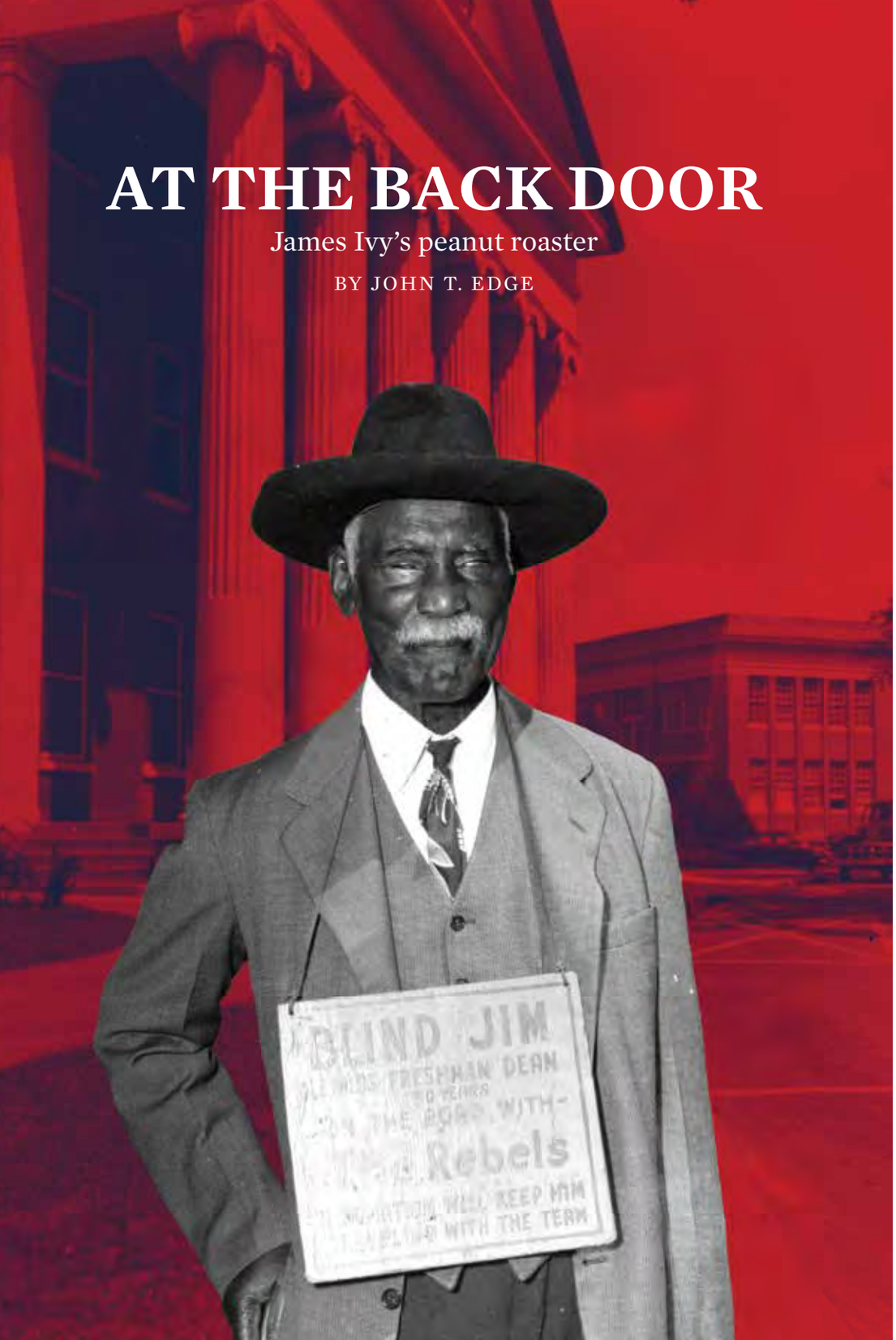
AT THE BACK DOOR

James Ivy's peanut roaster

BY JOHN T. EDGE



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BEFORE HE "TORE VIOLENTLY" A planation, when he was still a teenager, Thomas Sutpen, protagonist of William Faulkner's 1936 novel, *Absalom, Absalom!*, knocked at the plantation house door of a neighbor. A child of poverty whose family had risen to some respectability, Sutpen was rejected by the enslaved man who answered the front door. Sent to the back door, Sutpen was sent reeling. That simple affront compelled him to flee the South for the West Indies, where Sutpen made the fortune with which he would, on his return, do that violence.

On the University of Mississippi campus where I work, the idea of the back door still resonates. A statue of James Meredith, installed in 2006 after then-Chancellor Robert Khayat rejected a public art process led by students and juried by art and museum professionals, stands at the back door of the Lyceum, the columned administration building at the heart of our campus. There is power in Meredith's presence, and subjugation in his rear-guard stance.

