

## The Montmollin Building: from Slave Mart to Free School

The Montmollin Building,<sup>1</sup> located in the City Market district in downtown Savannah, Georgia, is a three-story brick structure built circa 1855-1856 for slave broker John S. Montmollin.<sup>2</sup> While rather non-descript in architectural style, the building is an important symbol of Georgia's transition from a slave-holding economy and the efforts of newly freed African Americans to secure their rights and freedoms by forging a path forward through education.

From June 1852 to March 1856, Montmollin partnered with George Wylly, as Wylly & Montmollin. As "commission brokers" they dealt in the buying and selling of various types of property, including real estate, stocks and commodities, and enslaved people.<sup>3</sup> After the dissolution of their partnership in 1856, Montmollin established an office on "Bull St. opposite Pulaski House" and opened a new storehouse on Trust Lot I, Decker Ward, where he advertised the sale of corn, wheat and slaves at "Montmollin's Building, west side of Market Square." In 1856, the *Savannah Daily Republican* published numerous advertisements for property Montmollin was selling, including enslaved people. During just the four-week span of October 1856, Montmollin's advertisements included at least sixty-seven people.<sup>4</sup> The 1856 City Tax Digest documented Montmollin's property with a total taxable value of \$65,277.71, including \$5,164.02 in commissions<sup>5</sup> and \$6,396 in slave holdings.<sup>6</sup>

Montmollin's business, and his success, are representative of Savannah's "central role in the establishment and expansion of slavery in Georgia." As a major transportation hub, supported by the Port of Savannah and a network of railroads, by the 1850s Savannah was Georgia's

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<sup>1</sup> The Montmollin Building is on the northwest corner of Barnard and West St. Julian streets, overlooking Ellis Square, which was occupied by the City Market building when it was built. The property's PIN is 20016 12007 and the current address as recorded in the Tax Assessor's Office is 23 Barnard Street, Savannah, Georgia 31401, though it is more commonly referred to as 21 Barnard Street in published histories discussing it.

<sup>2</sup> Jones, Carmie M., ed., *Historic Savannah: A survey of significant buildings in the Historic Districts of Savannah, Georgia*, Third Edition (Savannah: Historic Savannah Foundation, 2005), 54; Sheehy, Barry, Cindy Wallace, and Vaughnette Goode-Walker, *Savannah Immortal City, Volume I Civil War Savannah* (Austin, TX: Emerald Book Co., 2011), 51-52.

<sup>3</sup> "Co-Partnership," *Savannah Daily Republican* (3 June 1852); "Wylly & Montmollin," *Daily Morning News* (22 May 1855).

<sup>4</sup> "By John S. Montmollin," *Savannah Daily Republican* (4 March 1856); "At Private Sale," *Savannah Morning News* (16 April 1856); "Auction Sales. By John S. Montmollin," *Savannah Daily Republican* (1 October 1856); "Auction Sales. By John S. Montmollin," *Savannah Daily Republican* (10 October 1856); "Auction Sales. By John S. Montmollin," *Savannah Daily Republican* (22 October 1856).

<sup>5</sup> Commission categories in the 1856 Tax Digest included: gross sales by commission; gross commissions; and commission for commissions.

<sup>6</sup> Record Series 5600CT, City Treasurer's Records – Tax Digests, 1856 City of Savannah Municipal Archives; Using an inflation calculator, \$6,396 in 1856 would be equivalent to \$228,846.62 in 2023, inflation calculator available online at: <https://www.in2013dollars.com/us/inflation/1856?amount=6396> (last accessed 26 June 2023).

largest slave trading center and the hub from which the regional domestic slave trade radiated, with slave brokers like Montmollin supporting the slave economy state-wide.<sup>7</sup>

In December 1858, Montmollin was involved in the dispersal of the enslaved Africans brought to Georgia on the slave ship the *Wanderer*, “one of the last ships to smuggle bondsmen to American soil” in violation of the 1807 federal Slave Importation Act, making him a participant in the illegal importation of slaves. A group of the captured Africans were ferried up the Savannah River to Montmollin’s South Carolina plantation and from there they were sent out to various destinations across the South. However, in April 1859 a Federal grand jury declined to indict him on the charge of “holding African negroes” at his plantation. In June 1859, the 51-year-old Montmollin was killed in a boiler explosion on the steamer *John G. Lawton* twenty miles upriver from Savannah.<sup>8</sup>

