A Reader's Companion

to the Novel

ALEMETH

with Commentary

by the Author

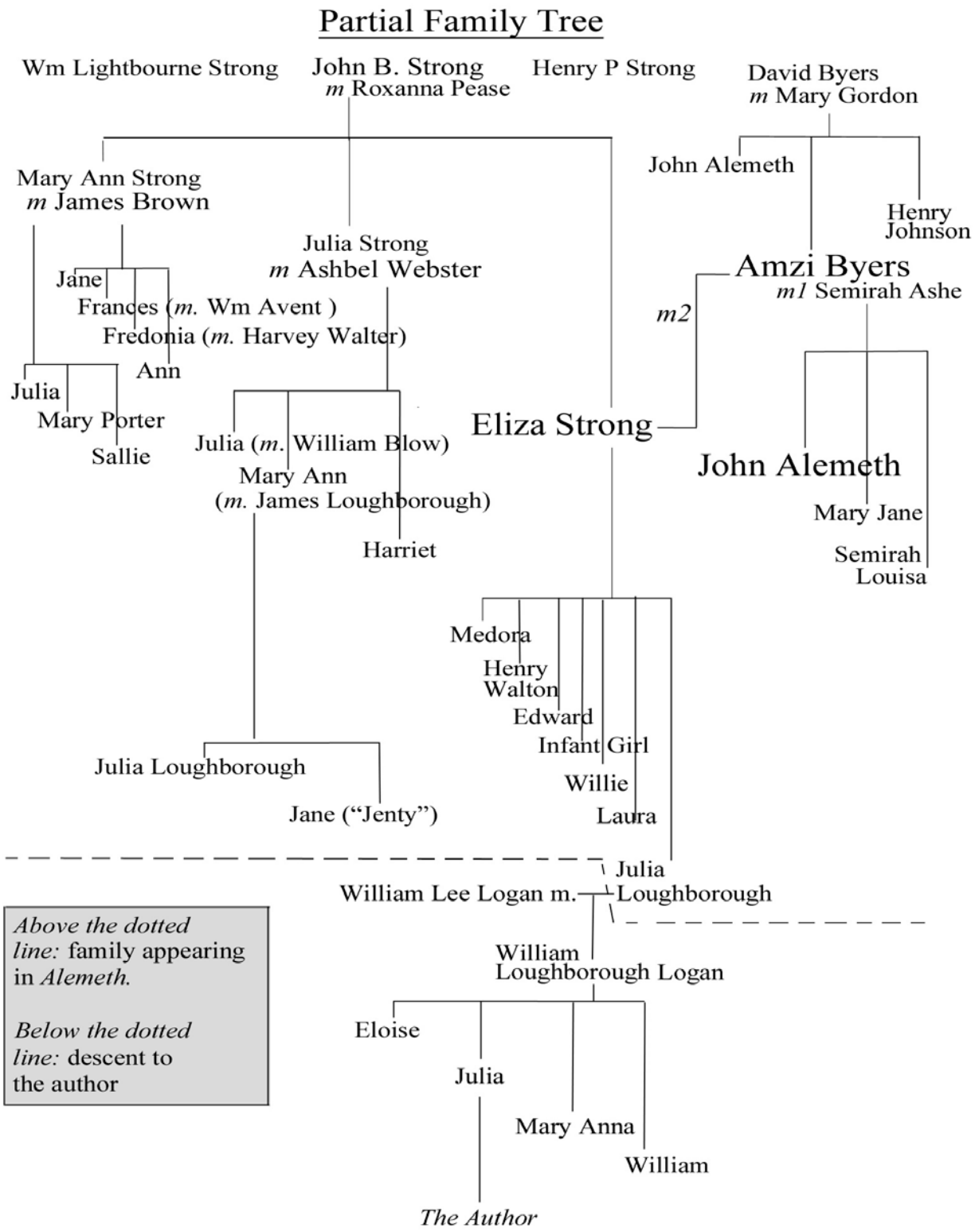
in Which Particular Attention is Given to What is Real

and What is Not

jwcarvin

WARNING

This Reader's Companion is meant to be read after the novel, *Alemeth*, is read. It contains plot spoilers and other information which may detract from appreciation of the novel.


Partial Family Tree
Wm Lightbourne Strong
John B. Strong
m Roxanna Pease
Henry P Strong
David Byers
m Mary Gordon
Mary Ann Strong
m James Brown
John Alemeth
Henry Johnson
Julia Strong
m Ashbel Webster
Amzi Byers
m1 Semirah Ashe
m2
Jane
Frances (m. Wm Avent)
Fredonia (m. Harvey Walter)
Ann
Julia
Mary Porter
Sallie
Julia (m. William Blow)
Mary Ann
(m. James Loughborough)
Harriet
Eliza Strong
John Alemeth
Mary Jane
Semirah Louisa
Medora
Henry Walton
Edward
Infant Girl
Willie
Laura
Julia Loughborough
Jane ("Jenty")
Julia
William Lee Logan m.
Loughborough
William Loughborough Logan
Eloise
Julia
Mary Anna
William
The Author
Above the dotted line: family appearing in Alemeth.
Below the dotted line: descent to the author

Introduction

I am intrigued by the past for the reason William Faulkner gave: that it is not, really, even past. It not only shaped us to be who we are; it is, in a real sense, who we are, and we can never escape its grasp.

I am also intrigued by the challenge of reconstructing it. Understanding what is real about it, and what is not, is almost the same thing as understanding ourselves, and nearly as hard. As Gordon Falkner points out in Chapter 67, we're on a steamboat of present time: after we've gone a few feet upriver, the murky bottom will never be as it was when we first passed through it. Even as I write, pieces of evidence are settling behind me, and not (I hasten to point out) as they first lay. What should I expect to find when I turn back to examine them, stirring things up again as I do? Can I keep my own perspective, all my assumptions and biases, from affecting what I see?

Reconstructing the past necessarily involves an effort to separate fact from fiction. But as Don Doyle writes in his wonderful book, *Faulkner's County*,[1] "historians are among the first to admit that the distinction between fact and fiction is hardly clear cut." The best historians sometimes get things wrong. Meanwhile, and perhaps not as obviously, good fiction writers often get things right.

In writing *Alemeth*, I faced this in multiple ways. Every piece of evidence raised more questions and every inference drawn was a signpost to what it *claimed* was the truth. I'm sure I got much wrong. But after getting to know a character a bit, I'd start speculating, suppose that he might have done something – thinking, as I did so, that I was writing fiction – only to learn, through later research, that he *had* done it. James and Mary Ann Brown, for example, were very wealthy; Presbyterians traditionally had a reputation for considering education important; Mary Ann Brown had gone to school back in Connecticut and had originally gone to work for Colonel Brown as a teacher to his children. That much was suggested by research. Since they had a home in Oxford, I started to plan story lines that had them heavily involved with the University that got its start there. It seemed like fiction at the time. Only later did I discover that Colonel Brown was not only interested in the school, but one of its first Trustees.

We don't know what we don't know. And the difficulty of distinguishing between history and fiction is, in the end, one of *Alemeth's* main themes. The fiction writer is advised to "write what he knows," to "let his characters tell him what they would do" so that they "come to life" and "become real." The biographer, meanwhile, has to speculate, has to form hypotheses in the effort to understand his "real" subject's psyche, but inevitably gets some of it wrong. As Gordon says to Howard at page 192, "A living, breathing human being can't be reduced to a few words; why should we think a dead one any easier?"

More broadly, however, it isn't only writers of fiction and history that have difficulty distinguishing between these two processes, and between the reliability of their outcomes. The more I researched, the more I saw characters who faced the same difficulties understanding their

[1] Doyle, Don, *Faulkner's County: The Historical Roots of Yoknapatawpha*, University of North Carolina Press, 2001

world as I did. Fact and fiction, I decided, are practically twins; Clio and Calliope are easily confused, for those who live as much as for those who write.

My subjects lived in an age of great discoveries and inventions – the cotton gin, friction matches, soil fertilization, photography, railroads, germ theory, Darwinian evolution, astronomy, weaponry, medicine, and – most importantly – the revolutionary notion that God may not have intended people of color to be the white man's slaves after all. These people were among the privileged, the well-educated, the well-informed. Especially around the University, they were impressed with their own understanding of science, touting the discoveries and accomplishments of their day, but blind to the fact that even in their great centers of learning, error ran rampant. What they believed was as much a function of tradition and rationalization as of science, on everything from spiritualism and proper wedding attire to the apparent justice of slavery. Their difficulty distinguishing between fact and fiction was remarkable; they possessed a gargantuan capacity for error.

One of the final edits before the book went to press was the removal of an illustration I had composed as a frontispiece.

I imagined the figure on the dock was Alemeth (or me, as his chronicler). To me, the river suggested the flow of time through history; the leaves of trees represented all the paper (letters, newspaper articles, historical records) that has come down through time to become the scattered, fragile clues which people use as they try to reconstruct history. Like the mud at the river-bottom, the leaves above aren't frozen in time, available for close inspection. The chronicler might stand beneath the tree as its leaves fall out of branches, clutch at them as they fall, try to learn from them, hoping to put them into a sensible order, to create a replica of the tree as it was. But the tree cannot be climbed. The branches are out of reach. The chronicler can't see the branches from any anywhere but down below, can't figure out which fallen leaf came from which branch or indeed whether any of them came from other trees altogether. All the while, the leaves are, one by one, becoming detached and being swept away by the wind. So there's little left for the figure on the dock to do but sit and watch the tree – or the river, as it passes – unsure, even, which of the two he is looking at.

What the differences are between history and fiction others may know better than I. But in case it may be of interest to others, I've decided to try to sort out what I believe to be fact, and what I believe to be fiction, in *Alemeth* – to describe the leaves I collected, and how I went about trying to put them back together – despite the impossibility of getting them all back exactly as they were.

By my count, if you count as a "character" anyone mentioned by name, there are twenty one entirely fictional characters in Alemeth – many of them slaves, entirely fictional in the sense that, slaves not being named in censuses prior to 1870, I had few names of slaves to draw upon. In contrast, there are well over two hundred (mostly white) historical characters, drawn from my effort to reconstruct history. They are "real" characters at least in the minimal sense that the their names were drawn from the Census or some other historical record, and the character I portray was consistent with the information in that source, and with any other source I could find, about that historical person. That limited, one-dimensional historicity applies to most of the characters only referred to once or twice; as to them, the rest is all fiction. As to those who appear more often, there has typically been much greater research, and more evidence found. Many might call these characters historical, and leave it at that – but for the reason Gordon keeps reminding us, to say that such a character is in any sense "real" is a pretty bold claim.

Obviously, all the dialogue and interior monologues included in *Alemeth* are fictional Beyond that, I have attempted in what follows here to distinguish fact from fiction in the novel *Alemeth* more or less sequentially, by chapter. The dates given under the chapter numbers that follow are sometimes historically accurate, "known" to be the dates on which the events described actually occurred; sometimes they are hypothetical, especially if the events described are hypothetical. But as a whole, they may assist in trying to piece together what was real and what was not – an undertaking which perhaps the reader will be more successful at than I have been.

I have striven to cite sources where I've been able to keep track of them, but sadly, my sources, too, sometimes fall from the tree before I can capture them, further hampering the effort to distinguish between what was "real" and what I only imagined.

At the end of the day, I strongly suspect that most of what's described below as historical really happened; and that most of the rest didn't. But it's only a good faith suspicion, and the reader is free to draw his own conclusions.

About Plot and Theme

I was very pleased by the nice things written about *Alemeth* in *Kirkus Reviews*. After complimenting several aspects of the book as "masterful," "sensitive," "thoughtful," "well-drawn," etc., the reviewer had one criticism. He or she commented, "Frustratingly, the story fails to fully bloom into a coherent plot. It reads like a chronicle of successive events, leaving the reader to wonder what thematic thread binds it all."

This criticism did not completely surprise me. I believe I understand it, and to some extent, I agree with it. Indeed, as for "chronicle of events" rather than "coherent plot," it may be relevant that the book uses the word "chronicle" eleven times. The whole of Chapter 15 is devoted to the Book of Chronicles and what might be learned from a chronicle. Rather than devise a fictional plot, intended to entertain, my effort was to discover whatever plot or plots existed in the lives of these historical characters and, as accurately as I could, to "chronicle" what I found.

As every day passes, I become increasingly convinced that, due to the limited size of our brains and the inescapable influence of our subjective points of view, human beings have a great deal of difficulty distinguishing between fiction and fact. I'd begun the novel wanting to test the proposition that, as literary genres, there isn't even a meaningful distinction between history and fiction. In the process, I think I learned that the genres do have different attitudes and aspirations. Perhaps the biggest difference I see is that history, like real life, tends to be full of plots and counterplots, interwoven with each other, while selecting a single story line from a complicated world may be the heart of good fiction. So maybe I could have done a lot better, drawing Alemeth out of the world in which he lived and putting him into a book that "fully bloomed into a coherent plot." But the fact was that his life came to an abrupt end, before it had a chance to bloom into anything.

It has been observed that people like stories because they appear to make sense out of a reality that doesn't. I've come to believe that we evolved to see the world in simplified stories, rather than as it really is, and my aspiration, in writing the story of these slave-owning ancestors, was to get as close as possible to what *really* happened. To the extent I felt able, I adhered (one might say slavishly) to the goal of putting everything I learned about my characters' lives into the book. The traditional view, I believe, is that this is a formula for a terrible story, and perhaps *Alemeth* helps prove that theory right.

At the same time, in a sense, ante-bellum America was incoherent, which may be why it bloomed into civil war and death and destruction on an unprecedented scale. From a fiction writer's perspective, that idea may not make for a very good plot. But the realistic book I was hoping to write was an experiment in being more like real life, in that it consisted of lots of little plots and story lines. As I saw it, concentrating on just one of them, letting it "bloom" into something "coherent," would have taken the book into the realm of fiction more than I wanted to go. And perhaps the very thing that it lacked – a "coherent plot" – helped it achieve what the same reviewer called a "masterful" job of recreating the time and place. Is this, in the end, proof of the difference between history and fiction? I don't know. But I think I understand the critique, and I accept it as it relates to the absence of a "plot."

As for the lack of a "thematic thread" that binds it all, I feel differently. Perhaps I made my thematic thread too subtle, or so complicated that the reviewer simply missed it. I've been waiting for someone – anyone – to ask me about the meaning of the name "Alemeth" that was of such interest to the young boy in Chapter 15, or about the Hebrew *Alemeth* on page 406. The name is itself a clue to the theme. In any case, I hope, in the present Reader's Companion, to make the case that there *was* a continuing theme, and for those who may not have picked up on it, it might be succinctly stated as "people's penchant for telling others what to do, despite their own tendency to be wrong."

Thanks to the miracle of the modern word processor, I can report that the word "wrong" appears 63 times in Alemeth. We have a High Court of Errors, a comedy of errors, and Reverend Gaston says "there can be no end to the error of our ways." "Tell" and "told" meanwhile, occur 235 times. "Persuade," "convince" and "conviction" occur 37 times, and "force" 30, while "submit" and "submission" also occur 30, and "bound" 31. Various forms of "obey" and "obedience" occur 68 times. "Free" and "freedom" occur 130 times, and "slave" and "slavery" 202 times.

Alemeth may not have fully bloomed into a coherent plot, but from my perspective, it has a clear theme.

Title Pages

The quotation from Abraham Lincoln is the opening line of the famous "House Divided" Speech, which Lincoln gave to the Illinois Republican State Convention on June 16, 1858. It struck me as something we'd do well to remember.

One of the final editing cuts was to remove an introductory quotation from John Davys. For a while, the quotation seemed a fitting introduction to the novel because of how well it conveyed the colonial attitude about the role of Christendom in the New World, and how that religious notion played into 'Manifest Destiny.'

The quote was:

> There is no doubt that we of England are this saved people, by the eternal and infallible presence of the Lord predestined to be sent into these Gentiles in the sea, to those Isles and famous Kingdoms, there to preach the peace of the Lord; for are not we only set on Mount Zion to give light to all the rest of the world? *** By whom then shall the truth be preached, but by them unto whom the truth shall be revealed?[2]

[2] The quote is taken from the last couple pages of *The Worlde's Hydrographical Discription*, Thomas Dawson, London, 1595, reprinted in *The Voyages and Works of John Davis the Navigator*, pg. 225, the Hakluyt Society, No. LIX, London, 1880, accessed online at http://www.spirasolaris.ca/sbb9c.pdf.

The concept not only depends on the infallibility of God, but on the confidence of anyone who (unlike me) can comfortably begin a sentence with the words "there can be no doubt that…"

My own take on certainty is that I've encountered plenty of it – but so far, every last piece of it has been in the minds of human beings.

Chapter 1

Friday/Saturday, June 20/21, 1845

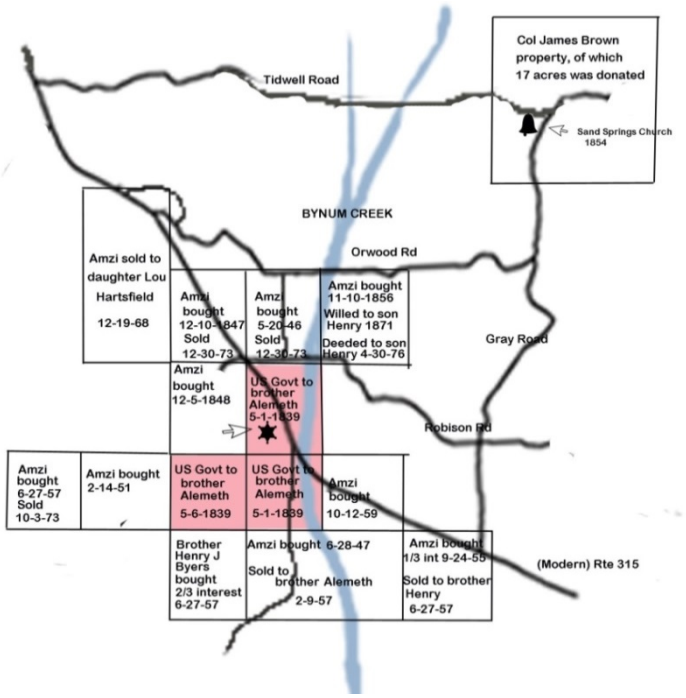
Panola and Lafayette, adjacent counties in northern Mississippi, are where most of the action in *Alemeth* occurs. A great deal of it, in fact, occurs astride the county line, Bynum's Creek lying barely on the Panola side and Colonel Brown's Clear Creek Plantation lying not far across the county line in Lafayette. Panola is an old Cherokee word for 'cotton.' The black, loamy soil of the region made it perfect for cultivation of the crop that gave the county its name.

Early in my research into this area of northern Mississippi I came across Don Doyle's book, Faulkner's County: The Historical Roots of Yoknapatawpha, which owes its existence to the fact that William Faulkner was born and raised in Lafayette County. From Don Doyle, I learned how recently this place had been taken over from the Chickasaw people native to the area. The Indian "Removal" Act of 1830 had paved the way for the massive displacement, but it wasn't until the latter half of that decade – July of 1837, according to Doyle – that the Chickasaw exodus began. Doyle wrote that the removal of the Chickasaw threw more than six million acres of land on the market. Meanwhile the great crash of 1837 sent land prices plummeting, so there was both a wealth of land available and a great opportunity for white men to buy it cheap. The Pontotoc land office was charged with selling the newly acquired Chickasaw land. As we'll see, Colonel Brown had started buying up Chickasaw land in 1835 – directly from the Chickasaw, even before the great exodus began. The Byers family quickly joined the Browns in the rush to buy it.

The first record of the Byers' plantation on Bynum's Creek is dated 1 May, 1839 when Amzi's brother, John Alemeth Byers, bought the NE and SE quarters of Section 8 of Township 10S Range 5W. (Pontotoc Land Certificates #6331 & 6332.) Five days later, on May 6, 1839, Byers also bought the contiguous SW Q of Sec 8, 10S 5W (Cert #7636). This left Amzi's brother owning three contiguous quarters of Section 8, totaling 480 acres, and this 480 acres was the original land on which Amzi and his family would soon come to live. It would seem that Amzi's brother Alemeth never intended to live there himself, but that he and Amzi had an arrangement whereby Amzi would live and plant cotton there, and would eventually pay for the land out of his profits – which he finally did, some eighteen years later.

In the wake of the huge May 1, 1839 Pontotoc land auction, the typical large landowner had parcels spread out randomly, like pieces of a crazy quilt. Amzi's brother Alemeth was typical in this respect, with purchases in various places in Lafayette and Panola. But he had clearly intended to have the three quarter-sections on which Amzi settled together. Amzi's own subsequent purchases, by which he added more contiguous quarters to these first three properties

until he finally had a very sizeable plantation, made clear that his focus was not on land speculation, but on owning a large plantation to farm himself.



The illustration shows the various accretions to Amzi's property over the years, following the first three quarters, which are shaded in pink. The section owned by Colonel Brown in the upper right was only one of many sections owned by Colonel Brown, in numerous counties.

The 1840 Census doesn't show the Byers family in Panola County yet – Amzi and his first wife, *nee* Semirah Ash, together with son Alemeth and daughter Mary Jane, are still listed in the 1840 Census for St. Clair County, Alabama. But we can infer that Amzi moved to Bynum's Creek within a few years of the original land purchases. By January of 1844, daughter Semirah Louisa Byers had been born in Panola County, and Semirah Ash Byers, who died in June of 1844, was buried at College Hill Presbyterian Church in Lafayette County. A local census taken in 1845 shows Amzi's family living in Panola. We can therefore conclude that by the time the novel opens, the Byers family was living in Panola County, in the sections shown, on Bynum's Creek.

As an aside, I should mention that Byers Road remains there to this day, and living on it is Martha Francis (Fran) Byers, whose descent is through Henry Walton Byers (1849-1945), and his son Charles Grady Byers. (I believe that Fran is Charles' granddaughter.) In this day of constant migration and relocation, it's remarkable that a Byers is still working the same land her great, great grandfather acquired in 1839, right after the Chickasaw were "removed." (The past is not really past.)

The 1840 U.S. Census for Panola County lists a John McKinney and numerous children, but says nothing of Leander McKinney. The 1850 Census, in contrast, shows young Leander and his family (father's name Moses) listed contiguously to the Byers family. It is therefore likely, if not entirely certain, that the McKinney family had moved to their Panola farm as early as 1845, when the novel begins. The fact that Leander and Alemeth were the same age, and neighbors,

makes it seem highly probable that the boys were childhood friends. That said, I see no reason to believe that Leander McKinney couldn't carry a tune, or that he needed comeuppance any more than most boys his age. Those traits, and the story of the boys' hunt for the panther, are entirely fictional. Whether I hit on anything "real" in their relationship is something I'll likely never know, but competition for dominance between two young boys strikes me as a near certainty. Leander, therefore, is the first of many characters in the book to tell Alemeth what to do.

Chapter 2

Saturday, June 21, 1845

When the novel opens, Amzi was a widower with three young children to care for; Alemeth (b. 1 January 1836) a nine year old boy, and daughters Mary Jane (b. 9 April 1838), age seven, and Semirah Louisa (b. 31 January 1844), age one. Thematically, note that the novel switches in this chapter from Alemeth's point of view, in which Leander needed "comeuppance," to Amzi's point of view, in which something needs to be done about Alemeth's disobedience, and in which Aunt Leety is a good slave because she understands the importance of following rules.

After leaving his birthplace on a plantation in South Carolina, Amzi had been employed in his brother Alemeth's mercantile business in Alabama. Asheville, in Saint Clair County, Alabama, was named after Semirah Ash's family. One can imagine Amzi and Semirah meeting across the counter at the Byers store there. The 1840 Census for Asheville shows Amzi owning six slaves: two males age 10-24, one male age 24-36, one female under 10, and two females 10-24.

By the time of the 1850 Census in Panola, Mississippi, Amzi had 52 slaves working his several hundred acres of cotton. According to Dan Doyle, only 4 per cent of white family heads in the 1850 Lafayette Census claimed twenty or more slaves. While it isn't clear how many of his 52 slaves Amzi owned when the novel opens in 1845, it is clear he was acquiring new slaves during that decade, whether by purchase or reproduction among those he already owned. One way or another, he was becoming one of the largest slave holders in Panola County. We know the names of several of Amzi's slaves from the letters Alemeth wrote home, and we can infer the names of many others from the 1970 Census, in which there are numerous black families named Byers, Beyers or Barrs on small pieces of property all around Amzi's plantation. (Blacks were counted by name in the 1870 census for the first time.) I believe that the slave named Leety was likely the children's primary nurse and nanny, due to the fact that in Alemeth's letter home of July 29, 1861, he called her "aunt" and singled her out by name when he wrote, "Tell Aunt Leety and all the negroes howdy for me."

In any case, the names of the people Amzi meets at the Colonel's house in Chapter 2, like nearly all the minor characters in the book, were all the names of actual people. It seems reasonable to believe that those mentioned in this chapter could have been in attendance at a "social" hosted by Colonel Brown and his wife at that time. Thomas Bradford, 46 year old farmer from South Carolina (Family #659), who owned 16 slaves, and Thomas Hunter, 46 year

old farmer from North Carolina (Family #644) were neighbors of the Byers family listed in the 1850 Census for Panola County with property valued at $5,500 and $6,500 respectively. William Harper Smither was an Oxford merchant listed in the 1850 and 1860 Lafayette censuses (Family #'s 1339 and 1315 respectively). Dr. John Waddel was a minister and educator who had been appointed among the first trustees of Ole Miss. Isaac Davis was a Panola County planter who was elected to the University's Board of Trustees in 1845; he owned 28 slaves in 1840. Mississippi Senator Alexander Pegues (1850 Lafayette Census, Family #123) was an early architect of the University of Mississippi, described at some length by Don Doyle and other sources; Pegues listed property worth $12,000 in the 1850 Census; he owned 61 slaves. These people were all reasonably wealthy landowners or highly educated or both – the chief characteristics, it seems, of the southern aristocracy.

Colonel James Brown, who would be named to the University Board of Trustees in 1846, lived west of Oxford on a plantation on Clear Creek, with his second wife, Mary Ann Strong Brown. The Browns were prominent even among prominent people. Whereas Senator Pegues owned 61 slaves in 1850, Colonel Brown owned 73. And the Browns' land holdings had to be among the very largest in the area. In the 1850 Census for Lafayette County, his real estate is valued at the very large sum of $118,000.

There is a chart, neither dated nor sourced, that appears at pg 18 of *The Lafayette County Heritage*, published by the Skipwith Historical & Genealogical Society (1986), which shows the largest landowners in Lafayette County.[3] The chart was apparently based at least in part on tax records. The chart at the Skipwith Society includes the following lines:

Name	Acres owned	$ Land	$ Pers Prop	Cotton Bales	Corn Bushels
Avent, W. F.	4700	$281,810	$206,350	348	5000
Brown, James	2200	$485,119	$189,000	104	4000
Lamar, LQC	1080	$25,000	$35,000	43	1000
Pegues, T.E.B.	2420	$39,500	$178,000	200	6000
Pegues, M. W.	1600	$50,000	$69,000	170	350
Wiley, Yancey	2100	$28,500	$70,000	200	4000

[3] A note cautions that it may be incomplete. It seems that the chart may have been based on 1860 Lafayette County tax records, because the property shown for Colonel Brown is essentially the same as the amount appearing in a paragraph of Joel Williamson's book, *William Faulkner and Southern History* (Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 127) describing wealthy Oxonians in 1860. According to Williamson's book, Brown was one of several Lafayette County residents of "great wealth," his property being valued in 1860 at $674,000.

According to this chart, Brown's land in Lafayette County was worth more than any one else's in the county. But whatever these Lafayette County holdings were, they appear from the Pontotoc land office records to be but a small fraction of Brown's total holdings in Mississippi. The bottom line is that both Amzi Byers and James Brown were among the largest slaveholders in the area, and Colonel Brown one of the largest landowners, with Amzi not too far behind.

Unlike the other named animals (Wolfie, Cracker, etc.) the parrots in the novel, Clio and Calliope, are historically real. (Well, sort of…) Back in 1818, Mary Ann Brown's father, the merchant, sailor and judge John Strong, had been sailing the waters of the Caribbean when, from Port au Prince, Haiti, he sent a letter home to his wife Roxanna in New York. In the letter, he wrote, "Keep Mary Ann to school at her grammar. I have sent the parrots on to New York." So we know that, at least for a while, two or more parrots were presumably part of the Brown household in New York. When Roxanna Strong died soon thereafter and John Strong's younger children were doled out to relatives, Mary Ann, who was his eldest child, joined him in Saint Augustine, Florida. That is historically accurate, based on the correspondence between John and Mary Ann Strong. My suppositions that the number of parrots was two, and that Mary Ann Strong brought them with her, first when she moved to Florida to join her father and later to Mississippi and her marriage to Colonel Brown, seem likely based on circumstances. And parrots can live for sixty years. So, all things considered, I think it not unreasonable to suppose that in the 1850's, Mary Ann Brown still owned two parrots which her father had sent home in 1818.

The parrots' names, Clio and Calliope, are my own invention. The columned architecture of the ante-bellum south is but one indication of that culture's fascination with ancient Greece, probably driven by the relatively recent discoveries of Greek manuscripts of the Bible.[4] The names of the Greek muses of History and Poetry therefore seemed appropriate names for a historical woman like Mary Ann Brown to bestow on her parrots in a fictional novel like *Alemeth*. But the human characters in Alemeth all share one difficulty: they are befuddled by their inability to understand creatures that aren't like them.

The description of the shortage in the seminary fund is taken from University Trustees' minutes. Two early issues in the history of the University of Mississippi were the shortage in the seminary fund, and whether the Legislature had intended the school to be a seminary or a secular institution.[5] Mary Ann Brown's supposition that "the folks in College Hill aren't too happy" reflects the fact that College Hill had been a competitor of Oxford in the effort to be named the site of the new state university. Within a few years, the North Mississippi College in College Hill would be driven out of existence by the arrival of Ole Miss in Oxford.

Regarding Mr. Hunter's question whether cotton would ever again reach ten cents a pound, the annual variations in cotton prices throughout the book are based on cotton prices published in newspapers of the day and various secondary sources, including Conrad & Meyer, The Economics of Slavery in the Ante Bellum South.

[4] A putative godsend for a Protestant America averse to the Latin translations of the Catholic Church.
[5] Sansing, David, *The University of Mississippi: A Sesquicentennial History*, University Press of Mississippi, 1999

The quotation referred to by Mary Ann Brown, 'There's no place more delightful than one's own fireside,' is from the Epistles of Cicero.

Chapter 3

Saturday, June 21, 1845

None of the contiguous census listings in 1850 or 1860 include boys Alemeth's age, except for Leander McKinney. So it seems a very good bet that Alemeth's friendship with Leander McKinney, presumed in the novel, is "factual" not fictional. Everything about the boys' decision to go after the goat is (presumably) fictional. But the competition between Leander and Alemeth continues, and this time, Alemeth succeeds in getting Leander to fall in behind him.

Chapter 4

Saturday, June 21, 1845

The chapter begins with grown men following the Colonel's lead, attracted by his invitation to cigars. Colonel Brown is a successful leader, skilled at getting others to behave as he would like them to – in this case, with good tobacco from the West Indies.

As for the "lucifers," my research leads me to conclude that the friction match had been invented by the English chemist Charles Walker as early as 1826. Phosphorus matches were first patented in the United States in 1836, and their use increased when, in 1843, beeswax was first used instead of sulfur, reducing the pungency of the fumes. Meanwhile, the early matches were prone to explode, and there was apparently enough white phosphorus in one pack of phosphorous matches to kill a person, presumably slowing down the spread of the new invention around the globe. Still, I'm betting they were new to Mississippi in 1845. The term "lucifer," first given to the matches made by London chemist Samuel Jones, persisted as a slang term for friction matches until the twentieth century.

Chapters 5 –7

Saturday, June 21, 1845

The boys' encounter with the panther and dialogue at the Byers' cabin are purely fictional, as far as I know. (Perhaps the most careful way to phrase the distinction is to say that I am aware of no written authority for the encounter with the panther, at least not prior to my publication of *Alemeth*.) Meanwhile, *fictionally*, Amzi "sets a trap" to interest his children in the Browns' parrots, and Alemeth submits to the shellacking he gets from Amzi.

Chapter 8

Sunday, June 29, 1845

The way Amzi sees it, the whole plantation (his children and his slaves) depend on him, which is why he tells Alemeth to "do what he was told." Meanwhile, he questions the wisdom of getting involved with strangers, taking comfort in "the familiar."

According to the records of College Hill Presbyterian Church at the Skipwith Society library, the Browns had pledged money to that church, so I assume he and his wife attended it, at least for a while. If so, Mary Ann Brown likely knew Amzi even before her sister Eliza arrived, and if so, surely she knew that his first wife, Semirah, had died. The dialogue between Amzi and Mary Ann Brown in this chapter is fictional, but what Mary Ann Brown says about her father sending her the parrots is based on her father's actual letters, which make clear that he was, among many other things, a judge, a gentleman, and the owner of his own sloop.

Those days were hard ones for the first white settlers in northern Mississippi, and men severely outnumbered women there. In the 1840 census for Panola County, there were 622 men between the ages of 15 and 40 – but only 408 women. The imbalance in Lafayette County was similar. So it would seem to make sense that the men, generally, were in intense competition to win over the relatively scarce women. At this point in the story – right before her younger sister Eliza arrives in Oxford – thirty-four year old Mary Ann Brown would surely have felt a degree of protectiveness for her twenty-two year old sister soon to arrive. As I see it, the most likely posture such a woman would take – a woman who had herself married an older man who was one of the wealthiest men in the area – would be to seek introductions for her sister to men of similar station, while shielding her from less "suitable" men who'd be sure to come after her. The idea of Mary Ann Brown as match-maker for Amzi and Eliza, while entirely speculative, seems more than reasonable to me, based on that situation. Whether fact or fiction, I cannot say.

Chapter 9

Wednesday, July 2, 1845

This chapter introduces the character of Eliza Strong, and her very different point of view – a woman who sees it as her Christian duty to teach others, a woman who prays that they will do as she teaches. How close the woman portrayed in *Alemeth* matches the historical Eliza we'll never know, but I tried in every possible way to recreate the actual historical character. I propose here to explain what I was able to learn about that character, and how those signposts guided my portrayal.

The historical Eliza Strong was the youngest child of John and Roxanna Strong. Listed in birth order, she and her siblings were as follows:

Mary Ann Strong (1807 - 1890)
John Bates Strong (1809 - 1867)
Henry Strong (1810 - 1812)
Unnamed Strong (1812 - 1812)

Julia Strong (1814 – 1891)
George Strong (1816 - after 1860)
Samuel A. Strong (1818 - ?)
Eliza Strong (1820 – 1907)

To understand Eliza, I sought first to understand her parents. Originally a resident of Connecticut and New York, where he'd become a lawyer, John Bates Strong had met and married a woman of the blue-blooded New England Pease family. For whatever reasons, he had then taken a southern home in Saint Augustine, Florida, from which he spent much of his time sailing the Caribbean in his 31-ton sloop, the *Leopard of Glastonbury*. (His fascinating Caribbean adventures didn't make it into the pages of *Alemeth*, but they speak to quite a tale on their own.[6]) From the letters Strong wrote home during his Caribbean travels, we know a good deal about his family's circumstances. When the children's mother, Roxanna, died in 1822, Mary Ann Strong, age 15, moved to Saint Augustine to live with her father, while the others[7] remained with various aunts and uncles in Connecticut and New York. Since her father spent nearly all his time ibn Florida and the Caribbean, Eliza virtually never saw him, even as an infant. While not technically orphaned until he died when she was four,[8] Eliza was effectively an orphan from the age of two onward.

She may have been left, at first, with her grandmother, Abigail Bates (member of another blue-blooded New England family), or with other aunts or uncles. (For obvious reasons, the two-year-old didn't join her sea-going, bachelor father in Saint Augustine.) It seems highly probable that Eliza lived most of her childhood in the home of her uncle William Lightbourne Strong, pastor of the Congregationalist Church in Somers, Connecticut. Reverend Strong and his wife, Harriet, already had eight children of their own when Eliza arrived.[9] After Eliza's arrival in 1822, they had three more.[10]

Apart from her sisters Mary Ann and Julia, I've found no evidence that Eliza kept in touch with her siblings, if she knew them at all. I had no signposts suggesting anything about her relationship with them. Meanwhile, they were all much older than her, and the story seemed simpler if I simply ignored mention of the others. So I'll ignore them here as well, focusing instead on the three sisters, Eliza, Julia and Mary Ann.

Mary Ann and Julia Strong were 14 years and 7 years Eliza's senior, respectively. In his 1818 letter to wife Roxanna – before the birth of Eliza – John Strong had written that he appointed his brother, Henry Pierce Strong, as guardian for his girls (only Mary Ann and Julia at the time). Since Mary Ann had left to join their father in Florida when Eliza was just two, it

---

[6] Strong's transactions involving the island of Key West have been described in Browne, Jefferson B., "Key West, The Old and the New," St Augustine, 1912, and in Haffenreffer and Haffenreffer, *Deeds and Misdeeds: The Title to Key West 1815-1833*, Florida Keys Sea Heritage Journal, Vol 21, No. 4, Key West Maritime Historical Society (2011). I've also been privileged to review (in January of 2018) a draft of an as-yet unpublished scholarly article covering the lawsuit against Strong – apparently the first jury trial in the state of Florida – written by Florida lawyer and historian Patrick Scott, tentatively titled, *Lawyers in the New Florida Territory*. I intend to write a biography of the man.

[7] John (13), Julia (8), George (6), Samuel (4) and Eliza (2)

[8] John Bates Strong died on October 16, 1825. The death was noted in the St. Augustine newspaper on November 1, 1825.

[9] William, born in 1808, Newton in 1809, Harriet in 1811, Edward in 1813, Mary in 1815, Sarah in 1817, Theodore in 1820, and Samuel in 1821.

[10] Julia in 1826, Helen in 1830, and Abigail in 1833.

appears Eliza wouldn't have known her oldest sister prior to taking up residence with Mary Ann in Mississippi in 1845.[11]

Eliza appears to have been closer to her sister Julia Strong. There's no reason to believe that Julia, only eight years old at the time of their mother's death, would have gone to Florida to live with her sea-roving father; it would have been natural for Julia to live with her appointed guardian, her Uncle Henry, who was a successful preacher. Indeed, the genealogy binder prepared by my grandmother Logan and my Aunt Mary Anna Rogers asserts that Julia went to live with her Uncle Henry Strong at age 12 (that is, about 1826), so I have taken that as fact. Henry Pierce Strong had moved to Phelps, in the New York Finger Lakes, in 1824. In the 1830 Census, his household is listed as including a young female of Julia's age, not accounted for in the records of his own children.[12] Then, in 1832, Julia was married in Phelps, the nuptials performed by her uncle Henry. All things considered, it seems all but certain that Julia spent most of her youth in the Finger Lakes, in the household of her Uncle Henry, while Eliza spent her childhood in Connecticut with Uncle William – close enough for occasional visits, perhaps, but no more.

As it turns out, Henry Strong died in 1835, whereupon the girls' Uncle William moved his own family to the Finger Lakes, bringing young Eliza with him.[13] It appears that this move was likely the occasion on which Eliza was given the autograph book described in this chapter – a real autograph book, currently in the possession of cousin Carol Lehr.

All I had while writing *Alemeth* were photocopies of a few pages of the book, photocopies that had been put in my family genealogy binders. These photocopies were among the earliest pieces of evidence I had regarding the life of Eliza Strong.[14] The inscriptions on them formed the basis for hours of research in census records and other materials as I tried to piece together the whereabouts of the orphaned Eliza through her early years. The long and the short of it is that Eliza had an unusual childhood – a combination of a very religious household, the "second class" life of an orphan being passed around among families of many cousins, and the privilege or station that came from the status of her family's good education, moderate wealth, and the community standing of her minister uncles. I don't know what it's like to be an orphan living with a family of eleven cousins headed by a minister of the gospel, but it had to force Eliza to think hard about what, in her life, she could count on.[15]

---

[11] Having gone to live with an adventuresome, "bachelor" father at the age of fifteen, Mary Ann Strong might be expected to be somewhat world-wise for her age, and I have attempted to portray her accordingly.

[12] The federal censuses through 1840 listed only heads of household and the genders and approximate ages of children and others. Notably, the 1830 Census description of the Henry Strong household does not include an additional female Eliza's age.

[13] William Lightbourne Strong had stepped down as pastor of the church in Somers, Connecticut, becoming pastor of the church in Redding in 1829.

[14] The original autograph book was passed down (presumably by Medora) to cousin Frances Maginnis. Her daughter, Carol Lehr, tells me she is afraid to open it for fear it would cause it to fall apart. (Yet another reminder of how difficult it is to reliably reconstruct the past.)

[15] The first page of the autograph book contains entries dated April 3 and April 5, 1837, with the place name Vienna, which I take to be Vienna, New York, in the Finger Lakes, and autographs of "G.A." and "Amelia A. Spooner." Two more entries in 1838 are signed by "J. L. G." and "Sarah Tallsman," and are identified as being made in Castleton – a place I suspect may have been

By the time she moved to the Finger Lakes with Uncle William in 1835, her sister Julia had been married (to Dr. Ashbel Webster) and had the first of her five daughters in Phelps; Julia had a second daughter the following year.[16] Now that they were neighbors, one imagines that Eliza and Julia saw a good deal of each other between 1835 and 1839. Now in her late teens, Eliza might have been helpful in the care of Julia's daughters. In December, 1838 and January, 1839, the autographs in the book include two signatures of apparent friends in Vienna, New York[17] and seven of people named Pease – her mother's maiden name – several of which reflect they were signed in Somers, Connecticut. The latter group of signatures suggests an extended stay with her mother's family back in Somers.[18]

To sum up, then, it appears that Eliza lived in Somers and Redding as a young girl, with aunts, uncles and cousins, most either Uncle William's children or the Pease family, or both; that she moved to the Finger Lakes in New York with her Uncle William in 1835, reuniting there with her sister, Julia; and that, between 1835 and 1839, she spent some portions of her time in Phelps/Vienna, Somers, and Castleton, with different families – wherever she went, the "odd person out" so to speak.

Then, at some point in the late 1830's, the Websters moved from upstate New York to Columbus, Ohio. The move to Ohio was part of a general migration of New England residents to Ohio, itself a part of the general migration westward.[19] By that time, I believe, Julia and Eliza would have become close. In any case, when the Websters moved to Columbus, Eliza either moved with them, or followed very soon after, in January of 1839. It seems logical for an unattached eighteen year old woman to prefer the company of her closest (in age, at least) sister to that of an ever-changing set of cousins. The 1840 Census in Columbus reflects that the Webster household included a 20 year old woman not otherwise accounted for – presumably, Eliza. And Eliza's own autograph book confirms her presence there.

Upon their arrival in Columbus, Ashbel Webster became an elder of the nascent Second Presbyterian Church, a church founded with the help of the famous Lyman Beecher.[20] Beecher

---

Castleton, Vermont, just across the border from Connecticut (Castleton was founded by people from Salisbury, I suspect Eliza may have had relatives there, though I could find none) but may also have been the Castleton of Richmond (Staten Island), New York. These signatures seem to be friends Eliza wished to remember, rather than relatives, perhaps suggesting a life of moves from place to place.

[16] Julia Strong Webster (b. 1833) and Mary Ann Webster (b. 1836), both of whom figure in the novel.

