us that King House was the hub of a number of outbuildings -- stables, barns, sheds, a smoke house, slave quarters. It was surrounded by an orchard, gardens, and fields for crops and livestock. The crops included wheat and corn, probably for home consumption. King may have grown cotton as well or he may have ginned it for his neighbors. He owned two cotton gins. In 1860 the plantation produced 10,000 pounds of baled cotton. (US 1860 Agricultural Production schedule.)

The fields and barns hosted an animal population that included two pair of working oxen, three mules, three horses and a colt, sixty-one pigs, forty-five sheep, forty-seven head of cattle, twenty-one ducks and seventy-six chickens. The King plantation sought to be self-sufficient as did other

plantations in the area. Agricultural and domestic activity on this scale required a large labor force. The inventory lists, just before the livestock, twenty-eight enslaved persons.

We know a lot about Edmund King and his white family. We know little about the lives of enslaved people who lived and worked on the property. Research on plantation households across the South allows some informed guesses. The "big house" -- often a modest structure like King House -- would have housed the master, mistress, and their white female children. The overseer and the family's white sons would occupy an adjoining wooden structure. That seems to have been the situation on the King plantation. Slave quarters, rough cabins housing one or two families, would have been located at varying distances from the "big house," with the field hands living at the furthest remove. Typically cooks, washerwomen, milkmaids, and nurses lived closer in. Children's nurses sometimes slept on the floor to be near the children. (Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 102-3).



Finger impression on brick produced by slave labor for construction of Fort Pulaski in Georgia.
From "Words Have Power," National Park Service.

These days it is hard to summon up, even in imagination, the scenes of coerced labor enacted daily on the land surrounding King House. Stroll the central campus today, designed by a famous firm of landscape architects, and you will marvel at the tranquil beauty of the dappled shade and gently curving brick walkways. There's nothing to remind you that this too was one of the dark places of a distinctively American evil.

King House remains, of course, along with a few panes of its famed imported glass. But there is no signage, no narrative, no campus tour to connect King House to its history as a place of enslavement. The existence of the African American community that raised families in nearby rough cabins is often ignored, even forgotten.

For more than four decades men, women, and children found the strength, courage, and sheer grit to survive the hardships of slavery on soil that is now part of the UM campus. It is past time for their story to be told.

Sources: Peter Datcher is quoted by Emily Sparacino, "Saying their names: Museum's new index serves as tool for slave ancestry research," *Shelby County Reporter*, June 27, 2022. The inventory of King's estate is in Will Book H, 16, pp. 857-883, in the Shelby County Museum and Archives, Columbiana. The NPS photo is credited to Elizabeth Smith: see www.nps.gov/articles/000/words-have-power.htm. Submitted by Kathy King and Anitka Stewart Sims on behalf of the Montevallo Legacy Project. Contact us at MontevalloLegacy@gmail.com.