

## **TRAGIC TALE RECOUNTS**

### **FIRST MURDER ON UGA CAMPUS**

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Nearly three-quarters of a century ago there was a double-slaying, a murder-suicide, in the second-oldest building still standing on the UGA campus. The killings sent ripples of horror through the Athens community. Although both victims were nonstudents visiting Athens, the double-slaying remains to this day the greatest tragedy involving a homicidal crime ever to occur on the UGA campus. The tragic incident has escaped mention in virtually every published history of Athens or the University of Georgia. Indeed, except for contemporary newspaper accounts, there does not appear to be anything in print giving an account of the double-killing.

Between 11 p.m. and midnight on the evening of Tuesday, January 29, 1918, two young persons, neither of whom was a UGA student, were seen conversing in the Manhaton Café, 114 College Ave., the site of which is now occupied by Murphy's bar. They were James E. (Jamie) Johnson, 20 years old, of Jefferson in Jackson County, and 17-year old Belle Hill, also of Jefferson.

The weather that night was, in the words of UGA professor and state climatologist Gayther Plummer, "foul;" it was rainy and cloudy, and the temperature was dropping, reaching 40 degrees F. around midnight.

Shortly after midnight, Jamie Johnson and Belle Hill left the café, walked under gloomy skies to the campus, and ascended the stairs at the rear of Waddel Hall.

Completed in 1821, located on north campus near Jackson St., Waddel

Hall is older than any other UGA building except Old College. Described by UGA history professor Nash Boney as a building “built in the federal style, austere and unpretentious,” Waddel Hall is one of the most historic buildings on campus. Over the years it has been used for many different purposes. In 1918 it was known as the Road Laboratory Building, and was being used as a student dormitory. Since 1977 Waddel Hall has housed the Dean Rusk Center for International and Comparative Law.

On the second floor of Waddel Hall Johnson and Hill knocked on the door of one of the dormitory rooms. In this room were living three UGA students who were also from Jefferson and who were friends of the couple: Tom C. Holliday and Howard D. Dadisman, both 19 years old, and Alva Pendergrass, 20 years old. Johnson and Hill requested and after some discussion received permission to spend the night there, in part because of the miserable weather conditions. The five young persons sat around for awhile and talked, and then they went to bed. After a few minutes, however, Johnson rose from bed and asked for stationery, saying he had to write that night a letter which had been on his mind for some time.

He then sat down at a desk and wrote an eight-paragraph letter to this mother. After completing the letter, which in effect was a suicide note, he took out a loaded pistol, shot and killed Belle Hill, and then shot and killed himself. Both fell onto the floor. The time was between two and three o'clock on the morning of Wednesday, Jan. 30, 1918.

The three students in the room apparently were sleeping at the time of the killings and woke up just as the last shot was being fired. They placed the corpses on beds, called for a doctor, and then went to the New York Café, where they called police. (The New York Café was located at 165-67 W. Clayton St.) Then, accompanied by a doctor and police, the three students returned to the scene of the tragedy. Jamie Johnson's letter to his mother was lying on the desk. The pistol was on the floor.

Around five o'clock that morning the bodies of Jamie Johnson and Belle Hill were taken to Dorsey's funeral parlor (which was located at 447 E. Clayton St.; a musical instruments store now occupies the site).

According to the Athens Banner, newsmen and policemen who assisted the undertaker in carrying the corpses into the undertaking establishment reported that "the bodies of the couple were hardly cold, in fact were as limp as the body of a person asleep."

A medical examination revealed that Belle Hill had one gunshot wound a little to left of the breastbone, with the bullet entering her heart. Jamie Johnson had two gunshot wounds: one of the left side of his breastbone, and one two inches away in the middle of his breastbone. So determined was this young man to perish that he had managed to inflict not one but two mortal wounds on himself.

Around two o'clock in the afternoon the embalmed and coffined bodies were placed on a train and left Athens. The Athens Banner reported that "many curious persons visited the undertaking establishment to view the remains ... before they were taken away."

That curious had flocked to the funeral parlor was not surprising. News of the double-slaying had spread like wildfire throughout Athens, rocking the community. A special edition of the Athens Banner helped trumpet the horrifying news on the day of the killing. The next day the Athens Banner, in a front page story, referred to the slayings as "shocking" and noted that they were "the theme of universal comment and speculation yesterday over the city."

Many false rumors and reports concerning the killings circulated widely by word of mouth during the following week. "The air was full of reports and rumors and speculations," the Athens Banner announced. "Some of the rumors were founded on slight circumstances—and later found to be unfounded in tangible fact."

There were two official investigations into the deaths of Jamie Johnson

and Belle Hill. The first, the coroner's inquest, was conducted on the morning of the killings. After hearing witnesses and examining the corpses, the coroner's jury verdict was simply that "Belle Hill came to her death of a pistol shot in the hands of Jamie Johnson and that he came to his death at his own hands."

The second investigation, by a Clarke County grand jury, took place on Tuesday, February 5. After hearing witnesses, the grand jury issued a report which reached the same conclusion as the coroner's jury verdict: Jamie Johnson had shot and killed Belle Hill and then shot and killed himself. In addition, the grand jury specifically exonerated roommates Holliday, Dadisman, and Pendergrass from any criminal wrongdoing in connection with the deaths of Johnson and Hill.

The letter which Jamie Johnson wrote to his mother shortly before his death was published in the Athens Banner on Friday, February 1. The letter, described by the Athens Banner, as "a document about which there has centered more interest than any other circumstance of the case," is very sad. It is the anguished missive of a most unhappy young man who thinks himself a failure, is resolved to die by his own hand, and wishes to say farewell to life and his loved ones.

The letter reads in part as follows:

"... The country is better off without such cattle [as myself]. I just have the nerve to die before disgracing my good people.

"My burden is so great I can't go on with it any further.

"Well, goodbye dear old Mother, goodbye brother, goodbye dear little sister.

"Well, goodbye to all of my friends."

In a postscript to the letter, Johnson wrote: "Tell all my friends goodbye for me, and tell them I am not crazy—it is nerve ... I hope God will forgive me for doing this good deed for the country."

The heartbreaking letter does not shed light on exactly why it was that Jamie Johnson felt so unworthy and depressed, but it is clearly the letter of a despondent young man on the verge of taking his own life. To that extent the letter explains why Jamie Johnson shot himself.

The letter does not explain, however, why Johnson also took Belle Hill's life, except possibly for an ambiguous passage which may contain a reference to Hill: "... don't lay this trouble on anybody but the one's [sic] that is going to ride the same train that I ride."

Jamie Johnson lies buried today with his parents and family in Woodbine Cemetery in Jefferson. Nearby are the graves of the three roommates in whose dormitory room Johnson died: Tom C. Holliday (who died in 1920), Howard D. Dadisman (who died in 1951), and Alva Pendergrass (who died in 1989).

Belle Hill is buried three miles away, in the graveyard of the Thyatira Presbyterian Church. Like Jamie Johnson, she lies in the family plot. Her tombstone incorrectly gives the date of her death as January 22, 1918. Near the top of her tombstone the word "Hope" is engraved. At the very top of the tombstone is an engraved dove.