

WAR, ON THE ST. FLORIAN LAND LAUDERDALE COUNTY, ALABAMA

By Odette [Rasch] Howard

"This land is your land... This land is my land.... This land was made for you & me..

**WILSON, JOHNS. BORN NEAR FINCASTLE, VIRGINIA
DEC. 3, 1789 DIED SABBATH NIGHT
APRIL 30, 1865 While sick and nursed by his
Nephew M.H. Wilson
They were cruelly tortured
& murdered by robbers**

A fairly new brick wall, encloses the antebellum family cemetery, stately in its disrepair. About 150 feet square, the enclosure contains valuable engravings recording the history of a plantation that lasted almost 50 years on this site. According to the marker, a number of slaves are buried here adjoining the south wall of the Wilson Cemetery.

It's a steep climb to the formal cemetery, up a perfectly shaped hill, smaller than the many Indian Burial Mounds in the area. One wonders if the burial site for the white and black settlers might have been chosen because of a connection to ancient Indians who lived and died on that land.

On a beautiful April afternoon of the year 2004, a dozen St. Florian folks paid their respects to the plantation cemetery. The small burial ground stands in mark contrast to the large sprawling Catholic cemetery located less than a mile away, in which the parents, grandparents and great-grandparents of those April visitors are buried. It has been in use for over 125 years. The beautifully groomed Catholic cemetery contains the history and graves of German families and their descendants, who bought the land sold by the Wilson survivors.

Although they came from places with northern names like Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin, the newcomers did not meddle in the local politics, and thus avoided the "carpet bagger" label. Devoting themselves to their own small farms and businesses, they were on reasonably good terms with their new neighbors, despite the horrors of the "reconstruction era".

As the visitors made their careful way down the hill, one young man in the party evoked hearty laughter as he let out the vibrant "Rebel Yell". His granddaddy and family of that generation fought in the Confederate Army. He treated the group to his familiar comment: "The Yankees won the war, but we whopped 'em, by God"

In the old Wilson Cemetery just a few miles south of the state of Tennessee, and a few miles north of the Tennessee River, an impressive ancient tombstone records two violent deaths, adding to the senseless toll of over half a million lives lost during the great American struggle. That cruel war had essentially ended three weeks earlier on April 9 of 1865 when Robert E. Lee surrendered his army at Appomattox, VA. Less than a week later Abraham Lincoln was assassinated April 14, 1865. Two weeks after that, life ended for two men named Wilson. Had the telegraph informed Wilson's killers of national events that would affect the life of every American? Did the killers ride forth to take advantage of the hiatus between the old law and whatever would come next? Had the 76-year old Wilson heard the news? His nephew Matthew was 49 the day they both died.

In 1825 when the Wilsons came to Alabama from Virginia, the United States of America

were referred to with the plural verb: a group of states who were separate entities. The nation was only 50 years old, made up of states who had willingly joined the federal government, and believed they could as easily leave that union. The language changed after the war when the Union was affirmed. Since then, our country is referred to in the singular The United States is.

In 1825 high on his isolated Monticello mountaintop, in Virginia, Thomas Jefferson, the third president of those United States lay dying. His correspondence with the second US president, John Adams, foretells the future war over the role of people of color. The lives of both men would end on July 4, 1826, peacefully in their own homes, surrounded by servants and family. They were bitterly aware of the unresolved issue of slavery, but unable to resolve the problem during their lifetime. Thomas Jefferson's will would free his trusted body servant, Burwell, several members of the Hemming family, and all the children of his slave, Sally Hemming, who was his first wife's half-sister and Jefferson's concubine. The old man was bankrupt. All his property including more than 100 slaves had been mortgaged to build the magnificent Monticello home. The slaves and the house were sold in 1828.

In the spring of 1825 the Wilson families left Virginia for the six-year old state of Alabama. That same year the young state received a prominent visitor. General Marquis de LaFayette. After his final visit to Monticello, (P. 465, Brodie, Faun M., "Trios. Jefferson, Intimate History". McLeod. Toronto, 1974) the French general, traveled southward, accompanied by his son and a secretary. The party crossed the Chattahoochee river into the Creek Indian nation, later to become part of Alabama. The 68-year old nobleman was escorted by a hundred shouting Indians and two troops of state militia, on their trip across the Indian nation before setting foot on what was then Alabama soil. Governor Israel Pickens welcomed him to Montgomery, which had been established in 1819.

