

Untold Stories

OF BLACK MONTEVALLO



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NERO AND LYDIA KING: A TALE OF THRIFT, OATS, AND FREEDOM

It is rare to find details about Montevallo residents who endured slavery and went on to flourish in the post-Reconstruction era as free people. Rarer still when these details point toward a rich life story with layers to be teased apart and pondered. Such is the case with Nero and Lydia King—a perfect offering for Montevallo's Black History Month.

Nero King "commands the respect of all who know him," according to one newspaper account. His wife, an "old colored woman, well known as Aunt Lidia King," was a "land mark in this community" (Weekly Advertiser, Montgomery, Ap 5 1888).

Nero was born in Georgia around 1808, probably to a woman enslaved by wealthy planter Edmund King, who would settle in Montevallo in 1818. A federal census return identifies Nero as mulatto, suggesting the possibility of white paternity. The child of an enslaver born of enslaved woman counted as an "increase" in his property—that chilling word is used in legal documents—and so remains property. Such was the greed that sought to maximize every financial benefit that could be squeezed out of the morally repugnant slavery system "peculiar" to the South.

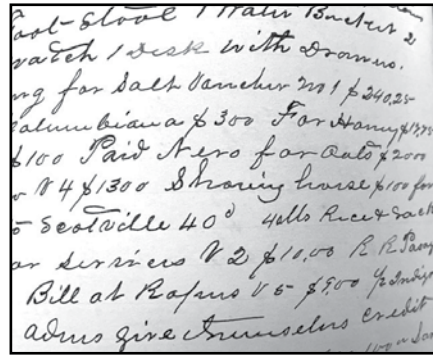
Nero's owner died in 1863. At this time Nero enters official records as part of the legal rigmarole that accompanies transfer of property when a slaveholder dies. The law required that Edmund King's personal property be sold at public auction, the proceeds to be divided among his heirs. A record of this sale—including names and ages of the persons he enslaved—can be studied in the Shelby County Archives in Columbiana, Alabama. Nero was purchased by French Nabors for \$1,400.

Therein lies an untold story to which we shall return. For now, note the irony that when Nero was put up for sale he had already been freed by the Emancipation Proclamation. News travels slowly in Alabama.

Easily missed in the lengthy handwritten probate records is the provocative detail that Nero is named as one of King's creditors. "Paid Nero for oats \$2000," the executors recorded. This is no inconsiderable sum, by the way, although by this time Confederate dollars had little value outside the South.

This detail may tell us something about Nero's work ethic, initiative, agricultural skills, and knowledge of grain cultivation. Obviously he had arranged with the landowner to sell the oats on his own account. Many plantations throughout the South allowed and even encouraged small gardens tended by enslaved persons, growing for their own use peas, corn, and the like. Nero's agricultural endeavors went well beyond gardening, however. He was in business for himself and his family.

Historians agree that Confederate demand for white male soldiers altered power relations between owners and owned.



"Paid Nero for oats \$2000."

From Will Book H, 1856-1867, Shelby Co Archives, Columbiana, AL.

Some enslaved persons ran off; others did more farming on their own account. "Little wonder that some wartime slaveholders ultimately offered their slaves small wages or shares of the crop to keep them at work and the operations afloat" (Hahn, 15). Whatever Nero's arrangement with King, his executors regarded it as legally binding.

Nero and his wife Lydia (Liddia, Lidia, Lidie) emerged from slavery reasonably well-off considering they had lived their entire lives in bondage. The 1870 census indicates they had real estate valued at \$260 and personal estate at \$100. (In today's dollars, \$6,262 and \$2,408.) They avoided the financial perils of sharecropping by renting outright 38 acres of improved land, including 22 acres of Indian corn and 15 acres of cotton. Livestock included two dairy cows, 10 pigs, and 4 chickens.

Nero was quick to exercise his recently recognized citizen's rights. He registered to vote at first opportunity in July 1867, in accordance with the Reconstruction Act passed in Congress in March of that year. In 1880 their household included their 13-year-old granddaughter, Della Pitts.

But in newspaper accounts it is thrifty Lydia who steals the show. The Weekly Age-Herald (Feb. 27, 1889) tells the story like this: "When Edward [Edmund] King died his personal property was sold at public sale, and Uncle Nero was put on the block. His wife, who had been very thrifty, had saved up several hundred dollars, and with that money bid her husband in, thus securing his freedom, while she remained a slave." In the Weekly Advertiser, the "unusually thrifty" Lydia "saved up nearly a hundred dollars in gold" which she exchanged for \$15,000 in Confederate money. At the public outcry, she "bought her husband's freedom."

The bill of sale in the Shelby County archives tells a more complicated story. Nero was not purchased by his wife but by one of the executors. As an enslaved person, she could not own property. Her husband was not exactly a free man, in other words, since legally he belonged to French Nabors. Nabors evidently acted on Lydia's behalf—in exchange for her family's lifetime savings—with support of the King family, who, as one paper puts it, "had such a kindly feeling for the couple that they would not bid against her" (Weekly Advertiser).

Trust in the "kindly feeling" of Nabors and the King family was never really tested. With the Surrender just a year and months later, Nero and Lydia King truly gained their freedom.

Sources: *Bill of Sale of Personal Property of Edmund King*, Will Book H, 1856-1867, Shelby County Archives, Columbiana, AL; Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet* (2003); *Federal Agricultural Census*, 1870. For more detailed documentation, see enhanced version of this story in themontevallolegacyproject.com. Do you have stories to share? We would love to hear from you! Write us at Montevallolegacy@gmail.com. Submitted by Kathy King and Anita Stewart Sims.