Following his death, Montmollin’s business was leased by Alexander Bryan, who picked up where Montmollin had left off, enabling the regional domestic slave trade in Georgia and South Carolina. On September 30, 1859, Bryan published notice in the *Savannah Morning News* announcing that he was continuing “business at Montmollin’s Building, negro mart, Market Square, Savanaah [sic], for the purchase and sale of negroes, and other business that may offer, and solicits the patronage of the former patrons of John S. Montmollin, and continuance of his own friends. The building is in condition and order for the safe keeping of negroes; rooms large and pleasant.” In the same issue, he advertised for sale “Thirty negroes, consisting of men, women and children, among which are girls suitable for house and nursing, capable women and several good men, for plantation and house servants.” A sign was placed over the doorway reading “A. Bryan’s Negro Mart,” and Bryan advertised frequently in the *Savannah Morning News* with the building listed as Alexander Bryan’s place of business in the 1860 City Directory.<sup>9</sup>

After eight years and two proprietors, the Montmollin Building was confiscated by the Federal government with the arrival of General Sherman’s forces in December 1864. Space in the building was then provided to Savannah’s African American community, and here in 1865 the

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<sup>7</sup> Sheehy, Barry, Cindy Wallace, and Vaughnette Goode-Walker, *Savannah: Brokers, Bankers, and Bay Lane, Inside the Slave Trade. Volume 2 Civil War Savannah* (Austin, TX: Emerald Book Co., 2012), 1, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Wells, Thomas Anderson, *The Slave Ship Wanderer* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1967), 28; “The Wanderer,” *Daily Morning News* (14 December 1858); “The Late Explosion,” *Daily Morning News* (11 June 1859); “The Wanderer: a finding aid,” National Archives Southeast Region, available online at: <https://www.archives.gov/files/atlanta/finding-aids/wanderer.pdf> (last accessed 24 February 2023); Rohrer, Katherine, “Wanderer,” *New Georgia Encyclopedia* (last modified 24 September 2020), available online at: <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/wanderer/> (last accessed 26 June 2023).

<sup>9</sup> “Notice. The subscriber continues business...,” *Daily Morning News* (30 September 1859); “For Sale. – Thirty negroes...,” *Daily Morning News* (30 September 1859); Hall, Jefferson, “From Slave House to School House: Rediscovering the Bryan Free School,” *Fact-checking Savannah’s History* (3 September 2019), available online at: <https://savannahhistory.home.blog/2019/09/03/from-slave-house-to-school-house-rediscovering-the-bryan-free-school/> (last accessed 16 February 2023) (hereafter Hall-School).

Savannah Educational Association (SEA)<sup>10</sup> opened one of Savannah's first legal Black schools, the Bryan School. As historian Jefferson Hall wrote, "From slave house to school house, this building stands as a testament to the very best—and the very worst—of the African-American experience in Savannah."<sup>11</sup>

Less than two weeks after Union forces entered Savannah, local Black leaders, including Reverend William J. Campbell, Reverend Ulysses L. Houston, and Reverend James D. Lynch (an African Methodist Episcopal minister from Baltimore who was an agent of the American Missionary Association), were called to a meeting at First African Baptist Church by cotton shipper Abraham Burke during which they organized the SEA "to establish schools for the improvement of its people, and to raise money to support them."<sup>12</sup> Reverend John Cox, pastor of Second African Baptist Church, was appointed chairman of the Association, James Porter secretary, and Reverend Houston, pastor of First Bryan Baptist Church, treasurer. Reverend John W. Alvord, secretary of the American Tract Society, Reverend Lynch, and John French administered an examination and certified ten local Black teachers. SEA opened two schools around January 10, 1865, Bryan School and Oglethorpe School (in the Stiles house), with about 500 students combined. The schools were initially supported entirely by the local Black community, and in its first year SEA collected and spent \$900 for educational purposes.<sup>13</sup>

In a letter to *The National Freedman* on January 4, 1865, Reverend Lynch, who had arrived in Savannah following the entry of Sherman's army, reported on the establishment of the SEA, "We have organized an Association called the Savannah Educational Association, composed of the pastors and members of the colored churches... Hundreds of the colored people are joining the Association as honorary members." He also stated they had secured from the Federal government the use of three buildings, including: "'A. Bryan's Negro Mart' (thus reads the sign over the door). It is a larger three-story brick building. In this place slaves had been bought and sold for many years. We have found many 'gems' such as handcuffs, whips and staples for tying, etc. Bills of sales of slaves by the hundreds all giving a faithful description of the hellish business. This we are going to use for school purposes."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The Savannah Educational Association was sometimes referred to as the Savannah Education Association or the Colored Educational Association.