No such fanfare greeted the Wilson party, journeying that same year by wagon train from Virginia. Three Wilson brothers with their wives and children made the trip, along with assorted slaves and livestock. In 1825 John and Anna Wilson's children were the 17-year old John C. Wilson, the 2-year old Matthew, and the newborn baby, Anna, born in Madison County, which could have been in Alabama. One more son, Matthew, would be born in 1827 in Lauderdale County.

Forty years later, when Old Mr. Wilson was killed, he had been widowed for almost seven years. His wife and four children had all preceded him to what is now a serene place of rest, located on a small hill off the Plantation Springs Road, which exits on "the Middle Road", County Road 61, Lauderdale County, Alabama.

Anna Brewer Wilson (Mrs. John S.) was born in Westmorland County, Virginia, on May 29, 1793. She died at the age of 65, on May 24, 1858, six years, eleven months and six days before her husband.

In 1841, their son John Randolph Wilson, age 18, born 1823, died at LaGrange College. This school was later Wesleyan Methodist College, according to the marker in front of the old Wesleyan building at the University of North Alabama in Florence. He was a little boy, five years old, when the transfer of Indians to Western reserve lands began. Chattanooga was used as a gathering point before they set out through Alabama on their "Trail of Tears". Perhaps the little boy saw the dispirited Indians being driven through Alabama. The Indians could have included some of the men who had escorted Lafayette during his 1825 visit to Alabama. Lafayette's 2-day trek through what was then the Creek Nation included crossing a flooded area, where two lines of Indians stood waist deep in water with interlocked elbows to protect the procession's transit across the flood-swollen swamp. (According to "Alabama Mounds to Missiles", page 86, by Helen Adams and Virginia Brown. The Strode Publishers, Huntsville, AL, 1962)

In 1849, The Wilsons lost their 24-year old daughter, Anne Elizabeth Wilson Turner, born in

1825. Then in 1854, their 27-year old son, Matthew T. Wilson, born 1827, passed away at age 27. He was their only child born in Lauderdale County. Two years later, in 1856, John Wilson's son, John C. F. Wilson, was buried. He was 48 years old, born in 1808. Wilson's wife, Anna Brewer Wilson, died two years later. Luckier than her husband, she missed the war entirely.

"John Brown's Body Lies a-moulderin' in the grave.. "

In 1856 in Kansas, Ole' John Brown made his first attempt to start the Civil War. Two years later, Anna Brewer Wilson died. Brown was hanged at Harper's Ferry, Maryland, on December 2, 1859.

In October of 1859, Lt. Colonel Robert E. Lee, leading a troop of Union soldiers, put down the John Brown insurrection at Harper's Ferry where Brown and his sons had expected to lead the slaves in revolt against their masters. All of which has nothing to do with the life and death of Anna Brewer Wilson. However, it had a great deal to do with the end of the culture in which she lived.

The historical marker describing the Wilson slave cemetery gives this information about the struggle and murder of the Wilson plantation owners:

"Christopher Brewer, a freedman was with John Wilson...(and) was wounded but survived to lead the Wilson heirs to where the family valuables were buried."

Traditionally, the slave population had no last names. One could assume that the family of Mrs. Anna Brewer Wilson at one time owned the family of the faithful servant, Christopher Brewer.

Around 1934, when the author was a very young child living in Lauderdale County, our family hired Molly Brewer, a highly respected woman of color, for about one month during the serious illness of the author's mother, Marie H. Rasch. "Aunt Molly", later worked for other families in the St Florian community, and is buried in the St. Florian Catholic cemetery, along with her son James. Both she and her son had been converted to the Catholic faith around 1940.

In 1872 the expansive Wilson plantation was sold to an order of Catholic monks, the Benedictines, who, in turn, sold plots to families of German descent. Their descendants make up the majority of the inhabitants in the town of St Florian in northern Alabama, 13 miles south of the State of Tennessee.

The Wilson story passed into the folklore of the region, becoming part of "The Glorious Lost Cause", the saga recounting the glory days of the confederacy.

Another of the three brothers from Virginia, Samuel Wilson and his wife, Priscilla were buried there before the war, but no children of that union are identified on the existing grave markers. Samuel Wilson's tall elaborate stone is the largest edifice. We traced the inscription which says either November 27, 1827 or November 22, 1837.

Matthew Wilson, the oldest of the three brothers, lost his wife, Eliza Wilson, in January of 1837. Their son, Matthew, was the younger of the two murder victims. The older Matthew Wilson was put to rest in the family cemetery in August 1874, after the plantation had been sold to the German-American newcomers. Several of the five children of the Matthew Wilsons were also interred in that cemetery after the property had changed hands.

