

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
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J. S. PRENTICE: A GLIMPSE BEHIND THE MASK

Who better to honor during Black History Month than Rev. Joseph S. Prentice (1857-1944), an advocate of education and Black uplift who blazed a trail for later pastor-activists in Montevallo. From records of the Bibb County Black Baptist Association we know that he held the position of Moderator for some four decades. This tells us he was a capable administrator and charismatic preacher highly regarded by Black clergy in the area. We know that he gained the approval of the White citizenry as well. In 1937, in a tribute entitled "Old Citizen Has Very Remarkable Record," the Shelby County Reporter affirmed that "Uncle Joe," as it called him, soon to turn 80, "has proved himself a good and useful citizen" (15 April).

We know, then, something of the "public" J. S. Prentice. But what about his service within the Black community where his actions were largely invisible to outsiders? Did he challenge things that were not right? Did he speak to the community's yearning for a better life? Yes. Not directly in the manner of successor social-justice pastors such as Albert L. Jones or E. E. Vassar, or Suburban League leader Leon Harris -- local men who in the 60s and 70s dared to be outspoken. Instead he offered indirect challenges, resisted the status quo in slanted or coded ways. In Paul Laurence Dunbar's famous phrase, he wore the mask. He had to. But two sources have come to light that show him speaking truths which would have resonated with special force within the Black community.

At the 1899 Shelby Springs Association meeting at historic Epsibeth Baptist Church in Aldrich, attendees urged Prentice to sing "his song." He had a strong voice, evidently, and he was associated with a specific song that, in the context of Black spiritual practices, was unmistakably a call for freedom from racial injustice.

Look, a mighty host advances,
Now, see the proud oppressors flee;
See, our country breaks its fetters,
And sets her captives free.

The deliverance theme continues in the next verse:

Sing, Oh Zion, no more desolate,
Lift thine eyes, the brightness see,
Thy Redeemer makes the[e] glorious,
Thine oppressors bend to thee.

What glory is promised by this song: Fetters are broken and captives set free; the "proud oppressors flee" and, triumphantly, "bend to thee." It is easy to imagine the excitement of the worshippers gathered at Epsibeth shouting out with exultant calls of their own. (Source: Minutes of 13th annual Shelby Springs Missionary Baptist Association, Oct 1899.)

On one other occasion we can sense a double meaning in Prentice's words. It comes in a 1904 letter to the editor of the *Centreville Press*. Prentice writes as pastor of New Hope Baptist, the "Colored Baptist Church of Randolph, Ala.," to extend sympathy to a White physician, Dr Wooley, who lost his house to fire. "We feel that we are citizens and ought to express our sympathy to our most honorable Doctor, and hope that he will feel that he has our sympathy. We are very sorry to know of any one getting burned out" (14 Jan 1904). Prentice asserts the status of his Black congregation as concerned citizens -- a



Joseph Prentice and his son Frank Herman Prentice, who went on to pastor a large Baptist church in Los Angeles.

radical enough claim in 1904. But it is puzzling to discover that the disastrous fire had occurred more than a year and a half earlier (*Centreville Press*, 31 July 1902).

The key to the meaning of this delay might be found in the final sentence: "We are very sorry to know of any one getting burned out." Many Black families at this time, for a variety of reasons, got "burned out" -- as punishment for insolence, retaliation for real or imagined crimes, or simply because someone wanted their land. Possession-by-arson was seldom punished when victims were people of color. Possibly Prentice used an earlier house burning to protest a more recent arson, a burned out church perhaps. Church burnings were common across the South. Rev. Prentice's own New Hope in Randolph was destroyed by fire in 1907. When present-day members of New Hope are asked what they know about the fire that destroyed the earlier church, they shrug and shake their head.

The poet Tyehimba Jess writes, there is "no complete record of all the attacks upon the black congregational body, no complete accounting of all the pulpits, pews and psalm books rendered into fire." In *Olio* he provides names of 148 Black churches that were "burned and bombed" and reflects, in powerful poetic language, on "all the unnamed churches lost to arson and TNT": the "AMEs and the Graces, the Tabernacles and all the many Firsts; the hand fans, tambourines, mourner's benches and collection plates: they rise in smoke like the songs that soaked through them and up to heaven's blued, eternal door" (221). Perhaps similar feelings of anger, outrage, and grief stand behind Prentice's well-masked letter of sympathy to the *Centreville Press* in 1904.

One last glimpse of a side of J. S. Prentice previously hidden from history can be seen in the image reproduced above. The picture, bearing the date 1916, is of a "Real Photo Post Card" of Joseph and his son Frank Herman Prentice. Somehow it found its way into the Robert Langmuir African American Photograph Collection now housed in Emory University's Special Collections. Who arranged for the photograph? Why? Who acquired the postcards? Who sent them? With what messages? Such questions remind us how much more work is needed to recover the lost stories and hidden legacies of Montevallo's African American past.

Photograph compliments of the Rose Manuscript, Archives and Rare Books Library, Emory University. Submitted by Kathy King & Anita Stewart Sims. Contact us at Moyaltrail@gmail.com. We want to hear your stories and welcome correction of any errors of fact of interpretation.