

Bell, Bettie Massingale
352 N. Ann St.
Mobile, Alabama

Francois Ludgere Diard
Writer
April 14, 1939

The second house from Basil Street on North Ann Street is known as No. 352. It is a well built cottage of three rooms. These three rooms are approximately 14 feet by 12 feet. The two rooms on the north are built one behind the other, and on the north side of these a narrow hall runs the full length of the house, which is divided at the front to form a small entrance or reception hall, which is entered from the front gallery. This hallway has three windows on the north and door opening onto the back gallery or porch. The third room on the south is built between these two rooms and serves as a wing to the house. It has a window and front door that open into the flower garden. The front room has two long windows opening on the front gallery. To the south side of the house a driveway runs to the back yard. While the whole cottage is in good condition, built when good lumber was cheap, it needs a couple of coats of paint. The lot on which the cottage is built is approximately fifty feet front and one hundred and fifty in depth. The soil of the lot is rich and dry. In the front yard are growing a hydrangea bush on the south side of the front steps and a large poke-berry bush, ready to blossom out, on the north side of the front steps. On the gallery is growing a wisteria vine loaded with purple blossoms. The main stalk and larger branches of this vine are about the size of a man and child' arms, respectively. To the front of the yard next to the front fence is a large white prim-rose, the flower of which is about the size of a saucer, with a heavy yellow center. Several of the trailing branches of this fine rose bush have been embedded in the dirt and stones placed on them to

hold them down in case of strong winds so they will root. Next to the prim-rose bush is a clump of flowering wild peach in full bloom. To the south of the front yard and close to the fence dividing the next door neighbor's yard is a chinaberry tree.

In this three room cottage resides Aunt Bettie Massingale Bell, an ex-slave, with her daughter Mary Jane, who is single. The latter received me at the door when I called, and asked me my mission in a polite manner; and when I told her I wanted to talk to Aunt Bettie Bell, she asked me into the small reception hall and placed a rocking chair for me to sit in. The door leading from the front room to the reception hall was open. This front room was used as a bed-room, which was neatly but plainly furnished. The bed, which was a double white iron bed, had on it spotless bed clothes and four day pillows with slips worked in a red and blue flower design. In this room was also a wardrobe, a washstand with bowl and pitcher, two trunks, a closet, and several chairs, one of which was a large armed rocker. On the walls were several pictures of both scenes and members of the family. A square wooden clock and several small and large vases stood on the mantel, from which a fringed scarf was draped. I did not see into the room back of this, which I presume was used as the kitchen, nor did I see into the wing room on the south. I could see, however, all the way through the main hall continuing from the little reception or front hall. This hallway like the little reception hall had several chairs and a table on the north side between the two windows. The door leading from the front reception hall to the main hallway was hung with heavy curtains divided and pulled to either side of the door for

convenience in passing without having to pull the curtains aside.

As Aunt Bettie Bell took some minutes to enter, her daughter Mary Jane said from the back hall:

"My mother will be in to see you in a minute."

I presumed the old ex-slave, who is a woman verging her middle eighties, was still in bed when I called, for it was about 8:30 o'clock.

When Aunt Bettie Bell, who is of dark brown complexion, did make her appearance, she said: "Let's go out on de gallery whar dere's plenty light an' sunshine, if yer don't min', young marster."

I consented, and we both went out on the front gallery, Aunt Bettie Bell seating herself in a rocker, while I sat on the top row of the front steps.

"Dis is goin' to be a pretty day I b'lieves," said Aunt Bettie Bell. "Young marster, why don't yer cum up here an' sit on dis here bench by de windows."

I told her I was very comfortable on the steps, and preferred sitting there as I could put my pad down on the gallery to make writing my notes down much easier.

