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"OLD MORDECAI"—THE FOUNDER OF THE CITY OF MONTGOMERY.

BY RABBI A. J. MESSING, JR.

The only source of our information concerning this extraordinary character is Col. Albert James Pickett, the celebrated author of the "History of Alabama." On the 30th of September, 1847, Pickett visited the aged Mordecai at his home in Dudleyville, Tallapoosa County, Ala., and notes of the personal interview which followed between the venerable pioneer and the indefatigable historian are still preserved in Pickett's own handwriting in the Department of Archives and History of the State of Alabama.

These notes, which have not as yet been published, evidently form the basis of the two accounts of Mordecai which Pickett has published; first, the elaborate biographical sketch which appeared in the *Montgomery Flag and Advertiser* of October 5, 1847, and secondly, the brief scattered references in the "History of Alabama."¹

Strange to relate, these two accounts, while agreeing in the main, as to the man's achievements in the world, give a totally different estimate of his moral character. In the newspaper article Mordecai appears as a most attractive personality, intelligent, pious, frugal, self-denying; looking with pride upon the record of a glorious past, "with eyes of deep hazel hue which ever and anon would sparkle like diamonds at the mention of old occurrences;" a nonagenarian held in such universal esteem that the people of the village vie with each

¹Cf. "History of Alabama," by Albert James Pickett. The Webb Book Co., Birmingham, Ala., 1900, pp. 83, 106, 384, 421, 424, 469, 470, 587.

other in smoothing the pillow of his declining years. In the "History," however, he is presented as a "queer fellow," "a dark-eyed Jew," "of amorous disposition," living among border ruffians and carrying on intrigues with Indian squaws in the most approved "border style," despite the fact that he is married himself, his faithful spouse being an "Indian considerably darkened with the blood of Ham."

It is difficult indeed to reconcile these totally divergent estimates of Mordecai, which Pickett has left to us, particularly when we remember that the historian entered upon his sacred task with these noble words: "Believing that the historian ought to be the most conscientious of men, writing as he does not only for the present age but for posterity, I have endeavored to divest myself of all prejudices and to speak the truth in all cases."²

The original *Flag and Advertiser* article was reprinted in the *Montgomery Evening Times* of January 21, 1904, and although the allegations in the "History" were easily accessible, elicited the following editorial:³

The sketch in yesterday's *Evening Times* of the founder of Montgomery in the person of "Old Mordecai," the noble Jew, must have provoked sentiments of tender feelings in the minds of those who read it.

Aside from its value as a literary production from the pen of Alabama's famous historian, Albert James Pickett, the article appeals to us for the unique and remarkable claims it forges on our regardful pride in the primæval past.

No class of our citizens have a better defined right to share in the pride and glory of Montgomery than those of whose faith this pioneer bulwark of remote times was an honored and useful type.

Cities, like republics, too often become ungrateful, and in the mad whirl and rush of revolution and change are prone to forget the claims that bind them to men and memories.

The neglect reproachfully bestowed upon this long-forgotten name is evidenced in the fact that out of a population of 50,000

² Cf. *History of Alabama*, Preface, p. 9.

³ Cf. *Montgomery Evening Times*, January 22, 1904.

people who shape the civic destiny that had its origin in the efforts of this pioneer Montgomerian, there are probably not one hundred, who prior to *The Times'* publication of yesterday could confess to a knowledge of the fact that "Old Mordecai" ever existed.

In retribution for the sin of oblivion to which this hallowed name has been doomed by those who have followed in the path he blazed in the wilderness, why not, in the spirit of service, and in pride of the work whose foundations his hands securely laid, erect on Court, our most beautiful square, a monument to the name and memory of "Old Mordecai," the founder of this city—the cradle rocker of Montgomery's infancy?

The biography of "Old Mordecai," as it appeared in the *Flag and Advertiser* of October 5, 1847, is here reproduced in full:

In the outskirts of Dudleyville, in the county of Tallapoosa, at the foot of a hill, are three solitary Indian huts. In one of these mouldering monuments of the red race, I found a man of another age. It was eight o'clock in the morning. He was busily engaged in preparing his homely meal. With a benignant smile he invited me to a seat. He lived entirely alone.

