

BLOODY WOOLFOLK

Published in slightly different form in *The Athens Observer*, p. 20A (November 21, 1990). For additional information on the Woolfolk murder case, see Carolyn DeLoach, *The Shadow Chasers: The Woolfolk Tragedy Revisited* (2000).

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A century ago, Oct. 29, 1890, the man who committed the most horrible and notorious murders in the history of the state of Georgia was publicly executed on the gallows. He killed more persons on a single occasion than any other murderer in America who did not use a gun, explosives, fire, or an automobile. Although he performed his crimes near Macon and was hanged in Perry, the murderer had close ties to Athens, where he was raised. Because the story of these murders is rarely mentioned in books on the history of crime in America and because the story has been almost totally forgotten even here in Georgia, this seems the appropriate time to retell it.

Thomas G. Woolfolk (pronounced Wool-fork) was born in Bibb County near Macon June 18, 1860, on the eve of the Civil War. His parents were Richard F. and Susan M. Woolfolk, who met while Richard was a student at the University of Georgia and married in Athens in 1852, two years before Richard graduated. Born on his father's cotton plantation, Tom Woolfolk was his parents' third child and first son. Shortly after Tom's birth his mother died and Tom was sent to stay with his aunt, Fannie Moore, his mother's sister.

Tom lived with his aunt at her house in Athens for the first seven years of his life, from 1860 to 1867. Fannie, who later married Athens architect John Ross Crane, lived in a house at 716 Prince Avenue which was torn down many years ago, on the site of which there is now a medical arts building parking lot.

Little is known of Tom's childhood in Athens except that he dearly loved his aunt. While Tom was growing up in Athens the city went through the ordeal of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Many times as a child Tom must have ridden in a horse-drawn carriage up and down Prince Avenue as he traveled about the town with his aunt.

In 1866 Tom's father remarried and soon after Tom left Athens to live with his father and new stepmother, Mattie H. Woolfolk, at his father's plantation home near Macon. Tom, who was quarrelsome and irascible by nature, never liked his stepmother; nor did he care for the six children born as a result of his father's remarriage.

Tom's last trips to Athens were in March and June 1887, when he visited his Aunt Fannie. On both occasions he behaved bizarrely: his talk was incoherent, he was insanely suspicious, he paced the floor, and he carried a pistol. It was clear to his aunt that his mental condition had deteriorated, that in fact he was crazy.

Massacre near Macon

Sometime between 2 and 4 a.m. on the morning of Saturday, Aug. 6, 1887, nine persons were

brutally slain at the Woolfolk plantation home near Macon. The victims were Richard F. Woolfolk, then aged 54; his wife Mattie H., aged 41; their six children, Richard F. Jr., 20; Pearl, 17; Annie, 10; Rosebud, 7; Charlie, 5; baby Mattie, 18 months old; and 84-year old Temperance West, a relative of Mrs. Woolfolk from Americus who had been visiting the Woolfolks for several days.

All the victims were killed by being struck in the head or upper body with a short-handled ax that belonged to Tom Woolfolk and was found in one of the rooms. All the victims were found dead in bed, except the two sons, who were lying on the floor of their parents' bedroom, and 10-year Annie, who was kneeling in front of an open window, evidently having tried unsuccessfully to flee her killer.

In the room where the victims lay brain tissue, blood, and gore was all over the beds, walls, and the ceiling. Pools of blood lay on the floor.

The only inhabitant of the home not slain that terrible morning was Tom Woolfolk, who at daybreak sought help from neighbors, claiming that his father's family had been murdered and that he had escaped death only by jumping out a window and fleeing.

He then returned to the house before anyone else got there, confirmed that everyone was dead, and, he said, heard the unknown killers exit the back way, slamming the fence gate behind them. He also washed himself and flung his blood-spattered clothing down the well.

Within hours several thousand people had rushed to the Woolfolk home, and a coroner's inquest was held on the spot.

Suspicion immediately focused on Tom. He admitted that the bloody footprints in the murder room were his; he had specks of blood in his ears; there was a bloody handprint on his leg; he behaved oddly (showing no emotion about the tragedy and appearing more apprehensive than grief-stricken); and his explanation of why he alone had survived seemed unlikely. There was no evidence of forced entry or theft. The coroner's jury therefore concluded that Tom was the murderer, but even before the verdict was rendered the sheriff had hurriedly and quietly conveyed Tom to jail, to prevent the angry crowd from lynching Tom.

The horrible murders were widely publicized in the local and national press; they even made the first page of the New York Times. Understandably, the press coverage at times was lurid. The crime was called "the bloodiest, blackest, chapter in Georgia criminal history," "the most shocking murder ever committed in Georgia," "one of the most heinous crimes committed in this or any other state," a crime "without parallel in the criminal history of the South if not the world," "the bloodiest tragedy in the annals of crime," and "the most ferocious and harrowing crime ever recorded in the annals of civilization."