"Yer sees, young marster, mah husban' bo't dis lot frum Mr. Bixler here in Mobile, an' Mr. Sutton who run de grocery store down dere at de corner of Lyons and Ann Street built de house, an' we hab been livin' here fur 'bout twenty-five years or mo' now, I s'pose. Mah husban' died here, an' mah daughter Mary Jane wid who I lives, an' mah son Allan who libs up North, wuz both raised right here. I wuz born mahself in Monroe County on de Massingale plantation not far frum

Claiborne. Mah Mudder was Susan Massingale and mah Fader was Jim Massingale. Dey had five chil'en. De oldest of dese wuz named Allan, an' when mah boy cum along I calls him Allan, too, af'er both of dem. De next chile of mah Mudder and Fader wuz Jane, named af'er Marster John Massingale's pretty daughter. Den cum me who dey named Bettie; den cum Henry, an' den de baby who dey calls General Beauregard af'er de Confederate general. I must hab been eight or nine years at de 'mancipation of de slave caze I wuz a good size gal when de Yankees cum thro'.

"De Massingale homestead on de plantation wuz a great big one-story wooden house wid a great hall in de middle of it an' on both sides wuz five or six great big rooms. Both back an' front de gallery wuz wide an' had big colyums an' wide stone steps dat run 'cross de full front of de house. Dis here main house wuz sho' furnished wid mighty pretty furniture, an' in ebery room dere wuz brass dog irons what had tu be shined an' polished every day dat cum till de folks could see demselves in de knobs. I 'members de logs dey burn'd in dose open fireplaces wuz cut six an' seven feet long an' had tu be dried out in de smoke house. In de livin' room dey kept a pot of water b'iling all de time in de winter months. All de water dat wuz used on de plantation, both in de main house an' de quarters, wuz got frum de sweet spring near de branch. Marster Massingale had dis spring all boxed in an' it wuz jes' as clear as glass.

"'Round de main house wuz built a white picket fence, an' ebery two weeks de slaves had tu whitewash dis fence an' keep it jes' like

sno'. In de front wuz de flow'r garden, an' at de bac' wuz de chicken yard, de barns, de smoke house, de loom room whar de slaves made de clothes, an' den de slave quarters. Dere wuz 'bout fifty slave cabins in de quarters. I 'members sum of dese wuz built of brick up tu de roof an' den de roof wuz cobered wid wide shingles made by de slaves wid de han's. All 'round de white fence 'roun' de main house wuz de fields, whar cotton wuz mos'ly raised wid sum vegetables, an' way down in de slope of a hill wuz de hog pens an' two big barns whar dey kilt de hogs an' stored de hay an' fodder. Mah Fader wucked mos'ly in de fields lak de odder slaves, both 'omen and men. Mah Mudder wucked both in de main house an' de fields. Yer sees, young marster, Marster John Massingale wuz sho' good to his slaves. He gib each slave wid a fam'ly a sep'rate piece of groun' tu raise his own stuff on, an' Marster John Massingale allers tuck dere stuff dat dey raised to Clai-borne whar he allers tuck his cotton tu sell an' ship on de steamboats.

"De slaves of de Massingales had all dey wanted tu wear an' eat. Ebery one wuz gib a task tu do, an' when he finished de day wuz his tu be free. Marster Massingale had no oberseers or drivers. All of his slaves wuz true an' faithful an' he trusted dem. I 'members as a lil gal many's de times I'd hold de cotton stran's fur makin' de cloth. Miss Jane Massingale, de Marster's daughter, wuz gen'rally de weaver. Mah Mudder, too, wuz good at makin' two an' three color'd cloth by putting diff'rent color'd thread on de shuttles. Dis thread was dyed wid cochineal an' indigo, also sum kin' of root dat made a yellow an' a brown color wid sertan ways of fixin' it. Dese colors wud hold fast