Beside his bed was a coffin, made for him by deserters several years ago. Upon this singular household appendage reposed an old Bible, from the pages of which he was accustomed to derive consolation and the assurance of eternal life hereafter. Several old trunks, two or three chairs, and a table, together with numerous bottles suspended by strings around the walls, completed the entire furniture of the cabin.

The old man was of low stature, round, and compactly built, his limbs and body being admirably knit together. While his head bore the emblems of age as to color, it was nevertheless covered with a profusion of hair. His forehead was well formed, his mouth large and expressive, his eyes of a deep hazel hue, which ever and anon would sparkle like diamonds at the mention of old occurrences.

Before partaking of his meal, now hastily prepared, he stood beside the table and in a most devout manner repeated a feeling grace, blessing his Maker for the long preservation of his life and the comforts then spread before him.

Supplied by the kind citizens of Dudleyville with the necessities of life, this man of years and former enterprise, is living on the

lands of an old Indian countryman, whom he has known for the last sixty years. The solitude of the place, the rude and comfortless cabin in which he dwells from choice, the coffin upon the floor, the dress and appearance of the ancient inmate, his piety and resignation to immediate death, all were calculated to impress the visitor with singular emotions.

This venerable personage is familiarly known in that region as "Old Mordecai."⁴ While drawing upon a memory most retentive of early incidents in Alabama, some items of his own life were casually elicited during the discourse.

He was born in Pennsylvania the 24th October, 1755. His father was a Jew and his mother was of German blood. Although now ninety-two years of age, his mind is unimpaired and he walks without difficulty to the village. He has pursued a variety of occupations during a long life, the first was that of a butcher. He served three years in the ranks of the American army during the Revolution, and was present at most of the engagements in Delaware and New Jersey.

In 1783 he settled among the Cusseta Indians at a place called Buzzard Roost, on Flint River, in the present State of Georgia, and there became a trader of Indian merchandise. About this time James Seagrove was appointed Indian agent, and resided at St. Mary's. Unlike his worthy successor Colonel Hawkins, Seagrove never visited the nation in Alabama, but transacted his business through agents. Mordecai being a man of agreeable manners, of adventurous spirit, bold and active, was often selected to bear talks to the distant tribes. He was generally accompanied by Timothy Barnard, whose father had been a colonel in the British service. The names of Barnard and Mordecai are frequently to be met with in the American state papers (Indian affairs) in reference to these very expeditions. On one occasion, sixty years ago, Mordecai penetrated to the heart of the Chickasaw Nation on a mission of peace, and passed by the falls of the Black Warrior where no Indians lived at that time.

During this period the Creek Indians were accustomed to commit depredations upon the settlers in the present State of Kentucky, and bring back to their towns many unfortunate captives. The Indian agent at St. Mary's employed Mordecai to visit the chiefs and arrange for their ransom. His knowledge of the In-

⁴Pickett does not appear to be certain of the spelling. He hesitates between "Mordecai," "Mordacai," and "Mordicai." Throughout this paper the Biblical spelling of the name is retained.

dian character, connected with a remarkable adroitness, contributed to the success of such applications, and enabled him to relieve from wretchedness and misery many women and children who had ceased to hope for relief.

We now rapidly approach that part of Mordecai's life, connected with the soil embraced in Montgomery county. In 1789, on a hill precisely where Mrs. Burch's house now stands on the Line Creek road, this man established himself as a trader among the Curvalla Indians, who then lived two miles distant west of the mouth of Line Creek. Some of these tribes also lived in the prairies adjoining, on the other side of his store. His buildings were erected by the Spanish deserters and were built in the Spanish style, of mortar and frame work, but were destroyed in 1812.

For twenty years he carried on an extensive trade, dealing in skins and furs, pink root, and other medicinal barks. These he conveyed to Augusta and Pensacola on pack horses, and to New Orleans and Mobile in barge canoes, with no companion but the savages, who were employed to assist him.

