**Unveiling ancestral truths: A descendant's journey through the past**

By Ashley Williams

MONTEVALLO, Ala., — Many people say the historic King House is haunted. "I've come to believe it is. In a sense that I believe there are spirits calling us to be truth-tellers about our past and that it hasn't sufficiently been done," Melanie S. Morrison said.

Morrison is an author, speaker and anti-racism educator. According to her website, she has written more than 50 articles for American and Dutch publications.

When she was 59 years old, Melanie discovered she is a descendant of Edmund King, the original owner of the King House. While visiting her paternal aunt in Raleigh, North Carolina, she was given a book about Edmund and his family.

Edmund King was a planter and entrepreneur who invested in agriculture, railroads and much more. Elizabeth King, one of King's daughters, is Melanie's great-great-great grandmother.

In her early years, Melanie served three churches as a pastor. She stopped in 1993, when she felt a deep, spiritual calling to work for racial justice.

Her parents had a major influence on her passion for racial equality. They were deeply involved in the NAACP and worked against segregation in Chicago. When they moved to East Lansing, Michigan, her parents worked to help Black people buy homes since it wasn't allowed then.

Her father would tell her stories about when he lived in Birmingham, Alabama, during the Jim Crow era.

At 14 years old, Melanie and her mother took a trip to Washington D.C. to see Martin Luther King Jr. give his speech. She said it's a legacy she inherited and is grateful for.

Years later, Melanie started Allies For Change, a national network of social justice and anti-oppression educators that works for non-profit organizations and colleges.

From the book her aunt gave her, she learned her ancestors came from Virginia, moved to Georgia, and finally made their way to Wilson's Hill in 1817. Wilson's Hill is now known as Montevallo.

Her ancestors brought with them 15 enslaved people. By 1830, the number of slaves they were housing tripled to 49.

Morrison learned that Edmund King purchased acres of land in not just Shelby County, but in nine other counties.

She made her way to Montevallo in 2016, where she visited the King House then the King Cemetery, where her ancestors are buried.

Along with her was a female worker from the President's Office, who answered some of Morrison's questions. When Melanie asked them if there was a cemetery where enslaved people were buried, the worker replied "We don't know." That made Morrison emotional.

"But the people who worked here, their descendants don't know where they're buried and have no place to come and reverently remember their ancestors. And the thought that the people my ancestors enslaved might be buried under dorms, brick roads here, just felt so terribly wrong," Morrison said.

According to her, that was the beginning. It was more than reading that book about King House, which only mentions slavery or enslaved people four times. She said the book is far from the truth.

"You can go online and it says Edmund King built the King House. He didn't build the King House. Let's just stop talking that way. Enslaved people built that house. It matters," Melanie said.

According to her, she wanted to learn not only about the brutality that slaves faced but also how they loved their families and resisted their enslavement in small ways.

"That's one of the things I've got to learn more about. I've got to be engaged somehow in some kind of repair," Morrison said.

Because of her 2018 book – "Murder on Shades Mountain: The Legal Lynching of Willie Peterson and the Struggle for Justice in Jim Crow Birmingham," she was invited by the University of Montevallo to give the Hallie Farmer Lecture in 2019.

On Feb. 4, 2025, Morrison, now 75, was the key speaker at Meri Moon for the event "Why We Must Remember?": Reckoning with Montevallo's History of Slave Trading. There, she shared some of her ancestors' history.

In April 2024, during three days of research into the Shelby County archives, she learned King would loan money to other enslavers in Shelby County. One way he would ensure the payment of these loans was through deeds of trust.

According to Morrison, within these deeds, King and the borrower agreed on a due date for the loan to be paid off, where he gave them a year. To secure that loan, the borrower offered a slave as collateral with a value higher than the money loaned to King. However, if the debtor had not paid the loan, the slave would be put up for auction, separated from their families and sold to the highest bidder. The proceeds would then go to King. This meant her ancestor was heavily engaged in the domestic slave trade in Montevallo.

She also learned the first names of the 105 slaves estimated that King bought, sold, and gave to his children or used as collateral over a length of five decades. Not to mention, 43 out of the 105 slaves were used as collateral by enslavers who owed King money. Morrison said, “The deeds of trust that my ancestor Edmund King devised put at least 43 enslaved people in jeopardy of being sold.” And out of the 43, 11 of them were children under the age of 12.

She also believes there are many more slaves to be accounted for. “I feel certain that estimated number is just a fraction of the enslaved people who might be found, might have been found, if Edmund King’s personal business records still existed, and they do not.”

Melanie experienced some challenges while researching and writing. She found in the will and estate papers they were selling everything that Edmund King had in his estate after he died.

“You're reading about plates, napkins, candlesticks, and suddenly, 28 Negroes. It doesn’t say human beings. And then they are given monetary value,” she said. And when Morrison read this part, she was horrified.

“One time, I was in the Shelby County Archives, I come upon a deed where Edmund King is saying ‘Out of the love and affection of my daughter Elizabeth, I give to her Amanda, a Negro girl, age 9, and her increase, meaning her children who will be born one day. I’m reading that and I’m shaking,” Morrison said.

The day before she discovered this deed, her sister sent her a photograph of her 9-year-old great-niece, and she instantly thought about Amanda. Reading and writing about these disturbing details were emotional for Morrison.

She knew this subject is complex to write about and to do justice to the people who deserve justice, she needed as much feedback as possible from others.

According to Morrison, when she’s writing, she has photographs of about a dozen people, people who have read pieces of her work and many who are her friends and colleagues.

She said when she gets stuck, afraid and overwhelmed, she looks over those photos and it motivates her to keep going. Furthermore, this project has changed her perspective on history and the world.

“It certainly deepened my commitment to working for racial equity and part of that is wanting to be more engaged and advocating for reparations. I think it really deepened convictions that were there, and the sense of we must know this history if we are going to understand how we’re gonna keep doing the work,” Melanie said.

According to her, people should care about this history because so many inequities are going on. She said not only slavery should be remembered, but also Jim Crow laws.

“The inequity has to be addressed and the white supremacist notions challenged. And I think it’s important we as citizens can know and speak truthfully about who we were, where we are today and where we will be headed,” Morrison said.

Her upcoming book – “Becoming Trustworthy White Allies,” is set to release in September 2025. It will include her discoveries along with other topics.

“Part of the reason I’m writing this book is I’m not trying to offer a template for what White people should do, but I want to give an example of how as you learn about your history, that you’re also gonna be engaged in acts of repair,” Morrison said.

“There’s an attempt to tell teachers across the country that they can’t talk about systemic racism. There’s an attempt to stifle and erase this history. It’s very important right now that the work continues,” she said.

Morrison believes that descendants of slaves deserve financial reparations, and she wants to work to make that happen. She also wants to be engaged in acts of repair in Montevallo by using truth-telling.

She said she knew she needed to speak truthfully about what she discovered, about slave trading in Montevallo. She wanted to do it respectfully and invite everyone to remember the pain that people have suffered then and still suffer today.

“It’s an invitation to break the silences and rebuild the foundations of our communities,” Morrison said.