if de thread wuz b'iled first in salt water. When dis striped and solid color'd cloth wuz woven eben lak Miss Jane an' mah Mudder used tu do it sho'wuz pretty an' made up into nice dresses. I 'members mah Mudder used tu sew so pretty an' kept all her clothes so neat an' white an' starched lak no odder slave cud do dem, Marster John's b'utiful daughter Miss Jane, who wuz de same size as mah Mudder, wud borro' sum of dem tu wear tu a party or a husking bee or tu de barn dance an' festival gib fur de slaves ebery year, er tu de May pole twinin' in de grove. Miss Jane wuz sho' a pretty thing; her hair wuz a rich brown an' hung tu de groun'. Her eyes sparkled jes' lak stars, an' her skin wuz lily white wid a rose on each of her cheeks. She wuz in love wid a fine lokin' young man named Adville Stacey, who she married, an' den cum de war an' he went tu de front an' wuz kilt. Dis sho' put a gloom ober Miss Jane, an' us slaves an' de pickaninnies wud jes' cry an' feel so sorry ebery time she wuz seed cryin'.

"Marster Massingale had two sons, Marion an' Allen. Marion de eldest married a lady named Miss Georgia Wiggins. I hyeard not so long ago dat sum of mah white folks, Walker Massingale, wuz livin' at Browton, in Escambia County. Maybe if I hyeard from him I can git mah age sactly right, an' den maybe I can git mah old age pension.

"I 'members when de Yankees cum through dey tuck all of Marster Massingale's good horses an' lef' dere old ones. Mah Mudder an' Fader stayed at de Massingale plantation for years af'er de Surrender, den mah Fader dies an' mah Mudder bro't me an' sum of de odder chillun tu Mobile. Den she married fur de second time a man named Jim Gainer.

Den when she died -- I 'spect it's been fifty years ago -- us buried her in de Magnolia Cemetery, but I ain't neber been able tu locate her grave since den.

"Marster Massingale made his slaves go to church ebery time dere wuz services. Us went right wid de fam'ly and de odder white folks, an' us set down at one and together. I 'members one of de hymns dey used tu sing. Yer sees, young marster, Miss Jane Massingale allers played de organ fer de congregation tu sing de hymns by. One of dese I 'members wuz:

'I wan't mo' religion
To help me on to God;
Lord, I want mo' religion,
Lord, I want mo' religion,
Lord, I want mo' religion,
To help me on de way.
Religion makes me happy,
Don't you want to go
And leave this world of
Trials and trouble here belo'?"

"I 'members de parson's name was Reveren' Mr. Moore, an' Marster Massingale tuck us down to de branch an' had Mr. Moore baptize us all, an' dey sang dis same hymn, 'I want mo' religion.' I 'members, too, on a summer's night de slaves wud git together in de quarters an' sing altogether 'Old Georgia.' Dis song wuz sho' a pretty thing. De moon wud be cumin' up ober de branch an' as far as folks cud see de lightning

bugs wud flash dere lights, an' de banjos an' de guitars wud bein'
played sof'ly, an' it wuz sho' sweet music. I 'members does words of

OLD GEORGIA

'Return, O god of love, return--
Earth is a tir'sum place;
How long shall we, Thy chillun m'urn
Our absence frum Thy face?

'Let heaven succeed our painful years,
Let sin an' sorro' cease;
An' in propo'tion tu our tears,
So make our joys increase.

'Thy wonders tu Thy servants sho',
Make Thy own wurk complete;
Den shall our souls Thy glory kno',
An' own Thy love wuz great.'

"Anudder song de slaves wud sing late in de evening wuz 'De Old
House at Home.' Dis wuz a pretty song, too. Miss Jane Massingale wud
cum to de slave quarters wid her young com'ny an' j'ine in wid de
slaves. I can see her jes' lak befo' de Surrender. She used tu sho'
sing so sweet an' so high up in her notes, an' she taught de slaves
lots of pretty songs. One of dem wuz, 'I'm sittin' on de Stile, Mary.'