On one occasion he sold to Gov. Dufort of Orleans, thirty gallons of oil which the Indian women had extracted from the hickory-nut, and also cakes made from the same. The latter were esteemed by the Spaniards as a great delicacy, when served up with condiments. The oil was obtained by boiling the broken hickory-nuts in pots of water, and skimming the oil as it floated on the top. He acquired a thorough knowledge of the Spanish language in the course of his traffic, while the Indian language had almost become his mother tongue.

I have intimated that Mordecai was the first native-born citizen of the United States who ever settled in Montgomery county. It is so, but there was, however, one before him of English birth who lived hard by. During the Revolutionary War, an English soldier deserted from the British ranks and fled with his wife to the Creek Nation. He died shortly afterwards at Careta, where Columbus is now. The woman being of a bold and romantic spirit penetrated still farther among the red people and finally settled upon a creek well known to us all, and which still bears her name. "Old Milly" and Mordecai lived many years close neighbors in this savage land. She married an Indian and owned several slaves, many horses and cattle.

Mordecai in these times often visited our own town, but then inhabited by an innocent and different population. It was located at an old Alabama town and the name was Acochanta, meaning

red ground. Persons acquainted with the spot are aware that the soil is very red.

In the "times that tried men's souls," Alabama was in the occupancy of the Royalists. Their agent, a British officer named Tate, lived at the red ground town, and was successful in his exertions in getting the Indians to war upon the Americans. Aconchanta contained, in Mordecai's time, four hundred hunters, and the culture of corn was carried on in the bend opposite.

In 1804, Mordecai conferred with Col. Hawkins, living at Pole Cat Springs, upon the propriety of establishing a gin and introducing the culture of cotton. He desired to place it at his store. Hawkins entered warmly into the project, for that indefatigable and honest agent was extremely desirous to bring the Indians to a proper system of agriculture, and to teach them the arts of civilization. But, however, he objected to the location for Mordecai's own good, and advised the erection of the gin-house at Weatherford's race tracks on a beautiful bluff just below the junction of the Coosa and Tallapoosa. Here in Loftin's plantation within three hundred yards of Dr. Rieve's gin-house in Montgomery county, the first gin-house in the State of Alabama was built at a great expense in the year 1804 by this same Mordecai. Col. Hawkins was of the opinion it was the proper place for the Indian women could bring their cotton down either river in canoes and sell it there. He procured the consent of the Hickory Ground Indians for its erection. Mordecai commenced operations and the first year sold his cotton in New Orleans at thirty-three cents per pound.

In 1805 two of Mordecai's horses strolled into the low grounds, opposite Coosawda and ate some young corn belonging to the Indians of that town. Towerculla (otherwise called Capt. Isaacs), Chief of Coosawda, had never liked the residence of this white man so near him. He now availed himself of this excuse to drive him off. Selecting sixteen of his warriors, each with many long hickory poles, he surrounded the house of the innovator. Mordecai offered to pay any price for the trespass of his horses, but Towerculla thirsted for his blood. He presently struck him a blow. Mordecai being a man of prodigious strength clasped him around the waist and sought to throw him over the bluff. But the other Indians soon felled him to the earth.

They now, man to man, thrashed him with their merciless poles until he became insensible to feeling, and as they supposed dead. Cutting off his left ear they left him to the care of his Indian

wife, by whose hands he was nursed, a miserable sufferer for several months.

I have lately seen his close-cropt ear and the immense knots raised upon his body, and it is wonderful that he recovered. Some time after this the Indians burned up his gin-house with all his cotton and destroyed a fine boat, for which he paid \$400 in New Orleans.

He was now a ruined man, wandering about the nation until the war of 1813 commenced, when he fled to Georgia and joined Gen. Floyd and was in the engagements of Autossee and Calcebe. In 1814, when Gen. Jackson assigned the Indians their future limits, Mordecai returned with his Indian family to the Creek Nation, where he has lived ever since, refusing to emigrate with his children to Arkansas in 1836.