<sup>11</sup> Hall-School; Perdue, Robert E., *The Negro in Savannah, 1865-1900* (New York: Exposition Press, 1973), 72.

<sup>12</sup> Hoskins, Charles Lwanga, *Yet with a Steady Beat: Biographies of Early Black Savannah*. (Savannah: The Gullah Press, 2001), 168 (hereafter Steady Beat).

<sup>13</sup> Washington, Austin D., "The Savannah Education Association, 1865-1867," *Faculty Research Edition of The Savannah State College Bulletin*, Volume 26, No. 2 (December 1972), 107; Hoskins, Charles Lwanga, *Out of Yamacraw and Beyond: Discovering Black Savannah* (Savannah: The Gullah Press, 2002), 115 (hereafter Out of Yamacraw); Harris, Leslie M. and Daina Ramey Berry, eds., *Slavery and Freedom in Savannah* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 151, 154, 174; Steady Beat, 168-169; Perdue, 72; Hoskins, Charles Lwanga, *W. W. Law and His People: A Timeline and Biographies* (Savannah: The Gullah Press, 2013), 45 (hereafter Law and His People); Using an inflation calculator, \$900 in 1865 would be equivalent to \$16,792.29 in 2023, inflation calculator available online at: <https://www.in2013dollars.com/us/inflation/1865?amount=900> (last accessed 26 June 2023).

<sup>14</sup> James T. Lynch to *The National Freedman*, January 4, 1865, as transcribed in Hall-School.

Rufus Mead, Jr., a member of the Fifth Regiment, Connecticut Volunteer Company, wrote of the efforts to establish educational opportunities in the region when he compared Savannah's progress with that of nearby Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, "They commence a school for freedom here [Savannah] tomorrow on a plan similar to that at Hilton Head. I believe I will learn more of its plan if we stay. It is to be in the Old 'Slave Mart'."<sup>15</sup>

The *Savannah Daily Herald* reported on the progress of the new school in March 1865: "The Bryan School House – This large and commodious building, corner of St. Julian and Barnard streets, west of the market, at the present time used as a school house for the colored citizens of Savannah, has a very interesting history connected within its walls. It was built about fifteen years since by John S. Montmollin, a trader in slaves. His death occurred about seven years ago by the explosion of the boiler of the steamer *John G. Lawton*, his head and upper extremities lodging in the mud; in this condition he was found, and brought to this city and buried. His property then fell into the possession of Alexander Bryan, who until a few days prior to the occupation of Savannah by the Federals used the premises as a jail and office for the barter and sale of slaves. The building, it is certain, will never again be used for a slavetrader's office, but it should be kept for the purpose of educating the black race, and not to sell them."<sup>16</sup> Just a few days later, the *Savannah Republican* noted the "earnestness and avidity with which these liberated people seek information. All manifest a desire to learn."<sup>17</sup>

The Bryan School hosted as many as 450 students in one session with James Porter serving as principal of the school. Porter, born in Charleston, South Carolina to free parents (his mother having purchased her freedom), arrived in Savannah in 1856 to teach music at St. Stephen's Protestant Episcopal Colored Church. He established a clandestine school for Blacks under the cloak of his tailoring business. Porter became one of the most prominent figures within the freedmen community and was among the twenty Savannah Black leaders Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton met with on January 12, 1865 at the Green-Meldrim House. He was elected to the Georgia State Legislature in 1870 and would later serve as principal of the West Broad Street School from 1872-1878.<sup>18</sup>

The *Savannah Republican* reported on a public exhibition held at the Bryan School on July 11, 1865, during which the newspaper had the opportunity to view the school's and students' progress:

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<sup>15</sup> Washington, 107.

<sup>16</sup> "The Bryan School House," *Savannah Daily Herald* (20 March 1865), 2.

<sup>17</sup> Perdue, 73.

<sup>18</sup> Steady Beat, 164-165; Perdue, 47; "Minutes of an interview between the Colored Ministers and Church Officers at Savannah with Secretary of War and Major-Gen. Sherman," Savannah, Georgia (12 January 1865), as transcribed by the Freedmen and Southern Society Project, available online at <http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/savmtg.htm> (last accessed 28 February 2023).