The most recent death date on a tombstone is 1908, identified only as Matthew Richard Pane, bom in 1829.

The author is deeply indebted to Agnes Beumer Gruber who provided the printed transcription of grave markers within the Wilson Cemetery.

Also deeply indebted to Marianne Macke Bemauer whose 1965 booklet included the information shared by Agnes Gruber. Both Mrs. Gruber's and Mrs. Bemauer's grandfathers were brothers, born in Michigan, who came to Lauderdale County as young men in 1873. They were Ed Rasch and Julius Rasch, born in Michigan, whose father bought some of the Wilson Plantation land. Julius Rasch was 12 years old, his brother Ed was 21, when they moved into the old Wilson plantation house. Their father, Florian Rasch II, his sick wife and ten of their eleven children lived in the old plantation house until the "new" Victorian house was built a few years later.

Mary Rasch Alt of Maine, Michigan, is the family historian most responsible for gathering family dates from ancient records. She's a good friend and fabulous in lots of other ways.

The author is also eternally grateful to "Skip" Conde whose grandfather, Frank Rasch, was the youngest child of Florian Rasch II. Frank Rasch was born in October of 1872, and came to Alabama with his family as an infant.

Florian Rasch II, who came to Alabama, was not a soldier during the Civil war. In 1865 he was the father of seven children. His two youngest brothers Alois and Julius Rasch served in Michigan units of the Union Army. Julius was crippled for life at age 19, during the Battle of Williamsburg on May 5, 1862, and received a disability discharge in September of that year.

Another brother, Franz Rasch, born around 1823 in Germany, went to New Orleans soon after arriving in America. A soldier of that name, born in Germany, entered the Confederate Army in New Orleans and was taken prisoner at Strausburg VA, as recorded on his August 31, 1864, Confederate Army Muster Roll. He changed his name to Frank Rasche, and in April of 1865 was discharged in Pennsylvania. Since he did not apply for a Confederate Army Pension in Louisiana, it may be that he remained in Pennsylvania. He did not return to Michigan.

Auguste Rasch, an older member of the same family, had been an army officer in Germany. Florian Rasch I, the father of Florian Rasch II who came to Alabama, had also been an officer in the Prussian Army. On arrival in New York, Auguste Rasch did not travel to Michigan, but made his life in the South. A prominent RASCH tombstone is located in LaFayette Cemetery, Garden District, New Orleans. Despite persistent oral tradition among the Michigan branches of the Rasch family, no record has been located to confirm the rumor that this man was General Auguste Rasch of the Army of the Confederacy. His title may have been honorary, after financing a large unit of Confederate soldiers.

The author is indebted to Howard F. Rasch of Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, for the photograph of the Rasch tombstone in New Orleans. The Michigan family believes the elusive Confederate General Auguste was two generations older than the Alabama Florian Rasch.

One cannot help but speculate about the murderers of John and Matthew Wilson. What did they know about the progress of the war? The Wilson men were killed by - "a man named dark from near the Tennessee state line" / or "two local Union guerrilla gangs", / or "a bunch of bandits who rode around terrorizing the countryside"depending on who is telling the story. It's a fascinating tale, and 150 years after the event, each storyteller has his/her own version.

I am indebted to my sister's husband, Karl Wade, for the Clark Story. Karl's family lived in Tuscumbia, south of the Tennessee River. Confederates controlled everything south of the river. The area north of that river was technically under Union rule, although the city of Florence is said to have changed sides 44 times during the war. (According to Larry Rasch who lives in Arkansas,

grandson of Tony Rasch who came to Alabama at age two, in the Florian Rasch family.) Karl Wade's grandfather was Jasper Newton Wade, who served for the duration of the war in the Confederate Army, under General Joe Wheeler.

The Clark story goes this way: "There's a bunch of Clarks still living around here, up near the Tennessee line. They're mighty fine people nowadays. The Clark who murdered that rich plantation fellow said he just got tired of being stepped on by Wilson. They buried him in the middle of the road, where he'd get stepped on by every person or animal that ever after walked over that road." That story could be completely true; his relatives would surely re-bury the men in the Wilson cemetery. Since Tennessee was in Union hands, the killers qualify as "Yankees". Facts blur. Myths emerge. To each his own.

WAR, ALABAMA, 1864

"Ain 't gonna study war no more... Ain 't gonna study war no more.. Ain't gonna study war No more...no more."

