

UNTOLD STORIES OF BLACK MONTEVALLO

presented by the Montevallo Historic Preservation Commission
Vol. 2, No. 8

THE BROTHERS AND SISTERS OF SHOAL CREEK BAPTIST

A neglected graveyard in a little-visited corner of Shoal Creek Park on Highway 119 may turn out to be the first stop on Montevallo's African American Heritage Trail. The rough-hewn stones, some barely visible in the underbrush, mark burial sites of members of the oldest Baptist church in Shelby County. The church was established in 1817. A log cabin meeting house stood on the site from 1820. It may surprise some to learn that the Baptist Church of Shoal Creek welcomed people of color into its fellowship from the start.

The Church minutes, covering the years 1820 to 1857, have been transcribed in full by local historian Marty Everse. They provide names and, in some cases, glimpses of the

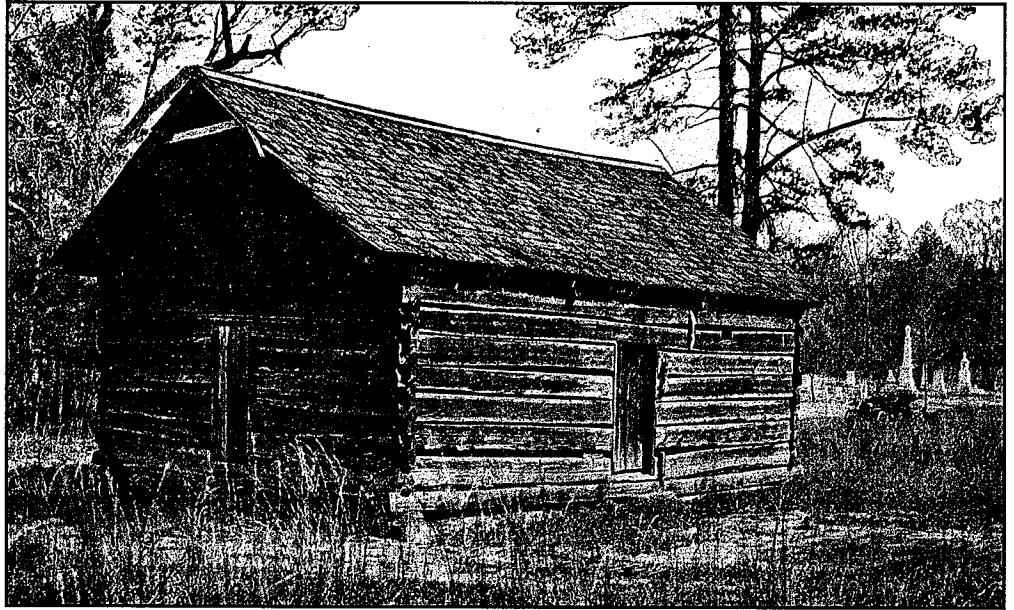
lives of early African American members of the church. By convention enslaved persons were identified by first name followed by their owner's full name. Thus we find Hannah, a slave of William Moore; Polly, a black woman belonging to David Meredith; Fill, a servant of Joseph D. Lee. The word servant is often used in place of slave. Several "servants" belonged to the church clerk, Edmund King, the wealthy planter and financier whose slave-built house, King House, dating from 1823, still stands on the UM campus. It was added to the National Historic Register in 1972 with no mention of its historic significance as a site of slave labor.

The minutes hint at untold stories of two men owned by King. Brothers Nelson and Jacob were probably among the fifteen enslaved persons inherited as property when King's father died in 1817. They seemed to have had unusual speaking powers and both sought an active role in the Sunday worship. In 1822 they gained authorization to "exercise their gift" -- that is, to preach -- the second Sunday of each month. Remarkably, white members of the church were instructed "to attend and hear" so as "to approve or disapprove of their gifts."

Away from the church, probably in the slave quarters at King House, Nelson and Jacob had a falling out serious enough to get themselves excommunicated. They managed, doubtless with assistance from their influential owner, to get restored to fellowship. Brother Jacob subsequently had his preaching role reaffirmed: he was approved as a public speaker "so far as heard by the Church." Brother Nelson, on the other hand, seemed destined for perpetual difficulties. In 1827, he was charged with "disorderly conduct" and subjected to a "trial" by the white leadership. They found him guilty of improper relations ("incontinency and licentious conduct") with "King's Suckey." He was again excommunicated and, despite later efforts to be reinstated, continued to be excluded. Suckey was owned by King for decades to come. As property she could and was deeded from one owner to another. A surviving quitclaim deed tells

us that "King's Suckey" was about eighteen at the time of the troubles. Hannah, Polly, Fill, Jacob, Nelson, Suckey: these enslaved persons had passions, conflicts, regrets, ambitions, desires -- complex emotional lives. Their very existence was nearly lost to history.

Scholars of the early Baptist Church in Alabama would not be surprised by these findings. Historians have long known that, especially in the 1820s, white Baptists took seriously the immortality of the souls of people of color and some even questioned the morality of slavery. Blacks and whites often worshiped together. But ambivalence regarding slave ownership (think about the oft-used substitution of servant for slave in the Church minutes) soon hardened into pro-slavery positions. Why? Cotton production became increasingly profitable and profits depended on slave labor. Historian Wilson Fallin writes: "As Alabama Baptists became prosperous cotton farmers and increased their slaves, they began to defend slavery and project it as a positive good" (Uplifting the People, 10).



The first meeting house of Shoal Creek Baptist Church would have resembled the Claybank Church near Ozark in Dale County, Alabama.

Records of the Shoal Creek Baptist Church make visible African American presence during our town's pioneer era. They cannot restore lost voices -- for that we must look to novelists and poets -- but they do invite contemplation of the individuality of persons once lumped together as nameless "slaves." Some are likely buried somewhere in the Shoal Creek graveyard. It is a site that demands recognition for what it is: sacred ground in the African American Heritage Trail.

We are grateful to Marty Everse for sharing his transcription of the Church minutes and for supplying us with the photograph of the Claybank log cabin church.

Submitted by Kathy King & Anita Stewart Sims. Contact us at Movaltrail@gmail.com. We want to hear your stories and welcome correction of fact or interpretation.