[17] One is illegible, but signed in Vienna. The other is the autograph of Sophronia Roat [sic, according to the typescript], also signed in Vienna. Though unable to find any Roats, I did find a Sophronia Root in the 1850 and 1860 censuses of Phelps, NY (p. 44 of 132 in 1850, p. 119 of 141 in 1860). The online town history of Phelps asserted that a James S. Root was a principal of a school there.

[18] It appears, then, that Eliza left her Bates relatives in Connecticut twice**,** first in 1835 and then again in 1839. The 1839 separation may have been in connection with Eliza's move to Columbus, Ohio, with the Websters. Since I have portrayed Eliza as raised in her Uncle William's household, I should mention the possibility that Eliza had spent most of her life to that point in Somers with the Pease family, rather than with her Uncle William. But I found no corroboration of that theory, and think it more plausible that Eliza went to Phelps with her Uncle William in 1835, to be close to her sister Julia. The Vienna autographs of 1839 suggest a presence there, as well as in Somers, and she may have been passed back and forth among different families of relatives.

19 The "Connecticut Western Reserve" was Ohio land previously claimed by the state of Connecticut – in fact, that part of Ohio was originally called "New Connecticut."

[20] Famous in his own right, Beecher was also the father of thirteen children, including Henry Ward Beecher and (most famous of all) Harriet Beecher Stowe.

had been Ashbel Webster's pastor back when Ashbel was a child in Connecticut,[21] and he gave some of the earliest sermons at the new church.[22] It was Beecher who had recommended the Reverend Henry L. Hitchcock (one of his students at Lane Theological Seminary) for the post of pastor at Second Presbyterian. Hitchcock was an aristocrat – his father had been a Justice of the Ohio Supreme Court, and he himself would later become president of Western Reserve College. The inscription from Hitchcock in Eliza's autograph book – dated October 16, 1843 – is perhaps the best evidence that Eliza moved Columbus with the Websters. The date of the inscription is also strong evidence regarding when the Websters left Columbus. But most important of all, I think, is that the inscription by young Hitchcock, signing as Eliza's pastor "and friend," suggests a closeness that made Hitchcock, as well as Ashbel Webster, strong forces in the evolution of Eliza's spiritual beliefs. And since both Hitchcock and Webster were proteges of Beecher, one can imagine that Beecher's views played a very great influence on Eliza's own.

The Websters were apparently so taken with the Columbus church that their third daughter, Harriet, born in 1842, was given the middle name Hubbell in honor of the church's founder. As part of the Webster household in Columbus, then, Eliza would have gone from one very religious household to another, and so, to understand Eliza's influences, I tried to understand those of Lyman Beecher.

After his early work in Connecticut, Lyman Beecher had gone west to become (in 1832) the first president of Lane Theological Seminary, where his mission was to train ministers to "win the West" for Protestantism. Beecher was more traditional in his approach to blacks than were his famous children. In 1834, as president of Lane, Beecher refused to offer classes to African-Americans.[23] He was also notorious for his anti-Catholicism.[24] His *Plea for the West* (1835) was an impassioned call for Protestants to move west to ensure that the West didn't become a bastion of papism.

Nor was it just Catholics and African-Americans that Beecher had problems with. His advocacy of aggressive evangelism ran counter to traditional Calvinist teaching, according to which people had been fore-ordained by God to be among the "elect" or not. If God had pre-ordained such things, then efforts at conversion were more or less irrelevant, according to some. For them, evangelism was in irreconcilable opposition to Calvin's teachings on predestination. Joshua Lacy Wilson, pastor of First Presbyterian in Cincinnati, had charged Beecher with heresy for his evangelical views, and in 1835, Beecher was tried twice on the charges.

The proceedings of the trial of Beecher for heresy are available on line.[25] The charges were that Beecher had preached that sin consists of a voluntary action in *dis*obeying God. (Obedience

[21] Beecher had become the pastor of the Congregational Church in Litchfield, Connecticut, beginning in 1810. Webster had been born in Litchfield in 1807, and the Websters were Congregationalists (the 1801 Plan of Union had made the Presbyterian and Congregationalist churches essentially the same church.) Beecher may have also known the Strongs. (He could hardly have escaped a close acquaintance with Eliza's preacher uncles, Henry Pierce Strong and William Lightbourne Strong.)

[22] For much of this history, see Moore, William E., *History of the Second Presbyterian Church of Columbus, Ohio: An Address Delivered March 3, 1889, on the Fiftieth Anniversary of Its Founding,* Hann and Adair, Columbus, Ohio, 1889.

[23] A group of about fifty students left the Seminary for nearby Oberlin College, which did accept students of color

[24] His sermon at Boston in 1834 was followed by the burning of the Catholic Ursuline sisters' convent there.

[25] Stansbury, Arthur, *Trial of the Reverend Lyman Beecher, D.D., Before the Presbytery of Cincinnati on the Charge of Heresy,* New York, 1835, accessed during 2015 at

and disobedience, whether man to God, wife to husband, children to father, or black to white, were clearly a recurring concern of the white European Christians of the day.) The accusing preacher, Wilson, asserted Beecher's doctrine was a crime because it violated the Church's teaching that as a result of Adam's fall, all men are sinners and *incapable* of obeying God. On that line of reasoning, all men sin every day; there's nothing voluntary about it; it's only the grace of a loving God who has ordained that some of them will go to Heaven, and others to Hell. Beecher defended himself by arguing that his views were acceptable Calvinistic theology.[26]

Meanwhile, in his *Plea for the West*, Beecher laid down the evangelical thinking I've focused on in *Alemeth*. His anti-Catholic rhetoric sounds eerily like some of the anti-immigrant rhetoric heard in America in modern times.

EXCERPTS FROM A PLEA FOR THE WEST[27]

> "...[I]f, upon examination, it should appear that three-fourths of the foreign emigrants whose accumulated tide is rolling in upon us, are, through the medium of their religion and priesthood, as entirely accessible to the control of the potentates of Europe as if they were an army of soldiers, enlisted and officered, and spreading over the land; then, indeed, should we have just occasion to apprehend danger to our liberties." (p. 56)
>
> "Of all influences, none is more pernicious than a corps of men acting systematically and perseveringly for its own ends upon a community unapprised of their doings, and undisciplined to meet and counteract them. A tenth part of the sufferage of the nation, thus condensed and wielded by the Catholic powers of Europe, might decide our elections, perplex our policy, inflame and divide the nation, break the bond of our union, and throw down our free institutions. The voice of history also warns us, that no sinister influence has ever intruded itself into politics, so virulent and disastrous as that of an ambitious ecclesiastical influence, or which demands, now and always, keener vigilance or a more active resistance." (59-60)
>
> "...[F]or all the political bearings of their unchangeable and infallible creed, and for all the deeds of persecution and blood, justified by their principles and perpetrated by Catholic powers, and not disavowed by his holiness or a council, the Catholic church is accountable..." (62)
>
> "...[S]ince the irruption of the northern barbarians, the world has never witnessed such a rush of dark-minded population from one country to another, as is

---

http://books.google.com/books?id=ZchLAAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=Lyman+Beecher+heresy&source=bl&ots=3WVvIT5AWg&sig=e5LyX4h7nT7iaORc9F-ikNhFOFE&hl=en&ei=57BfS-nwKtXOlAfr3dHtCw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=2&ved=0CA8Q6AEwAQ#

[26] The dispute for which Beecher was tried contributed to the major schism in Presbyterianism of 1838. Even though Beecher was exonerated on the charges, he left his post in Cincinnati in 1843 and later went back East to live with his son Henry in New York.

[27] Page numbers refer to the on-line image of what I believe to be the original edition.

> now leaving Europe and dashing on our shores...[28] Clouds like the locusts of Egypt are rising from the hills and plains of Europe, and on the wings of every wind are coming over to settle down upon our fair fields." (68-69)
>
> "You may as well suspend the attraction of gravity, or intercept the connection between cause and effect, as to prevent the adverse action of a Catholic education on the minds of protestant children." (93)

Whether Eliza shared all of Beecher's views we cannot know, but the man who wrote those words likely had a strong influence on the thinking of Webster, Hitchcock, and the young woman just entering her twenties. I have made that assumption in deciding that Eliza was likely an evangelical Christian interested in teaching the Presbyterian faith on the Mississippi frontier – definitely, in those days, considered the American "West."

From Columbus, the Websters moved west to St. Louis, probably in 1843. St. Louis was by far the largest city west of Pittsburgh, and already earning its reputation as "Gateway to the West." Founded by the French, it was still steeped in Catholicism when the Websters arrived. (The move to St. Louis seems an entirely plausible one for a young Presbyterian doctor to make if guided in part by evangelical desires.)

Technically, the Websters' move was not to St. Louis, but to Carondelet, then six miles south of St. Louis and now absorbed by today's larger city. I've uncovered only a little about Eliza's time there (except as it relates to the Blow family, which I take up in my discussion of Chapter 43, below). But while Eliza's reasons for accompanying the Websters to Carondelet seem plain, her reasons for leaving, two years later, in order to live with her oldest sister Mary Ann in northern Mississippi, are less clear. I read somewhere that the Webster house in Carondelet was practically a hospital, with Dr. Webster's patients coming and going. As his own family grew, it may have made sense that Eliza would live with Mary Ann and Colonel Brown in Mississippi – they were wealthy, and they appear to have had plenty of room for her. Perhaps it was felt that it was time for Eliza to "go out into the world on her own" for evangelical reasons.

Or there is also the possibility I adopted for purposes of the novel – that the schools of St. Louis were Catholic schools run by religious orders, and not interested in hiring an evangelical Protestant teacher. In contrast, mostly Protestant Oxford had already started its rise to become a center of education. Employment as a schoolteacher was one of the few occupations open to women in those days. In keeping with his Presbyterian faith, Lyman Beecher had been preaching that "Uneducated mind is educated vice" (*Plea for the West*, p. 48). The unattached, twenty-two year old Eliza Strong could easily have been interested in a frontier town like Oxford where there were already several schools and plans underway for more. Indeed, her sister Mary Ann may even have suggested that Oxford – where men outnumbered women by such a substantial margin – might be a good place to find a husband.

Such was the history that shaped my understanding of Eliza. If we feel sympathy for the orphaned girl, shuffled about from place to place by her aunts and uncles, with no money or

[28] For those interested in Manifest Destiny, I note that the reference to the European threat to "our shores" was written only five years after passage of the Indian Removal Act.

means of support, we should also be mindful of her background. Her father, John Strong, had been a lawyer, a judge, and a man of some wealth. The Pease and Bates families were blue-blooded families who'd come to America within a few years after the Mayflower. The Congregationalist churches pastored by uncles William and Henry Strong were among the most respected institutions in New England. Uncle William had attended Yale. One of Eliza's cousins (her Uncle Martin's son, Theron Rudd Strong) was Rochester, New York's Congressman between 1839 and 1841. Another Strong (Uncle William's son William) was on his way to becoming a Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. Sister Julia's husband, Ashbel Webster, was a great-great grandson of John Webster (1590-1661), the first colonial Governor of Connecticut. In short, Eliza's family was an aristocratic one. She was an orphaned, evangelical aristocrat without money – a combination that might be expected to produce an independent streak, a sense of privilege, and a strong sense of faith.

That, at least, is what I tried to capture in the novel. But even the best research does not supply specific thoughts and actions. For those, I drew upon my own mother. Though she was not an orphan, she was an aristocratic southerner, a woman of faith, a Presbyterian, and in fact, Eliza's great granddaughter, whose very name, Julia, had been given her in remembrance of Eliza's own daughter, Julia. Everything about my own mother suggested she strove to be like her parents, and indeed, that passing down the family's Christian "good breeding" was of the utmost importance to her because it had beenof the utmost importance to those who'd instilled it in her. Eliza had died just a few years before my mother was born. Extrapolation backwards seemed the logical thing to do.

The route described for Eliza's trip from Carondelet to Oxford seems the only logical one. There was plenty of steamboat travel between St. Louis and Memphis in those days. The Woolridge Steamboat List mentions two steamboats named *The Alex (or Aleck) Scot* – both side-wheelers – one built in 1842 and the second in 1848. A young Samuel Clemens worked on the second Aleck Scott, not yet built, but the novel supposes that Eliza Strong, traveling in 1845, could have been a passenger on the earlier vessel of that name.

We know that there was stage service from Memphis to Oxford because of advertisements for it in the Oxford newspapers of the day. The description of Eliza's uncomfortable ride in the coach, and of her fellow passengers, is fictional, but the conditions described were historically accurate, as far as I was able to determine them, taken largely from an original source I appear to have lost track of.

The letter from John Strong to his wife Roxana that inquired about Mary Ann's eyes – a copy of which I found in the family genealogy binders – was written the 15th of March, 1818 – before Eliza was born. The description of it is authentic. What the real reason was for John's inquiry about his daughter's eyes I've been unable to learn, but from my research I concluded that 'wandering eye' was a very common problem among children of the day, and was correctable with the right treatment – so I made the assumption that Mary Ann's early eyesight peculiarity was this affliction. (Besides, difficulty with a 'wandering eye' seemed appropriate, thematically, given what the book was *really* about.)

More generally, as I considered Eliza reading letters her father had written, I could relate to her in one sense: her reading of her father's letters must have been a lot like mine – neither of us had known the man; all either of us had of him were the letters he wrote; apart from the opinions of others, they were our only real window into what he was like.

I'd been thinking about this a good bit when another thought occurred to me. In the 1840's, with no internet, no television, no radio, no telephones, no tape recorders, and no automobiles, a person was relatively isolated from news and information about the outside world. What people got of such news was either from face to face conversation or from the written word – occasionally a book, perhaps, but mostly letters and newspapers. *Reading* had to be a much more significant part of your life (assuming you *could* read). To capture the flavor of the time period I had chosen, I wanted to capture the act of reading documents as what they must have often been: the significant "events" in a person's day. In writing the novel, then, letters and newspapers would have to be interwoven with the action; they had to become a part of the plot. And if I was going to use actual letters and newspaper articles, and was going to be accurate in incorporating them in a way that made sense and kept up the action, then those very documents would have to dictate the narrative action that tied them together. In a very large sense, the documents I came across – especially those that ended up incorporated into the text, but also those that did not – not only informed my sense of the characters, but actually created the "plot," to the extent there is one.

Hopefully, the process didn't entirely fail.

Chapter 10

Wednesday, July 2, 1845

I can't stress enough how hard I strove to let research drive the book. It's clear from Alemeth's surviving letters that Amzi wrote to him, during the war. But the only writing I've seen by Amzi was his post-war claim for reparations – essentially, just a list of his possessions. The fact that Amzi left no letters behind from which I could get a clue to his character helped drive my depiction of him as a sparing, simple, quiet man. As a farmer, he had to know both the importance of fencing in his livestock and of protecting them; I'd hoped that the parallels between his feelings about his children, his slaves, and his livestock, would be apparent.

Of course, his thoughts while killing the panther are fiction (as far as I've been able to tell), but if I'm right that panthers, catamounts, mountain lions, or big cats by any name were common threats to livestock in that place and time, Amzi surely killed more than one in his day. I didn't give this particular panther a name, so it could have been any of those he killed. So – fact or fiction? I've disclosed what little I know. I can say no more.

Chapter 11

Wednesday, July 2, 1845

Col. James Brown owned a lot of slaves, but the names 'Harl' and 'Emily," as being among them, as far as I know, are fictional.

The Webster/Blow connection is described in greater detail in the notes to Chapter 43, below, but for now, note that in the 1850 census, the household of the Websters' friend and neighbor in Carondelet, Henry Blow, included three live-in servants – all born in Ireland – Mary McCarty, Mary Byrne, and Mary Dugan. In 1843, the Marys' ages would have been thirty-three, thirteen, and eight. Given the Beecher emphasis on education in the western fight against Catholicism, and the close relationship between the Strong and Blow families, it is no great leap to imagine that during her time in Carondelet, young Eliza Strong got work teaching Henry Blow's "three Irish Marys." But her interest in discovering the problem with Mary Ann's eyes makes me think of Matthew 7:3

Chapter 12

Sunday, July 6, 1845

The lyrics of the hymn sung in this chapter are from the seventh verse of one of John Wesley's hymns, originally beginning with the line, "Glory to God, and praise, and love," but now usually comprising the first verse of a shorter hymn titled 'O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing.' It seems safe to suppose that Mary Ann Brown, having moved to Saint Augustine with her father when she was sixteen and having spent time (according to family letters) in Savannah and Charleston even before her residence in Mississippi, had developed a southern accent by the age of thirty-eight. In contrast, Eliza Strong, having spent her life in Connecticut, New York, and Ohio, likely had a pronounced Yankee accent when she arrived in Mississippi in the mid-1840's.

Although there's no direct evidence that Mary Ann Brown was responsible for introducing her younger sister to Amzi Byers, it seems a most plausible supposition. Amzi was a wealthy planter and recent widower; he had young children who needed a mother. He and his late wife had attended the College Hill Presbyterian church. Mary Ann herself had married an older man of great wealth. Everything about it made sense. Surely, a woman like her, looking out for her younger sister, would have encouraged the relationship.

Oxford's emphasis on education is well known. Its very name, taken from the English University town, reveals the aspirations of its founders. The Oxford Male and Female Academies had been founded in 1838,[29] the North Mississippi College, in College Hill, in 1840. By 1845, the University had been chartered and an initial Board of Trustees named. The March 31, 1849 *Organizer* contained ads for the male and female academies. By 1860, there would also be the Oxford Female Institute, the College Hill Male Academy, the College Hill Female Seminary, and the Union Female College, for a total of 33 schools in Lafayette County.[30] The people of Oxford had always wanted their town to be a center of learning. The University slogan, *Pro Scientia et Sapientia* – "For Knowledge and Wisdom" – reflects the aspirations of the people, if not their accomplishments.

[29] Mayfield, Jack, Oxford Olden Days: North Mississippi College, accessed March 23, 2017, at http://hottytoddy.com/2015/08/31/oxford-olden-days-north-mississippi-college/
[30] Doyle, *supra*, pp. 93, 398.

The conversation between Mary Ann and Eliza is about the importance of influencing what gets taught to others. But even as they discuss it, Mary Ann – focused on her own agenda of pairing her sister with Mr. Byers – misunderstands what Eliza considers important to teach. Focusing on one's own agenda causes misunderstanding of another yet again.

Chapter 13

July 27, 1845

Revivals and camp meetings were common in the mid 1840's.[31] According to Don Doyle, the Cumberland Presbyterians had held one at Clear Creek in 1843, and since Colonel Brown's father was a Cumberland Presbyterian minister, I wouldn't be surprised if it was held on Brown's plantation land there. There were also camp meetings at "Sinners' Campground" in Panola County.[32]

From all I can gather, Dr. Isom was the most socially prominent of the several active physicians in Oxford in the 1840's. In the 1860 Census, he lived just a few doors from Colonel and Mrs. Brown. I have therefore guessed he was the physician consulted by Mary Ann Brown during her pregnancies.

Like the names Harl and Emily, the name Sam (for one of Colonel Brown's slaves) is fictional. With few exceptions, I used the names of actual white people in *Alemeth*, while using (mostly) fictional names for the slaves. This was not a deliberate choice on my part. White people were fully named in the decennial censuses, and most of the records and histories that have survived are about them, giving an author ample opportunity to make inferences about the people so named. In contrast, slaves were not known by family surnames, which is understandable, given that their families were systematically ignored. They were only given first ("Christian") names. Prior to 1870, the United States Census didn't reference slaves even by their given names. They were simply reported in the Census Bureau's Slave Schedules by what white society considered most important about them – their age, gender, and owner.

Meanwhile, Mary Ann uses Eliza's interest in the camp meeting to help further her own match-making aims. She is a woman who knows what's best for her sister, and is skilled at getting her way.

.

Chapter 14

Saturday/Sunday, August 16/17, 1845

Lorenzo Dow (October 16, 1777 – February 2, 1834) was an itinerant Methodist preacher; at one time, his autobiography was the second best-selling book in the United States. He had preached against atheism, deism, Calvinism and universalism, but his most frequent target had been Catholicism, which he'd assailed in front of large crowds at camp meetings across the United State and Britain, shouting, screaming, crying, begging, and making jokes – not like what

[31] See Doyle, *supra*, pp 118-119.
[32] See, for example, former slave George Washington Miller's account of such meetings in *Prayin' to Be Set Free: Personal Accounts of Slavery in Mississippi*, edited by Andrew Waters, John F. Blair, Winston-Salem, 2002.

was heard from the pulpits of most churches in those days. Dow was extremely popular among his followers and famous for the large crowds his camp meetings attracted.

Reverend Leroy B. Gaston was an old school Presbyterian minister who had been the pastor of the Old Lebanon Presbyterian Church in Choctaw County in 1844[33] and became pastor at College Hill Presbyterian, in Oxford, in December of 1846. He appears in the Lafayette County Census of 1850 with his wife Susan and three sons, William, Charles, and L.B. By 1857, Gaston had left Oxford to found the Corona Female College in Corinth. [34] He was said to be a first rank orator, but the words attributed to him in this chapter are pure supposition.

Bottom line: I don't know that the Browns, Byers and Gastons attended any camp meetings together, but I'd be willing to bet that they did, and that it went something like what I've portrayed.

Chapter 15

Fall, 1845, to Spring, 1846

The specifics of Eliza's instruction to Alemeth is all fiction, but if her interpretation of Chronicles wasn't as I describe it, it certainly could have been. In any case, her interpretation of Chronicles fits with the theme of Alemeth as I grew to understand it, and a chronicle of real lives is, after all, what I set out to provide. I attempt, here, to sort out the fiction and non-fiction in my story. As for the fictional or non-fictional nature of the genealogies set forth in the Book of Chronicles, from Adam and Eve down to Abijah, Anathoth, and Alemeth, I can only say that having attempted the accurate chronicling of generations myself, I believe it would take a superhuman historian to get it exactly right.

So Alemeth understandably wonders what gave Eliza the right to tell him what he ought to know – just as Eliza comes to wonder how Reverend Gaston comes up with his strict interpretation of the Sabbath. At some point, I made a note that Gaston was active in the Sabbath movement, but if I ever saw a source to that effect, now I can't find it. In any case, the confrontation between Eliza and him, described here, regarding whether the teaching of scripture on the Sabbath violates the Commandment is, like all the dialogue in *Alemeth*, of a type traditionally called fictional.

That said, Don Doyle tells how, in 1858, the first Presbyterian Church of Oxford objected when one of its members allowed his slaves to trade with each other on their day off. (Slaves were allowed to keep the money they earned.) Their day off was Sunday, and the rationale given by the church was that permitting slaves to trade on Sunday desecrated the Sabbath. The offending church member apologized, admitted he'd been "exceedingly wrong," and promised to stop.[35] My research encountered scores of examples of scripture providing the rationalization for self-serving practices in which people tell other people what to do, despite their tendency to be wrong. But the story recounted by Doyle reminds me that belief in the sanctity of the Sabbath

[33] See http://www.oldlebanon.org/history.htm
[34] Alexander, Dawn, *Corona College as an Example of Ante-Bellum Southern Education*, master's thesis at Ole Miss, Oxford, accessed at a website of Milton Sandy, Jr., at http://mlsandy.home.tsixroads.com/Corinth_MLSANDY/dawn.html
[35] Doyle, *supra*, p. 142.

was far stronger in the mid-nineteenth century than it is today. So I can well imagine Reverend Gaston holding views like those presented here, even if he wasn't active in the Sabbath movement.

Chapter 16

1846 to April, 1847

Since the Reverend Leroy B. Gaston became pastor at College Hill Presbyterian in 1846 and remained in that capacity for several years, and since Amzi was a member of that church, it seems likely it was Gaston who joined Amzi and Eliza in marriage in 1847.

The custom of brides wearing white dresses began with the 1840 marriage of Queen Victoria in England, or at least that seems to be the generally accepted story of the custom's origin. But like any custom, white wedding dresses surely took time to catch on, especially in conservative Presbyterian households such as Eliza grew up in. According to Doyle, when the matter of dancing came up before the Oxford Presbyterians in 1849, it was agreed that dancing was "not compatible with Christian Character."[36] Given Eliza's strict religious upbringing, it's not much of a leap to suppose that an image-conscious socialite of upper class Oxford (Mary Ann Brown) would have had to do a little arm-twisting to get Eliza to wear such a "modern" innovation as a white dress.

Chapter 17

April 22, 1847

God gave Amzi Byers "dominion" over Eliza Strong on April 22, 1847, the way he'd given Adam dominion over Eve and all the other creatures of the earth – except that in Amzi and Eliza's case, He had the help of a minister. Since marriages were traditionally hosted by the bride's parents, most often at the bride's parents' home, it's quite likely the couple were married at the home of Eliza's wealthy oldest sister, with whom she had been living prior to the wedding. It is reasonable to assume that the ceremony was performed by Reverend Gaston, since he was the pastor of College Hill Presbyterian.

There can be no question but that on this occasion, even more than most, Alemeth Byers was surrounded by girls. In his own immediate family, he had two sisters, Mary Ann and Semirah Louisa. Now, the "new" family his father had chosen – locally, at least, Colonel and Mary Ann Brown's family – consisted of no boys and five girls: Frances, Fredonia, Ann, Julia, and Mary. On top of that, the most likely family to come to Eliza's wedding would surely have been the Websters, and other than Dr. Webster, this family consisted of Eliza's sister Julia and her three daughters, Julia (1833), Mary Ann (1836), and now Harriet (1842). In sum, among the three families likely in attendance at the wedding, Alemeth, at age 9, was the only boy, compared to ten girls.

[36] Doyle, *supra*, p. 117, citing church records.

Amzi was the fourth of eleven children, the third son of David Byers (1774-1862) and Mary "Polly" Gordon (1779-1867). Of his several brothers, I decided two of them were likely in attendance at his wedding — John Alemeth Byers and Henry Johnson Byers – for somewhat different reasons.

Amzi had been raised on his father's rice plantation in South Carolina. The original John Alemeth Byers (1798-1873), after whom the novel's title character was named, was Amzi's oldest brother, who had left home in South Carolina to become a merchant in Alabama – not the typical path for an eldest son, who'd have been in line to inherit his father's plantation. When John Alemeth left for Alabama, Amzi went with him, joining him in business there. The closeness between these two brothers is born out by the fact that Amzi later named his own son after him, and the respect Amzi felt for him seems further borne out by the fact that the land that became Amzi's plantation had actually been purchased by his brother Alemeth. So I have assumed that Amzi and Alemeth were close, and since Alemeth lived not too far away (just across the border in Alabama) I've assumed that he would have come to the wedding. But brother Alemeth being 49 years old by that time; it seems unlikely he'd have brought family with him for what was, after all, his brother's second marriage.

I've put brother Henry Johnson at the wedding because he appears in the 1850 and 1860 censuses living right next to Amzi. He owns his own slaves, though not nearly as many as Amzi does. And he never marries. Apart from such facts, I was unable to discover anything about "Uncle Johnson" at all. I wondered if he might have been a little slow. I wondered about his sexual orientation. I wondered if he might have been involved with one or more female slaves. I found no real evidence for any of these theories. But since he came to live with Amzi at some point prior to 1850, and Amzi was soon to name another son after him, I thought it likely he came to the 1845 wedding.

As for his drinking, this was entirely my own fabrication, suggested by the family name Gordon. Like Leander McKinney's actual opinions about the preaching abilities of Reverend Gaston, whether Uncle Johnson ever touched liquor will likely never be known, regardless of advances yet to be made in our understanding of history.

Chapter 18

May and June, 1847

My mother – one of Eliza's great granddaughters and a devout Presbyterian who grew up in the south – told me that her mother never discussed such things as menstruation or sex. She further asserted that this was the norm. In those days, she said, a young girl watched what older women did and figured things out as best she could; but bodily functions relating to sex and procreation were simply not proper subjects for the spoken word, even between mothers and daughters.

Now, I find it hard to believe that the silence adopted by my mother's family in this respect was universal, as she claimed. I rather suspect it was *un*usual, a function of something specific to my mother's family. But how is one to know how prevalent it was? The very proposition that such things were not spoken about in proper household conversation – and therefore certainly not written about, outside of medical journals, perhaps – seems to me to be impossible to know. Neither archaeology, DNA nor a review of written literature could ever yield an answer. Yet my mother claimed to know, and I am curious what led her to her conclusion. Mention of such a taboo in an occasional piece of private correspondence could disprove an assertion that it was *never* spoken of, but how many such mentions would have to be discovered to overcome the assertion that it was *rarely* spoken of, or not the norm?

In the absence of persuasive evidence about such unprovables, I suspect people tend to assume that their own experience is universal, or at least the norm. After all, when my mother asserted that mothers and daughters didn't talk to each other that way in those days, how could *she* possibly have known? How did she know that the universal principle involved was, rather, that you didn't admit, even to your best friends, that such things *were* spoken about in *your* house? And if her girlfriends told her *their* mothers had said nothing to *them*, was that a sound basis for assuming a norm that applied to all of society?

If we were to come across a writer of that day who asserted that it was common, or not, why would we trust the opinion of such a writer on such a thing, unless it was discovered that some visionary had beat Masters and Johnson to the scientific study of such things by a hundred years or so and conducted surveys among large numbers of people? It's my belief that there are certain things history simply isn't suitable to ever "get right," and this may be one of them.

Still, I had to make *some* assumptions about Eliza's innocence or sophistication on her wedding night, and for that purpose, I figured I had no better witness than my mother. So I took her at her word. And I enjoyed the challenge of simulating that silence – writing about menstruation, a wedding night, a childbirth, without ever mentioning them. How far could I go *not* saying anything about the unspoken reasons you just didn't talk about "such things"?

"Aunt Harriet had helped," was the way I introduced the subject in one draft; "but she had never spoken a word about the thing itself. And once it was clear that events had taken their course, the silence continued. Eliza heard others whisper about it, but it was never talked about at home, even afterward." That sort of thing.

At the end of the day, though we can only guess at Eliza's feelings during and after her wedding night, she must have conceived her first child around the first of July, 1847 – a little over two months after the wedding. For the truth of that presumption, I rely on things I've learned about pregnancy and childbirth which did *not* come from my mother.

Chapter 19

October, 1847

Cotton production today is different than it was in the mid-nineteenth century, slave labor having been replaced by modern machinery, fertilization and pest control practices having advanced since Professor Millington's day. Meanwhile, the growing season is different in different regions of the country, so that planting time in Mississippi would not likely be the same as in Virginia or south Texas. All of this creates obstacles for a modern city boy trying to understand nineteenth century Mississippi cotton cultivation. Ironically, one of the most helpful sources for me was James Chamberg's 1853 *Premium Essay on the Treatment and Cultivation of Corn.* Its title suggests it would tell us little or nothing about cotton, but it did (while saying not a word about corn.)[37] Also helpful was a slew of primary source documents collected in 1910's *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society,*[38] which included original diaries, letters, and other writings about plantation management, expenses, and routines from the ante-bellum period. Two of the pieces I consulted from that series were "Diary of Work on a Sea-Island Cotton Plantation,"[39] and "Cotton Routine."[40] The 1982 series *How a Cotton Plant Grows*[41] was a helpful modern source.

Meanwhile, specific to the area around Oxford, the website of College Hill Presbyterian Church says this: "Cotton ginned early before the roads got bad was hauled by wagon and mule to the Memphis market. Late cotton was hauled to Wyatt, a small town a few miles north on the Tallahatchie River, from which it was transported by steamboat down the river when the water was high in winter. When the railroad was built in the mid-1850's, cotton was shipped by rail."

In his very helpful book, *Oxford in the Civil War,* historian Stephen Enzweiler asserts that cotton planting in the area of Oxford was not until early May, but local newspapers were reporting the appearance of first blossoms on June 18 and June 19, first bolls as early as July 11, and first bales sold as early as August 29th. Based on those dates and the time frames I've otherwise researched, it seems likely to me that at least some planters started planting in April.

In any case, I tried my best to create a calendar of the local cotton growing season that would be consistent with a wide range of sometimes conflicting sources. What else was there to do? Conflicting sources were well on their way to becoming the normal state of affairs as my goal of painting an accurate picture of the past became more and more unattainable.

Chapters 20 – 21

[37] The Working Farmer, Vol. V, p. 151, Frederick McCready, New York, 1853. The article with the misprinted title was in fact about cotton, not corn. (So much for the reliability of original sources!) Speaking of mistakes, I accept full responsibility for a major share of the errors in *Alemeth*, but not all of them. Errors start arising when the actors themselves start making assumptions and drawing inferences. By the time first hand witnesses fail to remember and record correctly what they thought they experienced, even if only moments before andeven if that is their aim, errors are plentiful even in so-called "original" sources. So I take comfort in knowing that my own many errors are in keeping with a time-honored tradition in which we all have ample chance to participate.

[38] Arthur H. Clark, Cleveland, 1910. The first to volumes were devoted to "Plantation and Frontier."

[39] An extract of the plantation diary of Thomas P. Ravenel, 1847-1850, at page 195. Ravenel's plantation was 1100 acres.

[40] Extracts from the plantation diary of Leven Covington, 1829-1830, at page 231. Covington's plantation was in Adams County, Mississippi.

[41] This series appeared in *The Progressive Farmer* in 1982.

The Butler Hotel in Oxford was run by Mrs. Burlina Butler, widow of former sheriff Charles Butler and founder of the Baptist Church.[42] She was William Faulkner's maternal great grandmother.[43] Neilson's General Store, still in operation today as Neilson's Department Store and touting itself as "the South's Oldest Store,"[44] stood even then on the courthouse square.

At one point, I concluded that Leander McKinney's grandfather's name was probably Zephaniah, based (as I recall) upon finding such a McKinney, about the right age, in one of the area censuses. But now he seems to have disappeared, and without the help of someone like Doctor Edgar, I've been unable to find him anywhere.

Otherwise, these chapters are entirely fictional. They exist because my research kept encountering references to the popularity of spiritualism in the 1840's, and because my portrayal of Leander McKinney had been modeled on young boys I've known who'd have gone in for such things, enthralled by the preposterous. Varley's *Treatise on Zodiacal Physiognomy* (1828) had done much to foster interest in astrology and spiritualism. Not surprisingly, there were many who believed in such things and many who condemned them as quackery. It did strike me as interesting that much of the condemnation of spiritualism came from devout Christians who, despite their belief in all sorts of miracles, virgin births, the immortality of souls, the Holy Ghost, and a devil who possesses people, dismissed the summoning of ghosts as fanciful claptrap. Assuming that the practices of mid-nineteenth century spiritualists were, in fact, staged scams designed to dupe the unsuspecting, the fact that so many believed in them struck me as a prominent example of the major themes of Alemeth, making the phenomenon of spiritualism all but impossible to omit from my portrait of the time. Historical but fictionalized Leander McKinney seemed precisely the right guy to take us there. That decided, the opportunity to portray Alemeth as having to escape the watchful eye of his father and stepmother inevitably led to his little deceit, and the phenomenon Alexander Pope described when he wrote, "Oh what a complicated web we weave when first we practice to deceive."

Of course, in one sense, the writing of fiction is all about fabrication and deception, no matter how much we claim it to represent "truth" in some other way. Again and again, in the writing of *Alemeth*, my own struggles with truth mirrored the similar struggles of my characters. All historical fiction came to seem the summoning of the spirits of the dead, and all fiction the telling of "little white lies." As a tribute to the late E(dgar) L. Doctorow, a writer I very much admire, I couldn't resist the temptation to give my own summoner-of-dead-spirits his name. I hope Doctorow's spirit sees it as the compliment I intended it to be.

By the way, I do not know that Uncle William and Aunt Harriet had legally adopted Eliza. I'm almost certain I made that up.

---

[42] Williamson, Joel, *William Faulkner and Southern History*, Oxford University Press, 1993, p 120.
[43] Doyle, *supra,* pp 104, 211. See the family tree among the final (unnumbered) pages of Williamson, *supra.* Mrs. Butler appears in the Oxford Census for 1860 at p 205 of 240, family #1333.
[44] See http://neilsonsdepartmentstore.com/?page_id=11

Chapter 22

January, 1848

This chapter is essentially all fiction (except that Eliza did give birth to Medora Roxanna Byers on the 29th of March, 1848). It seems I may have erred in describing the Reverend Gaston as a large-girthed man. My own research about him had led me to Dawn Alexander's history of Corona College, and only after *Alemeth* went to print did I realize that Ms. Alexander's work contained a (second-hand) description of Reverend Gaston as "very tall and nicely-built with light brown hair and hazel eyes." Assuming that information, which I'd already collected, is accurate, then I clearly erred by overlooking it when I wrote my physical description of the man.

It is only a guess that, on his twelfth birthday, Alemeth was asked to make a profession of faith. My description of the scene is based on experiences I myself had, as a teenager, when my mother hosted a Presbyterian minister and his wife as visitors from Mississippi. Overcoming substantial reluctance on my part, they prevailed on me to get on my knees and pray hard for my Lord and Savior to come into my heart. No matter how hard I tried, I wasn't able to pull it off. When I reported this, they said all I had to do was ask *sincerely*, and they insisted I try again. I *did* pray sincerely, as I understand the meaning of that word, but still, I failed, and eventually, they gave up, saying it was clear I had not, in fact, been sincere.

It struck me early in the writing of *Alemeth* that there was some irony, prominent in the lives of the slave-owning class, on questions of submission, obedience, and servitude. I was listening to a book-on-tape several years ago which included a letter a confederate soldier had written home during the war, in which he railed at the atrocities of the northern government, complaining that "they are trying to make slaves of us." That soldier went on and on about the injustice involved. The irony of a white southern slave-owning class railing against the injustice of a northern government that was trying to impose its will on their freedom was strong enough, but with everyone in agreement that it was no good to be another man's slave, I found it fascinating that the "Lord" they all most worshipped was a Lord and Master who demanded absolute obedience, and to whom there was no better response than complete and unquestioning servitude, a Lord whose paternal love was proven by the fact that he demanded obedience, and would look out for you, provided you gave it, and otherwise, would be doomed to eternal hellfire.

It was in the context of those major thematic ironies that I began to contemplate how much of human behavior consists of dominance, servitude, and people trying to get others to behave the way they'd like them to. From simple suggestions or requests to absolute insistence, backed up by force of arms, it seems to me that people are always trying to get others to do what *they* think is the right thing to do. Along the continuum from meek suggestion, through repeated efforts at persuasion, to military subjugation, where and when is it no longer appropriate to get someone else to act the way we think they should? And where, along that spectrum, should I place the efforts of my mother, and that minister from Mississippi, to "help" me bring their Lord into my life?

Were they trying to enthrall me? Should I have been more sincere in my prayer for subjugation?

These are the questions that ran through my mind as I wrote about Alemeth's profession of faith, and they likely explain why, neglecting evidence that Reverend Gaston was tall and "nicely built," I described him as a man whose "gravity" had to be acknowledged. Emotions may be the greatest enemies of fact.

Chapter 23

December, 1847 to March 28, 1848

The effort to understand people who've died is more than just impossible to get perfect – it's often dependent on the most tenuous of clues. One category of clue I've often resorted to is the names that people choose to give to their children. It's something they have nine months to think about. They generally know that it will be something remembered for a lifetime to come, if not more. So my view is that a naming decision can often be a pretty good "tell" regarding what's important to a person.

March 28, 1848, was the date of birth of Eliza's first-born, and the name given to the girl was Medora Roxanna Byers. The name Roxanna was the name of Eliza's own mother, who had passed away when Eliza was two. Whenever a given name is the name of one's parent, or simply a common family name, there may be little reason to read meaning into it, apart from the idea that the parent is willing to follow tradition. But in Eliza's case, I wondered about her feelings since, as an early-orphaned child who likely had no recollection of her mother, she likely thought of her as an *absence* of something – a *lack*, rather than any sort of positive actual memory. If she cared about her mother enough to give her first-born daughter her mother's name, then she certainly cared enough to be curious about the woman who'd birthed her. Any letters Roxanna Strong may have written to John Strong had likely been tossed aside somewhere in Saint Augustine or the Caribbean islands. Roxanna Strong had died before the invention of photography; to my knowledge, there was no painted portrait of her. What Eliza would have known of her mother, then, would have come from two sources: what her remaining older relatives (and especially her older sisters, Mary Ann and Julia) would have told her, based on their own vague childhood memories; and from the letters their father, John Strong, had written *to* their mother. The letters of John Strong are full of apologies and excuses for why he was not coming home from his Caribbean travels, settling down with her, working a farm. As such, they strongly imply that Roxanna Strong wanted him to. Since his letters have survived, and were handed down to later generations by Eliza's youngest daughter, it's apparent that Eliza had them, and read them, and gained from them whatever insights she could about her mother's character – just as I would seek clues about them, from the same letters, nearly two hundred years later. And all of this leads to consideration of the *other* name Eliza chose for her first-born: *Medora*.

What struck me, first, about the choice of the name Medora was that it is not Biblical, and for a woman raised in the households of ministers, in a day when nearly all names were taken from the Bible, this just didn't seem natural. My next surprise came from the research discovery that,

in the mid-nineteenth century, Medora was actually a somewhat popular name for children because of the popularity of an 1814 poem written by Lord Byron, *The Corsair*. But popular as the name might have been among the general population, it seemed all the more improbable to me that Eliza would choose the name of a non-Biblical, fictional character created by the *incestuous libertine* Lord Byron, given her religious upbringing. *Lord Byron, of all people?* It simply made no sense.

But convinced there are reasons people give their children names – especially names that are neither traditional family names nor Biblical ones – I didn't give up on the matter, and at length, I read Byron's poem, *Corsair*. And therein, I'm convinced, I got an answer that made complete sense. In Byron's popular poem, Medora is the name of a woman whose husband is an adventurous sea-captain who abandons her, and is unfaithful to her; but she remains faithful to him, to the end. In other words, Medora was a fictional heroine whose portrayal by Byron exactly mirrored the experience of Eliza's own mother, Roxanna. Byron's Corsair was published in 1814. The letters from Captain John Strong giving excuses for not coming home were dated around 1818. One can readily imagine that Roxanna Strong had read Byron's (very popular) poem and identified strongly with the faithful heroine portrayed in it. Whether she explicitly adopted "Medora" as a nickname for herself or not, her teenage daughter, Mary Ann Brown, who importantly had not been raised in the homes of ministers and, anxious to live with her bachelor father in Saint Augustine, was likely the type to read and enjoy the poetry of a libertine like Byron, could easily have made the association. That is, Mary Ann Strong could easily have given her mother Roxanna the name "Medora" as a pet nickname. And when Eliza asked her older sister what their mother had been like, Mary Ann could surely have compared their mother to Byron's abandoned but ever faithful heroine.

So when Eliza Byers named her first born daughter Medora Roxanna Byers, I firmly believe she was making a statement about the mother she had never known; and about the feminine virtue she most valued: faithfulness. I base my characterization of Eliza's own faithfulness in no small part upon that evidence and my reasoning from it. Is the evidence convincing? Is the explanation of the name fact, or is it fiction? I'm afraid I don't know where the line between the two lies. As each day passes, I am more convinced that there is no fact; there is no fiction; there is only evidence, interpretation, and supposition by minds imperfectly suited for the task.

That said, Nancy McKinney, Anna James, and Mary Crawford, all mentioned in this chapter, were neighbors of the Byers family near Bynum's Creek, according to the federal censuses for Panola County.

