

# **REMAINS OF MASS MURDER HOUSE** **FOUND**

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The most atrocious mass murder in the history of the state of Georgia was in 1887 when Tom Woolfolk (pronounced WOOL-FORK) killed nine members of his family with an ax. After two trials and two appeals Tom Woolfolk was publicly executed on the gallows in 1890.

Although they occurred near Macon, the Woolfolk murders had close connections to Athens. One of the victims, Tom Woolfolk's father, was an 1854 graduate of the University of Georgia in Athens; and another victim, Tom's stepmother, was originally from Athens. The murderer had been raised in Athens for the first seven years of his life, and made the last of his frequent visits to Athens just two months before the crimes. A sister of the murderer, as well as his aunt (who now lies buried in Oconee Hill Cemetery), then resided in Athens. The murderer's chief defense counsel was an Athens lawyer.

The Woolfolk murders were committed inside the Woolfolk family farmhouse on what was then an 867 acre plantation in rural Bibb county, several miles west of Macon and several hundred yards south of what is now State Road 74 (popularly referred to as the Thomaston Road), in 1887 known as the Culloden Road.

After the terrible event the farmhouse appears to have been unoccupied for a time, and then to have been sold. In 1909 it appears the house was briefly occupied and used as the offices of an automobile club. Thereafter the house was again vacant, and may have been damaged by fire.

In 1964 legendary UGA history professor E. Merton Coulter visited the site of the Woolfolk murder house and found only ruins.

By the early 1990's, years after Coulter's death, scholars studying the Woolfolk murder case believed that all remains of the murder house had vanished. One scholar even suggested the possibility that the site of the killings was now beneath the waters of a man-made reservoir.

Twice--in August 1990 and October 1990--I drove to Bibb county, attempting to locate the site of the murder house. On the second attempt I was taken to a wooded area near State Road 74 by a descendant of the Woolfolk victims who gave me an interview and also graciously offered to point out to me the general location where she thought the house had been situated.

Although I spent several hours laboriously walking and clambering through hundreds of square yards of thickly wooded and brush-filled hilly terrain, I failed to find any sign of the murder house. I even published an article that year flatly stating that the remains of the house had vanished forever into bosom of the earth.

I was wrong. The remains of the murder house still exist, and I have now recently visited them.

Thanks to the kindness of several persons--and they will remain anonymous, out of respect for their privacy--who are familiar with the part of Bibb county west of Macon, I was conducted to the ruins of the murder house on Saturday, February 10, 1996. On my visit I was accompanied by Mr. Ed Green, Jr., an expert authority on crime history who has extensively researched the Woolfolk case.

During my visit I discovered that since Coulter's visit 32 years ago the site remains recognizable, but that the ruins have generally deteriorated and that the woods and vegetation and the ravages of time are steadily erasing all traces of the murder house.

Some of the photographs I took during my visit are now published for the first time. I have also prepared a chronology of the Woolfolk case.

I extend my deepest thanks to those wonderful persons from Bibb county who were kind enough to contact me and show me that, contrary to my previous belief, the remains of the tragic house in which nine human beings were slaughtered 109 years ago do, in fact, still exist.

## **WOOLFOLK MURDER CASE CHRONOLOGY**

### **June 18, 1860**

Thomas George Woolfolk is born in the Woolfolk family farmhouse west of Macon, in Bibb county, the third child and only son of Richard F. Woolfolk, of Macon, and Susan Moore Woolfolk, of Athens in Clarke county. Shortly after

his birth Tom Woolfolk's mother dies and is buried under a holly bush planted less than a hundred feet from the Woolfolk farmhouse.

### **1860-1867**

Tom Woolfolk resides in Athens, being raised in the care and custody of his deceased mother's sister, aunt Fannie Moore Crane, who appears to have lived on either Pulaski St. or Prince Ave. In 1867, on the remarriage of his father, Tom Woolfolk moves back to live with his father and new stepmother in the Woolfolk family farmhouse in Bibb county.

### **June 1887**

Tom Woolfolk pays the last of his many visits to Athens, staying with his Aunt Fannie. His bizarre, insane behavior attracts attention.

