

Untold Stories

OF BLACK MONTEVALLO



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The Ghosts of King House II: Aunt Julia and that "little lean, slim place of er grave-yard"

Ed. note: This is the second of three Untold Stories about stories that circulated within the local African American community early in the 1900s, many originating during slavery times. In 1913, a pair of college students went out seeking tales about "hants, ghostes, en sperrits." They printed three of their interviews in a college publication. These interviews are invaluable. They are presented as if transcribed verbatim and thus offer a rare opportunity to hear the distinctive voices and views of three elderly members of the first-freed generation.

Last month we met Uncle Ben, a natural-born "signifyin'" storyteller known locally for regaling White folks with yarns about Montevallo's ghosts. This month we meet Aunt Julia, a woman who has lived in these parts a "powerful long time." If she is the same Julia owned by Edmund King, she would be in her mid-eighties at the time of the interview.

Aunt Julia is at first a reluctant to give the students what they want, a "real ghostly story." She throws up her hands in dismay. She's too busy to fool around with ghost stories. But after "some persuasion," she admits she has heard "lots of cur'us things 'bout dat ole house whar dey puts you when youse sick." (King House at this time served as the college's infirmary.) But she disavows all belief in ghosts: "dis ain't sayin' I b'lieve in hants." She is only "tellin' you whut dey done tole me."

The scene of many of these curious happenings is the King family cemetery, that "little lean, slim place of er grave-yard behin' de old house." (A good description, by the way, of the cemetery still maintained on the UM campus, tucked in between Hill House and Harman Hall.) People who believe in "hants," as she does not, claim to see lights moving between the graveyard and the house. As the tales would have it, they belonged to the ghost of "old Marse King" looking for money he hid before he went off to war. (He never went off to war.)

Once Aunt Julia gets into the storytelling spirit, she begins to sauce the tale with "ghostly" details. "You see, ever' time anybody goes down dar [to the cemetery] dey feels hot air gushin' in dere faces, and de do' it jus' bangs shut fo' dey can git in no piece. They hears chains rattlin,' and er groanin' jes lak somebody er dyin'." That's right, rattling chains and dying groans.

As if to say the nonsense can go no further, she brings her story to an abrupt stop: "Dat's ther only tale I knows 'bout the infirm'ry."

Aunt Julia may be making fun of widespread notions about the superstitious nature of Black folks. She uses over-the-top Halloweenish detail to give her listeners a "real ghostly story" while "signifyin'" -- to those who can hear -- that folks looking for spooky ghost stories have little understanding of the African American experience of the spiritual world.

In 1982, Aunt Julia's story was retold by beloved Alabama folklorist storyteller Kathryn Tucker Windham. In a hilarious reversal, she assigns Julia's no-nonsense skepticism to her mistress and makes Julia a superstitious servant who sees mysterious lights in the cemetery because she misses her master so terribly. Julia is made to insist that "Marse Edmund's ghost is out there taking care of the money he hid." The jaw-dropping response of her mistress must be read in full:

"Now, Aunt Julia---," Elizabeth Shortridge began. Then she stopped. Why try to reason with the superstitious woman? So, instead of continuing the conversation, she dismissed Julia by saying, 'Please go out to the kitchen and see if there's any clabber. I think I'd like some for supper'" (Windom, 118).



"Dat little lean, slim place of er grave-yard behin' de old house," the King family cemetery. The burial sites of our three African American storytellers are unknown.

Try to reason with the superstitious woman, indeed. Best order her back to the kitchen.

So let's give Aunt Julia the last word. In 1913, in her own voice, she may take us closer to the experience of spirituality of people of African descent during the era of bondage than any foolery about rattling chains, deathly groans, or much-missed masters. The student interviewers say: "They tell us, Auntie, we are often nearer the spirit world than we think." She responds: "Now, ain't yer talkin'."

Next month the Ghost Stories series concludes with the interview with "Uncle Frank" and the "signifyin'" story of Edmund King's supposed fatal fall from one of his own peach trees.

Sources: Aunt Julia is quoted from "'Hant' Philosophy" by Orrie Stitt and Evelyn Beasley in *Technala* (1913, 142-45), available online in UM's Milner Archives Digital Collection. For the 1982 revision, see Windham, "The Ghosts at Montevallo's Mansion House," in *Jeffrey's Latest 13: More Alabama Ghosts* (Strode Publishers). Submitted by Kathy King and Anita Stewart Sims on behalf of the Montevallo Legacy Project. Contact us at MontevalloLegacy@gmail.com.

Copies of the beautifully printed Volume 2 of the Untold Stories of Black Montevallo are available at UM's Carmichael Library and Montevallo's Parnell Library. Check at the circulation desk. Suggested donation \$5.