Chapter 24

Summer to Fall, 1848

The material about the impact of a new baby girl in the Byers house is supposition, but Colonel Brown's advertisement, *Cotton Plantation For Sale*, did in fact appear in the *Oxford Organizer*, running on September 13, 1848, and for several months thereafter. The ad offers a Panola County plantation for sale while showing Colonel Brown's home address to be "Clear

Creek, Lafayette County." Clear Creek runs from west of Oxford to the north of it, where it flows into the Tallahatchie River. Comparing its course to the location of the numerous properties bought by Colonel Brown in the 1830's, I've deduced that Colonel Brown's actual Clear Creek residence during the 1840's was on 1,280 acres lying west and slightly south of Oxford.[45]

The fact that Colonel Brown was living on 1280 acres, was selling a different 1280 acres, and owned far more property than just these two parcels, gives some indication of his wealth and status in the community. The advertisement's casual, offhand reference to the Colonel's willingness to take Negroes in payment for the Panola property, instead of cash, speaks volumes about the difference between how we see such things today and what was accepted as " just plain the way things are" in 1848 Mississippi.

Chapter 25

April to May 2, 1845

The article from *The Chickasaw Union* mentioned in the second paragraph of this chapter had appeared in that paper's number of 23 November, 1837. The full piece is yet another eerie reminder of how different yesterday's "truth" is from our own.

INDIAN EMMIGRATION

> The agent charged with the removal of the Chickasaws has made a "clean job" of it. The presence of an Indian in our village, but recently the great place of rendezvous of the redman, is now almost a curiosity. The demoralizing, brutalizing effects of contact between the white man and the savage, which but a few weeks since were most painfully conspicuous in our streets, are now removed, and our town presents the same quiet orderly appearance which is always to be seen in the inland villages of the Atlantic States. Every well-wisher of his species, every friend of the redman, must rejoice at the breaking up of an intercourse which, as it existed here, was fraught with the most pernicious consequences to both the white man and the Indian – two races, which all time and experience prove cannot exist prosperously together.
>
> -- The Chickasaw Union

Colonel Brown may not have had portraits of his father and grandfather hanging on the wall of his house – at least not literally – but the story of his grandfather, also named James Brown, and his father, Joseph, is a fascinating one. That story, too, has to do with relations between white men and red, and it seems worthwhile to mention it here.

In the 1780's, Middle Tennessee was still in Chickamauga Cherokee hands. Despite British efforts to colonize the area, the Chickamauga didn't share the white man's vision of the future.

[45] Specifically, Township 8, Range 5W, Section 25, consisting of 640 acres bought from a Chickasaw man, Mish Um Tah Umby on April 14, 1836 (Lafayette County Deed Book A:37 and B:79), and Township 8, Range 4W, Section 30, consisting of 640 acres bought from the New York and Mississippi Land Company on the 24th of November, 1836. (Deed Book A: 173.)

When eight counties of western North Carolina declared themselves the State of Franklin and ordered a road cut from the south end of Clinch Mountain to French Lick, for the purpose of taking settlers into the interior, the Chickamauga were anything but pleased. But the Colonel's grandfather, James Brown, was not to be deterred. Some of the land just south of French Lick, in the heart of Chickamauga country, had been granted to him for his service against the British during the war of independence. On May 1, 1788, he took his family – his wife, four sons, three daughters, four other young men and all their belongings, including a number of slaves – on a voyage by boat into Chickamauga country. (At least, it *had* been Chickamauga country. As far as Brown was concerned, a significant part of it now belonged to *him*.) An early history of Tennessee[46] tells us that the party was making its way down the Tennessee River when, at dawn on May 9th, it passed the first of the Chickamauga towns near Chattanooga. The Chickamauga sent scouts down the river to notify their brothers of the approach of the white settlers. Then, when the party reached Nickajack Cave, things took a turn for the worse.

> They were surprised to see in midstream about forty Indians in canoes, bearing white flags, their guns and tomahawks being concealed in their canoes. Colonel Brown warned them not to come near, and turning the boat about, leveled at them a swivel he had on board. John Vann, a half-breed among the intruders,[47] begged him not to shoot, assuring him that the savages only wanted to trade for such wares as were on board. Meanwhile, the Indians were drawing near, finally boarding and pushing the craft to the shore. Their weapons now flashed on every side. The Brown party was seized and a massacre followed. One Indian with a sword beheaded Colonel Brown and threw his body into the river. Two of the older sons, James Jr. and John, and three of the young men were killed and their bodies mutilated. Mrs. Brown and one daughter were taken on foot two hundred miles south into the Creek nation, where for seventeen months they were kept in bondage. Two of the younger daughters, Jane and Polly, aged ten and five years respectively, were carried to the Cherokee nation and held captive a year. The youngest of the children, a boy, was detained five years by the Creeks. Another son, Joseph, was held captive a year at Running Water, as the slave of an Indian named Tunbridge. As a reward for having given notice of the approach of the immigrants, the negroes were presented to the Indians of the upper towns."[48]

During his captivity, young Joseph Brown (Aug 2, 1772 - Feb 4, 1868) – only fifteen at the time of the massacre – befriended the Chickamauga chief known as "The Breath."[49] He and the

---

[46] Hale, Will T. and Merritt, Dixon L., *A History of Tennessee and Tennesseans*, The Lewis Publishing Company, 1913.
[47] Not a few have taken issue with Hale and Merritt's' designation of the Chickamauga as "the intruders." Who was intruding on whom is obviously a matter of perspective. Note too that the Chickamauga weapons were "concealed" while Mr. Brown wasted no time leveling his cannon directly at their canoes, despite their white flags, such that Mr. Brown had to be "begged" not to shoot. How much, in this story, should we believe?
[48] Hale & Merritt, *supra,* p 153.
[49] Armstrong, Zella, *The History of Hamilton County and Chattanooga, Tennessee*, The Lookout Publishing Company, Chattanooga, 1931, Vol I, Chpt 4, *The Cherokee and Chickamauga Indians*, pg 39.

others who had been taken prisoner were eventually exchanged for some Virginia currency[50] and returned to North Carolina. But as far as Joseph could see, the land had been rightly earned by his father for his service in the Revolution. His family's birthright was not to be denied – friendship with "The Breath" notwithstanding.

He had his chance to set things "right" when he was twenty-two. His long captivity among the Chickamauga had made him familiar with Chickamauga ways. In late August, 1794, as guide to General Robertson, he led federal troops to Nickajack, where they fell upon the Chickamauga, burned their cabins, and killed many of the natives, including Chief Breath.

As the eldest surviving Brown son, Joseph settled in the Cumberland country, about three miles below Nashville, with his widowed mother. He became a minister and founding member of the Cumberland Presbyterian church. He married a woman named Sarah Thomas, and settled about three miles from Nashville, on White's Creek. [51] In 1796, the Browns named their first son James – the Colonel who figures so prominently in *Alemeth* – after the patriarch and pioneer who'd been "slaughtered by savages." In 1806, the Browns settled on Lytle's Creek, in Maury County.[52] During the Creek war of 1812, Colonel Joseph Brown, about forty years of age, was aide-de-camp and interpreter for General Andrew Jackson.[53] While I haven't traced the relationship further, the ties between Andrew Jackson and Colonel Brown's family may have run deep, lending credence to Chapter 43's speculation that Mary Ann Brown was apt to go on and on about them.

The list of Lafayette County properties Colonel Brown first bought from various Chickasaw in the 1830's is based on my review of the original deed books in the Lafayette County Courthouse in Oxford. The Chickasaw names given, with the property descriptions, are as I found them in those old deed books – the ink fading, but the words precisely as recorded in 1835. The first purchase (DB A:219) was on May 14, 1835, from the Chickasaw named Tobotubby. Tobotubby was a well-known character who operated a ferry across the Tallahatchie and was friendly to the white man.[54] This property today lies beneath Lake Sardis, so it may not be possible to know for sure, but I believe it may have been the very property from which Tobotubby's ferry ran. (Colonel Brown seems to have been very astute in selecting prime properties.) Of some interest may be the fact that, on March 31, 1836, the same property was also recorded as having been conveyed to Brown by the *wives* of Tobotubby.[55]

---

[50] Davidson County Census, *1770-1790 Census of the Cumberland Settlements*, p. 12.

[51] See the Cumberland Church website at http://www.cumberland.org/hfcpc/minister/BrownJ.htm. That site attributes to Joseph Brown what may have been the very origin of "the jerks." It includes much material written by him, including his own account of the massacre and his Indian captivity.

[52] This per the Cumberland church website, at http://www.cumberland.org/hfcpc/minister/BrownJ.htm. As settlers in Maury County, it's a safe bet the Colonel already knew the Bufords who, with other Maury County settlers, first settled the area near College Hill, Mississippi, in the 1830's.

[53] Again, see the Cumberland Church website.

[54] See, for example, Doyle, *supra*,, pp. 49-50. From what I can tell, the main component of being "friendly to the white man" was a willingness to profit from the white man's interest in his ancestral lands.

[55] This first purchase, and some later ones, were in the College Hill area. The fact that College Hill was where James Brown first bought property in the area suggests early ties to the Bufords, also of Maury County, Tennessee, who settled that area. For the Bufords, generally, see Don Doyle's *Faulkner's County*.

The purchases from the other Chickasaw, referred to in this chapter of *Alemeth*, are in Deed Book A, pages 37 and 433, and Deed Book B, pg 79. Purchases by Brown *not* mentioned in *Alemeth* appear in the early deed books at A:39, A:234, A:432, A:465, B:79, C:3, C:10, C:92, D:56, USR 13:27, and 13:103. By my count, the above purchases represent a total of over 9,800 acres of land. Notably, these were only the Colonel's "private" Lafayette County purchases between 1835 and 1841. They do not include private purchases in other counties, or the properties Brown purchased from the government land office in Pontotoc, the records of which show purchases by Brown in Lafayette, Panola, DeSoto, and Tunica counties totaling over 60,000 acres between 1839 and 1848.

Whatever the correct totals, Colonel James Brown of Clear Creek was a very wealthy man. So the assertion on page 67 of *Alemeth*, regarding Brown, that "Further investments followed," is an understatement. Brown appears to have profited immensely from the ability to buy land in the territory from which the Chickasaw had been removed. This opportunity was very largely the result of the Indian Removal Act that had been pushed through by President Andrew Jackson. The fact that Colonel Brown's father had been an adjutant to General Jackson during the Red Stick Campaign, and that the Brown family's original plantation outside Nashville made the Browns close neighbors of the Jacksons going back many years, may suggest something about the benefit of knowing those in public office – especially if you were the same color.

It should not be surprising that Colonel Brown, himself, was interested in politics. The details about his political activities in this chapter are factual, from his service on the University's Executive Committee to his being a convention delegate and his service in the state house. The meeting of the local Democratic Party described in Chapter 25 occurred on the 30th of April and was reported in the Oxford Organizer on May 5th, 1849. The newspaper account strongly suggests close cooperation between three main participants: Brown, Ben Dill (the editor of the Organizer) and Jacob Thompson, who would later serve as the federal government's Secretary of the Interior and then resign from federal office to become a high ranking official of the Confederacy – serving as an important spy for that short-lived government. Colonel Brown's close relationship to Jacob Thompson manifests itself in a number of ways mentioned here and in later chapters of *Alemeth*.

Chapter 25 also describes the lecture on soil science and fertilization given by Dr. John Millington on Wednesday, May 2, 1849, before a meeting of the Lafayette Agricultural Association. That lecture was reported in full, purportedly verbatim, in two successive issues of Ben Dill's *Oxford Organizer*.[56] The quotations incorporated in *Alemeth* are excerpts from the lecture as reported in the Organizer. The indirect quotations are paraphrased summaries of some of the key points Millington made, though not directly quoted. Although the intent of my own excerpting and paraphrasing was to make the lecture briefer and easier for a modern reader to follow than the original, I adhered slavishly to the original lecture as reported in the Organizer. Dr. Millington was one of the most learned scientists in the world at that time; to him belongs much of the credit for the University of Mississippi becoming known as a leader in the study of

[56] The first dated Saturday, May 5, 1849, and the second on Saturday, May 19th, 1849.

soil science. The verbatim report of what Dr. Millington said on the subject in a lecture given to cotton planters surely gives us insight into what was known as "cutting edge science" in those days. The lecture strikes me as a fascinating combination of facts and principles we take today to be entirely true, mixed with a crudeness of expression about other aspects of science which reveals it as the work of poorly-informed men, by today's standards. I especially liked Millington's observations that "nearly all the earth of our plantations is more or less colored," and that "the next question that arises is as to the nature and quality of that coloring matter."

In the Organizer of May 19, 1849 also appeared the following item, equally indicative of the state of science in those days:

> REMARKABLE FACTS IN NATURAL HISTORY.— The following account of a cross-breed between a stag and a mare we find in a late London paper:
>
> "A hybrid filly, seven months old, was found a short time since in the New Forest, and is evidently a mixed breed between the horse and deer. Her dam, a pony mare, was observed to associate with some red deer stags in the New Forest for some months, and at last this foal was seen by her side. The nose shows a proximity both of the deer and horse, her forehead is round like that of deer; legs slender and distinctly double; hoofs pointed, and partly double; color brown, lighter under the belly, and tail like a deer. This extraordinary animal is the property of T. G. Attwater, Esq., of Attwater, at the village of Bodenham, three miles from Salisbury. Dr. Fowler of that city has inspected the hybrid and is quite satisfied of the correctness of the preceding statement, and Col. Buckley, a keeper of the New Forest, has likewise seen the animal, and is of a similar opinion."

It makes me wonder what the scientists of two hundred years hence will think of our science today.

Chapter 26

May, 1849

The story of the bull on the roof is not fiction. It's based on the account given by historian Joel Williamson. In describing Ole Miss student Bolivar Bowen, Williamson writes, "At Ole Miss he led a group of students that hired a carpenter to build a scaffold alongside a building so that they could lead a bull to the roof during the night. The next morning the authorities found the bull on the roof but no scaffold."[57] Most bull, it seems to me, is supported by at least *some* scaffolding, but here we have a bull which appeared to have none at all, but which nevertheless, appeared to be real. It just goes to show, you can never be entirely certain about such things.

[57] Williamson, *supra*, p. 81.

Since Williamson notes that Bowen was among the first students admitted to the University, and that he dropped out of school in the same year, I have inferred that the incident involving the bull on the roof occurred in the spring of 1849. I have further inferred that it is the "gross outrage" referred to in the Faculty Minutes of June 12, 1849. As recorded in those minutes, "A communication was received and laid before the faculty signed by nine of the students confessing their guilt in the matter of a gross outrage recently committed in the College Building and asking pardon…" It was resolved that "… the whole matter shall be buried in oblivion…" but if further violations occurred, the students would be proceeded against "to the full extent of the law not only for that offence but for this which they have now confessed."

And so, in this case, some of the most interesting truth was intentionally "buried in oblivion." The Faculty Minutes talked about it without ever saying what it was they were talking about. Like menstruation and childbirth, perhaps – some things, you just don't name.

Colonel James Brown *was* one of the few local Trustees of Ole Miss, as he actually lived in Lafayette County, soon bought a house in Oxford directly across from the University campus, and was soon put in charge of campus construction.[58] Given those facts, one can assume that his involvement in the school's response to the bull on the roof could have been immediate and substantial.

The incident was only one in a string of incidents that first year in which Ole Miss students engaged in rowdy behavior. [59] Meanwhile, the University was also in the throes of a struggle over Reverend Waddell's proposal for a course titled *Evidences of Christianity.* The story is told in a number of places.[60] In his Memoirs, Waddel relates that in 1847 he was first appointed a trustee and chair of a committee to recommend a curriculum; at the meeting in January, 1848, he presented his proposal, including the course in question and his own desire to serve as a professor; and that another Trustee, Judge Wilkinson, not only objected strenuously to inclusion of the course, but proposed that no members of the clergy be allowed to serve as professors. Another trustee, the Catholic lawyer John McCaughan, not only opposed the course, but resigned as a Trustee. According to Waddel, "[t]he ground of opposition to the Christian system and to

[58] An Oxford Organizer article in July, 1850 refers to him as a member of the Executive Committee.

[59] Trustee and faculty member Reverend John Waddel described the students as "disorderly and turbulent, idle, uncultivated and ungovernable" that year. He added that "being left, particularly at night, to themselves, abundant opportunities for concocting mischief, and temptations were pressing upon them to indulge in all manner of sinful propensities… The disorder after a time became so notorious as to induce a visit of a part of the Trustees to the campus, and after a conference with the Faculty, a more rigid enforcement of the rules of discipline was insisted upon." (Waddel, Rev. John, *Memorials of Academic Life*, Presbyterian Committee of Publication, Richmond, 1891, pp 267-270.) Among religious men like Waddel, there was already concern that the University's first President, George Frederick Holmes, was one of the few college presidents in the country at that time who was *not* an ordained minister. One can imagine the relationship between Waddel's concerns over the students' "sinful propensities" and the President's lack of ministerial credentials. At the Board Meeting on July 12, 1849, the Board decided that each day would begin with sunrise prayer and close with a prayer by the President. Sunday Church attendance would be mandatory. Holmes resigned as President of the University. Acting President Professor Bledsoe's commencement address, in which he offered reasons for the student misconduct and assurances that all was under control, was titled, "If Human Nature Really Be Fallen."

[60] The struggle was described, inter alia, by Edward Mayes in his *History of Education in Mississippi* (pp. 137-138) and by Sansing, *supra* (pp 45-46). See also The *Historical Catalogue of the University of Mississippi*, 1849-1909 (Marshall & Bruce, Nashville, 1910).

Christian ministers was the assumption that the Evidences could not be taught without embodying the distinctive tenets of some one of the churches of the land, and that every minister would inevitably teach his own creed."[61]

Imagine that.

The Board flip-flopped on the question a number of times. I have found no direct evidence of Colonel James Brown's votes on the matter, but I suspect he played a low-key part in the controversy. My sense of the man is that he probably changed his vote according to the prevailing political practicalities of the day.

Chapter 27

Spring to summer, 1849

In a turn toward the religious and away from the secular, President George Frederick Holmes was replaced by the Methodist minister Reverend Augustus Baldwin Longstreet in the summer of 1849. Otherwise, this short chapter, trying to portray Alemeth's view of the world, is fictional.

Chapter 28

Summer to December, 1849

Colonel Brown had been elected to the Mississippi State House, and he attended the Mississippi State Secession Convention conducted on October 1, 1849. At that convention, the delegates condemned the Wilmot Proviso (which would have outlawed slavery in all new territories acquired from Mexico) but did not vote to secede from the Union – opting, instead, for a broader-based convention of all southern states, to consider the matter together.

Henry Walton Byers – Eliza's second child - was born on 27 October, 1849. "Henry" and "Walton" were Byers family names: "Henry" after Amzi's brother, Henry Johnson Byers, and "Walton," Amzi's own middle name, coming from his paternal grandmother, Elizabeth Walton (1740-1795). Apart from the observation that Eliza's family supplied the name of the first daughter while Amzi's supplied that of the first son, I see no great inference to be drawn from the naming of Henry Walton beyond the honor it paid to Amzi's younger brother, who lived next door, and to his grandmother. If anything, the naming choice seems to suggest that Amzi was a simple, traditional man, more interested in family relations than in creativity.

As reported in this chapter, on Christmas eve, 1849, Colonel Brown's daughter Fredonia married Harvey Washington Walter. Walter had lived in Michigan as a child, but his parents had moved to Ripley, Mississippi, when he was eight, and then on to Holly Springs. He'd passed the bar in Mississippi, become a lawyer, and started to make his fortune on real estate and cotton.

[61] Waddel, *supra*, pp 248-255.

Like Colonel Brown, Harvey Walter was early involved in the efforts to bring the Mississippi Central Railroad to Oxford.[62] After their marriage, he and Fredonia lived in Holly Springs.

For the Reverend Burney who performed the ceremony, see the discussion of Chapter 38.

The description of the black children standing on the tables waving palm fronds to keep flies away is speculative in this context, but it comes from my own childhood "nanny," Nancy Maddux Lowrie. Born in May, 1866, Nancy was raised on the Maddux cotton plantation in Pineville, Georgia. She was a daughter of Mr. Maddux's first two slaves. Though she narrowly escaped it herself, her older siblings had been born into slavery. In 1935, at the age of 69, she went to work for my paternal grandfather, in which capacity she served as nanny for all twelve of his grandchildren. Prior to her death (in 1973) at the age of nearly 107, she told me a number of stories about plantation life immediately after the war – including how she and the other black children routinely stood barefoot on the "white folks'" dinner table, shooing flies away as described in this chapter.

For me, Nancy was the foundation upon which all my attitudes, interests in, and prejudices about, people of color were built. I grew up adoring her. She always demonstrated, and expressed, nothing but love for me. So I was taken aback, later in life, when informed by strangers that she could not possibly have loved me; that it had certainly been an act put on by a black servant to mollify a white employer's child. I was told that, in her heart of hearts, she could have harbored no feelings for me but resentment.

I've spent a lot of time researching Nancy's life history, trying to analyze whether it's possible these strangers were right. Nancy's personal feelings about her white employers and their grandchildren do not bear directly on the subject of *Alemeth*. But a self-discovery I made, related to her, does. So I will relate it here.

By 1962, Nancy Maddux Lowrie had been working for my grandfather for twenty–seven years. My grandfather Carvin, a Philadelphia-born Catholic, had become an accomplished story-teller whose particular gift was mimicking ethnic accents. He could sound black, southern, Jewish, Canadian, German, Russian, Japanese, or just about anything else on the turn of a dime. He was so highly thought of as a story-teller that he'd performed with Bob Hope and Morey Amsterdam. On Christmas day, 1962, he and our grandmother came to our house, bringing their employee, our childhood nanny Nancy, with them. My parents gave him a tape recorder for so they could record him telling his stories. After dinner, the request was made that he conduct an interview of Nancy, and that it be recorded. The interview proceeded. In reply to his questions, Nancy described her parents as Mr. Maddux's slaves, her own childhood on the Maddux plantation, including her picking of cotton as a little girl.

Later in the sixties, as I tried my hand at writing stories, I wrote some that involved Nancy. Whenever I had occasion to reproduce dialogue, I rendered Nancy's voice as faithfully as I could, trying to capture a pronunciation that sounded, to my ear, so unlike my own.

Some forty years later, as a fifty-something, I returned to the 1962 tape recording with the intent of transcribing it word for word. Incapable of typing at shorthand speed, I played the tape

[62] Doyle, *supra*, p. 93.

through, beginning to end, at least thirty times – the first time catching only a few words here and there, filling in more words in subsequent passes until I had all the words right, and finally, after maybe fifteen or twenty passes, turning to the pronunciation and spelling, in an effort to get that right as well.

And that's when my discovery occurred. In my first passes, listening for the words and typing quickly, I thought I had captured Nancy's accent pretty well – it was far from Joel Chandler Harris, but it did a pretty good job of capturing the voice of a black woman born on a Georgia cotton plantation in 1866. After all, I was my grandfather's grandson, wasn't I? Surely, I'd inherited some of his knack for ethnic voices. I'd been writing dialect voices much of my life by that time. I knew that writing "chilluns" captured the pronunciation I aimed for much better than writing "children." Or so I thought, until I got to the careful, syllable by syllable listening of my later passes through the tape. Only then did I realize that Nancy *did* pronounce the "d" and the "r" of children. There wasn't a trace of a double "l." She had pronounced *children* as clearly and "correctly" as my grandfather had. In word after word, I found myself correcting my initial "dialect" spelling of Nancy's speech, to conform to correct spelling as I knew it. At times, I realized, my grandfather's Philadelphia Irish accent departed from Noah Webster's English far more than Nancy's did. I had taken the speech of this woman who'd nursed me, who'd been like a mother to me, who had taught me (I was embarrassed to remember) how to spell my name – and I had *distorted* her speech to conform to my white understanding about the speech of an "uneducated" person. All the while, I'd written my grandfather's speech the "correct" way, the way I almost always wrote the speech of my white characters.

This experience impressed me with the truth of a principle I'd been working with[63] for decades – that not all discrimination and racism are conscious. I now believe the vast majority of racism – like all wrongness – is *un*conscious – people acting, as far as they can tell, kindly, and rationally, in accordance with "the way things really are." But the way "things really are" is the product of conventions and culture that are inherited and uncritically accepted. That which is most familiar comes to *seem* real, even when in fact it is simply the perspective of a limited brain. Under such conditions, error and prejudice flourish. And the difficulty of escaping them is very real. In writing *Alemeth*, I tried hard to avoid the sort of bias I'd demonstrated in transcribing Nancy's words, but in writing dialogue, fiction writers are supposed to distinguish between their characters by capturing different patterns of speech. And the problem is that ALL of writing, all of speech, indeed all of language, is a matter of convention. Princes and dukes may speak the Queen's English, their speech best represented by flawless diction and spelling. But representing the speech of a cotton plantation slave in 1840's Mississippi, or the voice of any uneducated southerner of that time and place, is likely to be recognized and judged by today's readers based on adherence to conventions. One option for trying to represent the way people really spoke would be a peeoorlee foanetik speleeng uv evree wurd, but that would make everything close to unintelligible, because readers *rely on* conventions in order to read. None of

[63] As a part of my career in employment and civil rights law.

us actually speak the way we spell. Yet, even knowing the wrongness involved, we continue to write the way we do, because it is familiar convention.

In other words, once again, it is impossible to throw off the yoke of familiar convention. We are bound to the ways our families have taughted us to interact with the world, and with each other

So while Nancy Maddux Lowrie never appears as a character in Alemeth, her influence is everywhere in it. I have no reason to doubt that Nancy stood barefoot on the table tops and shooed the flies away for the Maddux family of Pineville, Georgia, as she said. I'll always be in her debt for that contribution to *Alemeth*, as I am for her teaching me how to spell my name and, most of all, for helping me be alert to the unconscious cultural bias that shapes us to be the people we are. And if the reader thinks my reference to "cultural bias" is only meant to refer to race relations, the point has been missed. Absent cultural bias, you wouldn't be able to read these words, no matter the color of your skin.

Given all that, I couldn't resist including the newspaper article *What Is Dirt?* that appeared in the Oxford Organizer of 25 May, 1850. (Page 81). It seemed wryly insightful about the relativity of perspective.

The difficulty of knowing what's dirt and what's not transcends the field of science,. On the fifth of March, 1850, the Mississippi Legislature authorized a state Agricultural and Geological Survey, to be conducted by Doctor Millington as State Geologist.[64] According to Ole Miss historian David Sansing, while Mississippi's "practical minded planters" wanted the survey, the faculty opposed the inclusion of experimental science in the curriculum at all. President Longstreet and most of the faculty, Sansing tells us, did not consider a soil survey a "legitimate function" for a University, given its mission of "producing Christian gentlemen."[65] So President Longstreet tells Alemeth, "A Christian gentleman does well to set an example as to good manners and proper dress." The debates over whether the University should be a seminary or secular institution, and over inclusion of a mandatory course on *Evidences of Christianity*, appear to have persisted. How and where, exactly, one should look for dirt, remains a subject that divides us. [66]

Chapter 29

Spring to October, 1850

According to records of College Hill Presbyterian Church, Henry Walton Byers, Medora Roxanna Byers, and Yancey Wiley's son, Jacob Thompson Wiley, were all baptized there on

[64] Historical Catalogue, *supra*, p 40.
[65] Sansing, *supra*, p. 67.
[66] As best I could determine, the controversy over including Evidences of Christianity was not finally resolved until the Board meeting of July 10 of 1850, when a motion was adopted that in the President's department, the course of study would include, in the Junior year, the course on Evidences of Christianity. (Board Minutes, page 136.) I see no scientific or theological significance in the fact that this decision was made a hundred years to the day prior to the date of my own birth. I think it's pure coincidence. But others may see it as evidence of something more meaningful, and God only knows, someday, someone might build a University course around it. Meanwhile, a more modern treatment of dirt in northern Mississippi is available in Charles Shelton Aiken, *William Faulkner and the Southern Landscape*, University of Georgia Press (2009).

July 6th, 1850, presumably by Reverend Gaston. It strikes me as odd that the two Byers children were baptized at far away College Hill Presbyterian just months prior to the founding of their own Sand Springs church, [practically in their own backyard. The Wileys apparently decided to name their son after the soon-to-be-infamous Congressman, Jacob Thompson, because Ann Wiley was his sister. Thompson may even have been present foe the christening. Colonel Brown's association with Thompson has already been mentioned: they were both local Democratic politicians who served on the Ole Miss Board of Trustees. The fact that the baptism occurred on the same day that Congressman Thompson might have been present is but one of the little coincidences that, to me, suggest the possible influence of Mrs. Brown, whom I have imagined as very conscious of societal politics as (as I've said) skilled at getting her way.

In any case, no sooner had Eliza's two children been baptized at College Hill than the Byers left that church to join the new Sand Springs "union" church. This chapter attempts to accurately capture the origins of that church. The information on which it is based – and especially the connection to the Cumberland church in Otuckaloffa – comes, first, from the records of the church itself, on display in the church nave. It comes further from the help given to me by current church members Tommy and Barbara Webb, who were gracious, giving, and helpful in my efforts to understand Oxford and Orrwood. I then researched on my own, on the internet, largely through U.S. Census records, in order to understand the family relationships of Sand Springs' founding members. Understandably, other accounts of the church's origins focus primarily on the group from Otuckaloffa; they did, after all, form the majority of the new church's membership, having come from Mecklenburg, North Carolina, where the Otuckaloffa pastor, Angus Johnson, also was from. In that sense, it seems that Sand Springs began as "their" church.

On the other hand, the fact that the new union church was situated so close to the Byers property, the fact that Amzi Byers was by far the wealthiest of the church members (as measured by land and slaves owned), and the fact that, within a few years, Eliza's brother-in-law, Colonel Brown, would donate the land for the building of a permanent home for the church – today, listed on the National Register of Historic Places – caused me to wonder what role the Byers family might have played in the founding of the church. In *Alemeth*, I attribute the very idea to Amzi Byers and his concern for his pregnant wife; this is possible, but entirely fictional, as far as I know. Regardless whose idea the new church was, having a church practically in their own backyard had to be very appealing to a family that had been traveling a couple hours or more to the College Hill church, each way, for several years.

The newspaper article *In a Fix* (pg 84) appeared in the *Oxford Organizer* of 28 September, 1850, as a reprint from a piece in the *Anderson Gazette*. Ben Dill presumably chose to reproduce the description of the hawk and the snake in the Organizer simply because he thought it a striking story his readers might find interesting; I included it in *Alemeth* for similar reasons. But its appearance at this particular point in the novel – the summer of 1850 – is not entirely because of its date of publication – the joining together, in a "union" church, of Baptists and Methodists with Presbyterians, and the joining together of African-American slaves along with white

plantation owners, was bound to make for interesting interactions. When groups who are set in their own ways, unfamiliar with the culture of others, come together, both may soon become like the entangled animals, "alive and evidently trying to part company." Indeed, 1851 is when College Hill Presbyterian added a "slave balcony."[67] It seems to me this could have been an indication that slaves were finally being allowed to join with whites for church services, or (more likely) being separated, no longer permitted to sit in the pews with the white congregation.

Surely, if there was discussion of cohabitation with Methodists and Baptists in relation to the founding of Sand Springs, there was discussion of attendance by slaves as well. I do not know what those discussions were like, nor their outcome, though blacks later became members of Sand Springs. I simply have a feeling that, to the people of that time, it was not unlike the entanglement of the snake and the hawk. To Abraham Lincoln, a "house divided" could not stand. To people of all colors, throughout the south, the close proximity of a white group of self-appointed "masters" with a black group of subjugated "slaves" may have put them all "in a fix" which was not likely to stand for long.

Chapter 30

October, 1850

Slaves named Aunt Leety, Aunt Mary and Aunt Harriet are all mentioned in Alemeth's later letters home, so those characters are real, provided you're willing to equate a mere name with a flesh-and-blood human being. Like Leander McKinney, Noff and Ben Spears, two children of Jane Spears, appear in the censuses,[68] The name "Mrs. Pegues" reflects the fact that there were several women named Pegues in the area, including more than one who was a member of the College Hill Presbyterian Church, all presumably relatives of the Alexander Pegues who appeared in Chapter 2. The Mrs. Pegues here might be thought to refer to any or none of them. The slave names Grote, Harl, Ike and Kep are all my own inventions.

I can't say there is any direct evidence that Eliza taught a Sunday School for her family's slaves, or for anyone else, for that matter. But for her to have done so seems likely; I for one would be surprised if she didn't. My speculation has its roots in the likelihood she was interested in education in the first place. Eliza had been raised by Presbyterian ministers. Her sister Mary Ann had gone to school as a child because her father had thought education important. A career as a teacher was about the only path open to a young woman in those days, outside the home. As a trustee of Ole Miss, Colonel Brown clearly thought education important, and Mrs. Brown had first gone to work for him as a teacher to his children. It seems unlikely that poor families produced as many teachers as wealthier, educated families did, and I imagine they didn't have the luxury of spending time with books the way wealthier classes did. All things considered, it

[67] Doyle, *supra,* pg 156.

.[68] The family of Jane Spears, including Benjamin and Flornoy (nicknamed "Noff"), is in the 1850 Lafayette County Census, family #486 at page 71 – they were neighbors of Colonel Brown at Clear Creek.

seems to me probable that Eliza Byers actually was, as *Alemeth* describes, a strong believer in the importance of education.

A different question is whether her support for education extended to being a teacher herself. Once she married wealthy Amzi Byers, living a couple of hours' wagon ride from Oxford and with a household of slaves to do more menial work, I don't know what else she had to do with her time other than to apply it to that which she found important; and since books were scarce and most instruction was Bible-based, Eliza was uniquely qualified to teach. So, I conclude that she taught Amzi's children. But to answer the final question – whether she also taught the family slaves – requires more careful consideration.

Clearly, agitation for abolition in the north contributed to a southern backlash, and it's easy to find support for the proposition that many southern whites of the mid-nineteenth century opposed the education of blacks. Personally, I take it as firmly established that many did so. One manifestation was the animosity some felt for the "Yankee school teachers" who were creating "trouble" by stirring up a rebellious spirit among the slaves. Dan Doyle goes so far as to say that literacy was officially proscribed among the slaves, an assertion I take up below, in my discussion of Chapter 53.

But when the importation of slaves had begun three hundred years earlier and questions about its morality were first raised, the theocratic elite had pronounced the practice acceptable because the civilized and educated Christians of the day had an *obligation* to rescue Africans from heathen 'savagery' in order to make good Christians of them. And if being a good Christian meant studying one's Bible, then teaching an African to become a good Christian would have to include teaching him to read his Bible.

There were certainly those in the South who considered it important to educate the slaves. The very existence of books on the subject shows that much. (See, for example, Charles C. Jones's *A Catechism of Scripture, Doctrine and Practice for Families and Sabbath Schools, Designed Also for the Oral Instruction of Colored Persons* (John M. Cooper, Savannah, 1837, though one wonders whether the instruction was envisioned as "oral" because blacks generally didn't learn how to read as a matter of practice, or were not supposed to.) Some slaves did get schooling.[69] My nanny, Nancy Lowrie, described her own childhood education in Pineville, Georgia, at a school for black children built by Judge Givens of that place. As a whole, the records suggest that some slaves were taught, and others were not.

Furthermore, in Presbyterianism, the reading and study of scripture is essential to an appropriate understanding of faith. As Eliza's indirect mentor, Lyman Beecher, had written, "Uneducated mind is educated vice."

[69] See, for example, *Prayin' to Be Set Free: Personal Accounts of Slavery in Mississippi*, edited by Andrew Waters, John F. Blair, Winston-Salem, 2002, in which various slaves are quoted describing their schooling before or during the war, including Mississippians George Washington Miller in Panola and Nettie Henry in Meridian.

At the end of the day, I conclude that a Beecher-influenced northerner like Eliza would have accepted the proposition that it was right to teach slaves to read, she would have interpreted the laws of the day to permit it, and as tensions grew, she would have been faced by a growing opposition to it among white slave owners – all of which would make Don Doyle's assertion that literacy along the slaves was prohibited a *de facto* reality, even if not a *de jure* one. That, in any case, is the situation I attempted to portray with my account of Eliza's Sunday school.

Noff (nickname for "Flournoy") Spears, Ben Spears, and Charlie Orr, were all boys Alemeth knew from Sand Springs church. Noff and Ben were two sons of Jane Spears, Charlie Orr was a son of Mary Orr. Jane Spears and Mary Orr were both original members of Sand Springs. Alemeth's spotting of Charlie Orr kissing Melissa Hudgepeth, mentioned here, is pure fiction and probably not something Alemeth ever witnessed; but at some point I recorded a note that Charlie Orr ended up marrying a Melissa Hudgepeth. I now appear to have lost track of my source, but not my belief that it is true – so whether Alemeth saw it or not, I believe the kiss to have really occurred.

Chapter 31

November, 1850

This chapter begins, "There was a lot of talk about secession that summer." The dialogue set forth here is fictional, of course, but there can be little doubt there was talk at the Byers house about the letter of Colonel James Brown, printed in *The Organizer* at the beginning of November, 1850 (which is historical, unless Ole Miss microfiche lies). 1850 was the year of the great "Compromise" in Washington, by which the country narrowly averted southern secession. The Compromise was actually five separate pieces of legislation enacted by Congress that year, by which Texas surrendered its claim to New Mexico, California was admitted to the Union as a free state, the slave trade was banned in the District of Columbia, the Fugitive Slave Act was strengthened, and the idea of the Wilmot Proviso – that slavery would be prohibited in the newly acquired territories out West – was abandoned in favor of popular sovereignty – that each new state would decide for itself whether to permit slavery or not.

At least some of the westward migration that followed was in response to calls from pro- and anti-slavery forces hoping to populate the new states with enough of their supporters to win the fight over slavery in a "democratic" manner.

The complete letter of Colonel Brown, as printed in the Organizer, was lengthier than the shortened version included here, but the words reproduced here are all Colonel Brown's, transcribed verbatim as they appeared in that paper. (A few non-essential paragraphs and sentences were removed for the purpose of appealing to a modern audience which, with automobiles, television and smart phones, doesn't have as much time to read as people did in the mid 1800's.)

The closing point of Brown's letter, "We have the examples of our fathers before us," was a thinly veiled threat that the south could and might secede in the same way that, just a few generations earlier, the American colonies had seceded from England. Again and again in

researching the pre-war South, I was struck by how strongly white southerners saw it as their right and duty, if pressed hard enough, to do as their forefathers had done. The Declaration of Independence had asserted the right of a people to secede if government was unjust, and at the risk of oversimplification, the framers of 1776 had found sufficient "injustice" to exist as a result of little more than a tax rate they thought higher than appropriate. To the slave-owning southerners of ante-bellum America, the threat of abolition was effectively a threat to take away everything they had – both the slaves themselves and, with them, the perceived value of the land they worked. The people of the south didn't have stock portfolios, retirement accounts or government social security funds as repositories for their accumulated wealth; that wealth consisted almost entirely of the land and the people they'd enslaved. If you thought – as they did – that slavery was ordained by God and actually in the best interest of the slaves – the abolitionist threat had to have seemed a greater injustice than the one their forefathers had faced at the hands of the King. Colonel Brown was hardly alone in this view.

Chapter 32

Summer, 1851

This chapter introduces the sheriff and other men "riding the beat."

Lafayette, Panola, and other counties of Mississippi were divided into geographic "beats," and I set out to understand what the "beats" really were. The word "beat," used as a noun to signify "the round or course habitually traversed by a watchman, sentinel, or constable on duty" appears in the Oxford English Dictionary with earliest written use in 1825 – only a scant few years before Oxford, Mississippi, was divided into beats. The OED asserts that it isn't known which of the numerous meanings of the verb "beat" gave rise to the noun in the sense under consideration, and suggests it probably related to the verb that means the action of feet on the ground in walking or running (as in, 'beat a path.') But it also suggests a possible relationship to the sense of "beating out the bounds" of an area by driving stakes into the ground to mark a border of a section of land. And finally (my favorite) a possible root in the verbal usage of "beating the bush" in order to drive out fowl or other game that might be inhabiting said bush. This last possibility intrigues me. As I thought about the situation in Mississippi in the 1830's when these counties were organized into beats, I came across sources explaining that the purpose of riding the beat was, naturally enough, law enforcement. But what were the sorts of laws being enforced? Patrolling the countryside on horseback, mostly at night, doesn't strike me as a particularly effective way to enforce, say, the legal obligation to repay debts, or the laws regarding inheritance of property. In fact, it seems that the laws with which enforcement by horseback patrols would have been most concerned were the laws regulating the behavior and whereabouts of slaves. According to Joel Williamson, Mississippi counties called their political subdivisions "beats"

> …probably because the state was virtually conceived in slavery and the policing of slaves by jurisdictions labelled beats was the most important single function of

> government at the local level. This police function was carried out by "the patrol," a sort of *posse comitatus*... In Mississippi… it was the duty of these citizen policemen to enforce the slave laws. For the most part, this meant riding the roads at night to ensure that slaves stayed in their place. Generally in the South, the patrol had the power to arrest, try, convict, and punish slaves on the spot.[70]

The analogy between beating game out of a bush and patrolling the countryside in search of runaway slaves is chilling.

The names Bill Starr, Jim Murdock, and Zeke Avery are fictional names, as far as I know. The name Al Cansler may or may not be fictional – I'm not sure. The "Al" Cansler of this and other chapters may or may not be the same person as the actual historical person "A. P." Cansler described in Chapter 126, on whose property a freedman was murdered by a man never caught for the crime.

The quotations from George Washington and Thomas Jefferson are included at page 94 as a reminder that the racism of those days was by no means limited to the planters of northern Mississippi. While much has been made of Washington and Jefferson as national heroes, and while we've recently heard much about Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings which almost makes it seem he loved his slaves a little *too* much, our school children are rarely reminded of their famous heroes' racist sentiments.

I think I understand why governments try to cultivate national pride. Celebrating your nation's founders as heroes is an effective way to cultivate national pride. But in my view, much as I love our country, I think we Americans may be too prone to think of ourselves the way John Davys described the English when he asked, "[A]re not we only set on Mount Zion to give light to all the rest of the world?" The idea that we Americans have somehow been ordained, whether by God, history, or heroic founders as the epitome of goodness and right – the idea that we have the right, if not the obligation, to impose our sense of right and wrong on the other nations of the world – is an attitude of superiority I find dangerous. I think our courses of education would do well to remind us more often of our national capacity for error. Reminders of the prevalence of racism in the founding of our country seem to me a good way to express my own hopes for our future.

Chapter 33

Summer to December, 1851

Leander's "Aunt Sally" is one of the few white characters in the book whose name I invented. I would have liked to find a local relative of Leander's actually known for moral opposition to slavery. In fact, I'd have liked to find *any* actual local white person of the day known for moral opposition to slavery. I suspect that such people existed. The problem, I believe, is that if you harbored such sentiments, you were drummed out of town. It seems that just about anyone left in the area was either a vocal supporter of slavery, or kept their dangerous views to themselves. And that's a very big part of the problem I see – the intolerance of groups

[70] Williamson, *supra*, p. 78.