These lines have been penned, supposing that the people of Montgomery county would like to know who first lived in their county after the Spanish and French dominion had terminated and who was the first to grow cotton in Alabama and to gin it. That man was "Old Mordecai," now breathing out a few more days of his existence in a lonely hut at Dudleyville.

Respectfully,

A. J. PICKETT.

Robinson Springs, Oct. 4, 1847.

Four years after the above article was written and published, Pickett gave to the world his celebrated "History of Alabama." In it there appeared the following scattered references to "Old Mordecai":

1. On page 106: Abram Mordecai, an intelligent Jew, who dwelt fifty years in the Creek Nation, confidently believed that the Indians were originally of his people, and he asserted that in their Green Corn Dances he had often heard them utter in grateful tones the words "Yavoyaha," "Yavoyaha." He was always informed by the Indians that this meant Jehovah, or the Great Spirit, and that they were then returning thanks for the abundant harvest with which they were blessed.⁵

⁵ Pickett was not the only one who held this opinion as to the descent of the American Indians. James Adair, an Englishman, who lived thirty years among the Chickasaws and had frequent intercourse with the nations of the Muscogees, Cherokees, and Choctaws, devoted the larger portion of his ponderous volume

2. On page 421: In 1785 came also unto this neighborhood a Jew, named Abram Mordecai, a native of Pennsylvania, and who established a trading house at the spot where now stands the house of Mrs. Burch, two miles west of Line Creek. Here also lived James Russel, another trader, who, being a Tory, had sought this place to be rid of Whig persecution. A Tory named Love, and Dargan, a Dutchman and notorious horse-thief, lived near the

"American Indians," published in London in 1775, to prove that the latter were originally Hebrew and were a portion of the lost tribes of Israel. He asserts that at the Boosketans of the Creeks and other tribes within the limits of Alabama, the warriors danced around the holy fire, during which the priest invoked the Great Spirit, while the others responded "Halelu," "Halelu." Then "Halelujah," "Halelujah." He is ingenious in his arguments, and introduces many strange things to prove, to his own satisfaction, that the Indians were descendants of the Jews. He formed his belief that they were originally the same people upon their divisions into tribes, worship of Jehovah, notions of a theocracy, belief in the ministrations of angels, language, and dialect, manner of computing time, their Prophets and High Priests, festivals, fasts, and religious rites, daily sacrifices, ablutions and anointings, laws of uncleanness, abstinence from unclean things, marriages, divorces, and punishments for adultery, their towns of refuge, purification, and other ceremonies preparatory to war, their ornaments, manner of curing the sick, burial of the dead, mourning for the dead, raising seed to a deceased brother, choice of names adapted to their circumstances and times, their own traditions and the accounts of English writers and the testimony which the Spanish and other authors have given concerning the primitive inhabitants of Peru and Mexico. He insists that in nothing do the Indians differ from the Jews except in the rite of circumcision, which he contends their ancestors dispensed with, after they became lost from the other tribes on account of the danger and inconvenience of the execution of that rite to those engaged in a hunting and roving life. That when the Israelites were forty years in the wilderness even then, they attempted to dispense with circumcision, but Joshua, by his stern authority, enforced its observance. The difference in food, mode of living, and climate are relied on by Adair to account for the difference in the color between the Jew and the Indian and also why the one has hair upon his body in profusion and the other has none.

site of Mt. Meigs, where they carried on a small commerce. All these traders had Indian wives except Mordecai, whose faithful spouse was Indian considerably darkened with the blood of Ham.

3. On page 469: In 1802 Abram Mordecai, an Indian trader, procuring the consent of the Creek chiefs and the approbation of Col. Hawkins, had established a cotton-gin at Weatherford's race track, on the eastern bluff below the junction of the Coosa and the Tallapoosa; it was built by Lyons and Barnett of Georgia, who brought their tools, gin-saws, and other material from that State on pack horses.