### **August 6, 1887**

In the early morning hours of this Saturday nine persons are slain with an ax in the Woolfolk family farmhouse near Macon. The only inhabitant of the house not slain is Tom Woolfolk, who seeks help from a neighbor and claims to have struggled with unknown intruders and to have escaped alive only by jumping through a window.

The nine victims are: Richard F. Woolfolk, 54, Tom Woolfolk's father; Mattie Woolfolk, 41, Richard's wife and Tom Woolfolk's stepmother; their six children (2 boys, 4 girls)--Richard, Jr., 20; Pearl, 17; Annie, 10; Rosebud, 7; Charlie, 5; and baby Mattie, 18 months old; and 84-year old Mrs. Temperance West, an aunt of Mrs. Woolfolk paying a visit.

The murder weapon, a short handled ax, smeared with hair and blood, is found in one of the rooms of the house. Witnesses say they saw Tom Woolfolk making baskets with it the previous day.

An inquest is held at the scene of the crime.

Tom Woolfolk is arrested for murder and taken to the county jail in Macon.

### **August 7, 1887**

The nine victims are buried in two rows (their graves later topped by red brick overlays) in Rose Hill Cemetery in Macon. Sometime during this day the Woolfolk farmhouse well is dragged by the sheriff, and a bloody shirt and pair of drawers belonging to Tom Woolfolk are found.

**December 1887**

Indicted on nine counts of murder, Tom Woolfolk goes on trial for the murder of his father in Macon in the Superior Court of Bibb county. His lead attorney is an Athens lawyer, John C. Rutherford.

**February 10, 1888**

After 12 minutes of deliberation, Tom Woolfolk is found guilty by the trial jury, and he is then sentenced to death by the judge.

**February 11, 1889**

The Georgia Supreme Court reverses Tom Woolfolk's murder conviction and death sentence, giving as reasons: (1) the trial court had allowed the introduction of certain inadmissible incriminating evidence, and (2) certain courtroom spectators, referring to Tom Woolfolk, had angrily cried out, "Hang him! Hang him! Hang him!" during the prosecutor's closing arguments, and the trial judge had done nothing.

**June 3, 1889**

Tom Woolfolk's retrial for the murder of his father begins in the Superior Court of Houston county in Perry.

**June 25, 1889**

After 45 minutes of deliberation, the trial jury convicts Tom Woolfolk of murder, and he is again sentenced to death.

**July 28, 1890**

The Georgia Supreme Court affirms Tom Woolfolk's murder conviction and death sentence.

**October 29, 1890**

At 1:30 p.m. on this Wednesday Tom Woolfolk is hanged in front of a crowd of 10,000 spectators in Perry. The same day Tom's body is buried in Orange Hill Cemetery in Hawkinsville in Pulaski county.

**1909**

After being vacant for years, in 1909 the Woolfolk murder house becomes for a short while the headquarters of the Macon Auto Club. Thereafter, the house again becomes vacant and appears at some later time to have burnt.

**April 16, 1964**

UGA professor E. Merton Coulter visits the site of the ruins of the Woolfolk murder house, finding only "two large piles of brick and stones, marking the

chimney places; a depression, appearing to have been the cellar; a well nearly filled up near a cedar tree; some shrubbery; and a large holly tree, marking the site where Susan M. Woolfolk, Richard's first wife, was buried."

### **1990-1994**

Published articles [Wilkes, ``Bloody Woolfolk," The Athens Observer, p. 20A (Nov. 21, 1990); Gray-White, ``The Terrible Woolfolk Murders," North Georgia Journal, p. 60 (Summer 1994)] on the Woolfolk murder case erroneously state that no remains of the Woolfolk murder house are extant.

### **February 10, 1996**

UGA law professor Donald E. Wilkes, Jr., and crime history expert Ed Green, Jr. are taken to, examine, and photograph the ruins of the Woolfolk murder house.

## **The Photographic Record**



**Prof. Wilkes standing next to the remains of the well of the Woolfolk farmhouse where the murders occurred.**



**Another view of the remains of the well of the Woolfolk farmhouse.**



**The terrain around the site of the Woolfolk farmhouse.**



The tree beneath which Susan M. Woolfolk, Tom Woolfolk's mother, is buried.



**Remains of a farmhouse chimney.**