

Untold Stories

OF BLACK MONTEVALLO



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"Tradition holds that King would wander, grief-stricken, the grounds of his home. . . . This house and the family cemetery still serve as a source of fantastic tales and ghost stories." -- Lewis O. Powell, Haunted Alabama

The Ghosts of King House I: Uncle Ben's "wonderful stories of 'hants'"

For as long as there have been students on the campus of the University of Montevallo, spirits have roamed the grounds and family cemetery of King House and played pranks within the house itself. These ghost stories are well known, passed along by successive generations of students and recounted in popular ghost tours. Edmund King, lantern in hand, searching for his buried gold. Edmund King, counting money in an upstairs room. But where did these stories come from? Many came from African Americans formerly enslaved on or near the King plantation.

"Uncle Ben" was famous for his "wonderful stories of 'hants.'" Two years earlier, in 1913, two college girls ventured off campus to talk with "negroes of Montevallo regarding their several attitudes toward 'hants, ghostes, en sperrits.'" Ben was at the top of their list. They had "heard of his fondness for telling ghost stories." They rendered his story in dialect in a piece called "'Hant' Philosophy" printed in Technala, the college yearbook.

One recalls asking him, "timidly," for something "scarey." Uncle Ben complied without hesitation in a "very business-like manner," treating the two young women to a sensational whopper of a tale from Ben's days as a young plantation slave. It concerns a wealthy slave owner, a man with the generic name of Massa Will Brown, who had "lots of slaves" and lots of money too. ("Twuz said by some that he had piles of money buried somers." In African American ghost stories, wealthy enslavers were much given to burying piles of money on their property.) He is discovered one morning dead in his bed, his throat slashed. The scene is vividly depicted: "Dar wuz Massa Will half er lyin' on ther bed and helf er lyin' on they floor, wid his throat cut from side ter side. His whold night dress wuz besplottered in blood."

The plantation is sold and sold again, but no owner manages to last more than one night in the house. Finally it is bought by a man "from out East" who sends his wife and children ahead to spend the first night alone. That's right, alone. The wife hears hammering and beating on the door, and a screechy noise around the windows, but unlike her predecessors she does not take flight. She goes to the door and, sensibly enough, asks who is there. It is, of course, the ghost of Massa Will. He reveals the identity of the two men who slit his throat and promises her a pot of gold and the deed to the plantation if she will take his murderers to court. She does, they are found guilty, Massa Will's satisfied ghost moves on, and the wife takes possession of the plantation. To be clear, the plantation already owned by her husband.

The details don't add up, but that is part of the fun in this deliberately posteros story. Paul Mahaffey, who teaches African American satire at UM, thinks it should be read in light of the African American narrative practice known as "Signifyin'." Uncle Ben is a born story-teller whose relish for exaggeration and indifference to historical fact allow him to "signify": to use humor and indirection to make fun of wealthy plantation owners while hiding the mockery from White listeners. What better way to speak truths about White folks or, perhaps, truths about the way former slaves felt about their former masters? Little wonder that another formerly enslaved storyteller, an "old servant," is seen to "chuckle to himself, as if he knows more than he is willing to tell" ("The Infirmary").

Sources: Photograph used with permission of Alabama Department of Archives and History. According to the ADAH, the scrapbook was probably assembled by faculty member Louesa Jane Keys. "The Infirmary" by Lilla Elliott, and "'Hant' Philosophy" by Orrie Stitt and Evelyn Beasley are found in the 1913 Technala (pp. 109-111; 142-145), available online in UM's Milner Archives Digital Collection. Submitted by Kathy King and Anita Stewart Sims on behalf of the Montevallo Legacy Project. Contact us at MontevalloLegacy@gmail.com.



"Uncle Ben" and his house on Asheville Road from a scrapbook, "Views of Montevallo, Christmas, 1915," compiled by L. J. K., now held by Alabama Department of Archives and History. "Uncle Ben" claims to have seen many a hant in his day: "They is strung clean long this here Asheville road fer fo' miles."

The series we are calling The Ghosts of King House introduces readers to elderly members of the first-freed generation who, early in the 1900s, entertained local White folks with ghost stories still heard today. We know them only as Uncle Ben, Uncle Frank, and Aunt Julia.

The scrapbook page reproduced above was assembled around 1915 by one of the teachers at the college. Her handwritten annotation reads: "'Uncle Ben,' an aged ex-slave, and his home" -- on Asheville Road -- "where we heard him tell wonderful stories of 'hants.'" She adds a snippet of their exchange: "How do you do Uncle Ben?" "Sparr'd to be a livin', thankee ma'am."