
Untold Stories



OF BLACK MONTEVALLO

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Ed. Note: This month's story is written by author and social justice educator Melanie S. Morrison. She is engaged in intensive research into her Montevallo ancestors, the enslaving planter and businessman Edmund King and his daughter, Elizabeth Shortridge King. William E. Shortridge is well known in Birmingham as an important figure in the Black Freedom Movement.

THE INTREPID WILLIAM E. SHORTRIDGE, LEADER IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN BIRMINGHAM

Sixty years ago, on April 28, 1964, the Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham, Alabama, lost a fearless and tenacious leader with strong ancestral ties to Montevallo. On that day, William Eugene Shortridge, director of the Shortridge Funeral Home in Ensley, suffered the heart attack that ended his long career as a prosperous businessman and devoted public servant who worked to secure equal and equitable justice for his people.

William's father, Charles Eugene, was born and raised in Montevallo—the son of Jack Shortridge and Narcissus King Shortridge. Jack's work as a carpenter, and Narcissus's profession as a midwife enabled them to purchase a house and full acre of land on Main Street, where they raised four children.

As a young adult, Charles E. Shortridge married Lula Bell Massingale. The couple moved to Jefferson County in the late 1890s where their second child, William, was born. In 1908, Charles founded the Shortridge Funeral Home in Ensley, and became known as Birmingham's first Black funeral director.

After graduating from Howard University's Commerce and Finance Department and serving as an officer in the United States Reserve Corp, William worked alongside his father in the funeral home and later succeeded him as director. In addition to running the funeral home in Ensley, William Shortridge served for several years as president of the NAACP's Birmingham Branch and became treasurer of numerous community and church-related organizations

It was Shortridge's reputation as a gifted fundraiser that inspired the Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, pastor of Bethel Baptist Church in Birmingham, to select him as the first treasurer of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR). Launched in 1956, the ACMHR embraced a bold mission of dismantling segregation in Birmingham by coordinating boycotts, lawsuits, and massive nonviolent protests.

William Shortridge served as Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth's right-hand man. At mass meetings, he helped get the audience

primed for the fiery speeches Rev. Shuttlesworth delivered. He traveled with Rev. Shuttlesworth to Washington, D.C., when he met with Attorney General Robert Kennedy and later with President John Kennedy. As treasurer of the ACMHR, Shortridge consistently raised money to bail protesters out of jail and respond to crises such as the bombing of Rev. Shuttlesworth's home on Christmas day 1956.

After the ACHMR announced plans to desegregate Birmingham buses, an explosion shattered every window in the Shuttlesworth house, blew the massive porch pillars into the street, and created a huge hole in the wall of the children's bedroom. Miraculously, Rev. Shuttlesworth and his family escaped serious injury, and William Shortridge went to work raising the funds needed to build a new parsonage.

In 1962, someone attempted to assassinate William Shortridge as he returned home from an ACHMR meeting. Three or four bullets were fired from a passing car as he walked toward his front door. None struck Shortridge as he dropped to the porch floor, but one of the bullets entered the house and narrowly missed his wife, Pinky Shortridge, who was holding their baby while talking on the phone.

Despite this and other threats to his life, William Shortridge was unflinching in his commitment to the Black Freedom Movement. During the last year of his life, he helped organize the Children's Crusade which inspired 1,000 children to leave school on May 2, 1963, and march peacefully through downtown Birmingham, singing and calling for an end to segregation. Seeking to halt the demonstrations, Bull Connor ordered the police and fire departments to blast the children with high-pressure fire hoses and attack them with police dogs and clubs.

It was the Children's Crusade and Bull Connor's brutal violence that convinced President Kennedy to deliver a televised address to the American people on June 11, 1963, calling for federal civil rights legislation. Just weeks after William Shortridge's unexpected death at age sixty, Congress passed the historic Civil Rights Act of 1964, outlawing segregation in public accommodations and making employment discrimination illegal.

My great thanks to Richard Shortridge Cain for sharing documents about his Shortridge ancestors. Richard, who lives in Phoenix, Arizona, is a descendant of Jack and Narcissus Shortridge.--MSM

To author Melanie S. Morrison, our great thanks for this important act of recovery. Visit our website at themontevallolegacyproject.com for a longer, fully sourced version of the story.

We want to hear from you! It's easy to post a comment. Submitted by Kathy King and Anitka Stewart Sims on behalf of the Montevallo Legacy Project.