By April of 1865 it was all over. The United States of America ARE, became The United States IS. One entity. All over but the shoutin', I guess. All over but the pain of losing. All over but the resentment "They won the war, but we whooped 'em" as southern descendants of those brave Confederates triumphantly repeat to this very day.

War broke out in 1870 between Germany and France. Despite skirmishes between the two immigrant groups, the war did not cross the ocean.

In 1872, eight years after the end of the War Between the States, my family arrived in Alabama, traveling by train, with ten of their eleven children. The Homestead Act of 1862 promised 160 acres of land, free for the taking, to settle the West. But life among the Indians did not tempt the Rasch family. General Custer was killed in 1876 by the Sioux at the Battle of Little Big Horn. "Into the Valley of Death Rode the Six Hundred" - Lauderdale County school children learned that poem, without relating the timing to the settlement of St. Florian.

Florian Rasch II and his wife were born in Germany. Their children who came to Alabama were all born in America. Yankees, of course, they spoke English, but mixed it with German at home. A Catholic community set down in the staunchly protestant area. Farmers, who had never owned slaves, unfamiliar with red clay soil, carrying heavy mortgages on small plots of land, cut from the expanse that had once been the Wilson plantation.

They were drawn to the south by tales told by northern soldier boys stationed in Tennessee, of land so fertile the grass grew up to the horses' bellies. "They didn't know it was all crabgrass, growing in red clay soil."

Six months before the end of the war, two armies were camped outside Gadsden, Alabama.

On July 17, 1864, before the battle for Atlanta, Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston was relieved of command for refusing to attack the superior Union forces under Sherman. (General William Tecumseh Sherman was buried in 1891, with the 82-year old Joe Johnston serving as honorary pallbearer. The old Confederate general stood bare-headed in cold wind outside the

church. When a friend warned him that he might fall ill, Johnston told him "If I were in Sherman's place, and he were standing here in mine, he would not put on his hat." General Johnston died ten days later, of pneumonia. (Courtesy of "The Civil War", Geoffrey C. Ward, Knopf, NY, page 409.)

Confederate Johnston's replacement, General John Bell Hood, "at least was a fighter, but his audacity sometimes outweighed his good senses." (Page 45, "The Civil War", William C. Davis, National Parks Civil War Series, 1994). Hood had lost his right leg in battle, as well as the motion in his left arm. He did attack Sherman's forces, with great losses, before retreating to Gadsden, in eastern Alabama. Hood was so physically disabled he had to be lifted onto his horse and strapped in place. Nevertheless he was a man of vision. He believed that a bold attack through Tennessee, capturing Nashville then Cincinnati, would turn the tide of the war by destroying Lincoln's chances of re-election in November of 1864. Northern morale at that time was very low, and even Lincoln expected that the Peace Democrats would elect former General McClellan to the presidency.

Hood's telegraph messages to his superiors sounded the urgency of his outnumbered and hungry soldiers. President Jeff Davis and his war cabinet in Richmond urged General Hood to attack the army facing him. Sherman had been drawn westward, after the Atlanta victory. However, he refused to move farther into enemy territory chasing the smaller and more mobile Hood army. General Hood wanted the Richmond government to give permission for him to take the army westward through Alabama to Tusculum then launch what he believed would be the deciding southern victory by taking Nashville, then attacking Ohio. On paper, the plan looked good.

At this time the Washington government was urging Sherman to destroy Hood's army. General Sherman protested that he could not catch Hood, who would only retreat, drawing the huge northern army deep into hostile territory. Sherman knew his larger force would be at a disadvantage by chasing Hood. "If Hood will to go to the Ohio River, I will give him rations ... Let him go north. My business is down South, (Page 613, Foote, Shelby, "The Civil War, a Narrative". Random House, NY, 1974). Sherman's conviction was that the South would not stop fighting until after their cities and food supply were ruined. His plan was to create a path of destruction, sixty miles wide, across Georgia to Savannah, then northward to the Carolinas. He believed that the only way to destroy southern morale was to destroy everything in his path: houses, cattle, crops, leaving the south without the means to supply either their army or civilians.

After weeks of telegraph messages between Hood and the Confederate government in Richmond, the desperate government gave permission for Hood's plan. On October 10, 1864, Hood's army reached Tusculum, which is on the south side of the Tennessee River, about 30 miles south of the Tennessee state line. Hood had expected to bring his soldiers to this point by rail, but despite his urgent orders, rail lines out of Decatur, Alabama, were not in operation. So they walked.

