

## UNTOLD STORIES OF BLACK MONTEVALLO

Your Historic Preservation Commission is working to create a first-rate Montevallo African American Heritage Trail. In coming months we will use this space to share some of our discoveries.

We focus today on Black business enterprises. We begin at the end of the 19th century in the nearby coal mining village of Aldrich, now an unincorporated part of Montevallo. Remarkably, Aldrich was home to a weekly Black-edited newspaper, The Alabama Time-Piece, which ran for a number of years beginning in 1895. It was edited by B. L. ("Booker") Lester, who was also principal of the Aldrich grammar school. (The grammar school seems to have been progressive. The 7th grade course of study included not only bookkeeping but also "Negro History.") We will return to the fascinating story of the Alabama Time-Piece in a later installment.



Booker Lester, editor of The Alabama Time-Piece, c. 1900

Advertisements from the 1898 Time-Piece give intriguing glimpses of Black-owned businesses in Montevallo at the turn of the century. One businessman, Richard D. Taylor, was born into slavery in 1855. By at least 1900 he owned his own home. One of his neighbors was H. C. Reynolds. His store, located just behind the post office, offered confectionary, cakes, and candles as well as "FRESH GROCERIES." His appeal to his readers gives the flavor of the spirit of Black entrepreneurship of the times: "Call on him," the ad says, "if you want to practice race pride, and also get the most for your money."

Another businessman was Robert B. Evans, who, like many at this time, may also have worked as a coal miner. He points with pride to "the only first class Colored Barber Shop" on the east side of town. He urges: "While in the city call on him and be treated right."

An ad of unusual interest was placed by a man still revered in some local circles, Rev. Joseph S. Prentice (1857-1944) for whom the beloved Prentice High School was named. Prentice, whom you will meet again in this space, was acclaimed as a Baptist preacher and educational leader. The Bibb County Baptist Association installed a monument in his honor in 1945, which can be seen in the Montevallo City Cemetery (or on Findagrave.com).

In 1898, Prentice not only pastored three churches in Bibb Co and our own Shiloh Baptist here in Montevallo; he was also venturing into the merchant line. On May 5 he wrote to the editor of the Time-Piece: "Rev. Prentice & Sons have opened a Grocery Store on his lot, near the Time-Piece office, for the accommodation of all," with "SPECIAL prices to Church Sabbath Schools and Secret Societies." He signs off: "Don't forget to bring your pocket book."



Joseph Prentice and Son posing in Aldrich, c. 1898

Moving forward, some will recall the Black Business and Entertainment District along Selma Road during the Jim Crow era. Most, if not all, of the commercial establishments were rented from a well-to-do African American couple from Marion (AL), Hampton D. Lee (1898-1971) and his wife Exie Patrick Lee (1902-1996). After WWI (in which he served), Hampton opened a funeral home in Marion that offered "prompt and efficient service"; before long he was wheeling and dealing in properties across central Alabama. Rev. Albert L. Jones remembers him as "really smart," a "wheeler dealer" with good hair. He does not know how Lee came into his property or wealth but thinks he had a white father. It was the Lees who in 1948 sold the state of Alabama the tract of 15 acres along Selma Road (for \$3750) that became Prentice High School and is now the site of Montevallo Middle School and George Dailey Park. Dailey was our first African American city council member.

The Lee Funeral Home in Montevallo offered an ambulance service, a notary public, and a burial association. It was operating by the early 1940s. A number of names have been linked with its daily operations: John Smith, Walter Taylor, Sam Cunningham, and a Mr. Foster. Other businesses along Selma Road included an Owl filling station (run by Andy Smelley and Ms. Heard); a cleaners operated by Hobie Harris; a pool hall (for men and boys only).

A barbershop was owned and operated by Tom Billingsley and an additional barber, Tommy Patrick of Wilton. Rev. Jones recalls working as a teenager in its shoeshine stand. A boot shine cost 25¢, a shoeshine 15¢. He got to keep a nickel for each, plus tips. There was also a taxi service (since few blacks owned cars) that advertised itself with a phone number on the side of the vehicle. The taximan may have been the same John Smith who drove the ambulance for Lee Funeral Home.

Coleman's Cafe, operated by Mable and Walter Coleman, sold soul food on one side and maintained a dance floor on the other. It came under new management in the 70s, bought by Sam Lilly, who renamed it The Superfly. It is said that the "Sensation Heartbeats" played at Coleman's and other local areas. The members included Sam Cunningham (alto sax), Chuck Chism (guitar), deceased drummers James Trenholm and Larry Deviner, and several other band members who have passed away. There was another dance joint up the street called Slim's Place (owned by Tellie Cunningham), at the site of the present Good Shepherd funeral home. Tellie was Earl and Sam Cunningham's uncle.

Montevallo produced at least one piano player who made it into the Encyclopedia of the Blues, Piano C. Red (1933-2013). He performed in Chicago with such greats as Muddy Waters, B. B. King, and Fats Domino. The son of Lucille Fain, he was taught to play by Thomas "Fat" Lilly who lived just to the left of the present Good Shepherd Funeral Home.



Blues musician Piano C Red

Much of the history of Black life in our town exists in the minds, memories, and photographs of our residents. Let us hear from you! Now is the time to search your attics, garages, and cupboards for drawings, pictures, and memorabilia of any sort. Let us build the African American Heritage Trail together!

Submitted by Kathy King & Anita Stewart Sims

Contact us at: [Movaltrail@gmail.com](mailto:Movaltrail@gmail.com). We want to hear your stories and welcome correction of any errors of fact or interpretation.