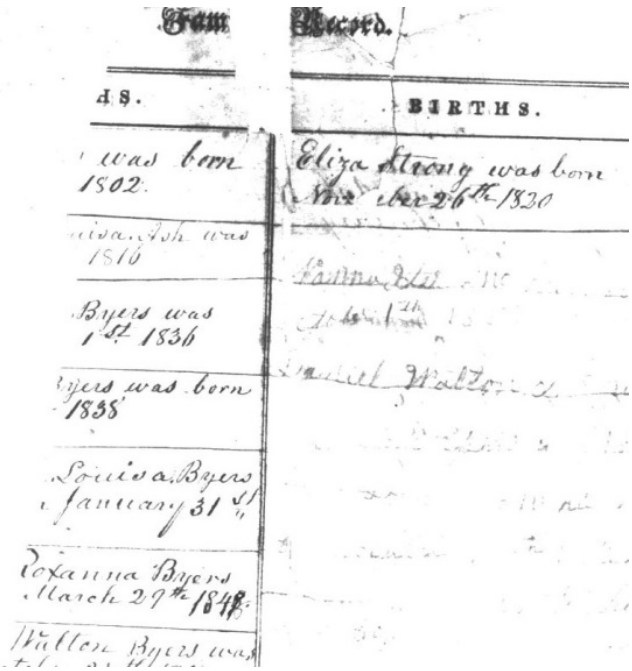
for internal dissent, especially in passionate times. If we see "mob mentality" only in the Southern United States or Nazi Germany, and not all over the internet or today's news reporting, I'd suggest we haven't been looking very hard.

The dialogue here is all fiction, as far as I know, but the substance of the discussion comes from contemporary materials which described the teachings of the southern churches on the subject of slavery. The fullest exposition of those teachings I came across was George Armstrong's *The Christian Doctrine of Slavery*, Charles Scribner, New York, 1857, an absolutely fascinating read. Step by step, marshalling his arguments like a masterful lawyer, Armstrong uses the Bible to "prove" the case for slavery. I highly recommend it for what it can teach us about the nature of error.

Chapter 34

January, 1852

In this Chapter, Alemeth turns sixteen. What year, month and day was he born? The question, again, is muddled by conflicting evidence, and one can draw one's own inferences.


Fam Record.

BIRTHS.

was born 1802.

Eliza Strong was born Mar 26th 1830

Byers was 1st 1836

Byers was born 1838

Louisa Byers January 31 st

Roxanna Byers March 29th 1848

Hallon Byers was

The family genealogy binder says Alemeth was born January 1, 1836. An 1836 birth year seems at least approximately right, given the ages of 14 reported in the 1850 census and 23 in the 1860 census.[71] But if the ages given in both censuses are correct, Alemeth had to have been born between September 14 and November 14, 1836.[72] I choose to follow the family genealogy binder based on a photocopy in it of a page labeled "Byers Family Bible." I do not know where this Bible is, or even if it still exists. The page that was photocopied (presumably decades ago) was old and torn even when the photocopy was first made. Even then, it no longer included the crucial first name of the individual or the birth month.

But: One can see the apparent birth of Semirah Louisa Ash in 1816, and that of Mary Jane Byers in 1838, and between them, a Byers born on the 1st of *some* month in 1836. Given the

[71] U.S. Censuses, 1850 Panola County, MS, District 13, Fam #648, and 1860 Panola County, MS, Fam #526.

[72] The 1860 Census page on which the Byers family is listed was dated September 13, 1860; if Alemeth was 23 years old when that entry was made, he'd have been born between September 14, 1836, and September 13, 1837. The 1850 Census page on which the Byers family is listed was dated November 14, 1850; if Alemeth was 14 when that entry was made, he'd have been born between November 15, 1835 and November 14, 1836. The only overlap being between September 14 and November 14 of 1836, he was either born in that window or one of the census entries is in error.

birth order of all the entries on the page, the inference is strong that the missing Christian name is that of John Alemeth. To square the evidence that he was born on the first of some month with the two censuses would require a conclusion that he was born on the 1st of October or November, 1836. Yet the family genealogy binder says he was born on the first of January, 1836. To the best of my knowledge, this binder, though finally assembled by my Aunt Mary Anna Rogers, was the result of effort that spanned multiple generations, going back to my grandmother, Corinne Howell, to my great aunt Bertha, and to others even before her, so there is what might be called "family tradition" to support the January 1st 1836 birth date.

It is symptomatic of the obstacles facing the faithful chronicler that memories fade, pages tear, and people must depend on such amorphous concepts as "family tradition." I have found no documentary evidence of Alemeth's date of birth on January 1, 1836. For all I know, a single erroneous guess of a 1-1-36 birth, based on a torn Bible page, could have been picked up and spread by others the way errors so often are, becoming "fact" by virtue of repetition. Given the theme of Alemeth, it seems fitting that I can't feel entirely certain of so fundamental a fact as his date of birth. Yet it is the date I accept, the date on which I have based my own understanding. If in so doing I err, I'm sure it won't be the first time I've succumbed to the heavy yoke of family tradition.

The Colonel's eldest daughters were the twins, Frances and Fredonia, born in 1830.[73] Fredonia had married Harvey W. Walter on Christmas eve of 1849, and Frances had married William F. Avent on January 30, 1851. The Colonel's third daughter, Ann Brown, was born July 23, 1832, making her about four years older than Alemeth. (Girls, girls, and more girls.)

The Pitkin watch company was the first to mass produce pocket watches in America. They made high quality watches between 1836 and 1852. Given Colonel Brown's known involvement in both the stage coach business and the nascent railroad industry, I think it a natural assumption that he'd have likely had an interest in timeliness, schedules, and pocket watches. Whether he raced horses is speculation, but the issue of a tax to subsidize the railroad was in fact before the electorate at the time, according to Doyle's *Faulkner's County*, and Brown was heavily involved in that.

Chapter 35

February, 1852

Charley Morgan, Harriet and Gilbert are all names borrowed from historical records, like Leander McKinney. All three are mentioned in Alemeth's letters home. What's said about them here could be true, though to my knowledge, it probably isn't.

I wrote here that Eliza's big Geneva Bible was open to the Song of Solomon, Chapter 4, verses 5-10. I took the liberty of modernizing the archaic spelling that was used in the actual Geneva Bible, to be less distracting to a modern reader, but otherwise, the translation here is that of the original. (Translation, that is.)

[73] Colonel Brown's offspring apparently began with a daughter Jane Elizabeth, born in 1827, but I've found no other information about her, leading me to believe she may have died in childhood, before the novel began.

Otherwise, the chapter is fictional.

Chapter 36

Friday, April 9, 1852

All reports I've read suggest that except among the most radical elements, the Compromise of 1850 had quieted most of the South's secessionist rhetoric. One indication of that comes from a letter written by Harvey W. Walter, Fredonia Brown's new husband, in March of 1852. Written from Jackson to his wife in Holly Springs, Walter's letter suggests that he was one of the few still on the radical side. He reported, "The mass meeting here has just ended, and the roaring of cannons, the music of bands and floating of banners are heard and seen no more – it was but a poor affair. There is no political excitement except among partisans. The great mass of the people is quiet and indifferent."[74]

In 1852, Easter fell on Sunday, April 11th. The exact date of the incident involving Colonel Brown's horse is unknown, but all accounts appear to point to April, 1852, and I took the liberty of placing it on the night of Good Friday, April 9th. So while the trial of Jesus depicted here may be fictional, there are several historical sources for the story of how Colonel Brown's horse lost its tail. But much like the trial of Jesus, accounts differ.

I found no reference to it in the minutes of the University faculty meetings. To my knowledge, the first account recorded was in the minutes of the Board of Trustees – specifically, the minutes of July 13th and 14th, 1852, at pages 179-183. Those minutes refer to "the malicious mischief perpetrated on the horse of Colonel Brown in the month of April last." They show that the Board wanted to know why no one had been punished for the incident. They reveal that President Longstreet had investigated, but had been unable to determine a culprit. They reflect that the Board accepted Longstreet's[75] assertion that there'd been no known perpetrator when the incident first arose, but that, in July, Longstreet felt "they now have sufficient testimony," and that the Board wanted to know what had been done. Finally, the minutes make clear that the Board knew how to use its power: it denied the students' request to use the Lyceum for a graduation ball until the matter was resolved.

The following day, a delegation of students, apparently speaking for the entire student body, disclaimed either "responsibility or support" for the vandalous act.

From the Board minutes, it is clear that something had been done to the Colonel's horse, but the minutes hardly give a detailed account of what transpired, either at the time of the April incident or at the time of the July Board proceedings.

---

[74] From the Harvey Washington Walter papers at Ole Miss, accessed April 2017 at http://www.library.olemiss.edu/exhibits/hail_to_the_chief/exhibitions/elections/1852.html

[75] The minutes refer to the "faculty" but as there were only four members of the faculty at that time, the President being one of them, "first among equals," the others being Millington, Bledsoe, and Waddell. Since Longstreet was obviously at the center of the affair, I take "faculty" to mean "Longstreet" in all this.

Sixty years later, long after Colonel Brown and President Longstreet had gone to their graves, John Johnson wrote a "Historical Sketch" of President Longstreet that described the episode as follows:

> Col. James Brown, a member of the board and superintendent of work on the chapel then going on, chanced one night to put his saddlehorse in the stall of President Longstreet, and himself remained for the night with the President, in order to discuss at length the best means of improving the university, especially in the way of beautifying the grounds and increasing the buildings. The intimacy of the two friends was close and confiding, both zealous in the same worthy cause. Alas! that thoughtless youth should intervene to bar such friendship and impede such noble work! In the night some students entered the stable and cut off the horse's mane and tail. Colonel Brown was a man of wealth and influence, had done a great deal for the university, had received and entertained students cordially around his own sumptuous board, and had admitted some of them to the society of his beautiful and accomplished daughters. Then, to be treated in such a way, was, in his estimation, simply beyond endurance or pardon."[76]

As a later student and faculty member of the University, Mr. Johnson had plenty of possible sources for his account of this incident. But Longstreet had died in 1870, Colonel Brown in 1880. Some forty years or more had passed since the incident occurred. Yet, Johnson includes details about the subject of discussion between Brown and Longstreet on the night in question.

From my own review of the Minutes, it seems to me that the Board (and perhaps Colonel Brown most of all) had been as upset with Colonel Longstreet, for his inaction, as it was for the student mischief itself. Johnson's account says that the discussion between Longstreet and Brown that night was about ways to beautify the University, but that the "work" itself had been interrupted and the men's *friendship* "barred" by thoughtless youth. There's no reason to believe that the damage to the horse was discovered until *after* the evening's meeting between Brown and Longstreet had concluded. Johnson says that what the student mischief had "barred" was not the discussion that night, but *the friendship* between the men.

It seems to me that a man who had become a student soon after the incident, and went on to become a faculty member, would have known whether the University community felt there'd been problems between Longstreet and Brown as a result of what had transpired. How much should one wonder about Johnson's sources? What about their possible biases? What about Johnson's memory, writing so many years later? Ultimately what about his sketch should I accept as fact, and how much might be something else? Yet what we have here is a story, the details of which that have come down to us appear, first, in Johnson's sketch.

Another century passed after Johnson wrote his sketch before Ole Miss historian David Sansing had this to say about the incident of Colonel Brown's horse:

---

[76] Johnson, John W., *Biographical Sketches Of Judge A. B. Longstreet and Dr. F. A. P. Barnard*, Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society, Vol. 12, 1912, pp 122-147.

In April 1852, Colonel Brown was angered by a "malicious mischief" perpetrated on his favorite horse. Some students had cut off the animal's tail. An infuriated Board ordered the faculty to identify and punish the guilty students. As of July, the faculty had not identified the perpetrators.

At its meeting on July 13, 1852, the Board demanded an explanation from President Longstreet as to why no one had been punished. Longstreet explained that "though my best exertions were used to get a clew [sic] to the offenders, I entirely failed." Longstreet did, however, deliver a general lecture to the students... in severe terms of reprobation." The day after Longstreet's report to the board of trustees, a student delegation petitioned the board for permission to use the large room in the Lyceum "for the purpose of giving a complimentary party to the Graduating class on the evening of commencement day." The board voted to decline their request until the "indignity" to Colonel Brown was "disclaimed" by the students. In a hastily called meeting, the student body unanimously adopted a resolution disclaiming and disavowing "the indignity offered to Colonel Brown of April last." After receiving a written copy of this resolution, the board granted the use of the Lyceum for the commencement ball. [77]

Given the passing of a century and a half since the incident, it's safe to assume Sansing had no eyewitnesses – only written accounts — on which to base his description. We know he had the Board minutes, and presumably Johnson's sketch, and maybe some additional written sources I never found. His assertions that Brown was "angered" and that the Board was "infuriated" seem reasonable inferences from the Board minutes, but, as "reasonable inferences," are they fiction or fact? Meanwhile, theough the Board itself had said nothing, Johnson had said that both the mane and the tail were cut off, yet Sansing mentions only the tail. And he says nothing of the statement in the July 13th Board minutes that the faculty "now have sufficient testimony" – a statement I read to suggest the Board felt there was pretty good evidence against *somebody*.

Ten more years passed. In the *Oxford Eagle* of November 10, 2010, Jack Mayfield became at least the fourth chronicler to describe the incident. The general idea of the story he tells is the same, but notice the differences in the details.

Horse's tail clipped.

On a spring day in April, 1852, Brown rode his favorite saddle horse from his home on Depot Street to the campus for a regular Board of Trustees meeting. He hitched his horse in front of the Lyceum as he usually did and entered the building for the meeting. After the meeting, he went to get his horse and, to his amazement, someone had cut the tail off his favorite horse.

He was indignant about the malicious mischief perpetrated on his horse. He went back to the office of Chancellor Longstreet and demanded that he find the

[77] Sansing, *supra*, p 34.

culprit that cut his horse's tail. Longstreet could not find out who the culprits were, but he "delivered a general lecture to the students – in severe terms of reprobation."

Brown was not satisfied and at a meeting of the Board in July, a resolution was passed requesting information from the faculty "whether any and if any, what action was taken – in relation to the malicious mischief perpetrated on the horse of Colonel Brown…"

Chancellor Longstreet replied in a note citing his procedure.

The trustees were not satisfied and another resolution was adopted to the effect "that though at the time of the injury committed on the horse of Col. Brown the faculty might not have had sufficient evidence to proceed against any one or more of the students, yet in our opinion, they now have sufficient testimony to justify such proceeding and they are hereby required to investigate the matter immediately and to report the result to this board."

Back and Forth

At the same board meeting, the students had requested the use of rooms in the Lyceum to hold a party to honor the graduating students after commencement… The night of July 13, 1852, the student body assembled and adopted the following resolution:

"That we the students of the University of Mississippi disclaim and disavow the indignity offered to Col. Brown in April last."

The apology was presented the next morning to the board, which then granted the use of the rooms for the commencement ball.

Still, the insult rankled the board and later that day the entire faculty was summoned to appear before the board to answer why "the government of the University has been too lax during the last session."[78]

Where Johnson had written that the incident occurred at night, while Brown was a guest at Longstreet's home, Mayfield wrote that it occurred during the day, while Brown was at the Lyceum for a regular Board meeting. Where Johnson had written that the horse had been left in the President's stall in his stable, Mayfield wrote that it had been hitched to a post at the Lyceum. Where Johnson had written that the pranksters had cut off both mane and tail, Mayfield (like Sansing) only mentioned the tail. Where the minutes had mentioned only a horse, Johnson had said that the horse was a saddlehorse, and both Sansing and Mayfield said that the horse was the Colonel's "favorite." Where Sansing said that in July, the students had asked to use "the large room" in the Lyceum, Mayfield wrote that they had asked to use "rooms." Johnson calls Longstreet the "President," while Mayfield calls him "Chancellor."[79]

[78] *University trustee Col. James Brown and student malicious mischief*, the Oxford Eagle, Nov 12, 2010, page 2B,

[79] The position of Chancellor wasn't created until well into the presidency of Frederick Barnard, some years after 1852. So technically, Mayfield could be said to "incorrect" in calling Longstreet Chancellor, a position he never held. But as I understand it, the change was largely one of title only, and if today the readers of the Oxford Eagle know the position as "Chancellor," it may

My point in going through all this is that, in writing my own account of the incident, I had four sources in front of me – my own Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, if you will. I had my own review of the 1852 Board minutes, Mr. Johnson's account (published in 1912, but apparently written around 1890), David Sansing's 1999 book, and Jack Mayfield's 2010 piece in *The Oxford Eagle*. Even as early as the time of Mr. Johnson's sketches, the major players were all dead, so, like me, the earlier chroniclers only had older writings to go by: written accounts left by those who'd gone before them.

These earlier writers may have had sources I never found. (Like leaves from a tree, still blown by the wind.) Some of the details that appear in later accounts may be based on accurate early accounts. But others seem less 'known fact' than reasonable inference. Take the horse itself for example. The minutes simply refer to Colonel Brown's horse. The fact that he had apparently used it for transportation suggests that it was a saddlehorse, not a draught horse. (A pretty strong inference there, in my view.) The strong likelihood that a man of the Colonel's wealth owned more than one saddlehorse makes me wonder if he rotated them, or whether the reason he rode that particular horse on that occasion warrants an inference that it was his "favorite," as Sansing and Mayfield report. (And consider his angry reaction: would he have been so upset, if he'd been riding an old nag that day?) My point is that when it comes to drawing inferences, there's a continuum in which the all-but-impossible gives way to the unlikely but conceivable, and which gives way in turn to plausible possibility, to possibility more probable than not, to substantial probability, and eventually to clear and convincing evidence – But does it ever, really, reach near certainty? Both the writer of history and the writer of fiction are engaged in the effort to depict truth, and ascertaining truth is a matter of considering evidence and drawing inferences. Where, in the end, does drawing good inferences go from being the essential tool of the good historian to being the special magic of fiction writers?

From the inferences drawn before me, I've gone a step further and inferred that Brown's "favorite" horse would have been a powerfully-built stallion – a chestnut stallion, perhaps – and I'm left to wonder whether it's that, rather than my lack of a history degree, that means *Alemeth* is fiction.

I suspect every one of these earlier chroniclers – acknowledged historians, not fiction writers – had access to sources I did not consider. But is it also possible I came across sources they did not? Consider this: I spent many hours in the Oxford Courthouse trying to determine the year in which Colonel Brown first built his house on Depot Street.[80] I was not successful, but all my work on that point left me with the strong impression that Brown hadn't yet built his house on Depot Street as of 1852, and was probably still living at Clear Creek that year. There are two possibilities: one is that he *did* already live on Depot Street. Perhaps Jack Mayfield has seen evidence of that; and if he has, I'd completely agree with the drawing of an inference that he would not have been staying the night in question at Longstreet's house, off the town square, just a short walk from his own home. And having spent so much more time in Oxford than I, Jack

---

well communicate "truth" to the readers of *The Eagle* to call Longstreet "Chancellor," rather than risking confusion by using the old term "President."

[80]See discussion of Chapter 70, below.

Mayfield may well have evidence that the Colonel was at the Lyceum for a Board meeting that April day. But the Board's initial practice was to meet only twice each year, a winter meeting in the state capital at Jackson alternating with a summer meeting in Oxford.[81] Then, on July 14, 1849, the Oxford Organizer reported that the Board had voted to meet thereafter only once each year, in July. From my review of the minutes, it seems they did so. I therefore draw the inference that Colonel Brown could *not* have been at the Lyceum for a regular board meeting in April, 1852, as Mayfield says. If he was at a Board meeting in April, it would have had to have been a specially-called meeting. I found no record of such a meeting. But meetings don't always leave records. Records can be misplaced.

So which, here, are the "right" inferences to be drawn? Mayfield didn't return my telephone calls. At the end of the day, what really happened boils down to subjective judgment about the strength of conflicting inferences. Having spent many years trying to get to the "truth" of *Alemeth*, I do not doubt that, as Don Doyle said, "the distinction between fact and fiction is hardly clear cut."

That said, when it comes to the horse, I feel constrained to mention another possibility. It is, of course, based on different inferences. We already "know" from the Board minutes themselves that back in April, 1852, no one had any idea who the culprit was. Yet by the Board meeting in July, the Board was recording that "we now have sufficient testimony" that Longstreet should have taken action. I think a reasonable inference is that the Board had just learned of this new testimony in July, and I wonder what inference might be drawn from another matter that had just come to the Board's attention at that time.

It appears that on Friday, July 2nd, the faculty had discussed an "affray" reported by a member of the Junior class who had come to the faculty with a complaint against Mr. Charles S. Morton of the Senior class. The nature of the "affray" and the complaint is unclear, but there'd been drinking involved. Since Morton was not present at that faculty meeting to defend himself, no action was taken against him based on the complaint. But when the faculty met again on the 5th of July, they voted to expel Morton for his part in the "affray." Then, on Thursday morning, the 15th of July, on the appeal of the students and the faculty, the trustees voted to allow Morton his diploma "notwithstanding the circumstances which have since occurred."[82] Could this incident, involving Morton, have unearthed whatever the Board was referring to when it said, on July 13th, that the faculty "now have sufficient testimony" to take action regarding the Colonel's horse? Had Morton's accuser accused him of the deed? Had it been the other way around? Had evidence about Morton changed the Board's posture from trying to flush out a culprit to demanding that the rest of the student body disavow the vandalism? I don't know, but if inferences are the tools of both historians and novelists, it's hard to say what inferences should be drawn here.

Was it just the tail, or was it the tail and the mane? The President's stable, or a hitching post at the Lyceum? And was it really Charles Morton, or was it Leander McKinney, Alemeth Byers,

[81] Its first meeting, in Jackson, was in January, 1845. It met again in Jackson in January, 1846, January 1847, and February 1848. Its second meeting was in Oxford in July, 1845, and it met again in Oxford in July of 1846, April of 1847, and July of 1848.
[82] University of Mississippi Board of Trustees Minutes, p 186.

and some guy named Nat? I don't know, but at this point, I have no particular reason for believing it could not have been so.

As Doyle says, the distinction between fact and fiction is hardly clear cut.

Chapter 37

August to September, 1852

If, in the end, Alemeth lied by saying he'd been at church when the horse's tail was cut off, he thinks here that "it was *just a white* lie." Indeed, one really succinct statement of the "binding theme" of Alemeth might be "the little white lie."

There's been much written about our history of associating blackness and darkness with bad things, whiteness and light with good. I suspect it goes back to ancient pre-history and the danger faced at night from attacks by wild animals. But in the context of *Alemeth*, and its setting in a time when race relations were on everyone's mind, I couldn't help but wonder about use of the color symbolism in the phrase "white lie." I think it VERY telling that to say something's a "white lie" is not to say the thing is good, but to excuse it, notwithstanding its flawed character. The phrase dates back at least to 1741, when the following appeared in a magazine:

> A certain Lady of the highest Quality ... makes a judicious Distinction between a white Lie and a black Lie. A white Lie is That which is not intended to injure any Body in his Fortune, Interest, or Reputation but only to gratify a garrulous Disposition and the Itch of amusing People by telling Them wonderful Stories.[83]

It seems a very large number of white people in Alemeth's day held tight to the notion that the peculiar institution of slavery was "not intended to hurt anybody," and so, was excusable – wrong, but not so wrong that to correct it wouldn't make matters worse –which is to say, just a little "white lie." But I think Ambrose Bierce was onto something when he defined the word "white," rather succinctly, in *The Devil's Dictionary*, as "black."

So much depends on point of view.

Chapter 38

August to September, 1852

This chapter introduces us to Mount Sylvan, and therefore to another aspect of the story that began as pure fiction but may have ended up as fact. I could see from Alemeth's letters that he knew how to read and write; I began to ask myself where he had gotten his education. Seeing that he had not attended Ole Miss, I began to focus on his preparatory education. To my knowledge, there were no elementary schools in the area, and his mother, Semirah, had died when he was eight. Had Eliza continued his education? Alemeth's sisters were sent to private schools, so it seemed likely that he was too. I started to write drafts on the assumption he'd done so. There was a boys' academy in Oxford, but it seemed a long way for a boy to go to school.

[83] *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 174, quoted in World Wide Words, http://www.worldwidewords.org/qa/qa-whi6.htm

When I first saw that Mount Sylvan Academy was a boys' school located *between* Panola and Oxford, I started to suppose that Alemeth might have gone to school there.

Meanwhile, as I became increasingly conscious of the fact that Colonel Brown had six daughters and no sons, and as I'd already convinced myself that the Byers family's social life in Oxford was surely tied to that of the Browns, I started to speculate that Colonel Brown might have taken Alemeth under his wing. Realizing, then, that Mount Sylvan was actually quite close to Colonel Brown's country home at Clear Creek, I wrote drafts of fiction supposing that the Colonel had specifically encouraged Alemeth to attend the school, and began to wonder if he had even supported it, financially, as he had the building of Sand Springs church. Only later did I discover that Colonel Brown had, in fact, been the chief benefactor of the school, having made a gift of $1200 about the time Alemeth might have attended. Specifically, the volunteers at the Mississippi GenWeb Project put together a list of Lafayette County place names and posted the following on their web page:

> BURGESS Settled in 1842 and located about eight miles west of Oxford, the community was first called Welcometon, and then Morganville. The name was later changed to Burgess for Mrs. Mollie Burgess, an early settler. **Mount Sylvan Academy for Boys** was established here in 1845 by the Reverend S. G. Burney and Robert Morris; the chief benefactor being Colonel James Brown who donated $1,200 to the school.[84]

It strikes me as a strange gift for a man who has only daughters to donate that much money to a boy's school. So it makes sense to me that my fiction might well be the truth, that Brown might well have taken Alemeth under his wing, and that Alemeth might have attended the school that Colonel Brown supported. Is this fact, or fiction? In truth, I have nothing but the idea that it could have been so.

Meanwhile, I take the Burney of that paragraph to be Stanford Guthrie Burney (1814-1893), a minister of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church who was later chair of English Literature at Ole Miss. He is *not* the same person as the Reverend William Sidney Burney (1801-1885), also a Cumberland Presbyterian Minister, who (see Chapter 28) was the minister who married Colonel Brown's daughter, Fredonia, and presumably received a donation from Colonel Brown for his services.[85]

---

[84] Accessed at http://msgw.org/lafayette/xlaftown.html between 2014 and 2016.

[85] Colonel Brown obviously knew both of these Reverend Burneys. William S. Burney's wife was Sackarissa Williamson, of Maury County, Tennessee, and I suspect she was a relation of Anne Williamson, the Colonel's first wife, from the same part of Tennessee. As a founding member of the Cumberland Presbyterian church, the Colonel's own father, the Reverend Joseph Brown, likely knew both Burneys. Their similarities run deep. Not only were both ministers of the Cumberland Church, both had connections to the family of another Ole Miss Trustee, William Howry. At first, the coincidences and similarities seemed so great I decided these two gentlemen had to be the same person, but research proved otherwise. My own confusion led to concern that the appearances of two Cumberland ministers with the same name would confuse my readers or cause them to think I had confused things by given a fictional character two different names. The temptation was great to turn the two people into a single person for the sake of the story – something I definitely would have done if I thought of myself as writing pure fiction.. But the one rule I'd imposed on myself was adherence to "known truth" when it forced itself upon me, so I couldn't combine the two – at least not explicitly. My "solution" was to make no mention at all of the first name (William) of the Reverend Burney who performed the marriage ceremony for Fredonia. If the reader should assume that he was the same Burney as the other, then I could wash my hands of it!

I was thrown another loop when research revealed that Stanford G. Burney, of Mount Sylvan, founded the College for Women in Oxford in 1852. I was not able to determine who might have run Mount Sylvan following his departure – when Alemeth likely attended – unless it was Robert Morris, about whom I was unable to find out anything. So the door seemed open to the creation of a fictional character to be Alemeth's teacher at the school. Enter Frederick Coffin Vrooman.

Vrooman is fictional, I suppose, but the name is a combination of Fred Tremallo, David Coffin, and Alan Vrooman, teachers who had a lasting impact on me at my own Mount Sylvan (the Phillips Exeter Academy). David Coffin taught me Latin and Greek. Vrooman and Tremallo taught me what they could about creative writing. As far as I know, none was a Reverend, but I revered them all. I hope that my composite character suggests as much. Exonians will relate to Reverend Vrooman's welcoming words, "Come in, boys. It's time to become men."[86]

One thing I believe distinguishes fiction from fact is that when a fiction writer fixates on patterns and symbols and such, he may be more conscious of doing so than the writer of history. In this chapter, for example, once I noticed a number of threes, I decided to run with them, as a paean to the number. My obsession with threes is not limited to this chapter. I think the number is the most important number for a good writer to bear in mind when writing sentences, paragraphs, and more. Like blues music and most jokes about people walking into bars, it takes two to set up a pattern, and a third to complete or vary it.

I'm grateful to those who've pointed out the typographical error at the bottom of page 108, but there isn't one. The page was intended to end mid-sentence in Alemeth's thoughts, his daydreaming interrupted by Reverend Vrooman's words at the top of pg 109, the only thing omitted from the sentence being a thought that never happened. I suppose that sort of typographical play is another example of what separates fiction and fact. (If this were history, it would have to be a typo.)

Speaking of omissions, even historians write more effectively when they tell stories, and sometimes that requires leaving stuff out. I therefore apologize to the memory of Edward Strong Byers, to whom Eliza Byers gave birth at Bynum's Creek on December 2, 1851. His birth just seemed a distraction from the story. No doubt Edward would have told this part of the story differently. But the fact that he later appears in the story, "without ever having been born," so to speak, arguably puts him deep into the category of a miracle baby, and it's my hope that that may be enough to appease him.

[86] The words inscribed in marble above the entrance to the Academy Building at Phillips Exeter are "Huc venite pueri ut viri sitis."

Chapter 39

October 1852 to June 1853

The quote from President Longstreet that opens this chapter was taken from a letter Longstreet wrote to his son-in-law, L.Q.C. Lamar.[87] Shocking as it is, I find it a compelling demonstration of the white thinking of the day. Here was the highly educated president of a University, ordained as a Christian minister, revealing how easily arrogance and good intentions can mask stupidity. However ugly the sentiment expressed, one can hardly doubt, upon reading it, that it is sincere. Longstreet – like so many educated white Christians of his day – was so certain his wisdom enabled him to "mate" these "creatures" better than they could mate themselves, their "persistence" in not abiding by his wisdom became (in his eyes) their folly, not his.

Arrogance has a way of doing that. Longstreet saw it as the white man's Christian duty to take care of his slaves, even if that meant making all their decisions for them, and backing it up with the force of corporal punishment. It seems that learned men have a long history of distinguishing between "mere brute creatures" and wise, Godly men like themselves.

The rest of the chapter is all fiction – in one sense, at least. But the dialogue about the word *famulus* at page 111 is an explicit discussion of the novel's central themes. Perhaps my favorite words in the novel are "family," "familiar," and the Latin word "famulus" (meaning slave) from which they derive. Between them, they occur 153 times. The words' origin in Roman slavery and the implications for everything familiar, and especially things relating to family, are explicitly discussed in Chapter 124 as well.

Ante-bellum America was a time of diametrically opposed views, in which, obviously, many people were very wrong. Yet everyone in the novel is telling everyone else what they should do. Preachers and the church want obedience to their interpretations of God's will; white masters impose requirements on their slaves; the north wants to tell the south what to do; Amzi tells his wife and children what to do; Mary Ann Brown tells her husband what to do. And *everyone*, beginning with Leander McKinney on the very first page and running through to his sergeant at novel's end, tells Alemeth what to do. (A partial list: Leander, Amzi, Eliza, Reverend Gaston, Reverend Vrooman, Mary Ann Brown, Colonel Brown, Gordon Falkner, Howard Falconer, Mary Ann Webster, Judge Longstreet, Mr. Ward, Semmy Lou, and later, all his superior officers in the army.) All these people are putting their own perspectives into Alemeth's head, trying to convince him of their ideas and of what he ought to do as a result of them. In this way, they are all trying to get *him* to do what *they* want. "Good" behavior on Alemeth's part, as they see it, is his acquiescence to their views. In Alemeth's world, some (like the abolitionist north, and George Washington Oliver) would impose their will on others by force of arms. Others proceed by more subtle inducements. But there's a continuum that runs from brute force to a coquettish "pretty please," and every character in the novel is using one tactic or another to get others to behave the way *they* see fit.

[87] I took the quote from Doyle's *Faulkner's County*, p. 146..Doyle gives as the source only, "'Quoted in Antebellum Homes,' WPA," but tells us the letter was from Longstreet to Lamar.

Meanwhile, as I see it, complete acceptance of any idea means submission and obedience to it. Once we dispense entirely with our rebellious spirit, once we accept an idea completely, psychological "slavery" results. Because we no longer question the idea, we've lost our freedom to evaluate and potentially reject it. When the "familiar" becomes ingrained, when we stop questioning our beliefs, when we become "convinced" of our "convictions" to the point of being willing to die for them the way the South was willing to die for slavery, we lose our freedom, becoming slaves to our pasts and to our personal (and errant) ways of seeing the world. As I advised myself with a reminder posted on my office wall years ago, "Never refuse to question your own convictions; the truth is too important ever to abandon the search for it." Or, to put it in the words with which the novel ends, never forget that "we may be wrong."

Such is the theme that was intended to bind the novel together.

Chapter 40

June, 1853

In this chapter, Colonel Brown tells Amzi about "a slave named Henry, in Haiti." Henri Christophe (1767 –1820) was a leader of the 1804 slave uprising in which Haiti won its independence from France.[88] After the 1804 rebellion, there was a split between the black Christophe, who declared himself King of a Haitian State in the north, and a fellow-rebel turned rival, the 'quadroon' Alexandre Petion, who (until his death from yellow fever in March of 1818) served as President of a Haitian Republic in the South. Christophe knew how to be civilized. Though born into slavery, he was educated in Spain, built palaces, and created a nobility. He founded a College of Arms to provide weapons for the newly ennobled. In July of 1818, Eliza's father, the sea-going John Strong, sailed his sloop to Haiti seeking compensation from the southern government for the taking of the Strong family's Haitian plantation. According to Strong's letters home, Jean-Pierre Boyer (who had just succeeded Petion as president of the Southern Republic) agreed to pay him $2500 compensation for his loss.

Strong's letter describing the resolution is coincidentally the same letter in which Strong referred to the parrots:

Port Au Prince, Aug 5, 1818

> My Dear Wife,
>
> I have the pleasure to inform you that I yesterday closed my claim against this government by a compromise and received the paltry sum of two thousand five hundred dollars. I have been induced to do this for several reasons first because the government is very poor, secondly because Christopher, a neighboring Negro chief, is within one day's march of this place with his army threatening to make

[88] The rebellion a success, Henry quickly took on the trappings of power. The official title he adopted was "Henry, by the Grace of God and Constitutional Law of the State, King of Haiti, Sovereign of Tortuga, Gonâve, and other Adjacent Islands, Destroyer of Tyranny, Regenerator and Benefactor of the Haïtian Nation, Creator of Her Moral, Political, and Martial Institutions, First Crowned Monarch of the New World, Defender of the Faith, Founder of the Royal Military Order of Saint Henry."

war upon them, and should he succeed, all would be lost, thirdly, if there was no other objection, the slow operations of our own government would not compel a payment in all probability in a long time, and $2500 now is probably better for us at this time than the whole sum would be a long time hereafter, especially connected with the uncertainty of the future collection of the claim against an unstable government.

But I have a piece of unpleasant news for you. I have agreed to go to Jamaica and shall not probably arrive in New York before September. The reason of this is that I have a prospect of making two or three thousand dollars by the jaunt. Keep Mary Ann to school at her grammar. I have sent the parrots on to New York. God bless you all, I will be with you as soon as possible.

Yours affectionately,

J. B. Strong

Papa's love to the dear babies one and all.

From today's perspective, it seems preposterous that a plantation owner could recover restitution from a government of former slaves for the wrongful taking of his plantation. But the view that the plantation had rightfully belonged to Strong's family – fortified, perhaps, by the new government's desire to be on good terms with captains who could afford to ply the seas with their own sloops – was apparently strong enough to affect Boyer's thinking.

The successful slave revolt by which the Haitians won their freedom remains the *only* successful slave rebellion in history. But to the slave owners of the American South, it stood as a compelling example of what could happen if their own slaves got out of control. There were more blacks in Mississippi than whites. If slaves could be successful in Haiti, could the same thing happen in the United States?

The Nat Turner rebellion of 1831 answered that question. The American slave uprising wasn't successful, but it left between fifty-five and sixty-five white people dead in Virginia. That state executed fifty-six slaves for their roles in the matter, but that wasn't enough for outraged white mobs who murdered at least a hundred more in the aftermath. After the Nat Turner rebellion, the question became whether what happened in Virginia could happen elsewhere. Throughout the south, state legislatures passed laws prohibiting education of slaves and adopting other measures to "keep things under control."

Chapters 41 and 42

June 1853

Like the rest of these two chapters, Mr. Murdock is fictional, even if he represents a type that is all too real.

Chapter 43

June – July 1853

The relatively long length of this chapter is a function of its purpose, exemplifying Alemeth's first extended journey into the unfamiliar. Contemplating what a first trip away from home means – the horizon-expanding, mind-awakening experience that can forever change the trajectory of a person's development – I was (and remain) bothered by the lack of direct evidence that this particular trip actually occurred. I don't know for a fact that Alemeth ever left home until his enlistment and service in the war. But just about everyone experiences a first trip away from the comforts of home, and nothing in Alemeth's wartime letters suggests it was his first. So, in deciding whether Alemeth's first trip was to St. Louis, for the Webster-Blow wedding in 1853, it's time, again, to talk about the evidence and inferences.

If records don't lie, Julia Webster (b. 1833) – the eldest daughter of Ashbel and Julia Strong Webster – got married to William Thomas Blow in Carondelet, Missouri, on Tuesday, the 12th of July, 1853.[89] According to state records, the wedding was officiated by Samuel B. McPheeters, pastor of the Westminster Church.[90] Following tradition, the ceremony would have been at the Websters' home in Carondelet. Logic tells us that Alemeth would not have attended unless Eliza did, as the bride was Eliza's niece, and no blood relation to Alemeth. The first essential question, then, for the historicity of *Alemeth*, is whether Eliza herself would have made the trip.

We know that the three Strong sisters – MaryAnn, Julia, and Eliza – were close enough to keep in touch and to travel to see each other. Eliza had moved to Columbus, and later to Carondelet, to be with sister Julia; then she had come to Mississippi to live with sister Mary Ann. The names these sisters chose for their children provides further evidence of closeness: Julia had two daughters named Mary Ann and Eliza; Mary Ann and Eliza both had daughters named Julia. Most importantly, in 1839, when Eliza first lived with the Websters in Columbus, she was nineteen, while little Julia (the bride) was only six. Eliza had lived with the family until Julia was twelve. During those six years, Eliza was surely all but a second mother to the young lady now getting married.

The trip from Mississippi to St. Louis was certainly feasible: there was regular stage service between Oxford and Memphis; Colonel Brown had actually been in the stage business himself (a fact we know from his letters to his father). And steamboats up the Mississippi were in their heyday, affordable even for families of meager means; hardly too expensive for wealthy families like the Browns and the Byerses.

Finally, perhaps the biggest piece of evidence suggesting that such a trip occurred is found in the 1864 book, *My Cave Life in Vicksburg*, written by the bride's younger sister, Mary Ann

[89]Missouri Marriage Records attest to the fact. See Missouri Marriage Records, Images for St. Louis, 1853, image 87 of 223, .accessed on Ancestry.com. For purposes of envisioning a sensible chronology, my fictional steamboat, the Calypso, departed Memphis Thursday July 7, 1853.

[90] Samuel Brown McPheeters (1819-1870) was a nephew of Rachel McPheeters (1774-1849), whose grandson William Lee Logan (1857-1936) would marry little Julia ("Dudie") Byers in 1887. The fact that a McPheeters officiated at the marriage of a Strong more than thirty years earlier was arguably a portent of things to come. But the population of America in those days – only 3.9 million in the 1790 census and 23 million in 1850 – was a small fraction of the 330 million people around today. As a simple matter of numbers, it's a lot more likely to discover connections between people living then than it is among people today. What's more, in those days, ethnic and religious populations married among 'their own kind' – *especially* people who thought highly of their own kind. When you narrow the field to Scots-Irish Presbyterians, then narrow it still further to the educated families of ministers, 'coincidences' begin to look less unlikely and sometimes almost inevitable.

Webster. Many of the war-time letters included in that book refer to her fondness for Oxford, Mississippi, and to her staying with "old friends" there. I know of no reason that New York-born Mary Ann Webster, having traveled first to Columbus, Ohio, and then to Carondelet, Missouri, with her parents, would ever have visited Oxford, Mississippi once, much less often – unless it was in the company of her mother, visiting her aunts, Eliza Byers and Mary Ann Brown, and their children. Given the close relationship between Eliza and her older sister Julia, the most natural inference to draw is that Julia Strong Webster had been a frequent visitor to Oxford, bringing her daughters with her. And if Julia and her daughters came often to Mississippi, it would seem likely that the Mississippi sisters would have reciprocated with visits to Carondelet. Eliza, especially, would have had reason to do so, having herself spent time calling Carondelet home.

And so, just as I supposed that the Webster family came to Oxford for the wedding of Amzi and Eliza – perhaps also for the wedding of the Browns' daughters, Frances and Fredonia – I suppose that Mary Ann and Eliza traveled to Carondelet for the 1853 wedding of Julia Webster to William Blow.

Alemeth's own attendance is a tougher call. I can't imagine he had much interest in making the trip with so many women, but he surely had made the acquaintance of the Webster family during their visits to Oxford. Mary Ann Webster was his age, and they might have already formed a friendship of sorts. Whatever his feelings for Mary Ann, a seventeen year old boy could hardly fail to be enthralled by the prospect of going up the Mississippi on a steamboat.

A simple headstone in the Sand Springs Church cemetery provides the only counter-evidence of which I'm aware. It reads, "Infant Daughter of A.W. and E.S. Byers, August 7, 1853." It means that Eliza lost a daughter in childbirth just a month after the Webster wedding in Carondelet. To be fair, the fact that Eliza was pregnant at the time of the wedding may militate against the likelihood that she (and, by extension, Alemeth) attended the wedding. But I think it quite plausible that she attended, either despite her pregnancy or in ignorance of it. I don't believe women were nearly so sure about their "due dates" in those days of more primitive medicine. And the infant's death may even imply that the pregnancy was not full term. Eliza could have made the trip thinking she was only two or three months into the pregnancy, if she was aware of it at all. In any case, I suspect that the strong-willed Eliza was 'bound and determined' to attend.

Once I made the decision that Eliza probably attended, the pregnancy then became a factor might have *increased* the chances that Alemeth, too, would have made the trip, to help look after her. I couldn't help but imagine that Amzi and Eliza, prodded by Mary Ann Brown, saw it as a chance for the young man to expand his view of the world. Primed no doubt by my reading of Huck Finn and the Odyssey, I saw it as a chance to explore what surely happened to the teenage Alemeth *somewhere*, as he became more aware of the larger world around him, and having no other signpost to suggest it happened to Alemeth at any other time or place, I decided the trip to St. Louis was a feasible as an occasion as any for his first venture out in the world.

That decision made, the historical fact of the pregnancy's unhappy end became an event that had to be dealt with, raising questions back then (as it does now) as to whether the journey was responsible for the tragedy.

Regardless of whether my suppositions are correct, it illustrates well the process by which *Alemeth*, for one, was created: Research leads to "known facts." "Known facts" lead to inferences and speculation about possible facts, which lead to assessment of probabilities, and ultimately, conclusions about probabilities led to story lines. Further, as I discovered, the story lines that grow out of past probabilities must themselves lead naturally to future historical facts. For some event, *E*, to have probably occurred, it must not only be a natural consequence of all that went before; it must be consistent with all that came after. It can't be the butterfly that flaps its wings and changes the course of history – at least not without changing my chosen genre entirely.