By the time his army reached Tusculum, the soldiers had traveled on foot over 200 miles from Atlanta. The devastated countryside could not support itself, let alone the soldiers. One day, each soldier was given only two ears of hard corn for his rations. Shoes were also in very short supply and were non-existent in some cases.

When permission for Hood's plan finally came, his orders were that he must leave the valuable Joe Wheeler Cavalry behind. Their role was the destruction of Union communication and rail lines between Chattanooga and Atlanta. Hood had been promised the cavalry of Nathan Bedford Forrest as replacement for the Joe Wheeler group. Unfortunately, Forrest's cavalry had left Tusculum only five days before Hood arrived. They would not arrive to join the army of Hood until almost a month later in Tennessee. The Forrest cavalry were caught behind Federal lines in western Tennessee and Kentucky, where they made outstanding victories against Union forces.

After a six-week delay, Hood's army began to march: Tusculum, then north a short distance

to Sheffield, Alabama, then over the Tennessee River to Florence, and another 20 miles north to the Tennessee State Line. Not surprisingly, the bridge over the Tennessee River had been destroyed by the Union Army. Hood's army constructed a pontoon bridge. During this first stage of the northward march a large cattle drove was being herded across the bridge. One of the animals near the front of the drove bucked in panic and blocked the herd's passage. In the melee, supporting cords for the pontoon bridge were broken, and many cattie were drowned. The good news is that even foot soldiers ate meat that night

Shoes for the troops were one of the badly-needed but missing items. Officers ordered that soldiers make shoes from the hides of the slaughtered cattie, using the hair side turned toward human flesh. These shoes worked pretty well, but after a few days they didn't smell very good. A month later, when shoes were an even higher priority, the army ordered soldiers to make shoes from the hides of the many horses killed in late November, 1864, at the Battle of Franklin, Tennessee. This time shoes were to be sewn on right over the old shoes. As the hides shrunk they became affixed to the existing shoes, providing some protection for soldiers caught in unusually cold weather in December.

Hood's Army of Tennessee, 40,000 strong, began a three-pronged march toward the Tennessee border. (Map, page 655, Foote, Shelby, "The Civil War, A Narrative". Random House, NY. 1974) The eastern group, under Alexander P. Stewart, moved toward Lawrenceburg, the western arm of the army under Benjamin F. Cheatam traveled toward Waynesboro. The center column under Stephen D. Lee, crossed the reconstructed pontoon bridge into Florence Alabama on November 10, 1864. They must have marched up the Military Highway, through the Wilson Plantation on what is known today as the Jackson Highway, County Road 43, St. Florian, Alabama.

Confederate armies were named after states, while union armies were usually named after rivers. The Union army defending Washington was called Army of the Potomac, while Lee's Confederate army was Army of Northern Virginia. In Northern Alabama, Union Forces were the Army of the Tennessee, opposing Hood's Confederates, called Army of Tennessee.

Hood's Tennessee army contained many men from that state, known as the Volunteer State because so many Tennessee men had volunteered en masse when the war began. They were local men, fighting to protect their homes from an invader. It was the same fight that had been lost by the Indians, generations earlier. These Confederate men of Tennessee did not own large numbers of slaves. Anyone who owned 20 or more slaves was exempt from service. While a few large plantations did exist in that area of the South, the "black belt" where whites were a small minority was located over a hundred miles to the south.

Hood's army marched north, up the Military Road, through the Wilson Plantation. When they reached the Tennessee State Line, 13 miles north of today's St. Florian, his soldiers were overcome with joy. Many were born and raised there, and had not been in Tennessee for three or four years. Whole units cheered at the sign which greeted them at the border "Tennessee: Freedom or a Grave".

Tragically, this slogan proved to be of heart-rending accuracy, as many of those men found the "freedom" they sought only in the alternative, the grave. Confederate casualties at the battle of Franklin, Tennessee, on November 30, 1864, would result in the loss of 6,500 southern soldiers, more Confederate deaths in one day than any other battle in that war.

When news spread of the staggering loss, wagons filled with Tennessee families converged on the battlefield, searching among the dead for the bodies of their loved ones, to be taken home for burial.

Many generations later, when touring the huge cemetery in Franklin, a small boy asked his grandmother "Why did they all do it?" His pragmatic grandmother replied "Lord only knows, chile. They'd all be dead by now anyway." *

*(This quotation and details of the military campaign in Northern Alabama are taken from "Shrouds of Glory", written by Winston Groom. Atlantic Monthly Press NY, 1995)