Tom Woolfolk, as the chief suspect, was described as "the most brutal murderer that ever figured in the annals of our state," "the most notorious criminal of modern times," and even as the "the greatest monster of the age ... the cruelest and [most] bloodthirsty brute on record." Tom was often referred to in the press as "Bloody Woolfolk."

Judicial Proceedings Against Tom Woolfolk

Tom Woolfolk was brought to trial in the Superior Court of Bibb County on a charge of murder in December 1887. He was fortunate to have a dedicated lawyer, John C. Rutherford, who worked without being paid and did everything possible in Tom's behalf, laboring so mightily for his client that he died of exhaustion shortly after Tom's execution.

In the 19th century a Georgia criminal defendant was not allowed to take the stand and testify under oath, but was permitted to make an unsworn statement to the jury. Tom made such a statement, completely denying the crime. No insanity defense was interposed. The case against Tom was circumstantial but the evidence was strong, and Tom's lawyer was unable to pin the blame for the slaughter on anyone else, with the result that Tom was convicted by the jury and sentenced to death.

However, because several courtroom spectators, referring to Tom, had shouted out "Hang him! Hang him!" during the prosecutor's closing arguments, the Georgia Supreme Court ordered a new trial in February 1889.

Due to community hostility, Tom was granted a change of venue and his second trial took place in Perry in the Superior Court of Houston County. The retrial took almost the entire month of June 1889 and resulted in another jury verdict of guilty and another sentence of death.

Incredibly, Rutherford's closing arguments to the jury took 13 hours, as did the closing arguments of the prosecution! The case against Tom was so strong, however, that the jury's deliberation took less than 15 minutes. A year later, in July 1890, the Georgia Supreme Court upheld the sentence.

Tom Woolfolk was hanged in Perry on Wednesday, Oct. 29, 1890 before a crowd of 10,000 people, some of whom munched on possum sandwiches while they watched. Since public hangings were permitted in 1890 only in the discretion of the sentencing judge and since the General Assembly outlawed all public hangings three years later, Tom's hanging was one of the last public executions in this state.

While on the scaffold, literally at death's door, Tom once again affirmed his innocence, disappointing the crowd which had hoped for a last-minute confession. His death was gruesome and painful: the fall through the trapdoor did not break his neck and it took 15 minutes for him to choke to death at the end of the rope.

The Woolfolk Murders 100 Years Later

The only mass murder in Georgia possibly comparable to the Woolfolk case is the mass slaying of six members of the Alday family in Seminole County in 1973. Indeed, there are striking similarities between the Woolfolk and Alday murders.

In both cases the victims were all members of a prominent local family; in both cases the press coverage was extraordinary; in both cases the initial conviction and death sentence was set aside

on appeal; and in both cases the accuseds received a change of venue at the retrial.

Amazingly, Carl Isaacs, the alleged ringleader of the murderers of the Alday family, was, like Tom Woolfolk, retried in Perry, found guilty, and sentenced to death there.

On the other hand, the Aldays were shot rather than axed, and died at the hands of total strangers rather than a relative.

In preparing this article, I decided to visit the graves of some of the persons involved and the sites of the key events in the Woolfolk murder case. I visited the grave of Tom's Aunt Fannie, who is buried in Oconee Hill Cemetery here in Athens. I visited the graves of the nine victims, who are buried in two rows in Rose Hill Cemetery in Macon. The three adults and two older children lie in one row; the four smaller children lie in the second row. Each of the nine graves is topped by a rectangular brick tomb flush with the earth and beginning to show the signs of a century of exposure to the elements.

I also visited the grave of Tom Woolfolk, who is buried near one of his older sisters in Orange Hill Cemetery in Hawkinsville. His tombstone is almost illegible and was recently repaired after being vandalized.

The place where Tom was hanged was the usual place of public execution in those days in Perry. It is a natural valley where Big Indian Creek joins the Fanny Gresham Branch, about a quarter mile west of the Houston County Courthouse. I visited the place October 3. Today the Dr. A. C. Hendrick Memorial Bridge spans the valley, near where Main Street empties into Gen. Courtney Hodges Boulevard. Every day thousands of persons in their cars pass over the bridge, totally unaware of the hangings that used to occur in the valley under the bridge.

The site of the Woolfolk murders is approximately 12 miles west of Macon, several hundred yards south of State Road 74. The late E. Merlton Coulter, the legendary history professor at the University of Georgia who wrote a 41-page article on the Woolfolk murders published in the Georgia Historical Quarterly in 1965, visited the site in April 1964. He discovered nothing was left of the Woolfolk home except ruins.

In August and again in October of this year I made two attempts to locate the site, which lies in a wooded area. I found that houses had been built in the general vicinity of the site, and that still more houses were being built. Although I spent hours tramping through the woods in the vicinity of the home, I was unable to locate the ruins. Not only the house where Georgia's worst murders occurred but even the ruins of the house appear to have vanished from the bosom of the eternal earth.