Meanwhile, the story line chosen here – an 1853 trip up the Mississippi river by steamboat – naturally reminded me of similar stories (like Huck Finn) and related principles (mind-expanding journeys of discovery). Such stories had formed much of the basis of my pre-existing understanding of reality. As they became interwoven with the story taking shape before me, the distinction between the real and the created became impossible to sort out. And this was the dynamic, not only behind chapter 43, but behind the entire novel.

A similar dynamic lies behind all historical fiction, as far as I understand it, even if other writers' plots are sometimes less bound by historical evidence than mine.[91] What is less obvious, but tenable, it seems, is the perception that what's called "history" gets written the same way. A case in point comes straight from the connection between the wedding of Julia Webster, the basis of this chapter, and the history of the celebrated slave, Dred Scott.

The definitive story of the Dred Scott case, which played such a central role in the events leading to the Civil War, is told by Don E. Fehrenbacher in his Pulitzer Prize-winning treatment, *The Dred Scott Case*.[92] Peter Blow, a Virginian, had brought his family – including his slave, Dred Scott – to St. Louis in 1830. By 1843, the year the Websters probably arrived in that city, Peter Blow and his wife were dead; Dred Scott had been sold and taken north by new owners, thereby creating the basis for legal claims that he had become free (by being taken into a state where slavery was illegal). By the time the Websters arrived, the five Blow children – who had grown up with Dred – were by now adults themselves. To varying degrees, the Blow siblings were prominent and well-connected people. Charlotte Blow had had married a successful druggist named Joseph Charless. Henry Blow was a successful businessman selling paints and chemicals. William Thomas Blow, the youngest of the family, worked as a druggist for Charless.

Carondelet was connected to St. Louis by a dirt road. It had a population of only a few hundred people, and only three churches, all of them Roman Catholic. The only school in

---

[91] E.g., *Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Hunter*.

[92] Fehrenbacher, Don E., T*he Dred Scott Case: Its Significance in American Law and Politics*, Oxford University Press, 1978. One of the few things I don't believe Fehrenbacher explained was how and why Dred Scott had a last name. Perhaps his travels north had something to do with it. Certainly, the idea of a slave having a last name (other than that of his owner) was foreign to the ways of the southern cotton plantation.

Carondelet was the school run by the Sisters of St. Joseph. Dr. Webster and his family may have first encountered the Blow family when Dr. Webster looked to St. Louis for his pharmaceutical needs and obtained some of them from Henry Blow, Joseph Charless, or both. Possible earlier connections aside, by 1850, Henry T. Blow, the chemical manufacturer, had moved to Carondelet.[93] According to the City of St. Louis, his mansion was "in wooded country near the present intersection of Virginia and Haven."[94] Meanwhile, according to the St. Louis Globe of June 26, 1974, Ashbel Webster's stately home, built in 1850, was on the northeast corner of Michigan and Krauss Street.[95] A glance at a modern map of the city reveals that the Webster house was just one block south and two blocks east of the Blow house, at a time when the lots of the wealthy occupied entire blocks. That is, Ashbel Webster and Henry Blow had essentially become next door neighbors.

In the census, I count only three physicians in Carondelet, so it's not hard to imagine that, given their proximity and social standing, Dr. Webster served as Henry Blow's personal physician. However they first came to know each other, Ashbel Webster and Henry Blow became partners of sorts when, in 1850, they founded the Presbyterian Church of Carondelet together.[96] Needless to say, the families were close, and there are several ways Dr. Webster's daughter, Julia, could have met Henry Blow's youngest brother, William. Whatever the timing and specifics of their meeting and courtship, the marriage between Julia Webster and William Blow occurred on July 12, 1853.

Meanwhile, the legal proceedings involving the Blow family's former slave had been going on since 1846, when Martha Blow's husband, the lawyer Charles Drake, brought the first lawsuit in Scott's behalf, and Henry Blow testified for Scott regarding his father's sale of the slave years before. Dred, therefore, had returned to St. Louis by 1846, and so was in that city, and in close communication with the Blows, during the time the Webster family was getting to know them. In the course of the litigation, the third son, Taylor, emerged as the most active member of the Blow family in supporting Scott.[97] It took Don Fehrenbacher 731 pages to cover the tortuous legal proceedings that followed, but for our purposes, it's suficient to note that beginning probably in 1848, Scott did not necessarily work for his latest legal owner – a status that was, after all, bound up in complicated legal controversy – but was being hired out to work for

[93] 1850 Census. The population of the town of Carondelet was about 1200 people, and of these, about a hundred and fifty were seminarians, sisters and boarders at the Roman Catholic Convent. Henry Blow occupied census dwelling unit 126. Ashbel Webster and family were in the same Carondelet census at dwelling unit 91. The numbers alone suggest they were close, but do not preclude their being contiguous, as sequential dwelling numbers simply reflect the route that the census-taker followed – typically up one street and down the next.

[94] https://www.stlouis-mo.gov/archive/neighborhood-histories-norbury-wayman/carondelet/carondelet6.htm, an official webpage of the City of St. Louis.

[95] The newspaper included a picture of the large and stately home. The caption asserted that Webster paid $100 for the lot; that he sold the home in 1874; that it was then included in a sightseeing tour of historic landmarks of Old Carondelet. From our genealogical notebooks, it would seem the home was demolished some time in the 1970's, but in 2017, the City of St. Louis's website still uses the present tense in describing the Webster house as located at the northeast corner of Michigan and Krauss. https://www.stlouis-mo.gov/archive/neighborhood-histories-norbury-wayman/carondelet/housing6.htm

[96] Hyde, William, and Conrad, Howard, eds., *Encyclopedia of the History of Saint Louis*, Vol III, (Southern History Co., 1899) pg 1806.

[97] Ultimately, when the United States Supreme Court finally ruled against Scott in March of 1857, Taylor Blow bought Scott back and promptly manumitted him.

others.[98] In 1850, the Missouri trial court had placed Scott in the custody of the local sheriff until his status could be resolved, and the local sheriff had hired him out, for private use and public profit. Beginning in 1851, the person to whom Scott was hired out was Edmond Charles LaBeaume, brother of Peter Blow's wife Eugenia.[99] One wonders whether, when Beaume left for Texas, [100] other Blow family members – active in the effort to win Scott his freedom – continued to rent his labor, and whether, as of 1853, when Julia Webster married William Blow, Scott was, in a sense, a servant of the extended Blow family once again – and that the wedding guests from Mississippi might have encountered him.

The most fascinating aspect of the story told by Don Fehrenbacher, as it relates to *Alemeth*, involves the role played by Julia Strong Webster's daughter, Julia Webster Blow (the bride in this chapter of *Alemeth*) and her impact on what has long passed for "history." It seems she may be partially responsible for creating a negative myth about the famous slave, a piece of fiction that made its way into history. As described by Fehrenbacher, the story as it relates to Julia Webster Blow goes as follows:

In 1907, a librarian of the Missouri Historical Society, one Mary Louise Dalton, had occasion to interview Mrs. Blow, by then seventy-four years old, about Dred Scott. From Mrs. Blow's "vague and flexible memory," Fehrenbacher tells us, [Mrs. Dalton] extracted the assertion that Dred was worthless as a worker and had begged from the Blow family for twenty years after his manumission." (Twenty years after Scott's 1857 manumission would have put the period of alleged "beggary" from 1857 to 1877.) Dalton had been assisting in research for a man who was writing a chapter on the Dred Scott case for a book to be called *Decisive Battles of the Law.*[101] Based in part on the interview with Julia Blow, Dalton told the man that Scott was a "no-account nigger." The man wrote in his book that Scott was "apparently a shiftless, incapable specimen of his race." Fehrenbacher cites a long line of subsequent "histories," popular in this country for many years, all of which picked up on the negative view of the slave that, according to Fehrenbacher, traced back to the 1907 Blow-Dalton interview.

Fehrenbacher points out that just a few weeks after Dalton interviewed Mrs. Blow, "Miss Dalton made the not very difficult discovery that Dred Scott had actually died in 1858" – thus making it impossible that Scott had begged anyone for anything for twenty years after his 1957 manumission. Further, says Fehrenbacher, "Mary Louise Dalton admitted that she herself probably influenced Mrs. Blow to believe that Scott lived twenty years after his manumission. One must consider the possibility that Dred's shiftlessness was as much her idea as Mrs. Blow's recollection."[102]

Fehrenbacher has here exposed a lot of subsequent "history" as wrong, or at least based on a foundation that is very highly suspect. Fehrenbacher is obviously a better historian than those who simply accepted Mary Louise Dalton's account of the 1907 Julia Blow interview. But once

[98] See Fehrenbacher, *supra*, p. 255 and p. 656, fn. 30.
[99] Fehrenbacher, *supra*, p. 270, and p. 659, fn. 20.
[100] LaBeaume appears to have moved to Texas at some point in the 1850's, dying in San Antonio in 1858. (Texas Wills and Probate Records, 1833-1974, Bexar, Bonds, Vol A-B 1848-1882, p 199 of 455.)
[101] Frederick Trevor Hill
[102] Fehrenbacher, *supra*, pp 570-571, and footnotes 7 and 9 at page 714.

again, even good history is all about the drawing of inferences. Fehrenbacher does a great job of tracing his sources, and still he's left unsure how much of the blame for Dred Scott's subsequent poor reputation can be attributed to Julia Blow, to Mary Louise Dalton, or to others.

My own thinking on the subject is this. Whether Julia was fair in her assessment of Scott or not, it seems that she did, at least, claim to remember him. But if Scott actually died in 1858, her personal contacts with him most likely occurred between 1851 (the year the sheriff rented out his labor to Charles LeBeaume) and his death in 1858. The first two years of this span, she was not yet a member of the Blow family. Whatever her personal recollections from '51-'58, they'd have been influenced by whatever else she heard about him in the years between then and the 1907 interview. Fehrenbacher refers to Mrs. Blow's "vague and flexible memory." I wonder how much of what Mrs. Blow said to Dalton was based on "family gossip." That is, it seems unlikely that Mrs. Blow told Dalton that she had personally witnessed Scott begging from the family for twenty years. What *did* she likely say to her interviewer, and on what was it based?

My own speculation is that when Julia Blow told Miss Dalton that Scott "had begged from the Blow family for twenty years," she may simply have been referring to the fact that the family had financially supported his efforts to win freedom for twenty years. Taylor Blow had gone to bat for Scott from the beginning, helping finance the initial litigation in 1846, putting up bond money in 1853, and buying Scott and his wife back (only to set them free) in 1857. In 1858 he had signed as security on an additional bond, and in 1867, he had had Scott's body re-buried (presumably at his own expense). That is, Taylor Blow had put his own time and money into Scott for a period spanning *twenty-one* years. The Blow brother-in-law, Charles LaBeaume had paid the sheriff to rent Scott's services and had put up bond money for the 1853 federal court lawsuit. Henry Blow had testified for Scott in his first trial. Fehrenbacher lists Peter Blow (son of the original owner) and Joseph Charless (husband of Charlotte Blow) among the family members who also lent Scott support.[103] That makes at least five members of the family involved in supporting the slave, in some respect, for over twenty years.

In contrast, in the 1860 Census, three years after their brother Taylor had bought Scott and his wife back, only to grant them their freedom, Charlotte (Blow) Charless and William T. Blow still owned slaves.[104]

The point is that, in my view, the Blow family was more likely *divided* on the question of slavery than solidly in Scott's camp. By the time Taylor Blow paid for Scott's grave to be moved in 1867, Taylor had converted to Catholicism,[105] a move that could easily have further alienated Scott's most ardent backer from the more conservative members of the Presbyterian family. If some of the family had been giving his legal battle financial support, despite repeated setbacks and ultimately a loss in the U.S. Supreme Court, it can hardly be doubted that others in

[103] Fehrenbacher, *supra*, p. 653, fn 4. I've found nothing specific about what sort of support Peter Blow or Joseph Charless lent Scott. But note that if Peter Blow is the same Peter Blow the census shows living in Newton, Missouri, in 1860, he still owned six slaves, three years after Taylor gave Dred Scott his freedom. Fehrenbacher also lists Henry Blow as a Scott supporter, but as far as I can tell, all Henry Blow had ever done was back in 1846 when he testified about his father having sold Scott years before. The oldest Blow sister, Rebecca, seems not to have played any role

[104] The 1860 Census for St. Louis, William T. Blow at dwelling #613, Charlotte Charless at dwelling #664.

[105] Fehrenbacher, *supra*, p. 569.

the family – those who were *not* giving such support – could have resented the further help given, and could have blamed Scott for accepting the family's financial help for those twenty years. By 1860, William Blow and Charlotte Charless were, by my count, two of *only fifty-three* slave owners in St. Louis, which had a white population of over four thousand. Clearly, St. Louis was not Mississippi. William Blow's slave-owning family was part of a dwindling minority. The extended Blow family was likely in disagreement over the Dred Scott case and over slavery in general, much as the rest of the country was. And if, in 1907, a 74 year old Julia Webster Blow had negative things to say that began Dred Scott's sullied reputation, I suspect what she said didn't reflect her own observations as much as it reflected talk she'd heard from her husband and other dissenting family members about all the time and money their siblings had put into a very long legal battle, which had only earned the family a reputation that wasn't popular among the slave-owning classes. Julia's husband, William, as far as I can tell, never lent any support to the slave or his case. Little wonder, it seems to me, that many years later, his wife Julia might have said something to an interviewer about the worthless cause of a man "who had begged from the Blow family for twenty years."

So much for the chapter's bride, Julia Webster Blow, and for the fiction she may have introduced into the course of history. It's time to reflect on her younger sister, Mary Ann Webster.

Mary Ann was Alemeth's age, and figures more extensively than her sister in *Alemeth,* both in this chapter and in others. Her book, *My Cave Life in Vicksburg*, was one of my first introductions to Alemeth's world. It was published in 1864, when she was twenty-eight and had borne two children; in July of 1853, when her sister married William Blow, she was still only sixteen years old. What, I had to wonder, were *her* views about slavery?

My Cave Life in Vicksburg strikes me as the work of a woman who prized her loyal servant, Cinth, but who refrained from rhetoric on the slavery question, pro or con. With the country severely divided on the question, Mary Ann kept silent on the issue, judging from the record that survives. Largely from that silence, I concluded that, like many in the border state of Missouri, she saw herself at the center of a conflict over slavery in which she had no personal stake. And she became a writer, leading me to suspect she may have tried to understand the institution with curiosity. In any case, when the Mary Ann Webster of my novel asks Alemeth if he has seen the book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she does so not as an abolitionist or defender of slavery, but as someone striving to understand the forces tearing her country apart.

My Cave Life in Vicksburg gave me my first look at Memphis's *Gayoso Hotel*. In two of the letters included in her book, she gives a vivid description of the social finery of the aristocratic Confederate brass there early in the war.[106] Research on the hotel convinced me that, as the most modern and fashionable hotel in the City, Mary Ann Brown (the Colonel's wife) would have insisted they stay there on their trip to the Webster-Blow wedding in St. Louis.

[106] Loughborough, *My Cave Life in Vicksburg*, (The Reprint Co., Spartanburg, 1988), pp. 149-158; reproduced from an 1882 edition at the University of Mississippi Library in Oxford.

There was a steamship *Calypso* captured by Union forces during the war, but the ship described here was not that one. The name is of my own invention, I think. The description of the ship is loosely based on several sources, but primarily on a detailed description of the U.S.S. *Eastport*.[107] Information regarding travel times on the stage coaches and Mississippi steamers was very hard to assess, due to a huge amount of variability.[108] What's depicted here comes from throwing a great deal of research into a soup, tasting, and serving it in a way that seemed to suit the story. The name *Calypso* seemed appropriate as the enchantress who detained Homer's sea-traveling hero, and in a way, the whole chapter evoked the Odyssey for me – not just because it was a long trip on an awesome waterway, but because, as Alemeth's first foray into "the world beyond," it exposed the seventeen-year-old to so much that was new and unfamiliar – the river, the steamboat, the luxurious Gayoso, the slave-market, and, of course, an enchanting member of the opposite sex who showed a surprising interest in him.

Having decided to write about a trip up the Mississippi river, I also struggled with what to do about Alemeth's contemporaries, Samuel Clemens, Mark Twain and Huck Finn, all three of whom were, in their own ways, traveling the Mississippi at this time. Clemens, born 32 days before Alemeth and having gotten his own start in the steamship and newspaper businesses, was in St. Louis for two months that covered the time of Alemeth's own trip there, working as a typesetter (he'd been an apprentice for his older brother's newspaper back in Hannibal) and submitting some of his own writing to *The Missouri Republican*.[109] I was very tempted to have Alemeth encounter him during the trip, just as I was tempted to have him encounter Dred Scott, But in the end, I decided against anything that would explicitly reference any of them. Possible as it was that Alemeth ran into Dred Scott, or Mark Twain, describing such encounters would have detracted from the historicity I was aiming for. (Forrest Gump had done this sort of thing well enough, so I thought it best to leave that sort of approach alone.)

In contrast, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published in March of 1852, sold at least half a million copies in its first year and became the best selling book of the century, after the Bible.[110] The

---

[107] Pearson, Charles, and Birchett, Thomas, *History and Archaeology of Two Civil War Steamboats*, Coastal Environments, 2001. Also helpful was *Helpful Hints for Steamboat Passengers*, published on the internet by the University of North Iowa as a part of its "Explorations in Iowa History Project." And of course, I had to take a look at Mark Twain's description from *Life on the Mississippi.*

[108] These reasons included (1) differences in times headed upriver and down river; (2) differences in speed based on speed of the river, dependent in turn on weather; (3) variations in steamboat power and design, not to mention increasing speeds as technologies improved; (4) most information I found related to record speeds; there was little about norms; (5) much depended on whether problems were encountered – ships run aground on sand-bars, fires, river debris, etc; (6) som*e boats, and boat captains, steamed through the night; others did not; for many, it depended on conditions; (7) a great* deal depended on layover times, which were a function of what (passengers or cargo) had to be loaded and unloaded, whether fuel and cargo would be ready to go when the ship was, whether the ship's owners preferred a timely departure or to wait on late passengers or cargo, and more.

[109] According to *The Mark Twain Project*, seventeen year old Clemens had left his home in Hannibal for St. Louis some time during the first two weeks of June, 1853 and left St. Louis for New York on the 19th of August. "On 26 October 1853, however, [Twain] mentioned that he had first departed Hannibal "more than four months ago". Since it would have been exactly four months on that day if he had left Hannibal on 26 June, Clemens himself seems to place his departure in the early weeks of that month." http://www.marktwainproject.org/homepage.html

[110] Wikipedia, Uncle Tom's Cabin, accessed March, 2017. The Wikipedia article twice puts first year U.S. sales as 300,000, but gives contradictory numbers for first year British sales, first offering the huge figure of 1.2 million and later the more modest 200,000. The Wikipedia article cites Geoffrey Wheatcroft, *"The Cousins' War: review of Amanda Foreman, 'A World on Fire'"*, New York Times Book Review, July 3, 2011; Everon, Ernest. "Some Thoughts Anent Dickens and Novel Writing," *The*

book was so widely read in 1853 – just about everybody was talking about it – that it didn't seem realistic to avoid any reference to it.

Similarly, I couldn't resist a few references to the Dred Scott case, given the Blow's involvement with it. Nor could I resist having Mary Ann Webster mention to Alemeth that the *Missouri Republican* was accepting submissions. So, maybe there's a little of Forrest Gump in Alemeth after all.

The Cotton Market in Memphis would have been busy in the cotton trading months of autumn and winter, but quite dead in August, when Alemeth passed through. In contrast, the slave market wasn't that seasonal. As the novel reflects, Memphis had been founded on the model of the ancient cotton and slave-trading city of Egypt. According to my notes and strong recollection, the Bolton Brothers, Isaac and Wayne, were slave dealers in Memphis who operated near the heart of the city, as described in *Alemeth*, and who did indeed advertise their slaves as "climate acclimated" – but now, in March of 2017, I can no longer find my source.

More falling leaves.

All in all, my object here was to convey the idea that Alemeth's first extended trip away from home expanded his horizons, and that travel to the border state of Missouri, with exposure to abolitionist sentiment there, and a return through Memphis, an important slave-trading town, would have been key elements of that exposure. As Odysseus and Huck Finn might both imply, a "sea" voyage, such as it was, can be an adventure to remember, as if someone who's been raised to accept reality as it is were suddenly thrust into an alternate reality.

Chapter 44

August 7 -14, 1853

According to a headstone in the Orwood Cemetery, Lafayette County, Eliza lost her baby on August 7, 1853. The headstone reads, simply, "Infant Daughter of A. W. and E. S. Byers, August 7, 1853." It requires only a slight inference to conclude from that evidence that the baby died during childbirth, or perhaps shortly before, and that, if Eliza had attended her niece's wedding, the trip could have played a role in ending the pregnancy. It requires much greater inferences for me to imagine Alemeth's (or Eliza's) feelings about the matter. Losing children in childbirth was so much more common in those days – does that mean that families were more steeled to the losses involved than they are today? All supposition, one way or the other; in my view; impossible to know.

On the other hand, if I'm right that Alemeth might well have resented his step-mother at first, and yet, was calling her "mother" by the time he was away at war, as his letters reveal, there had to be some point at which he was first willing to call Eliza "Ma" – whenever it was, it seems

---

Ladies' Companion and Monthly Magazine London, 1855, and *Slave Narratives and Uncle Tom's Cabin,* Africans in America, PBS, accessed February 16, 2007, While exact sales may be unclear, it's not disputed that the book was being very widely read in 1853.

likely it came at a time he felt sympathy or affection for her – and perhaps, by age 17, he was mature enough to want to comfort her in her grief.

Chapter 45

September, 1853

Fiction. But I should mention that the "subjunctive" mood is on stage, in this chapter and the next, playing on its own etymology. And Alemeth's ankles being almost "bound" to the base of his desk is meant to evoke a similar theme, as are all the uses of the word "bound" in the novel.

Chapter 46

September, 1853

Gordon Falkner may be fictional, but he has more roots than I know how to count.

I had long since decided to write a book about Alemeth Byers and his family when, months or more into my research, I discovered Don Doyle's book, *Faulkner's County: The Historical Roots of Yoknapatawpha* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001). Through that book I came face to face with the fact that I, like William Faulkner, was writing essentially historical fiction. That I was writing about the same time and place – the same churches, newspapers, cultures and questions Faulkner wrote about – indeed, to a significant extent – about some of the same *people*, that much of William Faulkner's fiction was about. Like Faulkner, I had set out to write about my own ancestors and background. No matter what I wrote, if I proceeded as planned, I'd surely be encountering Faulkner's ghost. I could try to ignore that ghost, but how can a writer seek to capture a time and a place when one of the greatest American authors ever has devoted the bulk of his life's work to capturing that time and place? Fearful of treading on literary hallowed ground, I considered abandoning the project altogether, but I'd already become too enamored of my story. So I continued the project. But I never escaped Faulkner's ghost. It was too real to ignore.

Would I be accused of walking on his grave? Would I be doomed to fail by virtue of comparison to him? Would I be accused of trying to emulate him? I considered reading up on Faulkner, seeking to become an expert in his fiction – so as to know when I might be stepping on his toes and when not – but that seemed a two-edged sword, as it might cause me (unconsciously) to try to emulate him, and obviously, that was not what I wanted to do, or even *seem* to do. The ghost of Faulkner became a Siren for me, a seductive voice that pled with me to come nearer, to immerse myself in, and I was considering how to tie myself to the mast.[111]

But then I read that Faulkner had even dwelled on the problem that had interested me – the difference between fiction and history. Don Doyle wrote that Faulkner "seemed keenly interested in how we come to know the past." Maybe my exposure to Faulkner in my school days had unconsciously left its mark, and the very concept of exploring fact and fiction was

[111] Homer's Sirens have come to rival, or even surpass, the cyclops as my personal favorite story in the Odyssey. The way one could barely hear them in the distance at first, but their attractive power increasing geometrically as one sailed closer, is a wonderful analogy for the way all ideas all ideas are capable of enthralling us, as they grow stronger and more dominant the closer we get to them.

something I was unconsciously borrowing from him. Maybe – and here's the ultimate point – I was *of course* influenced by him, I was *of course* responding to his writing, and to his characters, and to his Mississippi roots, whether consciously or not, because, for *me*, the fact and fiction had come together – if a white, Presbyterian Mississippi heritage had become part of who I was, so had *As I Lay Dying*. So had *The Sound and the Fury*. If I were going to write about the culture that made me who I was, I had to write about Faulkner, too.

But I decided against trying to read everything Falkner ever wrote. I read a little more by him, a little more about him, and concluded that keeping my distance would be healthy. But some way or another, I would have to deal with his ghost.

That's when I read, somewhere (probably in Don Doyle, or in Joel Williamson), of Falkner's habit of making voluminous notes as he pored over old documents and interviewed people who remembered the past, while denying that he ever did research. I read, too, that Falkner had extolled fiction, rather than history, as the best path for capturing "truth." Therein I found a difference between Faulkner's quest and my own, because I had already formulated my goal as one that was primarily *not* fictional. I did not want to invent a story, I wanted to find history and tell it in an entertaining, story-like way. I had resolved to research the time and place as much as I could with the mindset of a historian, to find what the historical record said to me, and to tell that story with as much fidelity to historical "fact" as I could. To tell it in an entertaining way, if I could, but to tell history, not fiction, to the extent (if any) that such a thing is possible to do.

I knew that inner monologues and dialogues would have to be invented, if my work were to succeed as a story, but I resolved that I would not, like Faulkner, create composite fictional characters with fictional names – I would not turn Lafayette into Yoknapatawpha – I would tell about real people, using actual names, and whatever I could learn about their actual lives. I would engage in inferences and speculation only to the extent I was forced to guess about the gaps left in the historical record. Even then, I would "create" only what I thought most likely happened. That would be my path toward writing something "true."

From this difference between what I understood to be Faulkner's approach and mine, I conceived a way to explore what I'd set out to explore – the difference between genres, the difference between fiction and fact. In time, exigencies arose that caused me to create other fictional characters for *Alemeth*, but at first, my plan was that every character in the book would be a historical person, with the single exception of Gordon Falkner, who would be modeled after William Faulkner, and who, in fact, might even be a cousin of Faulkner's ancestor, William Clark Falkner. He'd be from Ripley. He'd be an Ole Miss student. He'd be a card player, a drinker, a nattily dressed, short-statured "ghost" of William Faulkner, situated in time before, rather than after, but carrying his point of view.

I often second-guessed my decision not to immerse myself in Faulkner's history and writing. I knew that, with only a shallow understanding of the famous author, my effort to capture his ghost in the character of Gordon Falkner would fall short of what it could be if that were my primary goal. But I remained convinced that I could deal with Falkner better from afar than by trying to get too close. I didn't want to put the whole future of *Alemeth* on William Faulkner's

back. In other words, my main objective – of getting the story of Alemeth Byers as "right" as I could – would be jeopardized if I got too carried away with a Faulkner *homage.*

I hope I found a reasonable path for how to deal with Faulkner's ghost. My fictional character named Gordon Falkner is an effort – if a shallow one –to acknowledge the existence of the ghost. But my real homage to Faulkner, comes more from my own efforts to explore what he explored: the people, the time, the difficulty of understanding the past, the difficulty of escaping it, and "how a well told story can lead a a listener to see the world through several sets of eyes."

Chapter 47

Early to mid 1854

Eliza's grandfather, Adonijah Strong (1743-1813), served at Ticonderoga in 1775 and 1776, as a First Lieutenant of artillery.[112]

Amzi's grandfather, William Byers (1735-1799), an early settler in Augusta County, Virginia,[113] later moved to York County, South Carolina, became a delegate to the Provincial Congress, became a member of the state house in Charleston in 1775, and joined Major Andrew Williamson for South Carolina's Snow Campaign against British Loyalists.[114]

The Colonel's grandfather, James Brown (1738-1788), was a member of the North Carolina State militia who served under Colonels Lee and Washington at the Battle of Guilford Courthouse.[115]

The name of Hugh Pike arises from somewhere between fiction and fact. The last name is taken from an ad in the *Panola Star* of September 3, 1856, placed by one "I. H. Pike," "wholesale agent for the whole south." The ad states, "Orders sent to Bynum's Creek will be promptly attended to," from which I infer that this I. H. Pike, the wholesale agent, lived on or near Bynum's Creek. There is a J.M. Pike shown living in Panola County in the 1845 Mississippi Census,[116] but I was unable to find any Pikes in the 1850 or 1860 Panola or Lafayette censuses. If memory serves, somewhere along the way I spent hours trying to learn more about this fellow who apparently lived close to the Byers plantation in the mid 1850's, to no avail. But being a "wholesale agent for the whole south" he might also have had business with Colonel

[112] Sons of the American Revolution membership application of U.S. Supreme Court Justice William Strong, (Adonijah's grandson, Eliza's cousin) accessed at search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?db=sarmemberapps&h=19494 &ti=0&indiv=try&gss=pt, and *Connecticut Men in the War of the Revolution, Connecticut Cincinnati Society*, in the Possession of Yale University, p. 376, accessed through Anestry.com., search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?db=recservconnmen-1889&h=384&ti=0&indiv=try&gss=pt

[113] Where he likely knew the Logans of that place – one of whom would marry his great granddaughter, Julia Loughborough Byers.

[114] Byers Family Genealogy Binder (Private Family Records); see also Find-A-Grave memorial created by Larry Chenault at http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=34066418&ref=acom

[115] Sons of the American Revolution membership application of the Colonel's nephew, Joseph Joshua Brown, https://www.ancestry.com/interactive/2204/32596_242339-00553/835404?backurl=https://www.ancestry.com/family-tree/person/tree/8412569/person/191629034/facts/citation/102794123079/edit/record

[116] Mississippi, State and Territorial Census Collection, Ancestry.com, 1845, Panola, p.6 of 8

Brown. I have no idea whether "I.H." Pike had the middle name "Hugh," and so my character, Hugh Pike, must be counted as fictional, I suppose – even if he, too, was a wholesale agent.

Chapter 48

1854 to March, 1856

Sand Springs Presbyterian Church is a wonderful old church.

It was indeed first founded as a union church in 1850, very close to the Byers place on Bynum's Creek; the Presbyterian congregation shared a building with Baptists and Methodists until 1854, when Colonel Brown donated land and the use of his slaves to help the Presbyterians build their own church at the present location. Now on the National Register of Historic Places, the church continues to hold services to this day. On the front wall of the church there are various historic records regarding its founding, including the September 19, 1850 petition of a group desiring to leave their church across the Yoknapatawpha River in Otuckaloffa. Apparently, whenever rain caused the river to rise, these people who lived north of the river couldn't get across it to attend a church to the south of it. These people comprised the bulk of the church's original membership. I very much enjoyed delving into the censuses and piecing together the family relationships; they had all come from Mecklinburg within a few years of each other, as had Angus Johnson, their preacher. The members of the congregation referred to in Alemeth – the Grays, Spears, Bob Nickle, and the rest – were all actual members of the original congregation.

For obvious reasons, I was curious about the reasons the Byers family joined the Otuckaloffa congregation in forming Sand Srpings. They had no ties or relations to the Otuckaloffa group that I was able to discover. Yet Amzi Byers was, in 1850, one of the founding members. The likeliest explanation for that is the chance to attend a church much closer to home. Amzi and Eliza had been attending church at College Hill Presbyterian as late as July of 1850, when they had Medora and Henry Walton baptized there. I estimate that, by horse-drawn wagon on dirt roads, it was two or three hours from the Byers plantation to College Hill Presbyterian. If anything in particular happened between July and September to cause them dissatisfaction with College Hill, I don't know what it was; it may be that they were simply waiting for an opportunity to worship closer to home, and the petition of the Otuckaloffa group presented that opportunity. But long, bumpy rides can spell trouble for women in a motherly way, and not many young boys want to spend five hours in a wagon to go to church on Sunday.

The 1854 donation of land by Colonel Brown is historical, as was his supplying slave labor for the construction. But from there on, my treatment of Sand Springs church is fictional. Whether there really were any conflicts with the Baptists or Methodists, I have no idea – or, to be more accurate, I have no direct evidence.

I do have an idea, though, and it is one that comes from a visit to my grandfather, Eliza Byers' grandson, William Loughborough Logan. Visiting him in Texas in the late 1970's, I expressed an interest in possibly buying a piece of property nearby. He and my grandmother were clearly delighted, and for the rest of the day repeated their insistence that, before leaving

town, I contact a good friend of theirs, one of only two realtors in town, and let him know of my interest. I'd need to be certain, of course, to let the realtor know that I was Will Logan's grandson, and that Will had referred me. My grandmother – an elder and school teacher in the local Presbyterian Church – must have told me five times how nice a fellow this realtor was, and how he'd do me right, before finally adding a caveat – "Now, he's a Methodist," my grandmother said, "but he's really a very nice man."

One final observation about Sand Springs Church: early in my research for *Alemeth*, I discovered I'd seen the name recorded both as "Sand Spring" and "Sand Springs." I was going back and forth as to whether the name was singular or plural, changing it, until I was fortunate pleased to discover a photograph of the church. My Aunt Mary Anna Rogers and her friend Frances Maginnis had visited the church some years past, and had taken their photograph out front: there in the photograph, I could see the name of the church spelled out in large, black letters, as clear as day: Sand *Spring* Presbyterian Church, singular. Knowing that photographs don't lie, I changed all my references to Sand *Spring.* A couple of years later, on my second trip to Panola County, when my brother David and I met the current elders, Tommy and Barbara Webb, I was amazed to learn the truth: yes, the photograph was accurate. The big black letters on the church *had* said Sand Spring. But if I cared to look up, I could see for myself that the letters were no longer there. They'd been painted over, because they were *wrong*. As all the early paperwork made clear, the name of the church was, and had always been Sand *Springs* Presbyterian Church.

It was a fitting experience for the research behind *Alemeth*; even photographs don't always tell the truth.

Chapter 49

April-June, 1856

Information about *The Panola Star* comes largely from the copies of the paper on microfiche at Ole Miss, supplemented by information from the Census and the wonderful Library of Congress database at http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/search/titles/ which I consulted repeatedly in 2011-2013. I've often said that I could never have become interested in genealogy before the days of the internet, but in the information age, the speed of discovery brings with it the speed of finding out you're wrong. When I put together my files on the old newspapers, the Library of Congress didn't yet post copies of its papers to view on line. I based my understanding of the facts on my actual review of the newspapers on microfiche, but now, thanks to the internet, I see that my information was not quite accurate.

Ballard and Ward were indeed actual people who jointly ran this newspaper, as asserted in *Alemeth.* I based this conclusion on my review of the actual masthead of the issue of May 10, 1856, which refers to "Ward and Ballard, Proprietors," a fact I recorded in my (old fashioned?) handwritten notes.[117]

[117] I noticed at the time that the Library of Congress datasheet on the newspaper referred to the publishers as "Ward and May," but I chose to base my conclusion on the paper's masthead that I'd seen with my own two eyes. After all, deserved or not,

It seemed rather logical to me that a magistrate judge (B.S. Ballard) might have engaged with a lawyer (M.S.Ward) to publish a paper together, the census listing their (primary) legal occupations rather than their status as proprietors of a newspaper, but the newspaper listing them as co-proprietors. By this time, people were hounding me about when I was going to finish the novel. Unable to trace the entire life stories of Ballard and Ward, a devilish little voice in my head kept saying, "It's fiction you're writing, you don't need to be 100% certain." So I eventually decided to go with Ballard and Ward, the magistrate judge and the lawyer, as I'd come to believe them to be.

In the meantime, reviewing the microfiched newspapers, I had recorded in my notes that later in 1856, Ballard's name was no longer on the masthead. The idea that Ballard and Ward had separated from each other left me wondering whether they'd had some sort of falling out. (It may not be hard to imagine two lawyers getting into an argument.) The novel was already on its way to becoming one about clashing points of view, argument, and division, so I started to write descriptions of a hypothetical argument between Ballard and Ward to account for Ballard's departure. Basing it on one of the several court decisions in the Dred Scott case seemed natural enough, considering that slavery was the most divisive issue in the land at that time. Having been unsuccessful in finding first names for either Ballard or Ward, I settled on "Barton" and "Martin" because, enamored of the pugilistic connotations of the men's last names *(Ballard* "to throw," *Ward* "to protect"), I thought these first names would add to the effect. And so, in *Alemeth,* magistrate judge Barton Ballard came to argue with fellow lawyer Martin Ward over Dred Scott; this led to Ballard's leaving the paper, and to Alemeth's getting canned.

Only after Alemeth was published did I become aware of some errors in my effort to reconstruct the facts.[118] But what would life be like, if no one ever erred, and if everyone always saw things precisely the same way?

"my own two eyes" have long had a reputation for reliability. The masthead further referred to "M.S. Ward" as editor – a name I assumed to be the same Ward who was listed as proprietor – but I couldn't find a first name for either him or Mr. Ballard, so I began searching the U.S. Census to learn what I could about them. I found M.S. Ward in the 1850 Census identified as a 28 year old lawyer from Virginia. I found him again in the 1860 Census as a 37 yr old lawyer from Virginia, this time living with 22 year old John W. Ward, "Editor" (a rare occupation in a census full of farmers) from Indiana. (1850 Panola Census, District 13, p 115, resident in the house of a doctor and living next door to Asa Love's hotel – presumably, therefore, in the town of Panola itself. See also 1860 Panola Census, pg 5.) I also found M.S. Ward on the tax rolls in 1865, still in Panola, paying tax on a gold watch (IRS Tax assessment lists, Mississippi District 3, Lists 1865-1866, image 25 of 261) again at image 37 of 261 (listed as a lawyer) and again in 1866, still in Panola, listed as a lawyer (image 168 of 261). Since I thought John W. Ward was rather young (18 years old) to be editing a newspaper in 1856, I concluded that M.S. Ward likely began the paper in 1856, but by 1860, might have turned the editorial duties over to John F. Ward (a possible relation), or, simply, that John F. Ward was a young nephew or acquaintance who took up an editorial interest from the elder editor. The fact that I found no other "M.S. Ward" in the census, and the apparent "coincidence" that this M.S. Ward was living with someone else later identified as an editor left me satisfied I'd found the right Ward and that I ought to portray the editor as a lawyer as well.

I then set out to learn about co-proprietor Ballard. Here, the picture seemed less clear. I was able to find a J.E. Ballard who, in 1860, was age 25, living next door to Hulihan's Hotel in the town of Panola, and giving his occupation as "printer." Once again, the unusual occupation in a census full of farmers caught my eye and suggested I was on the right track, but if J.E. Ballard had been only 21 in 1856, I was skeptical he'd become the proprietor of a newspaper by that year. Meanwhile, however, I also saw that J.E. Ballard was the son of the town's Magistrate, B.S. Ballard (1860 U.S. Census, Panola County, MS, Family #10). . So I began considering a possible father-son arrangement, the elder Ballard, age 49, being a co-proprietor of a paper as a sideline to his work as Magistrate, with the younger Ballard as an apprentice typesetter who went on to consider himself a "printer" by the time of the 1860 census.

[118]The Library of Congress website now offers copies of newspapers on line. They also added some new explanatory material. From that material, I was able to see that my selection of "Martin" was a bad guess; Mr. Ward's first name was not Martin but

Of course, the idea that Alemeth went to work for *The Star* (and, later, *The Intelligencer*) at all are among the biggest stretches in all of *Alemeth*. It's nothing more than a plausible possibility. But weaving actual newspaper clippings into the story seemed a powerful way of making the story as true to the times as possible, and to weave all those news clippings into the story struck me as awkward absent some plot device to make them seem more natural. So Alemeth's interest in the newspaper business – plausible as it may have been – was a decision made for the sake of the story, and only in a round-about way designed to adhere to historical truth.

The name Jim Horton is used with the permission of my offset printing instructor at the John C. Campbell Folk School.[119] Just as I'd decided I'd have to chew a little tobacco if I were going to portray Alemeth's first taste of the weed, I decided I'd better learn something about traditional offset printing if I was going to portray Alemeth going to work in the newspaper business. I was fortunate to have Jim Horton as my teacher. Jim is one of those special people who's spent much of his life trying to keep alive the old ways of printing. The week I spent with Jim was a great deal of fun – and a lot more pleasant than the week I spent trying to dispel the taste of chewing tobacco.

Chapter 50

July 4th, 1856

Panola's celebration of Independence Day in 1856 was announced in *The Star* on July 2nd. The paper informed its readers that there would be fireworks at Courthouse Square on the 4th; afterward, music and dancing at the Planter's Hotel. It seems reasonable to assume that Alemeth, now twenty years old, might have attended. And with The Star Spangled Banner not yet designated as the national anthem, Samuel Smith's "America" ("My Country, Tis of Thee") would surely have been part of the festivities. I'd sung the song my whole life, but not until writing this chapter was I struck by the irony of the words. Smith wrote the lyrics in 1831, intentionally stealing the melody of "God Save the Queen," converting the patriotic British song into a patriotic American one. It had only been sixteen years since the end of the War of 1812 – sixteen years since England gave up trying to make America her colony again. So to steal the Queen's melody makes sense, in a 'smack-talk" kind of way. I find it very telling of the spirit of the times that to celebrate America's success in casting off Monarchy, the lyrics celebrate "Freedom's holy light" by praising God as the "author of Liberty" and proclaiming *him* King.

Matthew. A more leisurely and complete review of the newspapers on line also revealed that Ballard was dropped from the masthead between the issues of July 9 and July 16, which means that the timing I hypothesized is slightly off. (I had the argument occurring on page 157, that is after the August 20 letter from Long Creek (p. 151) and the September 11 McGuire pharmaceutical ad (p. 155). For the sake of history, I tried very hard to have the book be accurate down to the day and hour of every event; in this case, it seems, I slipped. A fuller review of the Star's masthead shows that Mr. May was listed in the first issue, but quickly replaced by Ballard; that in the June 21, 1856 issue, a new name (A.I. Hartley) is added as publisher. Two or three weeks after Hartley's addition to the masthead is when Ballard's name disappears. Alas, is it possible that Ballard's falling out was not with Ward, after all, but with Hartley? Well, *Alemeth*, the novel, was already printed. And what is the point of striving for perfect history anyway? Cf. Neal Gaiman's story, *The Mapmaker*, in *Fragile Things*, Harper Collins, 2006.

[119] It was nice, for a change, to be able to tip my hat by using the name of someone still alive, from whom I could actually receive permission. Jim is founder and President Emeritus of WEN, the Wood Engravers Network, whose website is at https://woodengravers.org/

This irony is not just related to Smith, Britain and this song – as I see it, it's part of the wider ironies running throughout the novel. Our indignation at being made slaves by those who would have us do what they want (rather than what we want), while we seek to influence others to act the way we think they should, to the point of involuntary servitude – while praising a God as "Lord" because He loves us but demands our loyalty and obedience – well, sometimes, it's really hard not to see irony in it all, as if all of us share a need to oppress and a need to submit. In the end, it is what it is, and is the binding theme I see in *Alemeth*.