Back doors are places of import. Before President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law, black citizens often entered white-owned restaurants in the South through back doors, if they entered at all. On the other end of the spectrum, back doors, screened and otherwise, have long been places of informal welcome in this region, free from the rigid social strictures that define front doors.

Here at Barnard Observatory, the antebellum headquarters of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture and the Southern Foodways Alliance, a collection of rusted metal parts has stood at the back door since the year 2000. You have to know the peculiar history of this University to recognize, in that jumble of metal, the remains of a gas-fired peanut roaster. Once operated by one of the most beloved and complicated figures to walk this campus, the relic was donated to the Center by an alumnus. My friend and colleague Andy Harper, who directs the Southern Documentary Project here, saw the value and meaning in the artifact, moved it from a corral out back to the back door, and made plans to restore the roaster. Years passed.

Lately, the University of Mississippi has installed plaques across campus that contextualize the legacies of slavery. Affixed to the base of the Confederate memorial in 2016, one plaque explains that, although it was erected to "honor the sacrifice of local Confederate soldiers, it must also remind us that the defeat of the Confederacy actually meant freedom for millions of people." A plaque now installed in front of Barnard Observatory explains that enslaved laborers laid the red brick in 1859 for our home.

It's harder to contextualize Jim Crow and the attitudes that took hold in that era. That's because so many of the symbols adopted then are still in use on this campus. In those years, the University came to be called Ole Miss, a term of respect used for the white mistress of the plantation. And the University embraced as its mascot Colonel Reb, a goateed man in Confederate grays.

Alumni and faculty and friends of the University continue to debate the origins of that now-defrocked figure. David Sansing, a retired University of Mississippi history professor, suggests that Colonel Reb may have been based on a man named James Ivy, known on campus as "Blind Jim." To support his thesis, Sansing points to an image of Ivy on the cover of the 1937 yearbook that looks a lot like Colonel Reb.

A black man born to once-enslaved parents, Ivy went blind in his teens and lived much of his adult life on or near the University. On campus he roasted and sold peanuts, ran a concession stand in the Lyceum, and led cheers at sporting events. Ivy became such a beloved figure that Jim Crow–era students often referred to him as the freshman dean.

Depending on their political stance, white Mississippians came to see Blind Jim Ivy as a symbol of positive white-black relations, an icon of University fidelity, or a totem of paternalism. Little has been published about how black Mississippians regard him. When Ivy died in 1955, alumni

> You have to know the peculiar history of the University of Mississippi to recognize that jumble of rusted parts as "Blind Jim" Ivy's peanut roaster.

and students raised money for Blind Jim scholarships that would fund black Mississippi student attendance at black Mississippi colleges. In other words, beginning in the year of his death, one year after the Supreme Court handed down the *Brown* decision, in the same year white Mississippians lynched Emmett Till, white Mississippians co-opted the Blind Jim story to further the segregation of higher education in Mississippi.

Here at Barnard, we collect few Southern artifacts. Instead, the Center and the SFA display photographs from this place. Downstairs, the Center has installed Bill Ferris photographs of Alice Walker in a stylish afro and Eudora Welty behind the wheel of a large American car. Upstairs in the SFA offices, we adopt a similar aesthetic, displaying photos of oral history narrators like Florida oysterman Unk Quick and Chicago restaurant owner Edna Stewart. Now that Blind Jim has come into focus, the SFA's inclination against artifacts may change.

This winter, on the first day of classes, which was also the day after the national Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, Andy Harper and I began texting back and forth about Blind Jim. The next day, we met at the back door of Barnard to survey his old machine. It appeared to be rusted but restorable. In light of the University's recent plaque installations, we asked each other, "What text would best contextualize Blind Jim's peanut machine?" And: "If someone hauled it from the back door and refurbished it and displayed it in, say, the building where the SFA headquarters, what should a plaque relate?"

After we talked, Andy texted to share what he had been thinking, way back when he moved Blind Jim Ivy's peanut machine to safety: "I knew there was a legacy there that should be honored, but I didn't want to be part of the perpetuating the Blind Jim myth and the wrong legacy. And at that time, because of the perceived attack on symbols and heritage...and because of Sansing's assertion that Col. Reb was based on Mr. Ivy...I decided to drop it. But now feels like a pretty good time to address it again...."

I'm with Andy. Now might be just the right time to claim and contextualize this story of the Jim Crow South, to honor Jim Ivy, the person, and to bring this tool of his labor in through the front door for all to see.

John T. Edge is the founding director of the SFA and host of TrueSouth *on the SEC Network/ESPN.*