*...we attended the examination of the Bryan School yesterday forenoon, and as this was our first visit to the Free Colored Schools, we felt it incumbent upon us to tell our readers what we saw while there... The Bryan School is one of the two free schools established by the Colored Educational Association of Savannah... The Bryan School is now held in the large hall formerly occupied as a slave mart... we found a very orderly assemblage of some three hundred and fifty children, between the ages of seven and seventeen years, all very neatly clad, and every pupil paying strict attention to their teachers, who were propounding various questions in the different studies. Upon the platform we noticed Maj. Manning, Superintendent of Public Schools, Mr. J. F. Cann, Assistant Superintendent, Capt. A. P. Ketchum, of Gen. Saxton's Staff, Lieut. Hall, of Brig. Gen. Davis's Staff, Rev. A. L. Houston, and Messrs. A. Burke and D. Harris of the Educational Association... Mr. Porter proceeded to conduct the examination, and we must express ourselves astonished at the great proficiency manifested in the various branches of high school studies. Exercises in grammar, ancient and modern history, orthography, geography, arithmetic, elocution, singing and declamation were excellent, and considering the short time the scholars have studied, they exhibited marvelous aptitude for the complete mastery of the most difficult studies.... The exercises were interspersed with singing, into which the children entered with a lively spirit, seemingly throwing their little souls in the National anthem... It was a pleasing picture that will long live in the memory of all who were present—this free school exhibition in a hall which not many months since resounded with the cries of the slave dealer as the auctioneer cried down men, women and children, to the highest bidder....”<sup>19</sup>*

Unfortunately, the SEA's autonomy was short-lived. Despite a strong start, the SEA had to appeal to the American Missionary Association (AMA)<sup>20</sup> for funding and soon the AMA co-opted control of the local schools started by the SEA. By 1866, Reverend Magill<sup>21</sup> and “the American Missionary Association had gained control of the schools and reduced the Savannah Education[al] Association to mere auxiliary' status.” E. A. Cooley, Superintendent of Freedmen's Schools, reported in the *Savannah Daily Herald* in March 1866 on the six “colored schools of Savannah,” including “the Bryan school at its school room, west of the Market.” However, the student population was moved before the end of the year to another school site with better accommodations.<sup>22</sup> Even with the short life of the Bryan School, it has been held up as “the

<sup>19</sup> “Exhibition of the Bryan School,” *Savannah Republican* (12 July 1865).

<sup>20</sup> The AMA was an interdenominational abolitionist organization working to assist freedmen in the south. In January 1865, the AMA opened a school in Wesley Chapel utilizing AMA teachers. The AMA soon moved to the Massie School to accommodate an increasing student population. (Source: Harris and Berry, 174)

<sup>21</sup> Reverend S. W. Magill was a white Georgia native and superintendent of AMA schools. (Source: Harris and Berry, 174)

<sup>22</sup> *Savannah Daily Republican* (19 April 1865) as recorded in Steady Beat, 170; Harris and Berry 169, 174; Law and His People, 46; “Schools,” *Savannah Daily Herald* (28 March 1866), 3.

beginning of colored schools in the new era of Georgia<sup>23</sup> during a pivotal first year of Black freedom when “at least 8,000 formerly enslaved African Americans” enrolled in schools across the state, many of them supported directly through their local African American communities, similar to the Bryan School.<sup>24</sup>

While the use of the Montmollin Building for a school was short-lived, its transition from slave mart to free school was symbolic and powerful; “in 1865 it was one of the most important buildings in Savannah. It marked an end; it marked a beginning... Once a slave brokerage, by 1865 it had been turned from a site of enslavement into a place of enlightenment.” Today, the site continues to serve as reminder and symbol of “a local ‘freedom’ organization born in the turmoil of the Civil War as an effort of Savannah blacks to manifest their freedom.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Wright, Richard R., *A Brief Historical Sketch of Negro Education in Georgia* (Savannah, GA.: Robinson Printing House, 1894), 16, 18.

<sup>24</sup> Butchart, Ronald, "Freedmen's Education during Reconstruction," *New Georgia Encyclopedia* (last modified 16 September 2020), available online at <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/freedmens-education-during-reconstruction/> (last accessed 7 June 2023).

<sup>25</sup> Hall-School; Washington, 110.