"When Emancipation cum an' de Yankees cum through, Marster Massin-
gale gib orders fur de slaves tu be calm an' quiet, an' when he told
dey dey wuz free tú go, dey didn't want tu leave him but stayed right

dere on de plantation. I can see de old Marster now, he wuz cryin' so hard. I recond I wuz a gal mos' twenty years old when mah mudder brung us here tu Mobile. Sum years af'er I grew up I meets James N. Bell. He wuz a colored man from British Honduras. He sho' cud talk Spanish, an' he wurked on de riber front stevedorin' cotton an' timber an' on de ships. As I told yer befo' he bo't dis here lot an' house. Af'er he died I went out wurkin' days at de dif'rent white folks' houses. I tuck in washin', too. I wurked fur Mrs. Peter Starke a long time. She wuz good tu me. Den de las' folks I wurk fur wuz de Edmund Gaines fam'ly. Dey, too, wuz good tu me.

"Mah son Allan what libs up at de North writes tu me now an' den, but I ain't seed him fur 'bout ten years now. Mah daughter Mary Jane an' mahse'f lib here alone. Mary Jane is a good gal tu me. I jes' felt, young marster, sumbody wuz cumin' tu see me tu'day, fer jes' befo' yer cum I wuz sho' dreamin' I wuz bac' on Marster Massingale's plantation, an' de Reveren' Mr. Moore wuz a-baptizin' de slaves an' dey wuz sho' singin' sweet dat hymn, 'I want more Religion,' when mah daughter woke me up an' said dat a white gen'man wants tu see me."

Name of Interviewed: Bettie Massingale Bell
Ex-Slave

NOTE: A separate sheet should be made out for each member of the family present and taking part in the interview.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

Please set down such details as: posture, color of hair and eyes, complexion, timbre of voice, characteristic gestures, type of clothing, etc. This should be quite full.

Aunt Bettie Massingale Bell is a brown-skin negro woman of about five feet, two and one-half inches tall, and approximately between 85 and 87 years of age. She is fairly active for a woman her age. Her features are rather regular and not broad in nostrils and without high cheek bones like most on slaves of the second and third generation from original slaves to the South. Her hands showed she has done some hard work but her feet were rather small--about a No. 8 shoe, worn a little large for comfort. Aunt Bettie had on a black skirt of some woolen goods stuff and a gray waist mingled with black squares and dots of small size. The sleeves of her waist had cuffs pinned at the flaps with small safety pins. Her head was bare, however, she had a black jet hair comb on the top of her braided knot which was held in place with black hair pins. Her hair still had its original heavy kink in it, and while originally black, was not heavily mingled with gray. A plain gold ring was on one of her left hand fingers. Her voice was [Ed. Note: Sentence and interview break off here]

Name of Interviewed: Bettie Massingale Bell
Widow and Ex-Slave.

ENVIRONMENT

Describe Neighborhood:

The neighborhood of this Life Story is an old Negro residential section of Mobile. Some of the houses date back prior to Civil War times when white families resided in them. These older houses were scattered with fields overgrown between them until the latter 1880's and during the 1890's and even in later years, when the open spaces were made into lots and sold off for building. This immediate neighborhood was formerly the western boundary of the Confederate Camping Grounds and still, though nearly all built over with fairly substantial one and two story cottages, bears the title "Camp Ground." Both Ann and Basil Streets are nicely paved.

Describe House: (How many rooms; how furnished and ornamented; in what order kept, etc). The cottage of Bettie Massingale Bell has three neatly ceiled rooms with walls of plaster, which are approximately 14 by 12 feet each. The long hallway on the north running the full length of the house is partitioned at the front to form a small reception hall. The one front room which I saw into was a bed room neatly furnished. The bed was a double white iron bed with spotless bed clothes and day pillows thereon. The mantel had several vases and a square clock on it, and it was draped with a fringed scarf. There was in the room also a washstand, a wardrobe, two trunks and several chairs, one a rocker. On the walls were several family pictures and pictures of scenes. The front windows had shades and lace curtains.