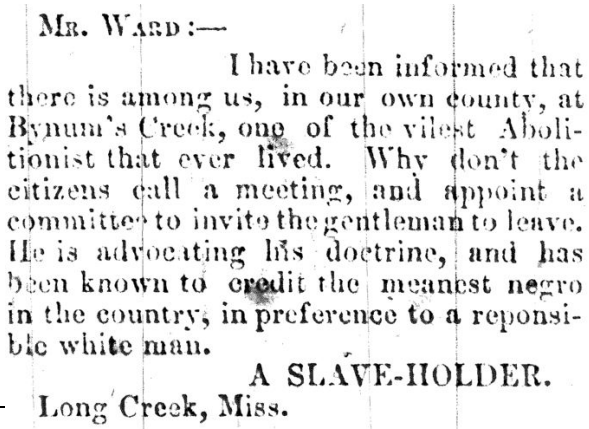
The fictional Gordon Falkner has a habit of appearing "as if out of nowhere" in *Alemeth*, a move consistent with his fictional origin which he shows off in this chapter. Of course, the beauty of a purely fictional character is that they're willing to do exactly what we want them to.

Chapter 51

Late July to Late August, 1856

The controversy surrounding the choice of a new University president is documented in various sources, as are Frederick Barnard's recent ordination to the Episcopal ministry, his former drinking problem, his deafness, and his affable personality, mentioned in Chapter 54.[120]

The letter from Long Creek, saying that "one of the vilest Abolitionist [sic] that ever lived" was "among us" at Bynum's Creek, appeared in the Panola Star on August 20, 1856. In various cases of transcribing actual newspaper articles and letters for *Alemeth*, I corrected misspellings and typographical errors, despite my desire to adhere to the truth as I found it, because the errors seemed to risk distracting a modern reader (or might even cause a reader to suppose they were my own typographical errors). But in this case, I had enjoyed speculating about the cause of the missing "s" at the end of the word "Abolitionist." Did it suggest that the letter's writer was as ignorant as he sounds? Or, even better, was the type being set by a young man of Bynum's Creek who was so shaken by an accusation so close to home that he made an uncharacteristic typesetting mistake? Either way, this error from the original cried out to be preserved, so I left it as it was.



MR. WARD:—

I have been informed that there is among us, in our own county, at Bynum's Creek, one of the vilest Abolitionist that ever lived. Why don't the citizens call a meeting, and appoint a committee to invite the gentleman to leave. He is advocating his doctrine, and has been known to credit the meanest negro in the country, in preference to a reponsible white man.

A SLAVE-HOLDER.

Long Creek, Miss.

[120] Among other sources, see Johnson, John W., *Biographical Sketches, supra,* pp 122-147; Barnard, Frederick, *Autobiographical Sketch of Dr. F. A. P Barnard,* Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society, Vol. 12, 1912, pp 107-121; Sansing, *supra, and* Doyle, *supra.*

In so doing, I'd come a long way from my original decision: my first thought was that I was going to use digital images of all the actual materials, as above. But these were sometimes very difficult to read. My next thought – which I spent many, many hours trying to effect – was to capture the column widths, font styles, and spacing so exactly as to preserve all line-breaks, hyphenated words, etc. This frustrating effort took an enormous amount of time, since the blanks and spacers used by the ante-bellum typesetters didn't work the same way as modern word processors. Still, I was successful, until preparing the entire novel for printing required some minor reformatting which caused every margin and line-break in the novel to came apart at the seams. I was not up for doing it all a second time, so while the wording (and even lettering) of the letter from Long Creek is historically accurate, my slavish adherence to line breaks and spacing fell victim, in this and similar instances, to the unrelenting advance of technology (yet another obstacle to the exact recreation of the past).

The letter about the Congressman, William Strong, occupies a different place within the fabric of fact and fiction. Eliza's cousin William was the eldest son of William Lightbourne Strong. Twelve years older than Eliza, it seems likely he was still living in the house when Eliza was first taken in as a toddler, so the two were likely acquainted, but their relationship was surely constrained by the significant difference in gender and age. William Strong had graduated from Yale in 1828 and had begun a rather successful career in the law. In 1846, he'd been elected to the U.S. House of Representatives as an abolitionist Democrat. He went on to become a justice of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court in 1857, switching to the Republican Party soon after his appointment to the bench. He became that Court's Chief Justice, and finally, a justice of the United States Supreme Court in 1872, when William Seward died before taking the oath of office and Ulysses Grant appointed Strong in his stead.[121]

Illustrating again how the past slips through our fingers, I'd be willing to swear that I saw an actual Pennsylvania newspaper article from 1856 referring to William Strong as "one of our more outspoken abolitionist Congressman" (which, by all accounts, he was). The quotation made it into the novel, but the source of the citation did not, and I now don't seem able to find it. It may be one of those instances when a fact, once imagined and revisited, becomes as real in the mind as things actually seen and remembered. All evidence I've seen from the field of psychology suggests that memory works precisely the same, either way, treating fact and fiction the same.

Unlike the Pennsylvania newspaper article, the idea that the same anonymous letter-writer from Long Creek sent a note to the Organizer about the famous Pennsylvania abolitionist being related to Eliza Strong seems entirely plausible, but is entirely without direct evidence to support it.

---

[121] One of the more complete biographies I've seen of William Strong is at http://www.historycentral.com/Bio/rec/WilliamStrong.html. Strong was a very religious man who retired from the U.S. Supreme Court to pursue religious causes. Though he did not favor the establishment of any particular church, he strongly favored a constitutional amendment declaring the United States a Christian nation.

In contrast, among the many ways I tried to make the novel historically accurate was my attention to all the reports I could find regarding the weather. On page 154, the statement that there'd been no rain since the middle of June is based on (a) a report in the Panola Star of May 3rd regarding recent heavy rains and prospects for a bountiful cotton crop, (b) a report from August 13th asserting that a long drought had damaged the crop, and (c) a report from September 3rd that it had been so dry the dust was six inches deep in the streets.

The M. J. McGuire advertisement at page 155 was taken from the OXFORD SIGNAL of September 11, 1856. It was simply too delicious to omit, as a reminder of how even bedrocks of scientific knowledge can change so rapidly. If there was dust in the air, there were people with coughs and irritations. If there were people with coughs and irritations, there were customers walking into drug stores seeking something to comfort them. For a people so convinced of the righteousness of slavery, one might imagine the hand of Providence putting white lead and window glass on the shelves of drug stores, but then, I know of no hard evidence to support such a theory.

Chapter 52

September/October, 1856

Fiction, except that Amzi Byers surely must have resented visits from government officials coming to his house to meddle in his relationships with *his* negroes.

Chapter 53

October, 1856

As mentioned in the discussion of Chapter 49 above, any argument that may have occurred between Ballard and Ward that led to Ballard's disappearance from the masthead of *The Star* would have occurred in July, 1856, not October. But if such an argument did occur, it could well have been about the Dred Scott case.

This chapter's treatment of "one of Bill Starr's boys" calling Semmy Lou a "nigger lover" is entirely fictional (as is Bill Starr himself) but his description of Mississippi law as it related to Eliza's Sunday school teaching is as accurate as I can get it.

The law in question was actually changed in the revised Code of 1857 to specify that the penalty for violation would not be 39 lashes administered by the sheriff on the spot, but only after a trial and conviction. Otherwise, apart from a few minor changes of wording and punctuation, the 1839 law remained in effect. It read as follows (I've added the italics to highlight key language):

Revised Mississippi Code (1839), Chapter XCII:

Sec. 88. *All meetings or assemblies of slaves* or free negroes or mulattoes, mixing and associating with such slaves, *above the number of five... for teaching them reading or writing,* either in the day or night, under whatsoever pretext, *shall be deemed and considered an unlawful*

assembly, and any justice of the peace of the county ... may issue his warrant, directed to any sworn officer or officers, authorizing him or them to enter the house or houses where such unlawful assemblages or meetings may be, for the purpose of apprehending or dispersing such slaves, free negroes or mulattoes, and to inflict corporal punishment on the offender or offenders, at the discretion of any such justice of the peace, not exceeding thirty-nine lashes, in the manner hereinafter directed.

Sec. 89.... *Provided, That nothing herein contained shall be so construed as to prevent the master, employer or overseer of any slave or slaves, from giving permission in writing to his, her or their slave or slaves to go to any place or places whatever, for the purpose of religious worship: Provided, That such worship be* conducted by a regularly ordained or licensed white minister, *or attended by at least two discreet and reputable white persons, appointed by some regular church, or religious society.*

As mentioned earlier, Don Doyle says in *Faulkner's County* (p. 145) that "literacy [was] officially prohibited" among the slaves. Doyle gives no citation for the assertion and doesn't relate it to a particular date. My review of the Mississippi Statutes of 1839 reveals no statewide prohibition against slave literacy. The closest I've found to such a prohibition is the section of the Slave Code reprinted above, declaring that meetings of *more than five* negroes for the purpose of teaching them reading or writing would be considered an unlawful assembly. From this, it appears it *was* lawful, in Mississippi, to teach slaves to read and write in groups of five or less. Furthermore, as described in chapter 53 of *Alemeth*, there was an exception made to the general "unlawful assembly" provision, specifically permitting a slave master to allow larger meetings for the purpose of religious "worship," on the further condition that such meetings be attended by two or more responsible white persons "appointed by some regular church." Reading that language liberally, if the meeting was authorized by a master for the purpose of "worship," the *proviso* would have removed it entirely from the unlawful assembly prohibition, including the limitation to five slaves and the prohibition against the teaching of reading and writing. And if it wasn't an unlawful assembly, there would have been no direct prohibition against (incidentally) teaching the attendees to read and write.

But obviously, the language was subject to interpretation. While *Alemeth*'s Sheriff Starr seems to assume that Amzi, an elder and founding member of Sand Springs church, had "appointed" Eliza and Alemeth as two discreet and responsible white people to attend the worship services, he neglects to remind Amzi that all the attendees must have written permission from their masters to attend. The bottom line is that, through and through, the law was subject to interpretation. The only thing that's clear is that, in case of a violation, it wouldn't be Amzi or Eliza who was lashed, but the slaves in attendance.

Chapter 54

November 1856

One thing I learned writing *Alemeth* is that, for me at least, the call of history is as enthralling as any Siren – if time away from actual writing is any measure. Every aspect of history called out to be understood, for fear that I might not understand my characters if I didn't understand the

things that occupied their minds. Were it not for Neil Gaiman's story of the Map Maker, I might not have found it possible to forego including everything I found. Even so, passing the year 1856 without mention of the U.S. presidential election took all the self-discipline I could muster.

Alemeth's sister, Mary Jane Byers, married William McKie on December 11, 1856. I can only assume that the marriage was announced beforehand, and that if these people were anything like my southern grandparents, the announcement was made on a social occasion such as the one mentioned here. But the primary focus of this chapter – Barnard's efforts to test whether the parrots were capable of carrying on intelligent conversation – while fictional, is meant to (accurately) portray his scientific curiosity and contrast it with those who'd base their opinions on pre-existing notions about the intellectual superiority of (white) mankind.

Chapter 55

Autumn, 1856

The Latin of Pliny the Elder with which this chapter begins is translated by Barnard at chapter's end: "The more I study nature, the more I consider nothing beyond belief."

The puzzlement of the academics as they try to understand the parrots has a lot to do with why I found John Strong's parrots fascinating from the outset. One of the reasons I couldn't escape is the obvious cliché reflected by the verb "to parrot" meaning to copy what someone else thinks or says, and Barnard's interest in investigating whether that's what the parrots are doing is similar to my own tendency to ask a similar question about what people (myself included) think and say. A second reason is that, for me, the birds' captivating colors and intriguing voices (that may or may not convey meaningful ideas) suggest the attraction of Sirens. But for me, the parrots' primary significance is more than either of those things. For me, they epitomized the exotic and unfamiliar. Our tendency to accept the familiar as true without question, while treating the unfamiliar as suspect, is well established in both history and psychology. Some psychologists call it the "difference-equals-deficit" error. (If it's not like us, it must not be as good.) The phenomenon is the same whether applied to Africans, native Americans, parrots or those uncouth Baptists whose ministers don't even have theology degrees. *(How can they understand God without one?)* So Barnard's efforts to determine whether parrots are simply repeating sounds without understanding anything of meaning, or are exhibiting an intelligence equal (or even superior?) to human beings, is a question that could be asked of any of us.

Pliny wrote about parrots, women with two pupils in one eye, Aethiopians twelve feet tall, and races with the heads and tails of dogs, in Book VII of his *Natural History*. The spirit of the 19th century, so infused with new scientific discoveries, seemed to prime people – everyone from Barnard to Sam Humphrey – for accepting just about anything.

Captain Edward C. Boynton had become the University's professor of Chemistry on January 12, 1856.[122] His photograph appears at page 31 of Stephen Enzweiler's *Oxford in the Civil War*. He was an avid photographer who took many photographs of the University of Mississippi in its early days.[123] He was also a military man, a graduate of West Point who'd fought in the Mexican War and who, according to Frederick Barnard, preferred being called "Captain" to being called "Professor." Reverend Waddell didn't appear to care for him, disapproving of how much he swore and what Waddell perceived as his general unseemliness.[124]

The depth of his views on slavery would become evident soon enough.

Chapter 56

Early December, 1856

To the extent it purports to describe a specific lecture at the invitation of Colonel Brown, this chapter is pure speculation, but to the extent it reflect Barnard's interest in lenses, his great desire to make the University a cutting edge institution by acquiring the best of them, and his solicitation of funds to finance that effort, it is supported by strong evidence.[125]

Chapter 57

December, 1856

In this Chapter, Alemeth misunderstands what Eliza was saying to Ike about the end of slavery. Amzi, in turn, misunderstands Alemeth's account of it. Alemeth misunderstands Eliza's later explanation, and Eliza misunderstands Alemeth's questions as a new interest in Scripture. I hope it requires no citation of authority to suggest the plausibility of people misunderstanding each other. In fact, it may be the most factual and persistently omnipresent thing in the novel.

Chapter 58-59

December 24, 1856

This chapter, including the idea that the Colonel had given Alemeth a Curtis pocket watch,[126] is all fictional, except that this Christmas eve sermon is very nearly verbatim the Thanksgiving Sermon delivered in the First Presbyterian Church at New Orleans on November 29, 1860, by the Reverend B. M. Palmer, D. D., which Howard Falconer saw fit to reprint in the Dec 12 1860 number of the *Oxford Intelligencer*. I have made only minor stylistic changes, some omissions intended to shorten it, and the addition of three sentences at the end. (Those at page 173

[122] Sansing, *supra*, p.68, says he was appointed in 1855…
[123] See Sansing, *supra*, p. 359.
[124] Waddell, *supra,* pp 306-307.
[125] Sansing, pp. 79-94; Mayes, Edward, *History of Education in Mississippi*, Govt Printing Office, Wash., 1899, pp.146-150
[126] The American Horologe Company had introduced the Samuel Curtis model pocket watch in 1852

beginning with "Paul advised the Corinthians…" which I added in order to tie the sermon to the historical fact that the Presbyterian Church was, itself, about to split in two.) So while it's a bit out of place here chronologically, not a word of it is my own apart from those three sentences, and it seems entirely historical and relevant in substance.

As far as I can tell, Howard Falconer's decision to reprint the full sermon in *The Intelligencer* shows the newspaperman felt the Reverend's thinking would resonate with his readers. As far as I know, this was the only sermon Reverend Stewart ever gave, or ever will. (I did not want to put the Reverend Palmer's words into the mouth of any real preacher, at Sand Springs church or elsewhere, so "the Reverend Stewart, guest preacher from Pontotoc," was invented for the occasion.) Palmer, one assumes, gave many sermons along similar lines, and from my research, it didn't seem most people in the community saw his views as anything but an excellent statement of principle on the slavery issue – especially the main point that service to slavery was service to the word of God.

"The past is disclosed," proclaimed *The Star* on Christmas Eve, 1856; "the future concealed in doubt." The newspapermen in *Alemeth* probably never tried their hands at history, or they may not have been so convinced that the past is disclosed. But one can argue that it's possible to learn *something* from history, and I take *The Star's* assertion that human nature is heedless of it as (pretty much) plain fact.

Chapter 60

December 25, 1856, to January 1, 1857

In my classical education, I was exposed to ancient historians like Herodotus, Thucydides, and Tacitus. So it came as a surprise to me – due, no doubt, to my lack of university-level training in history – that "history" as a field of academic study was not recognized by universities until very late in the day. I noticed in the Catalogue of the University of Mississippi that the school's first history course was not offered until the 1858-59 school year, when Professor Richardson taught a class in Roman History that recommended, among other readings, Smith's Expurgated Gibbon. An earlier draft of this chapter had Captain Boynton or Professor Richardson (I forget which) complaining to Barnard that the University didn't have a History Department, while pointing to the fact that Oxford University, in England, had just instituted one. The concept that history was not a recognized field of study struck me as mildly disturbing. But it was the Catalogue's reference to Richardson's recommendation of Smith's *Expurgated* Gibbon, specifically, that most caught my attention.[127] Why did a professor explicitly recommend an *expurgated* edition? Research led to the discovery that the lexicographer William Smith had produced a Bowdlerized edition of *Gibbon's Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire, removing passages which were critical of the church.* I had by that time so committed myself to getting my history of the Byers family right – leaving out no blemishes, no matter how severe I

[127] See *Historical Catalogue, supra,* p. 49.

might find them – that the idea of a man who was a scholar of history, who may have been responsible for convincing the University to create a curriculum of history, would seek to remove unpleasant aspects of something like Gibbon's work the way Thomas Bowdler had remove parts of Shakespeare, was simply astounding. Richardson's teaching from an expurgated Gibbon became one of those Sirens of an idea that kept on singing until the book went to print, and it continues to resound in my ear.

In this chapter, the parrots "enthrall" a crowd, just as in Chapter 43, the Gayoso hotel had "enthralled" Alemeth's traveling companions. In Chapters 82 and 87, Sally Fox will "enthrall" Alemeth with her smile. Sirens, all. Captivating. Enthralling. Subjugating.

As for the idea that Alemeth fell for Mary Ann Webster, as hinted at here, I've found no real evidence that he was interested in her, but then, in the absence of any information about Alemeth's romantic interests, it seems inevitable that, consciously or not, I would start to fill in the gaps with my own sentiments. I'd first seen a copy of Mary Ann Webster's book, *A Cave Life in Vicksburg*, at my grandmother's house, decades before it appeared on the internet. It was the first book – nay, the *only* book – I'd ever seen written by any of my family, and as I was interested in writing, I was naturally interested in Mary Ann Webster. I suppose it was easy, as a result, to imagine that Alemeth felt about Mary Ann Webster the way I did. Of course, there's a difference between expurgating history and amplifying fiction. (Isn't there?)

Mary Ann's photo on page 178 is copied from an original in our Byers family genealogy binder.

Chapter 61

January 1, 1857

From Alemeth's later letters home, it seems clear that the slave child Gilbert belonged to him when the letters were written, rather than to Amzi. That fact raises the question of when and how Alemeth took ownership. In Mississippi, one's twenty-first birthday was when one became a full adult in one's own right, no longer subject to the virtually unlimited authority of one's father. In the law, the age of twenty-one is called the "age of emancipation," because it extinguishes the previous subordinate state and creates a free one in its stead, with the freedom to bind oneself through contract, the freedom to own property, the freedom to make a will, etc. It's the day, legally speaking, that a boy becomes a man. It seemed the most likely time Amzi would have made such a gift to him as his own slave, and I liked the idea that on Alemeth's own emancipation day, he would get responsibility not only for his own life, but for that of another. It seems to me to strike at the heart of what real freedom is all about.

Chapters 62-64

February to June, 1857

The Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision came down on March 6, 1857. One assumes that, with telegraph lines laid across much of the country, news of the much-awaited decision traveled

fast. But I'm not certain Oxford had its telegraph lines up yet, so it may have taken a little while to reach Bynum's Creek. That said, when news did arrive, indications are that nearly everyone was talking about it.

Frederick Barnard, it seems, was a peace-maker. Student and Ole Miss faculty member John Wesley Johnson wrote that he "would often throw down in disgust a newspaper teeming (as nearly all did at that time) with ex parte statements, special pleas and senseless vaporings, and say with a sigh: 'Oh, dear me, if people would only behave themselves."[128] So I imagine his reaction to *Dred Scott* decision was to see it as the final settlement of an argument, an occasion to push, again, for peace in the hope that people could return to the pursuit of science and learning. Alemeth, for one, could have seen things the way Barnard saw them – accepting the Court's decision as the law of the land much the same way he had accepted Gilbert, while at the same time being enamored enough of Barnard as to see an alternative to life on his father's plantation, subject to his father's authority.

But as it happens, few others saw the Court's decision as an occasion to accept things the way the Court had left them. Once the *Scott* decision came down – essentially holding that the federal government was powerless to end slavery – many northern abolitionists felt the time for talk and negotiation was over. The division between north and south deepened, and a gravitational pull toward separation and war grew exponentially.

Largely in reaction to the *Scott* decision, on the 29th of May the "New School" Presbyterian churches, meeting in Cleveland, voted to condemn slavery; before a year had passed, the southern "New School" churches had formed the pro-slavery United Synod of the South. In June 1857, former Congressman Jacob Thompson gathered local Democrat leaders in Oxford (including Colonel James Brown) at his house, to decide what to do about the worsening outlook for pro-slavery interests; the men decided to nominate the fiery orator Lucius Lamar for Congress in Mississippi's 1st Congressional District. [129]

I have no reason to believe that Alemeth ever applied to the University of Mississippi. But from his letters home, he appears to have been intelligent; his "uncle" James Brown was a Trustee. He surely *had* to have considered the possibility. So he either had no interest and rejected the possibility outright; or he attended, and the University's records failed to notice his attendance at classes; or he applied for admission and was rejected. Given his apparent intelligence, his social status, and his connections, it wouldn't seem likely that he was rejected, but for one detail: as it happens, it was at precisely this time that, as a part of President Barnard's efforts to turn the University into a first class (and therefore demanding) institution, the admissions requirements were increased. For the first time, entering students were required to have studied Vergil's *Georgics* and three books of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.[130] I couldn't imagine the pro-education trio of Colonel, Mrs. Brown and Eliza letting Alemeth not apply, nor could I

[128] Johnson, John W., *Biographical Sketches Of Judge A. B. Longstreet and Dr. F. A. P. Barnard*, Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society, Vol. 12, 1912, pp 143-147. I put such words into his mouth on page 164 of *Alemeth*, and otherwise based my portral of Barnard in significant part on Johnson's sketch..
[129] Enzweiler, Stephen *Oxford in the Civil War*, The History Press, 2010, p. 17-18.
[130] *Historical Catalogue, supra,* p. 28

imagine his attendance had fallen through the cracks of Ole Miss recordkeeping. When I noticed the increase in attendance requirements, just at the time he might have been applying, his rejection on that ground seemed the most plausible possibility.

That said, both the May 26 letter from Mary Ann Webster (p. 184) and the June 10 letter from President Barnard (p. 186) are outright forgeries.

Chapters 65-66

Mid-June to August, 1857

Mary Ann Webster was married to James Loughborough on October 11, 1857, so it seems an announcement around the first of August would have made sense.

The name Loughborough had intrigued me since I was a young child who learned that it was my dear grandfather's middle name. When I asked him about it, he made some vague reference to a man he'd never known, as if he assumed I'd care little about it. At the time, he was probably right. It would be another fifty years before I understood the story behind the Loughborough name, and it all started with Mary Ann Webster's decision to marry the man.

I really do believe that Alemeth may have had some interest in Mary Ann Webster; still, her letter on page 188 is another fake.

Chapter 67

Autumn, 1857

I'd already discovered (from Don Doyle) that Lafayette was William Faulkner's County when I made my first trip there and found Howard Falconer working in the editorial offices of the *Oxford Intelligencer*. Somewhere in the struggle to deal with Faulkner's ghost, I realized that Falconer and Faulkner were the same name, and so was Falkner, which was the spelling used by Faulkner's grandfather, a well-known figure in northern Mississippi at the time. At some point in my struggle to deal with Faulkner's ghost, I focused on the fact that while Faulkner had championed fiction, Falconer was a newspaperman who aspired (or at least claimed, in his editorials) to pursue truth through the objective reporting of facts. I sensed that Faulkner and Falkner were like fraternal twins, images of each other aligned along different axes. And instead of having William Faulkner magically appear back in the ante-bellum south, and instead of making his grandfather a character in my novel like all the other historical characters in it, it might be better to have the spirit of Faulkner represented by a fictional, fiction-writing Falkner, who would be like a fraternal (*not* identical) twin to the factual, journalizing Falconer. The two would present strands of fact and fiction that wound around each other like DNA.[131] Since they had to have such similar names without actually being related, the story of their

[131] My grandfather's brothers were named Howard and Gordon, and that no doubt is why, in *Alemeth*, Howard's "brother" had to be named Gordon. The name also reminded me a bit of a Gordian knot.

meeting by being assigned seats alphabetically seemed an appropriate explanation and an opportunity to play with Faulkner's name – without ever mentioning him.

And so it was that, like Clio and Calliope, Howard Falconer and Gordon Falkner became champions for fact and fiction, respectively. Their conversations (in this chapter and elsehwhere) get as close as anything to an explicit discussion of the novel's theme.

Aawwwk.

Chapter 68

Autumn, 1857

Strange ideas, indeed. I'd already written much about union and separation[132] when I learned that the mid-nineteenth century also witnessed debate on the so-called *Homeric* question – whether Homer was a single genius, as held by the Homeric "Unitarians," or several people, as held by the Homeric "separatists," who said that multiple authors had contributed to the Iliad and the Odyssey. It was rather like the debate going on at the same time regarding God and the Darwinian evolutionists, or like the debates of the Council of Nicea over whether God was one or three. What seems strange to one person seems quite plausible, even probable, to another.

So, into this University of ideas comes Ole Miss student Sam Humphrey. What Sam says about the three skulls is based on something I was told by a man I once worked for (in 1971) who insisted that the skeleton of a black man is visibly, obviously, half way between that of a white man and an ape. This man told me he knew it to be true, because he had seen pictures of the three skeletal types in science text books. I did my best to challenge him, but he was older, he was my boss, and most importantly of all, he'd seen the pictures himself, in science books.

It wasn't until some years later that I considered this man's background. He was from Tennessee. Guessing from his age, I suspect he'd been born there in the 1920's. The infamous Scopes monkey trial had been set in motion by a 1925 law – the "Butler Act" – by which the Tennessee legislature had forbidden the teaching of evolution. The Tennessee Supreme Court upheld the Butler Act, and it remained the law in Tennessee until 1967. So this man's entire life had been spent, not only in a culture that outlawed the teaching of evolution, but whose school books, apparently, showed skeletons which "proved" that a black man was as close to an ape as to a white man.

[132] The separation of orphans, the unions of marriage and adoption, union churches and church schisms, the "separatists" who'd left the Church of England after the church of England had left the church of Rome, the casting off of monarchy and the embracing of the Lord, secession from the Union and establishment of a new confederacy, obedience and freedom, family and independence, are all examples. As far as the binding theme of Alemeth goes, note the etymological connection between the word "union" itself and the concepts of dominance and submission. The fundamental concept has its origins in Indo-European, spawning a host of related words typified by Sanskrit yoga ("union"), Greek *zugon* ("yoke") and Latin *iugum* (also "yoke"). The action of yoking a pair of oxen to a cart is an act of joinder, or union, and our very word "join" derives from it, as do junction, conjunction, subjunctive, zygote and zeugma. "Subjugate" means to put something under the yoke, to join something to oneself, in the position of slave to master. All forms of joinder have that element of submission or loss of freedom, whether it be in the form of a yoke on the neck, shackles on the feet, wedding ring on the finger, or signature on the employment contract – the union binds you to the interests and will of another, and you thereby forfeit some of your own autonomy. Accepting an idea to the point of taking it as beyond dispute is another example of submission through joinder.

Strange ideas take even greater hold when young children get the same message from their schools, their churches, their parents, and their neighbors. It's easy for us, today, to dismiss past nonsense as reflecting the ignorance of the place or the times. But Jean Louis Agassiz (1807 – 1873) had received a Doctor of Philosophy and medical degree, had been a professor of natural history in Europe, became a professor of zoology and geology at Harvard, and was made the head of Harvard's Lawrence Scientific School. According to Wikipedia, "he made vast institutional and scientific contributions to zoology, geology, and related areas." He was one of the world's best known scientists; Longfellow even wrote a poem in tribute to him. Yet, as Chapter 68 observes, he taught that God created the races of man separate and apart, just as he'd created difference classes of fish, and birds, and dogs.

Strange ideas are not limited to the poor, the provincial, or the uneducated. Quite often, some of the strangest of all have become even more powerful by virtue of having been written down in books by universities, departments of education, and (I must acknowledge) occasionally people like me.

Chapter 69

March, 1859

This chapter begins with a reference to Mississippi's 1858 Slave Code, but apart from that reference, there is no part of the novel that takes place in the year 1858. Chapters 67 and 68, as I imagined them, took place in the autumn of 1857, but they contain no specific references to dates. Even so, 1858 was a year like any other, having fifty-two weeks, being divided into twelve months, and so on. It also had a number of developments relevant to the history of the times as reflected in *Alemeth*. Some of the hardest to neglect in the novel were the ongoing controversies at the University. In March of 1858, President Barnard published a letter to the Board of Trustees – a letter than ran 112 pages long and called for the University to become a *universitas scientiarum* – an institution designed not simply to cultivate the mind, but to "diffuse knowledge among men." It was an ambitious plan, and it would cost a lot of money. The letter was widely discussed, and produced a great deal of controversy. Captain Boynton and Professor Stearns supported the proposal. While many others criticized the proposed reforms on their face, rumors began to arise "questioning Barnard's soundness on slavery and states rights." Local physician Henry Branham accused Barnard of being a free-soiler, if not an outright abolitionist, and he was joined by not only J.D. Stevenson of the Oxford Mercury, but Latin Professor Wilson Richardson.[133]

Controversies in Oxford were mirrored by those in the north. In August through October of 1858, the Lincoln-Douglas debates in Illinois became a media fest, making Lincoln well-known nationally. But Mississippi wasn't particularly enamored of either of those men: neither Lincoln, who was against the expansion of slavery, nor Douglas, who was for state-by-state popular

[133] Sansing, *supra*, pp 85-88.

choice. Seeing nothing to suggest that Alemeth might have traveled to Illinois to witness those debates, I ignored not only them, but the entire year in which they occurred. My only defense for the omission of 1858 is that dramatic pacing, for story purposes, seemed to warrant speeding up the events leading to war.

Surely, the omission of a year doesn't disqualify *Alemeth* as history.

That Uncle Johnson received a subpoena in the case of *The State of Mississippi vs. George Washington Oliver* is yet another bold-faced lie. As far as I know, he had nothing to do with the case. But it was a real legal case; that much is sure. Don Doyle called it "notorious."[134] And the Census shows the defendant, Oliver, living in Paris, Mississippi, not far from Bynum's Creek. As planters with a large number of slaves living close to each other, Oliver and the Byers' brothers, Amzi and Johnson, were surely acquainted.

According to the final decision of the Mississippi Supreme Court, the killing for which Oliver was tried occurred on the morning of March 14th, 1859, when the "violent, turbulent, and rebellious slave" John refused to give up a corn punch. The court described the punch as "a stick, about five feet long, about two and a-half inches in diameter at the large end, and gradually tapered to the other." According to the Court's version of the facts, Oliver first told his slave to give up the punch, "in a quiet and unexcited tone," but in mere moments, there was a struggle between the men over physical possession of the punch in which "[t]he countenance of the deceased at the time had a very vicious and savage look." It seems the outcome was never in doubt. "Very soon the accused succeeded in wresting the stick from the hands of deceased, and he immediately struck deceased with the same on the head, and deceased fell and almost immediately expired."[135]

One might think, from the outcome of the struggle, that Oliver was the more powerful of the two men, since the "violent, turbulent and rebellious" slave began with possession of the punch, and in short order, thirty-eight year old Oliver was able to wrest it from him and kill him by a single blow of the stick to the head. But the Court tells us otherwise, saying it was proved that John (the slave) "was a very stout and strong man, and the accused a weak and feeble man."[136] (The Court didn't seem concerned about how it was, then, that the frail man prevailed.)

In his account of the testimony, Don Doyle refers to the version of events attributed to the overseer, Bramwell, to the effect that Oliver told John to work faster and John didn't. Although it isn't entirely clear from the higher Court's opinion, it sounds to me as if Bramwell may have as much initially, but had a change of heart at some point between the day of the killing and his testimony in the trial court. He testified at trial that he wasn't present when the incident began, having left the corn crib for a few minutes; that upon his return, he heard Oliver instruct John to give up the stick and observed the struggle that resulted in the death by a single blow; but he seems to have said nothing about John working too slow to please Oliver, and even seems to

[134] The Oliver trial is described in Doyle, *supra*, at pp. 133-134. (See also footnote 26 at page 404.)
[135] *George W. Oliver v. The State*, 39 Mississippi Reports 526 (1860).
[136] George Washington Oliver is in the 1850 Census, Lafayette, not stated, p 113 of 199, as a "farmer," and in the 1860 Census, Lafayette, not stated, Family #1424, p. 220 of 240, as a "planter." According to the census, he was born in South Carolina in September, 1810.

have testified that while Oliver had struck at John twice more after the fatal blow, both those blows had missed the mark.[137] One possible inference, then, is that Bramwell, having seen first-hand what had happened to a man (John) who didn't please George Washington Oliver, changed his version of events by the time of the trial, having thought better about the wisdom of displeasing his erstwhile employer.

One can't know what really happened; one can't even know for sure what the testimony was, as even court reporters make mistakes. By the time a politically charged case gets to the State Supreme Court, we're always dealing with third-hand information at best. My effort to reconstruct excerpts of the trial testimony assumes that Bramwell stuck to his original story.[138] I tried to imagine testimony that would best serve to illustrate the argument Barr made on appeal – that the very right of a master to compel obedience necessitates the use of whatever force might prove necessary. But in this case, I wonder if the other version – in which Bramwell changes his testimony – may actually be the more accurate and more interesting, especially when one considers an additional fact Don Doyle shares: that this same George Oliver shot and killed another black man in 1866.[139]

Hugh Barr was a known associate of Colonel Brown. Given the Colonel's ownership of many slaves and his strenuous political defense of the rights of slaveholders, I think it no great stretch to suppose that the Colonel supported Barr's appeal to vindicate the rights of slaveholders to compel obedience from their slaves.

That said, the suspicious drowning death of Reverend Vrooman, also mentioned in this chapter, is very unlikely, especially given the extreme improbability of his actual existence in the first place.

Chapter 70

July 12, 1859

Julia Brown's wedding to Andrew Shotwell was on July 12, 1859, four months after the killing of Oliver's slave. My placement of the wedding at "the Colonel's new house on Depot Street" is an assumption based on a lot of evidence about the location of the Colonel's residence that, as far as I'm concerned, leads to no certain conclusion. For many, what follows will be a significant digression on that topic, but in light of later developments involving the Colonel's house (occupation by Ulysses S. Grant, and two destructions by fire), I feel compelled to record here the evidence of which I'm aware.

---

[137] The Court refers to Bramwell as "the witness." It would seem that Bramwell, the only white man present other than Oliver, was therefore the only actual witness to the event in court. But two other men, Cook and Strickland, were apparently first on the scene on the day of the killing, and testified that when they arrived, Bramwell had *told them* that Oliver killed John for "nothing" after Oliver told him to work faster and he didn't work fast enough to satisfy. But their testimony boiled down to hearsay, and with no black men allowed by law to testify against Oliver, it's hardly surprising that his conviction was overturned..

[138] It seemed to serve my story better that way, avoiding the complications of changed testimony, impeaching one's own witnesses, and the technical legal arguments raised by Barr on appeal.

[139] Doyle, *supra*, p 263. As for Bramwell, his allegiance to Oliver (if that's what it was) didn't guarantee he would keep his job as overseer on Oliver's plantation. The 1860 Census shows Oliver with a new overseer, a man named Thomas Denton.

In addition to the many sections of land Colonel Brown bought as investments, presumably for resale, there were a number he appears to have used as personal places of residence. In an 1830 letter to his father, Colonel Brown mentioned "my purchase of a tavern establishment in Jackson" and a "stage contract," which gave him rights to the portion of the stage run from Jackson to Bolivar. Finally, the letter says, "our new house is nearly completed and we have moved into it." It isn't clear where this letter was written from. I imagine that it was written from Jackson; I have no evidence that Colonel Brown had a presence in Lafayette County as early as 1830.

The first evidence I've seen of Colonel Brown's presence in Lafayette County is his purchase of 1280 acres from Tobotubby on May 14, 1835 (Lafayette Deed Book A:219.) I think this purchase very well could have included the land where Toby Tubby operated his ferry. Part of it is now underwater, under Lake Sardis. But in any case, Brown didn't keep that land long – he sold part of it in 1838, and the rest in 1844. And though it appears Brown may have been an early subscriber to the College Hill Presbyterian Church, I see no evidence that he ever lived on the other properties he bought in that vicinity.

He did, however, buy 640 acres on Clear Creek in April of 1836. (Section 25 of T8SR5W. See Deed Book A:37.) He bought an adjoining 640 acres on November 12, 1836. (Deed Book A:173.) While I don't know how long it took him to build a residence on these 1280 acres, he owned the property for at least twenty-six years. That fact, plus his use of "Clear Creek" as his address in the advertisements for sale of the Panola Cotton Plantation (Alemeth, pg. 66), make abundantly clear that he considered that plantation his main address while the ad ran – for about six months beginning in September of 1848. It seems the Clear Creek plantation was the Colonel's residential "country estate." Oxford itself didn't yet exist in April of 1836 when the Colonel bought the property.[140] So at first, whether Brown was living in Jackson, College Hill, or had quickly built on Clear Creek, he was not likely living in Oxford.

In a June 26, 1850 letter to his father, Brown wrote of a 200 acre plantation he called his "Mississippi River" plantation, of a half stand of cotton at his Clear Creek Plantation, and of a three quarter stand at "Pondu Place." I've been unable to determine the location of "Pondu Place."[141] But the 1850 Census, enumerated in October of 1850, shows the Browns living in Lafayette County among a number of much smaller farmers (smallness as judged by the estimated value of their property, and their slave holdings) and with an overseer, Saunders Petersen, living in the house.[142] Since the 1850 slave schedule shows him owning 73 slaves,[143] I take this to be a residence on a plantation – almost certainly the one on Clear Creek. This all seems to suggest strongly that Brown didn't consider any place in town his principal residence in 1850.

---

[140] The town had its origins later, in June of 1836, when three men bought 640 acres from the Indian woman Ho-Ka and donated 50 acres back to the county for establishment of a county seat. See Williamson, *supra* , p 79.

[141] This could have been a name given to his plantation in Panola – the one he advertised for sale – but only if his advertising in 1848 and 1849 was unsuccessful, and he still owned that plantation at the time of his 1850 letter to his father.

[142] 1850 U.S. Census, Mississippi, Lafayette, dwelling #489, p 71 of 199 – probably enumerated between Oct 4th and Oct 9th.

[143] 1850 Slave Schedule, Lafayette, not stated, p 43-44..

However, at least at times, Brown did own property in town. His first purchase of property in Oxford itself appears to have been in December of 1840, when the Colonel bought Lot 23 at a sheriff's auction for $332 (Deed Book C-10.) That lot lies between Pierce and Buchanan Streets on what is now Lamar Street but was, at that time, simply called "South Street." There was at that time no certainty of a University, or a railroad, coming through town. But the idea must have been under discussion, as it was only the following month, January of 1841, that the Mississippi legislature designated five-year old Oxford as the site at which to build the State's University. While it seems possible the Colonel only bought this property as an investment, or to lease it to someone else, it seems more likely he bought it so as to have a house in town for himself. Though his Clear Creek plantation was only about eight miles west, in those days, even eight miles was a trip, and a man of Colonel Brown's wealth – he had bought some 60,000 acres in Mississippi by 1840 – could certainly afford a second home in town. Brown's activities in Oxford were substantial. And I find it helpful to consider the quick succession of events, from the Legislature chartering the University in February of 1844,[144] to the Legislature accepting property just west of the town line for construction of a campus in July of 1845,[145] to the election of Colonel Brown to the Board of Trustees in July of 1846,[146] to Colonel Brown selling his property on South Street on December 25, 1847[147] and to his placing an ad in September of 1848 to sell his Panola County plantation. It seems plausible to suppose that he sold the South Street property (on the south side of town) in order to move closer to the University (by then scheduled to be built just west of town), and that he may have been trying to sell his Panola County plantation due to an expectation of great involvement with the University. Notably, Colonel Brown's 1848 ad gave "Clear Creek" as his address. From all this, I surmise that the Colonel sold his South Street home in 1847 because of his plan to build a new home closer to the University, but in the interim, lived at his "country estate" at Clear Creek.

Of additional relevance is a short announcement that appeared in the *Oxford Organizer* of January 5, 1850: "MARRIED – On Christmas Eve, by the Rev Wm S Burney, Mr. H. W. Walter of Holly Springs to Miss Fredonia, daughter of Col. James Brown, *of Veranda Place, this county.*" I have tried in vain to find the location of the property there called "Verandah Place." Was it the name Colonel Brown had given to a new residence on Depot Street? A name he sometimes used to describe his Clear Creek residence? A third property, at which he lived after selling his South Street Property but prior to moving to Depot Street? And does the reference to "this county" suggest that Verandah place was outside the town limits? Relevant, to be sure, but of uncertain impact. I decided I would not mention Verandah Place in *Alemeth*, lest it confuse the reader as it had confused me.

On May 4th, 1850, *The Organizer* reported that the prior week's arrivals at the Lafayette Hotel included W. F. Avent. Eight months later, Avent would marry Brown's daughter Frances.

---

[144] Sansing, *supra*, pp. 24, 27

[145] *Historical Catalogue, supra,* p. 7.

[146] Sansing, *supra*, p. 33; University Board Minutes.

[147] Lafayette County Deed Book F:362. Historian Joel Williamson, referring to the Census of 1860, refers to Brown living on South Street at that time. I believe Williamson may have erred in this regard, overlooking the 1847 sale, though given the extensive acquisitions of Brown and the limits on my own hours in the Oxford Courthouse, I can't rule it out.

That wedding, presumably, took place at the Brown residence, but I can only guess that, at that time, that would have been the Clear Creek plantation. Meanwhile, Avent's residence at the hotel is strong evidence that, as of 1850 at least, he did not own a residence of his own in Oxford.

We know that the Colonel eventually built a house on Depot Street (now Jackson Avenue), near the edge of the University campus. The question is, when. Although the courthouse records include various transactions involving Brown during the 1850's, I was not able to relate all of them to specific locations in town. On April 7, 1855, however, Brown bought two town lots, #66 and #94, which were near the path of what would soon be the railroad tracks. But did either of these become his home on Depot Street? That possibility is thrown into question by the fact that on May 27, 1859, he sold those two lots to his now son-in-law, W. F. Avent.[148] Meanwhile, Avent himself had already started buying town lots,[149] as had Colonel Brown's sister, Zebina Conkey. Conkey's 1857 purchase seems to have been in the approximate area where the Depot was soon to be built.[150] One of the more interesting theories I've entertained about my inability to pinpoint Colonel Brown's purchase of his residence on Depot Street is the possibility that, as a University Trustee, he was concerned about a conflict of interest in his purchase of property at the railroad depot, at the same time he was acting as Trustee to cede land to the railroad to entice the railroad to build its depot at the University's entrance.[151] If the Colonel was concerned about such a conflict, he could have attempted to shield it from scrutiny by having his sister – whose name of course was no longer Brown, but Conkey – purchase the property, while having some private (unrecorded) arrangement with her. The delay of nearly two years in recording the right of way at the courthouse might also suggest a desire to keep the transaction "under wraps" for a time.

