

Untold Stories

OF BLACK MONTEVALLO



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JACK AND NARCISSUS SHORTRIDGE: REMEMBERING ONE OF MONTEVALLO'S HISTORIC BLACK NEIGHBORHOODS

Jacksonville, once a close-knit community northside of downtown Montevallo, Alabama, was on the verge of becoming one of America's lost and forgotten historic Black neighborhoods. Team Untold is working to reverse this process. Thanks to contributions from descendants of Jack and Narcissus Shortridge -- from as far away as Maryland, North Carolina, and Arizona -- we can begin to tell the story of historic Jacksonville.

A Shortridge family history compiled in 1997 preserves memories of Jacksonville from the 1890s. Jack and Narcissus (sometimes Narciss) Shortridge were both born into slavery. By 1870 they owned a prospering farm, with 45 developed acres, probably on land now owned by the University of Montevallo. By 1900 they owned a substantial home with a greenhouse on a one-acre plot on Main Street in the vicinity of what locals will remember as Eclipse Coffee. The light-skinned Narciss, formerly Narcissus King, was an educated and highly respected herbalist, midwife, and wet nurse who attended Ward Chapel AME church. Her husband Jack, who took the name of his Shortridge enslavers, worked as a farmer and carpenter. He was said to be founder of Jacksonville.

Jack and Narciss Shortridge had a large family home in Montevallo. Jack was brown-skin, medium height and size. The first joint of his first and second fingers had been cut off. Narciss (Cecelia) was very light with light eyes. She was a very prim woman. She did not go to college, but you would never have known it. Narciss was a wet nurse for white people. She was very respected by upper-class whites whose babies she nursed because she was so intelligent and knew what she was doing. She had a greenhouse and grew many unusual plants and flowers.

Jack Shortridge was well respected in the community and his family lived in a neighborhood called Jacksonville (named after Jack), on the main street which was up a hill. They lived in the best house blacks had, and owned a lot of land.

*Narciss went to church every Sunday, but instead of church, Jack preferred to sit in the swing on the front porch and sip on corn liquor. At the end of the street [Main Street], around the corner, was a little Methodist church [Ward Chapel AME] which the black people attended. The back of the church sat on the edge of the creek. People used to wade in the creek and got water from a spring that flowed in the creek. When you stepped off the porch, there was a path that led down to the opposite corner of the block where Jack's brother Lewis lived. (Source: Linda Thompson, *The Family History of Lillian Shortridge Jones in Celebration of Her 100th Birthday*, 1997).*

In October of 1893, Jack was in an altercation with a neighbor of his, Wesley Perry. Allegedly, Jack cut Mr. Perry with a knife. An article by a local correspondent reported the incident as follows:

Last Monday Jack Shortridge, a man of the colored persuasion, and the founder of Jacksonville, a suburb of Montevallo, came to the conclusion that it was time the fall fights had opened and meeting with Wesley Perry proceeded to open the campaign by sticking his knife between Wesley's ribs. Jack now has the pleasure of seeing how a bond for his appearance at circuit court feels. (Birmingham Age-Herald, October 8 1893).



"Narciss was very light with light eyes. She did not go to college, but you never would have known it."

In Spring 1894, several months after the newspaper article came out, Jack was charged with assault "with the intent to murder" Wesley Perry, "by cutting him with a knife." The charge was ultimately dismissed as frivolous and Perry, a man in his 40s, was ordered to pay court costs. Jack admitted to a lesser charge of assault with a weapon and was fined \$50. It was a sum he was prepared to pay.

Jack and Narcissus were persons of means. In 1870, in the first Federal census to recognize African Americans by name, Jack is identified as a farm laborer. Inherited stereotypes might lead one to assume that Jack was a sharecropper barely eking out a living. By a stroke of good fortune for fans of true history, a Federal agricultural schedule from that same year allows us to correct this false impression.

The Shortridges farmed 45 acres of improved land with a cash value of \$450. They owned a mule and two pigs, and we can infer that they had owned cows, perhaps sold or slaughtered over the course of the year, for they claimed 100 pounds of butter (as well as 400 bushels of corns and 175 bushels of potatoes). The total value of farm products was given as \$1425. That's the equivalent of \$34,215 today.

Shortly after Jack's death in 1903, apparently of heart disease, the legally well-informed Narcissus had a new will drawn up. It establishes that she owned an acre of land on a hill leading out of the city. This goes some way toward confirming the family memory that Jack and Narcissus "lived in the best house blacks had, and owned a lot of land."

Jack and Narcissus are buried side by side in the City of Montevallo cemetery.

Sources: Photo courtesy of Linda Thompson. Our great thanks to Dr. Thompson and Richard Shortridge Cain, descendants of Jack and Narcissus Shortridge, and Melanie S. Morrison, descendant of George D. and Elizabeth King Shortridge, for invaluable information about their ancestors. Jack and Narcissus are the grandparents of Birmingham civil rights leader William E. Shortridge. He is the subject of an earlier Untold Story. The fullest account of the 1894 trial is found in Circuit Record Book 1889-1894 in the Shelby County Museum and Archives, in Columbiana, Alabama. Visit our website at themontevallolegacyproject.com for a fuller version of this story. We welcome any information our readers can provide about Jacksonville, one of America's lost and nearly forgotten historic Black neighborhoods.