4. On page 470: Abram Mordecai was a queer fellow. He traded extensively with the Indians, exchanging his goods for pink root, hickory-nut oil, and peltries of all kinds. These he carried to New Orleans and Mobile on boats and to Pensacola and Augusta on pack horses. Mordecai bought cotton of the Indians in small quantities, ginned it, and carried it to Augusta on pack horses in bags much smaller than those of the present day. He was a dark-eyed Jew and amorous in his disposition. Towerculla (Capt. Isaak), chief of the Coosadas, hearing of his intrigue with a married squaw, approached his house with twelve warriors, knocked him down, thrashed him with poles until he lay insensible, cut off his ear, and left him to the care of his wife. They also broke up his boat and burned down his gin-house. A pretty squaw was the cause of the destruction of the first cotton gin in Alabama.

From what source had Pickett, whose veracity be it understood is unimpeachable, received the information which induced him to so completely change his opinion of "Old Mordecai" in the few brief years between 1847 and 1851? On whose authority does he amend that stirring anecdote of the cutting off of Mordecai's ear, in which the victim has our entire sympathy as the innocent person grievously wronged to that version in the "History" in which he gains only our contempt as a chartered libertine?

The History informs us that the new version is based on a conversation with one "Lachlan Durant." Diligent search among the unpublished papers of Pickett now resting in the Department of Archives and History of this State fail to reveal the identity of this man. If we remember the

doubtful character of the white people by whom Mordecai was surrounded in that savage land, Russel, "the escaped Tory," Dargan, "the notorious horse thief," "Old Milly" and her Indian paramours—and these were the only ones who were in a position to really know what had happened in that tragic affray between Towerculla and "Old Mordecai"—we shall probably know where to put Lachlan Durant in the social scale and what value to place upon his testimony.

But on the other hand and over against the statement of the unknown Durant we have the deposition of "Old Mordecai"—a dying statement as it were—taken down by Pickett himself. For, prefaced to the original narrative of Mordecai as preserved among the unpublished papers in the Archives of the State there occur these words in the historian's own handwriting:

Notes from the lips of Mr. Mordecai, taken down the 30th of September, 1847, at Dudleyville, Tallapoosa county. This old man was nearly ninety years old—lived in a hut by himself, had his coffin by his bedside, was quite resigned to death—is supported by the people of the village. He is a remarkable man, having lived all his life among the Indians in the capacity of trade interpreter. He was originally a good scholar and the oldest man I have ever conversed with.

Is it likely that such a man, of unquestioned piety, in the visible presence of death should stoop to lies to curry the favor of people by whose opinion, whether good or ill, he never seemed to have been hitherto affected? And what are Mordecai's own words of the affair with Towerculla as recorded in this narrative of Pickett?

He had been there but a short time when two of his horses got loose and strolled into a patch of young corn in the low grounds opposite Coosada belonging to that town of Indians. Capt. Isaak Towerculla and a good many of his warriors went to Mordecai's house with long ox poles. They commenced abusing him for the trespass committed by his horses. He offered to pay them damages—they spurned the offer, telling him that he should be beaten and driven off—that the whites should not crowd them. Capt.

Isaak struck him with one of the poles. Mordecai seizing him determined to throw him over the bluff, but was soon knocked down by the others. The Indians beat him until they left him for dead and then cut off his left ear close to his head. I examined Mordecai and found him beaten terribly, having great knots on his body from the poles.

Why should Pickett have preferred the uncorroborated statement of the unknown "Lachlan Durant" to these words of Mordecai, uttered under circumstances witnessing so strongly to their sincerity and truth?

The answer is clear. Abram Mordecai was a Jew. To have laid the foundations of a great city, to have been the first to raise cotton in one of the greatest Commonwealths of the Southland, and to have created a foreign market for the fleecy staple, thus securing to posterity the commercial prosperity of the country, to have blazed a way for industrial progress in the wilderness, and to have suffered privation and torture in the process, is no small achievement. Then welcome any pretext which shall take away from the Jew his merited glory and give to another the fame which he so richly deserved.

On eagle's wings immortal scandals fly,
While virtuous actions are but born to die.

But Mordecai's memory still lives and from out the forgotten pages of dusty tomes in secluded archives it seems to be saying:

Horatio, I am dead;
Thou liv'st; report me and my cause aright
To the unsatisfied.
Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me.
If thou did'st ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story.