In any case, I believe the Colonel had already built a house on Depot Street by 1859 and that the wedding of Julia Brown to Andrew Shotwell took place there. For the further relevance of all this, see the discussion below regarding Chapter 82.

The description of the two-room outdoor privy is based on the article in the July 25, 1860 Intelligencer. The description of Alemeth exiting the privy and meeting Sally Fox, and being rather taken by her, is based (again) on a string of inferences. This string began with Alemeth's June 14th, 1862 letter – reproduced at Alemeth page 317 – in which he wrote to his sister from the front lines, "Please give my love to Miss Sally. I could enjoy a piece of that big cake now if I had it." Alemeth elsewhere referred to beloved slaves as "aunts" and to unmarried white women

[148] Lafayette Deed Book H:193; see also LDB I:291.
[149] Lafayette Deed Book H:290 (May 2, 1855)
[150] Lafayette Deed Book H:313 (August 3, 1855) and H:700 (April 16, 1857).
[151] According to Mayes, *The History of Education in Mississippi*, *supra*, p. 146, it was in 1854 that "the University granted the right of way through its grounds and a depot site to the Mississippi Central Railroad." Although I didn't find any reference to it in the minutes of the July, 1854 Trustees meeting, I did find the right of way at the Courthouse, filed two years later. The document, dated 4-29-56, was filed 5-10-56. The University of Mississippi, which had been built on the south half of section 20 and the north half of section 27, conveyed the right of way to the Mississippi Central Railroad, over N-1/2 of Sec 29, south half of Section 20. The right of way was for fifty feet on either side of a center line described in technical language but essentially running N-S down the eastern side of the University's property, which is where the railroad tracks run, and the reconstructed Depot sit, today. The 1856 document asserts that the road bed was "for the greater part" already constructed. Lafayette Deed Book H:497.

as "Miss." I therefore assumed this "Miss Sally" to whom Alemeth sent his love was white. Setting out to determine her identity, I decided Alemeth must have known her prior to his enlistment in the spring of 1861. Finding no "Sallys" or "Sarahs" among Alemeth's near neighbors, relatives, or members of Sand Springs Church, I scoured the Panola and Lafayette censuses for "Sallys" and "Sarahs" his age, and came up with a modest handful. Although few, if any, could be entirely ruled out, my attention quickly fell on Miss Sally Wiley, because I knew that Yancy Wiley's family were acquaintances of the Browns, and that, in fact, Yancey's son Jacob Thompson Wiley had been baptized at College Hill Presbyterian the same day as Alemeth's two step siblings, Medora and Henry Walton (see Chapter 29, above.)

For story purposes, I was thrilled to think that Alemeth might have actually had a crush on Sally Wiley, the "orator" whose ceremonial speech at the Cumberland church would stir southern fervor for the war. But Sally Wiley, it turns out, was married very shortly after that ceremony, so I couldn't imagine Alemeth sending his "love" to her from the front lines. Then, in the 1850 Panola Census, I came across seven year old Sarah Fox, living with her mother, Mary A. Fox, a brother, ten year old William Fox, and several older siblings.[152] At first, I simply added this to my list of candidates for Alemeth's heart throb, despite the fact she was seven years his junior. But then I also came upon the appearance of a seventeen year old Sarah Fox and nineteen year old William Fox in the 1860 Lafayette Census, living (presumably on Depot Street) with none other than W. F. Avent. Like the earlier Sarah and William Fox, this pair of siblings was born in Tennessee. They had to be the same pair, and since they were now living next door to Colonel Brown, the opportunity for Alemeth to meet them was obvious. (Indeed, since Colonel Brown's daughter had married W.F. Avent, they could hardly have avoided knowing each other.) But what had happened to Sarah and William's parents? And why were they now in Oxford, living next door to Colonel Brown?

My efforts to nail down facts with certainty fell short here, but I did enough research on the families involved to come up with a viable theory, to wit: the middle initial "A" of Sarah and William's mother Mary stood for her maiden name, Avent. At age 44 in the 1850 Census, Mary Avent (if that was indeed her name) could well have been sister to W.F. Avent's father, Tomlin Avent. (The 1840 census shows a daughter of that age in Tomlin Avent's household in Greenville, Virginia.) So my theory is that Mary Avent was W. F. Avent's aunt, making Sarah (Sally) Fox W.F.'s cousin. And as it turns out, a George T. Fox had married a Mary Avent in Greenville in 1824.[153] Birth locations of the older Fox children indicate that the Foxes moved from Virginia to Alabama, and from Alabama to Tennessee, where William and Sally were born. I imagine that George Fox passed away, either before or after Mary Fox appears as a single mother and farmer in the 1850 Panola Census, and that, soon thereafter, Mary too died – leaving two minor children, William and Sally, with their geographically-closest living relative, their older cousin W. F. Avent, being a very wealthy man and able to take them in.

[152] 1850 U.S. Census, Panola, MS, Family #705.
[153] Dodd, Jordan R., et al.. *Early American Marriages: Virginia to 1850*. Bountiful, UT, USA

So that became the story I decided to run with. In fact, I believe it to be true – I think the evidence is reasonably strong that the "Miss Sally" of Alemeth's 1862 letter was this Sally Fox, and many hours perusing census records failed to unearth any other Sally candidates with nearly so much to offer.

While I didn't much care that Alemeth's heartthrob would have the name "Fox" – surely it would be seen as a poorly chosen invention – it seemed "factual" enough I felt I had to go with it. I was excited to realize, then, that this same Sally Fox, while not the orator at the Cumberland church ceremony that Sally Wiley had been, had at least worn the South Carolina sash at the event! The stage was set for Alemeth's heartthrob to play a role in his decision to enlist and fight, to protect the honor of southern womanhood. I believe all this to be true. But the image of Sally Fox at page 204 is my own concoction; I have no idea what she really looked like.

Chapter 71

July 13, 1859

Captain Boynton's interest in photography is historical. The rest of the chapter is fiction, but being focused as I was on how people see things differently, on how much "truth" seems to depend on culture and point of view, the fact that photography (still in its infancy) held out the promise of seeing things *exactly as they really are* pulled the novel (i.e., my interest, and Alemeth's) in the direction of all things photographic.

Chapter 72

July to October, 1859

As best I can tell, Jacob Thompson was a fascinating figure. I kept coming across him in my research, but never found anything close to a unified biography of him. If I'm right that no one has yet written a biography devoted to this man, someone ought to. He had been a Congressman from Mississippi for six successive terms, then lost in two races for the U.S. Senate, the latter to Jefferson Davis.[154] He had served as Chairman of the Ole Miss Board of Trustees, and had donated a small fortunate for it to start its law school. When President Buchanan was elected President in 1857, he appointed Thompson Secretary of the Interior, a post Thompson held until under through his resignation in 1861, and during the war, he first fought as a soldier for the Confederacy, and later, as a spy. Does that warrant a biography?

Thompson's own son, Caswell Macon Thompson (b. Oct 11, 1839) was a few years younger than Alemeth, but given his father's prominence, struck me as likely to have been endowed with the confidence that often attaches to the children of prominent people.

There's apparently some dispute over the rightful discoverer of gun cotton. Charles Thomas Jackson (1805-1880) claimed credit for discovering it, but having "breathed himself into insensibility" from his experiments with ether, he also claimed credit for the telegraph; it was

[154] Enzweiler, p 17.

apparently Charles Schönbein (1799-1868) who is more credited with it, at least if we trust as reliable an authority for things (both real and unreal) as Isaac Asimov, who tells us that Schönbein's discovery, in 1845, came when he was toying with some nitric and sulfuric acids in his kitchen and, having spilled a little, wiped it up with his wife's cotton apron, then hung it over the stove to dry. [155] In any case, gun cotton (or nitrocellulose) was understood from the outset to be erratic and unpredictable, exploding without flame, burning without smoke, and leaving no residue.

The explanation for the explosion (given by Captain Boynton in the next chapter) may or may not make sense to a chemist. I tried to make this explosion plausible, but in the end, I relied on the advice given by George H. Scithers and Darrel Schweitzer,[156] to wit, "Fiction writers… are liars… Get so many facts… right that your departures will pass unnoticed." As Schönbein's accidental explosion proved, gun cotton will indeed explode when heated. But would it explode with enough power to send glass shards into Macon Thompson? I added the nearby ether in hope that the chemicals would work together to make the desired mess, but I'm still waiting for someone who actually knows something to weigh in on whether it could have happened this way – (in the unlikely event, of course, that it happened at all). I'm hopeful that enough of the surrounding story is credible that this explosion (if not credible) will pass unnoticed.

On the other hand, pages 210 and 211 don't have a word in them that isn't absolutely true.

Chapter 73

October, 1859

As I child, I had a serious problem with fainting – I probably lost consciousness over a hundred times before the age of fifteen. For me, at least, the feeling I had upon recovering consciousness was nothing like waking up from a dream. It was always the hearing of sound that came first – a wash of vibrating background noise like the sound of ocean surf, but steady and prolonged and growing rather than crashing and stopping – against this background, I might only then become aware of the specific sound of voices, or something sharp and bright like clinking metal, sometimes with a quick whiff of smelling salts – but I'll never forget that, every time, the return of that ocean surf sound preceded the return of vision, or even smell or touch. I believe it was due to the frequency of my childhood fainting – and (thankfully) the regaining of consciousness afterward – that I've always been interested in just what *consciousness* is. In any case, this chapter is not the only one in which I attempted to capture the experience of regaining consciousness. The sounds Alemeth hears here clearly precede his understanding of where, and who, and what he is.

Related to the dawning of consciousness is the attempt to raise recollection, as Alemeth struggles to remember events just before losing consciousness – especially difficult to do when

[155] Asimov, Isaac, *Biographical Encyclopedia of Science and Technology*, 2nd Ed (Doubleday, 1982), pp. 340 and 357.
[156] Scithers, George H., and Schweitzer, Darrel, *How Fictional Can Fiction Afford to Be?*, The Writer's Digest Handbook of Novel Writing, Writer's Digest Books, 1992.

events haven't had time to register in long term memory. From what I've experienced, and read, about recollection, whether from sort-term memory or long, it is much like the experience of writing about the past. We aren't really pulling any real, or accurate, pictures or events from our memory, as much as we're creating new images by analogy to our past experiences. This aspect of memory seems to me to bear not only on what consciousness is all about, but on what culture itself is all about. Since I don't faint much any more, these days it's mostly through observation of how my own memory works (or doesn't) – and reading about psychology experiments – that inform the understanding of memory. But whatever it is, I've tried to depict its manifestation here.

Macon Thompson did go out west at about this time, and upon his return in 1861, I understand that his face was heavily scarred.[157]

Chapter 74 - 76

October, 1859

Chapter 74 is pure interior monologue; any attempt to get in to the mind of another faces the same problems. Surely it must always be counted as fiction, no matter how much evidence points its way.

I'm no expert on firearms, but as I understand it, the "Model 1842" that arrived, all crated up, would have had a .69 caliber, 42 inch long barrel, like all derivatives of the Model 1816. But it would have been new in several respects. First, prior to the Model 1842, all of the firearms produced by Springfield Armory had been flintlocks; the Model 1842 was the first to have the much more reliable percussion lock. It was also the first model to have fully interchangeable parts. But the main difference was that the barrel was intentionally made thicker than necessary, due to the assumption that it would be rifled. (Rifling being the process of creating a spiral groove inside the barrel, to impart twist and rotation to the emerging projectile.) Thus, though born as a musket, the 1842 Model was the first mass-produced firearm properly called a "rifle." Overall, it was 52 inches long and weighed ten pounds, and could fire far more accurately than a musket.

Though the name Springfield" attaches to this whole line of muskets and rifles, they were manufactured not only in Springfield, Massachusetts, but also at the Harper's Ferry Armory.[158] John Brown's raid on the arsenal at Harper's Ferry occurred on October 16th. His plan had been to take control of the arsenal and use the weapons obtained to arm slaves throughout the south for a general uprising against their owners. His trial was between October 27th and November 2nd. He was hanged on December 2, 1859.

[157] Here again, I can't seem to find my source for this tidbit of information. I seem to recall that there was an inference that he might have sustained the scarred face in some sort of fight with native Americans. If *Alemeth* is to be believed, Macon was simply too embarrassed to admit that the wounds were of his own doing, but on this point, I'm not suggesting anyone believe *Alemeth*.

[158] This information thanks to Tom Kelley at Civil War Guns, http://www.civilwarguns.com/9605.html.

Chapter 77

February, 1860

I came across the existence of a locomotive called the *James Brown* in a website referring to the locomotive's 1862 demise (see discussion of Chapter 107). But while the author of that website didn't know who the locomotive was named after, I think it's a very good bet it was Colonel James Brown of Oxford. The 1862 train was traveling southbound toward Jackson from Holly Springs, along the Mississippi Central Rail Road. The M.C. R.R. was the road for which Colonel James Brown of Oxford had been an early and active supporter. In May of 1852, he had been the one to call a public meeting to order in Oxford, the purpose of which was to boost stock subscriptions for the railroad. It was Colonel Brown who had opened the subscription book to record the orders.[159] Two weeks later, Harvey Walter – the Colonel's new son-in-law – would give a rousing speech about the need for support to prevent the road from being built through Panola, rather than Oxford.[160] Don Doyle called Brown and Thomas Isom leaders of the movement to bring the railroad through Oxford in 1856, saying they had volunteered their own slaves to help with construction.[161] True enough, "James Brown" was not the rarest of names. But who would a southern locomotive on the M.C.R.R. be named for, if not a man who was a member of the Mississippi State house, a Trustee of Ole Miss, who happened to be one of the leaders of the movement to fund the railroad?

I therefore take as presumptively true that there was a locomotive named after Alemeth's own James Brown. That said, the specifics of where the engine was built, when it first arrived, how it was financed, where it spent its time, etc., are largely speculation.[162] Philadelphia's *Baldwin Works* was one of the largest builders of railroad locomotives, and did in fact build engines to specification, including many for the wider southern tracks. It seemed logical to assume that the locomotive would have been put into service soon after the M.C.R.R. itself was operational. The contract or lease arrangement between the Colonel, Baldwin Works, and the M.C.R.R. itself, I can only guess at, but I figured it was possible, at the least, that the Colonel insisted its maiden run include a stop in Oxford.

The speech attributed to Colonel Brown regarding the coming of the railroad to Oxford is my own invention, as is the linocut image of the locomotive that appears on page 220. Here, I must mention that it was Jim Horton – not the fictional Jim Horton of *Alemeth*, but the real Jim Horton who was my printing instructor at the John C. Campbell Folk School, to whom I owe the interest in linocuts that caused me to want to make the image of the locomotive. Sadly, the print reproduction in a book like this makes the color of the locomotive almost gray. The inks that

[159] Doyle, *supra*, p 93, citing *The Democratic Flag* of May 5, 1852.
[160] Doyle, *supra*, p 93, citing *The Democratic Flag* of May 19, 1852.
[161] Doyle, *supra*, p 99.. Another man listed as a key supporter was Robert Shegogg – the man who built a mansion in Oxford that would later be the home of William Faulkner, "Rowan Oak."
[162] Might Brown have owned his namesake locomotive, and leased it to the M.C.R.R.? Might he simply have paid for it to be built, in return for shares of the M.C.R.R.? As wealthy man with political as well as financial ambitions, was his arrangement with the M.C. R. R. similar to the modern practice of companies having sports stadiums named after them, a piece of vanity or publicity for which a wealthy investor might be willing to pay? I do not know, but I strongly suspect something like that lay behind the naming of the *James Brown*.

Jim Horton had us use were the shiniest black I've ever seen, and printed in that ink, the James Brown image looked as magnificent as the original locomotive might have as it pulled into Oxford. But the main reason I wanted an image was to emphasize weight as much as color. Thinking of the Hilgard Cut – that is, of the practicality of moving so many tons of dirt and rock, once, to spare trains the extra work of going up hill for years to come – made me think of weight, and of the force required to move cargo up hill, and of the momentum of a train pulling so many tons (whether on level ground or, *a fortiori,* downhill), at the same time as thinking of the potential power of magnetism snapping iron magnets into place. Together, these ideas about the laws of physics simply held me captive in a world of unseen forces I could neither understand, nor explain, nor resist.

To the best of my ability, information about the Hilgard Cut, the Magnetic Observatory, and the 'Dead Room," are all historically correct, based on David Sansing's book and various other sources regarding early Ole Miss history. Much has been made, in a number of sources, about the irony behind the magnetic observatory's "dead room" becoming, later, a morgue for civil war soldiers. But much as I craved an explanation of how the observatory, prior to the war, came to be called the "dead room" in the first place, I was not able to find one. Circumstances suggest that it was for the reasons I offer in *Alemeth*—namely, resistance to those unseen physical forces which might affect the readings of magnetometers – but as far as I know, this, too, is only speculation on my part.

I feel more confident about a different concept that underlies this chapter, a concept that's suggested in this chapter by Gordon's statement, "the more a path is followed, the deeper the rut becomes." Frankly, I am amazed, doing a word search on the entire novel now that it has gone to print, that I only used the word "character" once in the entire novel, because, in earlier drafts, the word came up again and again. What I find particularly enthralling about the word "character" is the tracing of it, and its cognates, back to their sources in the ancient Indo European root *khar,* meaning to scratch or cut a groove. This root gave the ancient Greeks their words *charadra, charagma*, and *charakter*.

C*haradra*, to the ancient Greeks, meant a mountain stream, a torrent, that cuts its way down a mountain side, and hence, the gulley or ravine formed by that action. I remember being somewhere once – Colorado, I think – where the side of a mountain, generally full of trees, had clear brown stripes cut down the sides, and realizing, for the first time, that when heavy rains hit the top of a mountain, following the natural gravitational pull and the paths of least resistance, they follow the same patterns, rainfall after rainfall, and over time, the water's friction deepens the resulting ravines. As the boys recognize in this chapter of Alemeth, the deeper a ravine (or rut) becomes, the less likely it is for anything to come out of it. (More reinforcement of theme.)

Meanwhile, the Greek *charagma* meant any mark that was engraved or printed, whether the brand on a camel or the engraving that marked a coin. And *charakter* meant an engraver, or a branding iron, or anything that makes such a cut or engraving. It's easy enough to see how this notion of making a mark in something came to be the word we use in English when speaking of typographical characters: what we do these days by laying ink or toner on top of paper used to be

done by cutting lines into pieces of clay. But what I find fascinating is that, even among the ancient Greeks, this set of words came to have a metaphorical meaning,[163] and it's that metaphorical meaning that led to our use of the word "character" to mean not only the symbols used in writing or to mark coins, but the very nature of a thing, its shape, its attributes, its "character." When one considers the natural tendency of that mountain torrent to cut deeper and deeper into the mountain side with every rain, and considers as well what physiologists have to say about muscle memory, what anatomists have to say about neuron growth, and what psychologists have to say about habit – not to mention confirmation bias – it's hard to escape the idea that one's "character" is little more than a habit (the word "rut" now sounding too negative) that is difficult to break. Indeed, even teachers of the craft of writing novels say that to create a good "character," the key is to show a recurring pattern of like behaviors in reaction to like situations.

For better or worse, it's ruts, indeed, by whatever name. And if the rut is deep enough, and the weight and momentum as powerful as that of a twenty-two ton locomotive, it's easy to see why two opposing characters can end up colliding.

Chapter 78

March 1-2, 1860

The trial of Frederick Barnard by the University Board of Trustees took place on the first and second of March, 1860. The whole affair takes up many pages in the minutes of the faculty and trustees. I'll attempt to summarize it chronologically here.

The allegations arose out of an incident involving J. P. Furniss and Sam Humphrey that occurred on May 12, 1859, while the Barnards were out of town. Severely bruised, President Barnard's house slave, Jane, told Captain Boynton (who lived in the other half of the house) that, she had been assaulted by Furniss and Humphrey. Upon his return, Barnard summoned the students to the Faculty meeting on May 23, and after hearing from the accused students and others, Barnard made a motion to suspend the boys from the University.

President Barnard charged Humphrey with two things: (1) "Visiting the dwelling of the President in his absence and while it was occupied by defenceless female servants, and with shameful designs upon one of said servants;" and (2) "Committing a violent assault and battery upon the servant aforesaid, and inflicting severe personal injury, whereby the said servant was for some days incapacitated for labor, and of which the marks are still, after the lapse of many days, plainly visible."

The charges were read, testimony was adduced from the accused students and others, and a motion was made to suspend Humphrey. The motion to suspend was supported by Barnard, Captain Boynton, and Professor Moore, but opposed by Professors Richardson, Stearns, Whitehouse, Phipps, and Carter, so did not pass. It seems that the nay votes were concerned

[163] For all these Greek words, including the ancient metaphorical use, see Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford University press, 9th (1940) edition, 1958 reprinting, p. 1976.

about either the possible criminal ramifications for Humphrey, or the interpretation some might place on their vote, in light of the Mississippi criminal statute prohibiting testimony by a negro against a white person. Barnard then put forward a second resolution: "That although the Faculty are morally convinced of Mr. Humphrey's guilt, yet they do not consider the evidence adduced to substantiate the charge as sufficient, legally, to convict him." That resolution was approved on the vote of Barnard, with the support of Professors Stearns, Whitehouse, Moore, and Phipps. It isn't clear why Richardson and Carter voted against the second motion – perhaps they felt that accepting the testimony of a negro was wrong, regardless of circumstance or qualification placed on the matter. Professor Boynton's nay vote, I suspect, was because he accepted the testimony of the attacked negro servant and thought her testimony was (or ought to be) sufficient to convict Humphrey.

For some reason – perhaps the sensitive nature of the case and possible ramifications of their action for any subsequent criminal proceeding – the minutes of the faculty meeting were not at that time recorded in the Faculty Minute Book. [164] Following the faculty meeting, President Barnard asked Sam Humphrey's parents to withdraw him from school, which they did. But subsequently – perhaps when they'd satisfied themselves that Humphrey wouldn't be prosecuted criminally – Humphrey's parents thought better of the matter and asked that Barnard re-admit him. In November of 1859, Barnard denied their request.

By February, the drama might have ended, but due to what David Sansing described as a "whispering campaign,"[165] it didn't. The same group that had questioned Barnard's southern loyalties before (see discussion of Chapter 69) – Branham, the Mercury's Stevenson, and their allies – attacked him (and presumably Captain Boynton) again. This is apparently why the proceedings of the May 23, 1859 faculty meeting regarding Humphrey's behavior finally appear in the Faculty Minute Book on February 2, 1860. With those minutes recorded, Professors Richardson and Phipps then added statements of their own. A sort of contest ensued in which everyone wanted to have the last word in the Minute Book; additional statements of individual faculty members were recorded on February 13 and February 23. Professor Moore's subsequent statement explained his reasons for voting again Humphrey on the second motion:

1. Serious presumption against Humphrey due to his own conduct
2. Humphrey's complete failure to prove his chief defense (alibi)
3. The refusal of an alibi witness to deny that Humphrey was there in Barnard's home
4. Because one member of the faculty *knew* of Humphrey's guilt through a third person.

From Moore's statement, it appears that Humphrey claimed he'd never even come to Barnard's house; and that he apparently called an alibi witness to testify to that effect, yet his own witness refused to do so! Meanwhile, much as Moore might have disagreed with Captain Boynton's political philosophy, he apparently accepted Boynton's insistence that he had

[164] In my own practice of law, I frequently dealt with clients (employers) who, when inclined to dismiss an employee arrested for commission of some crime, had a great deal of difficulty reconciling their own role as employers from the role of a criminal court in deciding a criminal conviction. The Faculty and Board of Trustees may have suffered the same problem here, confusing their role as representatives of a public University with a contractual relationship with a student, on the one hand, and the role of a criminal court, charged with determining criminal guilt or innocence, on the other.

[165] Sansing, *supra*, p. 97.

personally witnessed Humphrey there on the occasion. So Humphrey's credibility was *highly* suspect.

In another evidentiary twist, Boynton apparently testified that he knew Humphrey was there from his own knowledge, and further, knew that Humphrey was guilty of the assault, but not from his own knowledge – and then apparently refused to say who he had heard it from. He refused to answer a question regarding whether his informant was white or a negro. Taking all the testimony together, my own conclusions was that the slave, Jane, had likely given the personal details to Mrs. Barnard; that Mrs. Barnard had shared the gist of those details with Captain Boynton, and that Jane herself had shared them with Boynton more summarily; and that Captain Boynton had not wanted to drag Barnard's wife into the whole mess, or state squarely on the record that he *had* accepted the word of a negro over a white person.

In any case, with Humphrey out and everyone having had a chance to put his position in the Minute Book, the matter might then have come to an end; but as it happened, it only got even more strange. The "whispers" continued to the point that on February 29th, Barnard wrote a letter to the Governor asking for an "investigation" so that *he* could clear *his* name. His effort to stand up for his attacked servant, Jane, had cost him his own reputation in some quarters, and he was desperate for vindication. In my view, the man was so such a believer in science and human reason that he considered it possible to "prove" his innocence that he asked for a *trial of himself* by which he'd make it happen!

The rest of the story is told in *Alemeth*, Chapter 78, and Sansing, Chapter 4. The scene I describe in Alemeth, at the offices of the lawyer, Hugh Barr, is fictional, but represents the conversation exactly as I suspect it might have gone, had I been the lawyer confronted with the situation. As it turns out, even Jefferson Davis put in a good word for Barnard, but the days were numbered for people like Frederick Barnard and Edward Boynton. At the heart of it all was that broad, McCarthy-esque question – who was 'sound on the slavery question,' and who was not? Clearly, there were many ready to be rid of *anyone* who might not support slavery 100%, and if you weren't for them, then you had to be against them.

Much as it seems to have been lately, the country was clearly well on the way to polarization.

Chapter 79

Mid-March, 1860

As David Sansing points out, the creation of the *Oxford Intelligenc*er was "one of the results of the Branham affair and the *Mercury*'s assaults on Barnard and the University." The *Mercury* dismissed Falconer's new newspaper as the "organ of the University clique."[166]

The Falconers had moved to Marshall County in the 1840's. Howard had enrolled at the University of Mississippi, had graduated, had entered the law school, and had become a friend of President Barnard. I have little doubt that, with the establishment of the pro-University newspaper, he was also a friend and associate of the influential Trustee who lived at the edge of campus, Colonel James Brown.

Chapter 80

Late May, 1860

The piece on page 229 is the beginning of the Prospectus as it was later published in the *Intelligencer*. The piece on page 232 is the beginning of the salutatory article from the first (June 6) issue, and the paragraph on page 234, a continuation of it. "The Past and the Future" piece on page 236 was also published in that issue. What's here are taken verbatim from the originals, but they are only excerpts; I have omitted the rest, to save the eyesight and attention of the reader for more important business.

Based on my review of the 1860 Census, I conclude there were two hotels in town: the Butler Hotel, which was on the town square, and T.H. Robinson's hotel, which appears to have been nearer the University. Howard Falconer, age 22, "Editor," resided there (at least when the census was enumerated that year on November 15th).[167]

"Today is Thursday," says Howard on page 231. "We have five days to put together our first issue." Such a statement would have been made on Thursday, May 31st, in anticipation of the issue being completed the following Tuesday night, for release on Wednesday, June 6th. That first issue of the Intelligencer reported, "For some weeks past, not a drop of rain has fallen."

Chapter 81

May 31 – June 5, 1860

As originally conceived, this chapter was meant to convey the daily routine in the office of a weekly newspaper for a full seven-day cycle. As it ended up, the chapter begins "at the end of the day" on Thursday, May 31st, and ends five days later, with the printing of the first (June 6th) issue on Tuesday night, June 5th.

In commenting on Chapter 70, earlier, I discussed the evidence regarding when Colonel Brown built his house on Depot Street, including my conclusion that he had at least built it by the time of his daughter Julia's wedding in 1859. The "Improvements" article that appeared in

[166] Sansing, *supra*, p. 98.

[167] 1860 U.S. Census for Lafayette County, Mississippi. At pp 238 is the Robinson Hotel. The 44 Hotel residents are listed, including the Butler family, as Family 1541. (Just one tiny point I mention in connection with the question I hope Alemeth raises in the minds of some readers: *What, exactly, is a family?*) The Butler Hotel, with its 39 residents, is at page 205.

the inaugural issue of the *Intelligencer* makes clear that a set of Brown relatives was now gathering along Depot Street, which Jack Mayfield says was known as "Quality Row."[168] That article shows A. L. Shotwell putting up an elegant house,[169] and W.F. Avent completing a spacious dwelling "near the Railroad." The 1860 Census would show the residents of Depot Street sequentially, from Family #1548 through #1553, as follows: W. F. Avant, Planter, with wife Sarah (*nee* Brown); James Brown, Planter; A. L. Shotwell, Planter, with wife Julia (*nee* Brown); Thomas Wendel, Merchant; T. D. Isom, physician; and C.A. Pegues, Physician.[170] Colonel Brown now had two sons-in-law building homes on either side of (or across the street from) his own.

I had noticed the "Improvements" article in that first issue when I first sat at the microfiche machine in the Ole Miss Library. The fact that it mentioned the Shotwell and Avent residences caught my eye first, and I recorded that page of the paper to a flash drive for research purposes. It was only later, contemplating how to best make use of the newspaper pieces I'd collected, that I decided to have Alemeth go to work in the newspaper business; so it was only later, while deciding which of the many pieces to include in the novel that, coming again across this particular piece, I realized what it must have been like for Alemeth – or any typesetter, for that matter – to compose a piece about the building in which he worked. It's not the same with me sitting at my keyboard right now, for right now, my fingers are touching the keyboard and my eyes are looking up at monitor. Alemeth, by contrast, held the type in his hands. Letter by letter, he assembled the words that represented the building – Doyle's, downstairs, and the plasterers working around him – but the sorts that represented the building where he was as he worked were, literally, held in his own hands.

If I take a hunk of clay and fashion the house in which I sit, it would surely be different from making a self-portrait of my face or body on a canvas. In the self-portrait, I'd be seeing myself, and very much focused on myself. In modeling a clay version of the very room in which I sit, I wouldn't be able to see myself at all; I'd simply "know" that I was inside the lump in my hands, working hard at the very clay (from the inside?) that I was working on.

There seems to me little better way to look at oneself *from the outside,* with an emphasis on the location of self within a structure. And that, in the end, has a lot to do with what *Alemeth* is all about.

---

[168] Mayfield, Jack, Oxford Eagle, November 12, 2010.

[169] The Shotwell house was presumably being built on Lot 87 or 91, which Shotwell had bought three months after his marriage to Julia Brown (Lafayette Deed Book I:353 and I:354. (October 26, 1859)) or on Lot 88 or 89, which he bought at the beginning of 1860 (Lafayette Deed Book I:410 (Sale on January 24th, recorded February 24th, 1860).) All of these lots fronted Depot Street, on the north side of the street.

[170] 1860 Census for Lafayette, pp 238-240. While that part of the census indicates it was "enumerated" November 12-15, 1860, I note that the Oxford Intelligencer of October 24 indicated that the Census results for Oxford were in, and reported the totals. So the actual dates on which houses were visited and dates collected appears not to have been the enumeration dates indicated on the census forms – perhaps they were a later tabulation. It had been the July 4th issue of the Intelligencer that reported that census takers were then busy throughout the state. So the 1860 census data may have been collected in Lafayette County anywhere between July and October, 1860 – perhaps explaining why Colonel Brown was still listed as living on Depot Street, despite the July 18th destruction of his home there.

Chapter 82

June 15- 1860

The letter to the Intelligencer titled *Step-Mothers,* printed in *The Oxford Intelligencer* of June 20, 1860, was a most tantalizing find. From the earliest months of considering Alemeth Byers' life, I had wondered about his relationship with his step-mother; had theorized that it could have been a difficult one; and had already gone a long way toward writing it that way, when I came across this letter to the editor of *The Intelligencer*. The number of educated, local writers who could have written such a letter seemed limited to the University set, and the possibility that it could have been written by someone who knew Alemeth Byers, and had him in mind when they wrote it, was simply too tempting for me to ignore. Whether he set the type for it or not, he had to have seen it, and surely read it with his own situation in mind. And if he didn't know better, how could he *not* have wondered whether someone had written it with him in mind?

As for Alemeth's walks down Depot Street, toward Colonel Brown's house, and the Avent house where Sally Fox now lived, this was difficult to write for a different reason. At page 16 of "Oxford in the Civil War," Stephen Enzweiler includes a map of Oxford, dated 1862, which shows "James Brown Home (Grant's HQ)" on the north side of Depot (now Jackson) Street, in a location between 4th and 6th streets. Jack Mayfield wrote in an article for the *Oxford Eagle* that Brown's house lay "where the Detention Center now stands," which is on the north side of Jackson Ave, between MLK and 9th. As best I can tell, Brown's son-in-law, Andrew Shotwell, had bought all the property on the north side of that section of Depot Street (see fn 145 above.) If the north side of the street was indeed the site of Colonel Brown's house, was Brown living on a property owned by his son-in-law? Had his son-in-law deeded the land to him in a transaction never recorded? While these scenarios seem possible, another that seems possible, at least on the information I've been able to discover, is that Brown's property was on the *south* side of Depot Street. Practical limits on my visits to Oxford kept me from confirming, or ruling out, that possibility. I assume that Enzweiler and Mayfield may have had access to sources I missed. At the end of the day, I'm unsure exactly where Colonel Brown's house on Depot Street was.

Such uncertainty is a problem not only for the aspiring historian, but for the writer of fiction as well. It's hard to write a description of something you can't visualize; not knowing the precise location of Brown's house made it difficult to picture the oak tree, and Sally Fox in the swing, and so on. Ambiguity necessarily infused itself into my descriptions here; I hope it didn't detract too much from the story.

The oration by student Micajah Wade, titled "The Anglo-Saxon Race," was given on Thursday, June 28th. The Commencement Ball was that evening.[171] According to the Intelligencer of July 11th, the drought continued.

Chapter 83

[171] See the *Oxford Intelligencer* of Wednesday, July 4th.

In *The Intelligencer* of June 20, Howard Falconer had written of the Trustees' decision to approve a leave for Doctor Barnard, so the University President could attend an expedition to Labrador for a viewing of the eclipse of the sun. Falconer also included this observation: "Accounts of the occasional fall of stones from the heavens are to be found in writings of almost every age; but until about the beginning of the present century, they were for the most part rejected by all but the very credulous."

Is a writer supposed to understand everything he writes at an intellectual level? If so, page 244, divided into four nearly identical quarters designated by latitude, longitude, and time, must fail, as it's very unclear to me why it's here at all. But I did want it to be. As far as I can tell, its origins lie in the fact that I'd been thinking a lot about the way a person's life is only partly determined by his or her own decisions, and otherwise – probably mostly—consists of reactions to outside events – events that arrive in the person's present time and space unexpectedly, like some meteor flying in from who knows where.[172] Every few pages, something unexpected was dropping in, to which the characters had to react, and this frequent "arrival of meteors from places unknown" had got me thinking about the interconnectedness of all these places unknown. It had got me looking down at the globe the way Alemeth had looked at the Intelligencer's Offices in the palm of his hand. This inevitably led to thought about the synchronicity of an infinite number of events, of millions of characters and frames of reference rubbing up against each other, occasionally impacting contiguous worlds. With this in mind, I happened to be reading a report about President Barnard's observation of the eclipse in Labrador – on July 18th, at 9:31 a.m. – right before reading *The Intelligencer*'s account of the fire at Colonel Brown's house, which asserted it had occurred on July 18th "about 9 1-2 o'clock." Within moments, I realized this was not exactly synchronicity, as the eclipse had occurred in the morning, and the fire in the evening, but then, contemplating the impact of time zones, hemispheres, and the relativity of time itself, I decided that worldwide synchronicity might be illusory anyway. Still, the idea of trying to capture these co-existing worlds remained something I just had to do. Originally, the four items were to occupy two facing pages, representing that fantastical geometric phenomenon called the four corners of the globe, with corresponding global coordinates, but the relevance of having something happen precisely at the opposite side of the globe from Oxford, Mississippi – which is to say, somewhere far out in the middle of the Indian Ocean, between Madagascar and Australia – just didn't seem workable. After spending far too many hours trying to make "the four corners of the globe" work, I was simply unwilling to abandon the idea of representing different places by times and global coordinates. I settled for four shorter segments with arguably greater relevance to the plot, all occurring at 9:31 o'clock but spaced by twelve hours each, two on the 17th and two on the 18th of July, and decided to abbreviate all four to fit on a single page.[173]

[172] So at page 12, Alemeth was mulling things over when Leander "reappeared." On page 20, he was mulling something else over when Leander's father appeared. Etc etc etc.

[173] Writing has all sorts of markers, from commas and periods within the sentence, to the indentations that signal new paragraphs, to the double spaces that suggest lapses of time or new subjects, to chapter changes, and sometimes to larger divisions like

The information about Philip Thomas, Commissioner of Patents, signing the Benjamin Garvey patent, comes from *Descriptions of Claims of Patents in the Year 1860*, part of the Annual Reports issued by the U.S. Patent Office. I trust it's within the bounds of reason to suppose that Thomas may have worked late signing patents that night – at least until 9:31 p.m. Among the many I examined that were issued on July 17th, I chose to include the steam generator as best supporting the mood of the country at the time, over patents for an airtight watch, a cotton cultivator, an improved breach-loading firearm, and a new design for a rat trap, also described in that volume.

The information about the expedition to observe the eclipse comes from a contemporaneous New York Times report of the matter, titled *The Astronomical Expedition: Observations of the Total Eclipse of the Sun on the Coast of Labrador*, which was based on a report of the Astronomical Expedition to the Scientific Congress. Excerpts from the *Times* article follow:

> The expedition went out under the direction of the United States Coast Survey. It left New-York June 28, in the surveying steamer Bibb, Lieut. MURRAY, U.S.N., commanding. The general charge was given to Prof. Stephen Alexander, of Princeton, N.J., who was aided by President F.A.P. Barnard, of the University of Mississippi… (etc). They returned here yesterday afternoon.
>
> The meeting came to order about 10 o'clock, and with little delay, Prof. ALEXANDER gave, his account of his expedition… Never in his wildest dreams had he conceived of such a scene of wild grandeur as on the fifty miles of the coast of Labrador, along which they skirted. An unbroken chain of mountains seemingly made of cast iron, with no arborescence, sent down their cold chills upon the water below from peaks covered with snow. Along the base of this barrier slept a bed of mist, held there by the laws of nature… When the weather was clear it was very clear, but it did not remain so for more than two days at a time; and they waited with great anxiety to see what the weather would be on the eventful day…. Prof. ALEXANDER was in the centre of the group, the photographer was at his side; one person counted the seconds, another the minutes. When perfectly sure that the exact minute of first contact had arrived, Prof. A. gave the signal, and the picture was taken. It proved that the belt of light nearest the moon was much brighter than the rest. Along the edge of the moon was a bluish light, which the photograph caught. Before it has been thought that this light was only in the

---

"Parts" or even separate "Books." Within this hierarchy, it struck me as wasteful that the page itself – the pause that must occur when one's fingers turn from one to the next—comes at such random moments in the narrative. Halfway through the writing of Alemeth, I decided to see if I could harness those natural page breaks and use them to advantage instead of letting them attempt a contrapuntal rhythm of their own. I liked the idea of focusing on the page as a distinct unit as I wrote. (For one thing, it eliminated the problem of orphan and widow lines, and ugly, wasted white space. I was reminded of Dylan Thomas's insistence that his "Collected Poems" be typeset just so, as he desired.) Seeing each page as a canvas on which to write actually helped my writing, I believe, for reasons I won't try to describe here, and having formatted the work into pages even as I wrote first drafts, I found various opportunities to "play" with the turning of the page. The way page 38 ends is but one example. Others involved the recognition that if I were controlling when pages would start and end as I wrote, I'd also be controlling when two pages would face each other, and when not. Pages 210 and 211, for example – the blanks ones -- would not have created the same effect had they been pages 211 and 212, not facing each other. But once I started this vision of controlled pagination, the decision led me down all sorts of difficult paths. I found myself shortening sentences, or adding paragraphs, in order to avoid those ugly widows and orphan lines. Each time I created a page that had to be on the right or the left, I added more constraint to the actual text, since two pages that had to appear immediately after the turn of the page – i.e., two pages on the left – had to be separated by an even number of other pages, even if they came fifty or a hundred pages apart from each other. The final decision to put all four "corners of the globe" onto a single page was forced on me by just such constraints. I think they'd have come across better if laid out on two opposing pages.

observer's eye, but now it is proved that there is something there, which must be studied hereafter... But the clouds prevented a thorough observation…

President BARNARD followed, with the physical side of the question. He regretted that the state of the atmosphere had prevented them from observing several phenomena, and hoped that observers in other quarters had been more successful. He saw that curious breaking-up of the lines of light between the sun and moon, just at the moment of total obscuration, described by FRANCIS BAILEY in 1837, and called "Bailey's beads."…

On passing the Straits of Belle Isle, July 7, the expedition, met with a series of optical phenomena. The irregular refractions of light were exhibited on a large scale all around the horizon, constantly changing… Animal life has almost disappeared; they found a very few land birds and a few ducks, but bagged no game. They saw no human beings, and no quadrupeds; only a few bones. The whole scene presented a grand and almost sublime Golgotha.

Prof. ALEXANDER corrected Dr. BARNARD in so far as to say that there was a little animal life, which came out most beautifully, when the sun was half covered. A little bird, sweet as a nightingale, but unknown to them, in the midst of the silence and gloom, burst out into song… Dr. BARNARD said he had forgotten to mention another animal, which was exceedingly abundant, even though the temperature was but little above the freezing-point. The mosquitoes were so thick that perhaps the swamps of Mississippi could hardly compete with that region.

Prof. ALEXANDER spoke of the magnetic variations, which were extreme. Under the influence of the eclipse, however, they were quiet.[174]

The article here titled "The Fire" was in fact the beginning of a longer article that appeared in *The Oxford Intelligencer* on 25 July, 1860 – except that the article, as eventually printed, was titled "The Fires" (plural.) *The Intelligencer* at that pointed was being issued each Wednesday, and the first fire – Colonel Brown's house – occurred on Wednesday night, the 18th – after that day's edition had been printed and distributed. After considering the flow of work in a newsroom , and realizing that pieces were being written and typeset throughout the week, I concluded it likely that the first piece – just about the fire at the Colonel's house – was written shortly after the first fire, probably on Thursday, and so titled simply "The Fire" (singular). As the week progressed and more fires occurred,[175] I imagine that new paragraphs were composed and added to the original article, and the headline was changed to "The Fires" (plural). I imagine that only toward the end of the week did Falconer then compose the additional piece, *Excitement Among Oxonians,* though both *The Fires* and that piece were printed together in the issue of July 25, 1860. To support this theory, I'd point to the fact that in the description of the Brown fire, it is attributed to "carelessness on the part of the servants," whereas, by week's end, the string of fires has clearly come to be seen as intentional arson and Howard Falconer is ready to strangle the perpetrator.

[174] The New York Times, August 10, 1860.

[175] The additional fires described at page 246 – the fires at the new steam mill, at Nathan Worley's, and at Neilson's, were all reported in the Intelligencer, prompting Howard to write "Excitement Among Oxonians," for the issue of July 25th, outraged that someone was engaged in a "determined effort" to burn down the houses of citizens and calling for "death by strangulation" to whomever was responsible.

Suspicion of Captain Boynton as the arsonist is surely speculative, but he clearly *had* become *persona non grata* in some quarters, and he was soon to be let go from the University for "unsoundness on the Slavery question," so it seemed he could well have been a suspect.

Chapter 84

Early August, 1860

The whole discussion about suspicion and evidence regarding Boynton is meant as a sort of parody on confirmation bias – especially the concept that the ability of guncotton to disappear without a trace is used to support the suspicion that Boynton had used it.

"The Slavery Problem" at page 249 is from the Oxford *Intelligencer*, 12 September, 1860. Although this is an abbreviated version of the original newspaper article, what's here is word for word the same as the original. That said, it's difficult to distinguish my decision to abbreviate the piece in my own work – for reasons of pacing and brevity – from Smith's expurgation of Gibbon, as criticized by Captain Boynton in Chapter 60. We've both left parts of our originals out, and have thereby tampered with the recording of history. The only difference may lie in our motives for the omissions. But as far as motives go, it's difficult to put my own motive above that of Smith's, when my own is simply to improve the readability of a novel I'm writing, while Smith's was nothing less than to protect the reputation of the Holy Mother Church by deleting passages where Gibbon had been overly critical of it. Smith and I are both tampering with recorded history to suit our own ends, and whether people should be judged by their motives in the first place is a question that I think defies an easy answer.

Chapter 85

Autumn 1860

An earlier piece regarding the Knights of the Golden Circle had appeared in the Intelligencer's issue of July 18, 1860. That article (briefly referenced at the top of page 244) read as follows:

> **Knights of the Golden Circle**
>
> GEN. BICKLEY has published an address to the Knights of the Golden Circle, requesting them to repair to their Texas encampment by the 15th of September. He declares the object of the association to be to Americanize and Southernize Mexico. The Knights will go to Mexico as Emigrants, under the sanction of the Mexican Government. The Order is said to number fifty thousand members.

Mexico had long outlawed slavery, and Bickley's intentions to "southernize" the country were intended to reintroduce the institution there.

That announcement was followed by the piece at page 252, which appeared in the Oxford *Intelligencer* on Wednesday, 26 September, 1860.[176] In its full version, it read as follows:

> **K. G. C.**
>
> Gen. Bickley, father of the K. G. C., paid Oxford a visit on last Thursday. At night he addressed the public in the Town Hall, and, at the close of his address, organized a Castle of the celebrated brotherhood. A number of our citizens enrolled their names among the faithful, and there is little doubt that a large number of our people will enlist under the banner of the K. G. C.
>
> Gen. Bickley is a very handsome man, and very pleasant and winning in his manner. He speaks fluently and eloquently, with a full knowledge of the subject which he discusses. His hearers, on last Thursday night, interrupted him with frequent applause, which was most vociferous when he spoke of the objects of the Order of which he is the founder and chief. We commend Gen. B. to the editorial fraternity as a gentleman eminently worthy of the highest consideration, not only as Captain-General of the K.G.C., but as a man. He is *en route* to the Rio Grande, to take command of the army now assembling on its banks. The laws will not be infringed upon.

The K.G.C. article puts the Bickley meeting ("last Thursday") on September 20th. Falconer printed other news from Bickley on October 24th, advising his castles not to send men to Mexico until after the presidential election. Howard was, in effect, serving to propagate Bickley's instructions to his follower – not, at this point at least, the normal modus operandi of a "secret society." Especially when viewed alongside the KGC coverage Falconer printed later, as he was volunteering to fight for the confederacy, the KGC pieces appear to reflect that Falconer had high hopes for Bickley's success.

Dan Doyle asserts that "in its secrecy and ceremony, its hierarchy of ranks and pompous medieval titles, and above all in its tactics of terror, the KGC foreshadowed the Ku Klux

[176] It survives in *Alemeth* as an example of what I set out to do with all my reproduced newspaper articles: it has the same font, capitalization, line breaks and hyphens as in the original – my best effort at a virtual photocopy. The version in this Supplement does not attempt that degree of near photographic likeness, relying on Microsoft Word to do the typesetting.

Klan."[177] That the hierarchy and proposed ceremony foreshadowed the KKK, I do not doubt. Apparently, if Doyle is right, they also included plans for "terror tactics." But understanding what the KGC was all about is made difficult by several factors. As David Keehn writes in his history of the KGC,

> Verifying claims regarding the Knights is sometimes difficult. They were, after all, a secret society, particularly at the upper level at which policy was established and where communications were generally oral. The KGC's front man, George Bickley, was known to exaggerate and fabricate, especially in his post-1862 accounts from prison. After May 1860, the Knights were decentralized and emerged as a loosely coordinated affiliation of state regimental commanders who did not always act uniformly.[178]

Keehn goes on to applaud the fact that some files of the KGC have survived, captured from Bickley. But he asserts that they "disclose the KGC's origins and intentions.." Keehn has just informed us that Bickley was known to exaggerate and fabricate, a fact that is strongly suggested by Falconer's coverage itself. I have to question what evidentiary value lies in documents that reflect grandiose plans and intentions, as opposed to progress toward the realization of those intentions. As the most obvious examples, Bickley's plan to invade Mexico never came to pass, and he certainly never made good on the plan to form a union with the slave-holding governments of south and central America. I haven't read Keehn's history or the records held by the National Archives, but I'm left wondering how much of what Bickley planned ever really came to pass.

Ultimately, Dan Doyle says that Colonel Brown had been one of the founding members of the States Rights Association in 1851[179] He was a major slaveholder, and clearly, by the end, a secessionist. But whether he was a member of the Oxford Castle of General Bickley's Knights of the Golden Circle is a different question, since Bickley's interest in such things as an invasion of Mexico and confederation with Brazil may have been too unrealistic for the practical-minded Brown. If Brown was as shrewd a man as I've come to understand he was, he likely would have seen through Bickley's exaggerations and unrealistic dreams.

Meanwhile, in the *Intelligencer* of Sept 26, 1860, about six weeks before the presidential election, Falconer reported that "Vigilance committees are being formed everywhere," the duty of which was "to hang up every white man convicted of insurrectionary movements."[180]

Chapter 86

October, 1860

---

[177] Doyle, *supra*, p 176.
[178] Keehn, David C., Knights of the Golden Circle: Secret Empire, Southern Secession, Civil War, Louisiana State University Press, 2013. See also the Texas Handbook of History on Line, *Knights of the Golden Circle*, https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/vbk01 "…[C]onspiracy stories associated with the Knights of the Golden Circle are now part of the historical record associated with the organization, but none of them can be reliably documented."
[179] Doyle, *supra*, p. 167.
[180] *Oxford Intelligencer*, September 26, 1860, quoting the *Holly Springs Union*.

The Court's ruling overturning the conviction of George Washington Oliver can be found at *George W. Oliver v. The State of Mississippi*, 39 Mississippi Reports 536-40.[181]

The description of Brown, Barr, and others celebrating the victory over *coq au vin flambé* is pure fiction.

Since a black man couldn't be a witness in a case against a white man, it was only in cases involving blacks that the provisions of Mississippi Slave Code, Article 63, might ever come into play. That Article provided that the penalty for negro perjury in any case punishable by death was to have an ear nailed to the pillory, and then, after an hour, cut off; then, the same with the other ear.

Chapter 87

October, 1860

October was a busy time at the Oxford cotton market. (The *Intelligencer* of October 17th reported that the streets were crowded with cotton wagons and that middling cotton was selling for 10-1/2 cents per pound; that of October 24th asserted that cotton activity was high and that the town was "like a city.") All indications are that the market was a place for business, and when business was done, for talk among men. There can be little doubt that the main subject of conversation was about the approaching election and the uncertain future it implied.

The story of the knife being thrown into the ground seemed a good way to put the state of Tennessee in context as the "border state" through which Alemeth was soon to pass.

The invitation to the BBQ at Colonel Brown's Clear Creek Plantation was printed in the *Intelligencer* of October 10th. The location may have been a last minute change due to the fact that the Colonel's house on Depot Street had just been burned down. I was most fascinated by the assertion in the newspaper notice that "the ladies especially are invited to attend," as the function was otherwise clearly intended as a political function. One imagines that such a specific invitation might have been thought important, to lure ladies to a function they might otherwise have avoided, or been excluded from. Or, that the presence of ladies would be more likely to attract men. Whatever the reasons that ladies were specifically invited, I couldn't help but think of the dynamic of the presence of the ladies (from Venus) as opposed to that of the men (from Mars) and the perhaps stereotypical notion that all the women would have been fearful for their men's safety while the knife-tossing men would have been more pro-war. The Sally Wiley speech seemed to contradict that, while putting a clear "Men Are Honor-Bound to Protect Their Women" spin on the war. At the end of the day, I couldn't help but think of the special invitation for the ladies to attend the political function other than in relation to the "Resolutions of Our Agricultural Society" which soon followed – clamping down on the activities of blacks at night. The Resolutions were printed in the issue of October 24th, four days following the BBQ. Sandwiched between them, a (fictional) young woman's encounter with a large black man in town at night seemed to provide a plausible impetus for the adoption of the stricter Resolutions.

[181] Doyle, *supra*, pp 133-134, cites Helen Tunnicliff Catterall, ed., *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro*, vol. 3 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution, 1932.) The Court case is now available on line.

Chapter 88

Tuesday, November 6, 1860

Election day was a Tuesday, and that evening *The Intelligencer* went to press. I've wondered about the decision that was made to have *The Intelligencer* published on Wednesdays, and it occurs to me that, possibly, the reason had everything to do with Howard Falconer's anticipation of this day, when he'd be guaranteed to have late-breaking news. Yet late-breaking news is best when it's a surprise. From all that I can gather, the outcome of the election was widely anticipated.

It's ironic that the issue announcing the election results is one I could not find. As I tried to understand its absence from the collection at Ole Miss, the first thought that occurred to me was that collectors had squirreled them all away, because of the historical importance of Lincoln's election. But the more I considered that possibility, the less likely it seemed. If collectors had them, then wouldn't some generous sort have allowed Ole Miss to make a microfiche copy? And more fundamentally, while Lincoln is revered today as one of our greatest Presidents, he was hardly viewed that way in 1860 Mississippi. So my second thought as to the absence of issue was that the newspapers had all been destroyed as containing abominable news. (Hence the scene in Chapter 90.) But whatever the explanation for its absence, I took it as license to imagine my own issue.

As we've seen, the telegraph was already up and running. I presume it was operating at least by the time of the first rail traffic, since it was indispensable to coordinate rail traffic and avoid collisions. At the latest it was operational as of its mention in the June 20th Intelligencer, so it served its purpose well in quickly communicating the results of the November 6, 1860 election.

American Morse Code is now obsolete, but it was the version in use in America during the civil war. My effort at using it hopefully translates as follows:

D E M O C R A T S D O I N G W E L L

-.. . -- --- .. . .-. .- - ... -.. --- .. -. --. .-- . .-.. .-..

I N R A C E S F O R C O N G R E S S

.. -. .-. .- ... .-. --- .-. .. . --- -. --. .-. . ...

(stop) M I S S I S S I P P I F O R

..--.. -- .. ..--. .--. .. ..-. --- .-.

B R E C K EN R I D G E (stop) N O R T H E RN

-... .-. . .. . -.- . -. .-. .. -.. --. . ..--.. -. --- .-. - .... . .-. -.

D E M O C R A T S F O R D O U G L A S

-.. . -- --- .. . .-. .- - ... ..-. --- .-. -.. --- ..- --. .-.. .- ...

(stop) L I N C O L N E L E C T E D (stop)

..--.. .-.. .. -. .. . --- .-.. -. . .-.. . .. . - . -.. ..--..

I included the Code in the book for three reasons: first, because I was trying to showcase the "new discoveries" of the times, it struck me as one of the ways I might bring that era to life; second, because it was fun to deal with the challenge; and third – the most important reason – because Alemeth's inability to understand the code, or indeed, even to understand Howard Falconer's shorthand notes, struck me as central to the book's themes: not only do we all tend to see things differently, we express ourselves differently too, and so have a difficult time understanding each other. It's the deconstructionist problem of T.S. Eliot's, "I find it impossible to say just what I mean." Seeing things differently, thinking of them differently, communicating them differently, are all components of the misunderstandings and disagreements that drive us apart by placing a veil over the face of Truth.

Chapter 89

November 14, 1860 – January 9, 1861

The articles printed in the Intelligencer after the election of Lincoln tell us much about what Howard Falconer thought his readers should hear. More than that, by comparison to today, when we're bombarded by so much information, there wasn't a lot to set the brain thinking in those days beyond what one read in your weekly newspaper – so even if Falconer's readers didn't necessarily agree with everything he printed, what he printed surely played a large role in the things they thought about; and with everybody in Panola and Oxford reading the same very small number of newspapers, the Intelligencer likely sowed the seeds for a great deal of what they talked about.

In addition to the examples given in *Alemeth*, the November 14th issue contained:

- An update: "It is reported that the man with the red sash, who was so extensively advertised in Mississippi papers, has been found swinging to a limb on the banks of the Pearl River."[182]
- News of the hanging of a defiant black man named Dick, who had killed his overseer the prior spring. Falconer had reported Dick's conviction on October 10th, writing then that during the trial, Dick had "[taken] things very coolly, appearing to be delighted at seeing himself the centre of so many staring eyes, winked at persons in the crowd, and spoke flippantly to the officers about "the journey home." [183] In the November 14th issue, Falconer reported that at the hanging, Dick had "urged the

[182] The red sash had been described as an emblem of support for maintenance of the union.
[183] Oxford Intelligencer, October 10, 1860. Dick's story is told by Doyle at p 173. It was with the greatest reluctance that I abandoned plans to incorporate a full retelling into *Alemeth*.

executioner to 'hurry up'; saying that he 'wanted to get to dinner in hell before the crowd down there had grabbed everything worth eating.'"

- The announcement of a meeting for the organization of "minutemen," concluding "let every man attend."
- A late-breaking proclamation by Governor Pettus convening the Legislature for November 26, to decide on a course of action. Falconer's comment: "This is just as we had hoped and expected."

The issue of November 21 contained discussion of whether Mississippians should wait for some "overt act" by the north before seceding. On December 5, 1860, it reported a speech given in Oxford on December 1 by Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus Lamar, in which Lamar suggested that southern states meet to form a new confederation; it also reported the formation of the "Lamar Rifles." And on December 12, 1860, in addition to a piece about the legislature considering secession, it reported the Thanksgiving sermon that compromises Chapter 59.

South Carolina seceded from the Union on December 20th, 1860. As of the New Year's Ball described in this chapter, it had still been the only state to do so. The 'Rhett' and 'Calhoun" referenced in this chapter are toasted as leading figures behind southern secession. John C. Calhoun, former Vice President and Senator from South Carolina, had become legendary as a supporter of slavery and southern rights. Robert Rhett had succeeded Calhoun in the Senate on Calhoun's death, and had been working toward secession of South Carolina ever since the Compromise of 1850. He was among those credited with orchestrating the series of events that actually transpired: southern Democrats split from the national party when its 1860 platform was not sufficiently pro-slavery; this inevitably resulted in the nomination of separate Democratic candidates for President, one by the Southern party and one by the Northern; this in turn guaranteed the election of Republican Lincoln; and this, in turn, effectively guaranteed southern secession – which is what Rhett had wanted all along.

The 'Merry Christmas' article was published in *The Oxford Intelligencer* on January 2, 1861. It strongly suggests that Falconer was sending a message to the north, as well as to his own readers, his purpose to express extreme confidence regarding the action that was, by that time, all but inevitable.

The Mississippi Secession Ordinance appearing at page 266 is excerpted from the original, dated January 9th, 1861. I added the State Seal to assist in conveying the solemn formality of the act.[184] Mississippi's secession made it the second state, after South Carolina, to secede.

Chapter 90

March 1-2, 1861

[184] All the state secession ordinances can be accessed on line at http://www.constitution.org/csa/ordinances_secession.htm#Mississippi. That website gives as the source of the Mississippi ordinance "Official Records, Ser. IV, vol. 1, p. 42."

The Intelligencer of January 16th had reported the secession of Alabama and Florida, with Georgia, Louisiana and Texas soon to follow. That of January 23 reported the resignation of Jacob Thompson as Secretary of the Interior. That of January 30th, contained a report on the shelling of Charleston Harbor and recommended that planters plant only half the usual cotton, devoted the rest of their fertile land to grain and the improvement of their stock. The cutback on cotton production may have resulted from the view that with cotton being "King," loss of cotton shipments to the north and to Europe would be so devastating to the Atlantic economy that the world would make peace with the south to restore it.

The January 30th Intelligencer also reported Mississippian Jeff Davis passing through Oxford, and the February 13 issue reported his election to be president of the Confederacy. On February 13th, Falconer also described the organization of troops to fight for Mississippi, composed an article arguing that the Bible itself required the south to secede, and reprinted an article from the Panola Star that called upon the ladies of that county to arm and equip a company of men – to be called "the Ladies Own" – or some similar name – and the writer of the Panola Star article concluded, "He who pens these poor lines… will gladly be the first man to respond to your call." The February 20th issue contained the text of the proposed new Constitution for the Confederacy.

March, of course, is named for Mars – the Roman God of war – and it struck me as fitting that the month would be consumed by War's imminence. The hanging of Lincoln in effigy took place in Oxford on Saturday night, March 2nd,[185] and it set the tone for a month of intense martial preparations.

[185] Oxford Intelligencer, March 6, 1861. That issue also reported the marriage of J.W. Falkner of Ripley, saying "the bridegroom will be remembered as our graduate of law class of 1860." The Falkner in question was William Faulkner's great great uncle, James Word Falkner (1834-c1874), younger brother of the Colonel Falkner after whom Faulkner's Colonel Sartoris was modeled. See Williamson, *supra*, pg 26. (I'm not sure why Williamson identifies him as a "bachelor" – probably based on the 1860 Census.)

Chapter 91

March 12, 1861

The parade and ceremony at the Cumberland Church were held ten days later, on Tuesday March 12.[186] The parade, Miss Wiley's speech, and other details of the affair were mentioned in the *Intelligencer* of March 13 and reported in greater detail in the *Mercury* on the 14th; and then reported fully in the *Intelligencer* of March 20th. The speech as quoted in the Intelligencer differed from the version reported in the Mercury, and purported to be an accurate rendition. Since the differing accounts threw into question the absolute historical "truth" of either one, I considered neither one my master and felt it natural to draw on both; however, all the lines in Sally's speech are from either the *Intelligencer* or *Mercury* version, and since a major portion of the latter was damaged before the paper was micro-fiched, most of the speech I used was from the Intelligencer. However, Sally Fox's role as wearer of the prestigious South Carolina sash was mentioned only by *The Mercury*.

According to the newspaper accounts, General Mott was the ranking officer on the train that brought the soldiers from Holly Springs to the Cumberland Church for the event. I have not been able to determine whether this was General A. G. Mott, of the 1st Regiment of Mississippi, or General A. Mott, of the 2d Battalion, MS Infantry, (State Troops), or whether A. G. Mott, of the first, and A. Mott, of the second, were, as I suspect, the same person.

According to the *Mercury* account, the parade was followed by a meal at Robinson's University Hotel. Given that location and certain comments made by Howard Falconer in the Intelligencer, I suspect this meal was at the invitation of Falconer (who was resident at the hotel) and Colonel Brown:

> THE SUPPER.
>
> The visitors were invited to the University Hotel to supper. It is unnecessary to tell anybody about here that Col. Robinson "knows how to keep a hotel," and that the volunteers were furnished with the very best that he had in the house. Perhaps many of them were not promptly waited upon, which they of course saw was in consequence of the great number in the dining room. They all, however, obtained an excellent supper, and a highly flavored Havana upon their exit from the room.

H.W. Walker, identified in both sources as having spoken briefly at the end of the ceremony, was identified in both papers as a Lieutenant of the Jeff Davis Rifles. This was surely the same Harvey Washington Walter, now 43 years old, who had married Fredonia Brown. He was presumably the same Harvey Washington Walter who was a signer of the Mississippi secession ordinance; he was the same, one assumes, as the Harvey Washington Walter at whose house

[186] Only now, after *Alemeth*'s printing, do I notice that the novel doesn't make the ten day gap since the effigy on March 2nd clear; the novel may even imply that the Cumberland church ceremony occurred the same evening as the burning in effigy; I apologize for that misleading implication.

Mrs. Ulysses S. Grant stayed at, in Holly Springs, during the 1862 Yankee invasion.[187] It would seem that the older, wealthy man was looking for a position of responsibility, and was only briefly a lieutenant with the Jeff Davis Rifles. The Intelligencer reported that Chalmer, Harris and Walter all gave "eloquent and stirring speeches, eliciting hearty and enthusiastic applause." The *Mercury*'s report of Walter's brief speech was not flattering, making one wonder if that paper's animosity toward Colonel Brown and the University extended to the Colonel's son-in-law:

> Lieutenant H. W. Walter, of the Jeff. Davis Rifles, succeeded Capt. Harris upon the stand. He said that the best speech he could make would be to dismiss the audience from the great heat in the room. He alluded to the flag presented and its defence, the language employed in the latter being in bad taste, to say the least of it. The company did not like that portion of his remarks at all, but we are sure he did not intend to offend them.

The question of where, and when, Alemeth may have eaten of Miss Sally's cake – as he clearly had, based on his 1862 letter – seemed as likely as anything to have been at a reception in honor of the newlyweds, Sally Wiley and David Hubbard.[188] The invitation on pg 272 is therefore my own invention, part of a design to give background to the reference to her cake appearing in Alemeth's letter. I don't think it unlikely that Sally Fox – of the same high social class as Miss Wiley, and honored with the South Carolina sash at the flag ceremony – would have given a reception for that ceremony's speaker, even if she was only seventeen.

The reference to "Uncle Buck" on pg 274 could well be a slip on my part. If my speculation about the relationship between Sally Fox and W.F. Avant is correct, Sally was Avant's cousin, not his niece. But you never know, she might have called him "Uncle Buck" in deference to his older age and financial support. You just never know.

Call for More Troops for Mississippi was in *The Oxford Intelligencer* on 10 April, 1861.

"War! War!! War!!!" was the *Intelligencer* headline on 17 April, 1861.

Chapter 92

April 17-27, 1861

The University Grays were mustered in on April 23rd, 1861, and the Lamar Rifles were ordered north on April 27th, 1861. The information about Mary Ann Webster's husband, James

[187] This could not be Harvey Washington Walter's son by Fredonia, Harvey Junior, who was not born until 1862, and I can find no other younger H. W. Walter anywhere.

[188] According to the Oxford Intelligencer of March 27, 1861, the marriage of David Hubbard to Sally Wiley was on Thursday, March 24. The problem with that is that the 24th was not a Thursday, but a Sunday. I believe the marriage actually occurred on Thursday, March 21, and one family tree on Ancestry.com so has it. I imagine that whoever was setting the type at *The Intelligencer* on that occasion simply made an error, so I felt comfortable supposing that the reception in honor of the newlyweds occurred on Sunday the 24th.

Loughborough, is historically accurate as best as I've been able to put it together from numerous sources. A visit from the new Mrs. Loughborough at this particular time is speculative, but from her own writings, it's clear she had visited Oxford, probably a number of times, and given the situation in Missouri a visit at this time seemed likely.

The very first enlistees, including Howard Falconer, had enlisted several weeks before Alemeth did, and that fact told me he couldn't have been as anxious as someone like Falconer to fight for the south. I saw Alemeth as wrestling a bit with the decision of whether to enlist. And as I found myself considering what opinions different characters likely had on the matter, it was easy to imagine what it was like for Alemeth to listen to those opinions.

This dovetailed nicely with an idea that had been percolating since the very earliest days of thinking about Alemeth – that all ideas are like the voices of Sirens. The Siren metaphor – explicitly referenced in *Alemeth* Chapters 55 and 121 — actually appeared first in Chapter 2, with the appearance of the parrots. The Siren metaphor was in fact so thematically important to me that the parrot image on page 11 was actually the first version of the novel's cover. The Sirens were said to have the bodies of birds, so Clio and Calliope seemed apt images of them. The story of Odysseus having his crew lash him to the mast to keep him from falling prey to the attractive voices of the Sirens has always been one of my favorite Homeric tales, because it captures, for me, the way a voice (which, in our brains, I consider the *de facto* equivalent of an idea) can grow to be irresistibly attractive. Ideas, like voices, begin as faraway, unfamiliar things, when we're first exposed to them; but as we get closer to them, as they lose their unfamiliarity, they can become ever more attractive until we accept them and consider them "fact" – at which point, we seem unable to question them further. In that sense, they have overtaken us, much as the Sirens overtook passing sailors. In Chapter 121, Gordon explains this view in my behalf.

In any case, since the Siren idea was central, it seemed to culminate in Alemeth's pivotal decision about what to do with his life – his decision to "volunteer" (i.e., etymologically, to exercise his own will). Was he exercising that will for his father? His family? For the whole South? Regardless of how that question was answered, it seemed thematically ironic to me that the decision to exercise one's own will becomes, here, a matter of deciding who or what else to serve. In a sense, then, Chapter 92 is the novel's pivotal chapter, as Alemeth finally makes a decision that amounts to asserting himself, even if it's a matter of selecting among the opinions of others regarding what interest, other than himself, deserves his commitment.

Of the many research discoveries that fascinated me, few were more impactful on my thinking than discovering the name of Alemeth's company, the Panola *Vindicators*. In English, to "vindicate" something is to prove it to be right, or to justify it – in that sense alone I'd have come to appreciate how suitable the name was for a book about the perils of enslavement by certitude. The name captured precisely what I was striving for, in my study of what Alemeth was doing when he chose to vindicate the southern cause. But my fascination grew deeper. English "to vindicate" comes from Latin *vindicare*, which is itself a combination of the Latin roots "vim" and "dicare." *Vim* means strength or force; *dicare* to assert. *Vindicare*, therefore,

has to do with assertions by force – again, rather suitable ideas for a book in which white southerners, having subjugated black slaves, are protesting against a government that seeks to subjugate them, and everyone is prepared to use force. The noun form in Latin, *vindex*, was a surety – someone who vouched for the truth of something by "putting his money where his mouth was," so to speak. Various Latin usages of *vindicare* include such diverse ideas as appropriating or laying claim to property by threat of force, setting free or liberating by force, protecting by force, and avenging or punishing by force – so that the word essentially boils down to insisting on any outcome to the point of willingness to use force to press one's point. Ironically, a *vindicta* came to mean a manumission staff, "the rod with which the praetor touched the slave who was to be manumitted," as if, in freeing the slave, the praetor was symbolically pointing out that even the slave's freedom was possible only by the authority and mercy inherent in the military power of the state.[189]

All these currents of thought are what, in the end, unify *Alemeth*, for me: The "Truth" being elusive, we can't discern, with certainty, the difference between fiction and fact; we have different desires and points of view; we have difficulty understanding each other. Yet, despite all the reasons for our uncertainty, at the end of the day, we seek to "have things our way." The degree of influence, pressure, or force we are willing to use to "have things our way" in the face of the possibility we're wrong seems subsumed in the question of whether Alemeth is willing to devote himself to vindicating *anything* – and if so, what. Resistance to submission – the assertion of freedom and independence – seemed an apt idea for him to want to vindicate, never mind that, as with all of us, resistance to the authority of the north generally means pledging obedience to the south.

Chapter 93

April 27 – mid-May, 1861

The attempts to portray the rhythms of military drill are based primarily on the *Manual for Instruction for the Volunteers and Militia of the Confederate States*.[190] Though I was never in so much as a marching band myself, I've seen enough of marching and drilling to appreciate how rhythmic it can all be, and as someone who has always been fascinated by the rhythms of the written word, I had a lot of fun trying to capture the rhythm of military life in this chapter and elsewhere in Alemeth.

The "New School" of the Presbyterian Church had split as a result of the Dred Scott decision in 1857, and in the spring of 1861 it was the Old School's turn. It was the custom of the Old School Presbyterian Church to alternate the annual meetings of its General Assembly, one in a northern state, the next in a southern. The seventy-third general assembly met in Philadelphia on Thursday, May 16, 1861, and with a state of war having been declared, a large number of representatives from southern churches were not present. Gardiner Spring, D.D., of the New

[189] I refer to those usages listed in *The Classic Latin Dictionary*, Follett Publishing Co., Chicago, 1961

[190] Gilham, William, *Manual for Instruction for the Volunteers and Militia of the Confederate States*, West & Johnson, Richmond, VA, 1861, pp 58-75

York Presbytery, offered a resolution that the General Assembly of the church express its devotion to the Union and its loyalty to the Government. Charles Hodge, D.D., of the New Brunswick Presbytery, offered a resolution pointing out that the Presbyterian church was the last evangelical church body not "rent asunder" by the north-south divide, and resolving that, while its members present were all loyal to the Constitution, the Assembly should refrain from endorsing the Union of states due to the absence of so many Southern elders, and that the Assembly, "comprehend[ing] the entire Presbyterian church, irrespective of geographical lines or political opinion," should refrain from action likely to result in a division of the church.
Hodge's motion lost, and the Gardiner-Spring motion went to Committee. The northern majority's first proposed resolution called for the Assembly to declare it the obligation of its elders to "maintain the Constitution of these United States" in the full exercise of its "legitimate" powers, and "to preserve our beloved Union unimpaired."

The motion lost. Apparently, there were members who felt it didn't go far enough. One imagines that Southern secessionists felt some northern interpretations of the constitution were not "legitimate" interpretations, and the resolutions limitation of support to the "legitimate" powers of the federal government might have struck them as an inappropriate loophole. In the wake of that version's defeat, a second version was prepared and approved. This one declared the obligation not only to promote and perpetuate the integrity of the United States, but to "strengthen, uphold and encourage the Federal Government in the exercise of all its functions…" That resolution as adopted by a vote of 156 to 66.[191] The secession of the southern Old School Presbyterian churches quickly followed. I presume that Sand Springs Church was among them.

Notably, in Washington at this time, the United States Senate saw daily debates about last ditch efforts to avoid war – a December 4, 1860 speech by President Buchanan arguing for the preservation of slavery in the south; a December 13th, 1860 speech by Andrew Johnson proposing to make slavery illegal in the north, while strongly protecting it by law in the south; a December 31, 1860 resolution by Senator Wilson directing the Secretary of War to report to the Senate on the whereabouts of the arms in federal armories; the Mar 4 1861 inaugural address of President Lincoln; the July 5, 1861 message from Lincoln reporting on what he had done since inauguration and asking for 400,000 men and $400 million dollars to suppress the rebellion.[192]

Frank Duval, now editing *the Intelligencer* after Howard Falconer's departure, printed three more short pieces about the K.G.C. in the issue of May 1, 1861. The first of these reported on KGC activities in Kentucky; the second was an "order" issued by George Chilton, Marshall of the Texas Division of the K.G.C., directed to the captains of each Castle in Texas, ordering them to meet him in Galveston with a complete muster roll of companies; the third was a short statement by Bickley himself, concluding, "Let no member of the Order now flinch."

---

[191] *The Presbyterian Historical Almanac and Annual Remembrance of the Church for 1862*, by Joseph M. Wilson (Philadelphia: Joseph M. Wilson, 1862), pp. 69 - 79. See http://www.pcahistory.org/documents/gardinerspring.html

[192] Such proceedings, recorded in the Congressional Record, would all have been reported by my paternal ancestors, Dominick, Dennis, James and Edward V. Murphy, who together constituted the bulk of the official reporting staff of the U.S. Senate at the time.

Chapter 94

Late May, 1861

I debated whether to have Sally Fox reading Mary Shelley's novel, *Falkner*. (The 1837 novel was hardly late-breaking news.) But Gordon giving her the book "to remember him by" seemed plausible, and if Sally Fox liked the book's theme of reconciliation, it seemed to plant the right seed of doubt regarding her innermost views. Besides, Shelley's more famous novel, *Frankenstein*, has long been one of my favorites, and I simply couldn't resist including yet another *Falkner* in *Alemeth*.

The order from W. H. Brown directing the Vindicators to Corinth was dated at Jackson, Mississippi on May 21, 1861. My rendition omits the names of the other forty-nine companies ordered up in addition to the Vindicators, and two additional points. "An officer from each company will be sent forthwith to report to these headquarters the condition and strength of their companies," and "The captains of the several companies are charged with the execution of this order."[193] The design on the page began with a photograph of a single soldier, which I modified in Photoshop and then duplicated.

"A Gun for the Times" was reprinted in *The Oxford Intelligencer* of May 29, 1861.

According to Robert Moore's *A Life for the Confederacy*,[194] the Vindicators arrived in Corinth on the evening of May 30st. That would make Alemeth's last night with Sally Fox, in Oxford, the night of Wednesday, May 29th – the same day as the last issue of the Intelligencer.[195]

Chapter 95

May 30, 1861

Also ordered to Corinth, along with the Vindicators, were 49 other companies. Included in that order and therefore already on the train taken by the Vindicators may have been the McClung Rifles, the Water Valley Rifle Guards, The Grenada Rifles, The Yalobusha Rifles, The Quitman Rifles, or the Choctaw Guards. The Buena Vista Rifles, from Chickasaw County, which became Co A of the 17th, were not likely on the same train, as they apparently arrived in Corinth the following day, the 31st. Additional soldiers picked up in Holly Springs might have included: the Mississippi Rangers, the Confederate Rifles, the Magnolia Guards, the Water Valley Rifle Guards, the Confederate Guards. Which of these other units actually shared the train with the Vindicators I do not know. The mood of the human cargo I can only imagine. The one thing I feel sure of is that the trip marked a huge change in Alemeth's life, and for the

[193] Source: Ainsworth, Fred, Kirkley, Joseph, et al., *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series I, Vol. LII, Part II, Confederate Correspondence, Government Printing Office, Washington, 1898,* pp. 105-106. See https://archive.org/details/cu31924077725954

[194] Robert Augustus Moore, *A Life for the Confederacy: as Recorded in the Pocket Diaries of Private Robert A. Moore, Co. G., 17th MS Regiment, Confederate Guards*, Holly Springs, MS, 1959. At Library of Richmond, Call No. E605.M83.

[195] It seems that, with its typesetter gone, the paper could no longer survive. ☺

duration of the journey, I tried to capture that by reciting how much, in Alemeth's eyes, would have been unfamiliar.

Chapter 96

May 30 – June 18, 1861

The text in this chapter attempt to explain the strategic importance of the Memphis and Charleston Railroad. The map at page 290 is of my creation, superimposing the railroad on a topographic map of the region to display graphically how the railroad "sewed" the south together and how Corinth, at the northern border of Mississippi, was that state's "front line" of defense.

At Camp Mott, outside Corinth, the companies that had organized themselves in their home counties were placed into the service of the Confederacy. Several of those units listed above were placed into the 15th Mississippi Infantry regiment. Companies comprising the 17th Mississippi were:

Company A - The Buena Vista Rifles, from Chickasaw County
Company B - The Mississippi Rangers, from Marshall County
Company C – The Quitman Grays, from Pontotoc County
Company D – The Rough and Readies, from Pontotoc County
Company E – The Burnsville Blues, from Tishomingo County
Company F – The Sam Benton Relief Rifles, from Marshall County
Company G – The Confederate Guards, from Marshall County
Company H – The Vindicators, from Panola County
Company I – The Pettus Rifles, from DeSoto County
Company K – The Magnolia Guards, from Calhoun County

The companies elected officers between June 4 and June 6, and were mustered into Confederate service on June 7. The daily schedule at camp in Corinth is based on the schedule as given in the diary of Robert Moore, who was in the Confederate Guards, which became Company G of the 17th MS.[196] As Company G was presumably deployed close to the Company H, Moore's diary offers a near daily account of the war as it might have related to Alemeth Byers.[197]

According to Moore, the first casualty suffered by the 17th Mississippi occurred in Corinth, in early June: George Moore, of the Confederate Guards, no apparent relation to the diarist, died of bilious fever and diarrhea. The 17th's orders to head north, to Knoxville, came in to Corinth on June 11th. The regiment was split into two separate trains for the trip north. While *en route* they got new orders to proceed to Lynchburg, at which place they arrived on June 17th. They arrived at Manassas Junction at 9:30 a.m. on 18 June, 1861. The map at page 293 uses a coastline adapted from some other map, but is otherwise of my own creation.

"Bandages – Army Patterns" at page 294 had appeared in the final issue of *The Intelligencer* on May 29th. The background image on page 294 is supposed to represent the relative sizes –

[196] Moore, Robert Augustus, supra.
[197] Unless otherwise indicated, my sense of the whereabouts of the 17th is largely based on either Moore's diary or Alemeth's own letters, coordinated with published accounts of Confederate orders of battle.

and the total count, by size – of the bandages recommended in the *Intelligencer* article. As I've already said, one's own motives are among the hardest things for a person to understand.

Chapter 97

About July 1, 1861

This chapter is the first that mentions the impact of the war on the prices of various goods. There's no doubt that the war had a severe impact on both prices and availability, but the determination of specifics is a major problem, due to huge fluctuations based on time and geography. Due to wartime factors such as reduced production capacities, blockades, military prioritization, destroyed railroads and other transportation difficulties, there might be a scarcity of one item everywhere (increasing the price), or a surplus of a good at its point of production (reducing its price) and a scarcity elsewhere. Some published sources reflect the prices of goods without specifying where the prices were in effect.[198] Wherever possible, the prices reflected in *Alemeth* were taken from Alemeth's letters, local newspapers, and other published sources which seemed likely to reflect a current and *local* price.

The armory in Saint Louis had been built on the bluffs at Jefferson Barracks, where the man to whom Dred Scott had first been sold (Dr. John Emerson) had worked as a doctor. I suspect it's possible that Doctor Ashbel Webster also worked there at some point. It was, in any case, close to the Webster house in Carondelet. It was the largest armory in any of the slave-holding states, and even prior to formal secession, southern states had been ordering large quantities of muskets and rifles from it, in anticipation of war. In March 1861, Missouri's Constitutional Convention voted to stay in the Union, but *not* to supply weapons or men to *either* side if war broke out. The security of the munitions depot at Jefferson Barracks was immediately in sharp question.

The federal "raid" there occurred on April 29th, when a Union army captain, under orders from top Union brass, transported 21,000 of the 30,000 weapons that had been stored there on a steamboat to Illinois. Missouri's Governor, Claiborne Jackson, called up militia to defend the state against a federal invasion, and was suspected of planning to take over the arsenal. (His agents promised Confederate President Jefferson Davis that if Confederate troops entered Missouri, his Missouri militia would fight alongside them to repel the Yankees.) When discussion failed to reach produce agreement between federal military commanders and the state government, war had effectively broken out in the state. On June 17th, federal troops had routed the Missouri militia at the battle of Boonville. It was a natural time for Missourans loyal to the south to seek refuge in Oxford.

---

[198] For example, one helpful source giving prices for lots of goods, was War Industries Board, *A Comparison of Prices During the Civil War and Present War* Govt. Printing Office, Washington, 1918, accessed at https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=mIEuAAAAYAAJ&printsec&pg=GBS.PA1 but that source seems to report prices without regarding to location and with a strong New York (or at least northern) orientation. Prices in New York often had nothing to do with prices of the same goods in rebel-held Virginia or Mississippi. But a farmer successfully growing a crop might have a surplus and no way to get it to market, and might be willing to give it away.

Amzi and Eliza had not had a child since Eliza's sixth child Laura (Amzi's ninth), in 1858. He was now 59 and she was 40. But now, a war was on. We know that they conceived another child around the first of July, 1861, and this chapter is my effort to imagine how it happened. The event was of some importance to me, since the conception in question was that of my great grandmother, so I would not exist had this event not occurred.

The Feast of the Visitation is celebrated on the 31st of May in modern Christian practice, but in 1861, it was celebrated on the second of July.

Chapter 98

June 23 to October 26, 1861

There are two major factors that complicate the effort to understand Alemeth Byers' war service. The first pertains to his regiment (the 17th Mississippi) and company (Company H, the Panola Vindicators.) Most of the military records and histories of the war – whether general orders, contemporaneous reports by general staff, or later-written histories, describe action at high levels, often referring simply to the movement of major divisions and brigades by the name of the commanding generals, and not too often getting down to the level of individual regiments, much less companies. If Alemeth's 17th Mississippi Infantry had always been a part of a certain Brigade which was always commanded by the same Brigadier General reporting to the same Major General, keeping track of the location of that regiment would be a much simpler matter. However, in the exigencies of war, not only do commanders change, but units become detached. At any given time, the 17th Infantry might have been detached from its usual Brigade and assigned to some special task, under the command of some different officer. Similarly, while Company H, the Vindicators, generally remained with the rest of the 17th, there may have been times that it was detached and operating apart from its regiment. Generally speaking, I've assumed that the Vindicators remained with the rest of the 17th, and that the 17th remained with the rest of its Brigade, unless I've found evidence to the contrary. Comparing the general "histories" to specific sources like Alemeth's own letters and Private Moore's diary, I've became relatively confident in my understanding of the whereabouts and activities of the 17th Mississippi during the war,[199] and that understanding is what's found in *Alemeth.* Company H, the Vindicators, appear, for the most part, to have remained with the 17th, with two possible question marks relevant to *Alemeth*: the initial transportation from Corinth to Manassas; and the action during the battle of Fredericksburg.[200]

The second factor pertains to Alemeth individually, i.e., whether he was actually with his regiment at any particular time. This is largely a matter of understanding his letters home, which

[199] One possible exception is in the latter stages of the 7 Days Campaign; see comments regarding Chapter 104, below.
[200] The Brigade was divided, taking separate trains north from Corinth in June of 1861, and I was not able to find evidence on which units went north under which commander. During the battle of Fredericksburg, different companies were attached to different commanders and operated independently – see comments re chapter 108, below.

are presumably the very best evidence of his whereabouts and activities, and his Compiled Military Service Record (CMSR) at the National Archives. As explained by the Archives,

> The CMSR is an envelope (a jacket) containing one or more cards. These cards typically indicate that the soldier was present or absent during a certain period of time. Other cards may indicate the date of enlistment and discharge, amount of bounty paid him, and other information such as wounds received during battle or hospitalization for injury or illness….
>
> The War Department compiled the CMSRs from the original muster rolls and other records some years after the war to permit more rapid and efficient checking of military and medical records in connection with claims for pensions and other veterans' benefits. The abstracts were so carefully prepared that it is rarely necessary to consult the original muster rolls and other records from which they were made. When the War Department created CMSRs at the turn of the century, information from company muster rolls, regimental returns, descriptive books, hospital rolls, and other records was copied verbatim onto cards.[201]

As reflected above, the government emphasizes that the CMSR's were "carefully prepared." However, after thoroughly reviewing the CMSR for Alemeth Byers of Company H of the 17th Mississippi Infantry, it is my view that the jacket reflects cards of two different individuals; that most of them do indeed refer to the John Alemeth Byers that is the subject of *Alemeth*, but that some of the cards relate to another person. It has been several years now since I actually reviewed the jacket contents, but based on my recollection and notes, the cards sometimes refer to John Alemeth Byers, sometimes to J.A. Byers, sometimes to Jno.A. Byars, and if memory serves, sometimes even to names like A.J. Byars or simply J. Byars or Barrs, and others to J.J. Byars *of Company A.* It is possible that all these records did refer to our Alemeth Byers, and that (never mentioned in his letters) he spent time as a member of Company A. But there were also instances in which one card appeared to contradict another, leaving me to consider which of the alternative versions seemed more likely accurate based on surrounding context and (once again) inferences drawn from conflicting pieces of evidence. In such cases, I couldn't determine whether one of the conflicting records did refer to our Alemeth but was simply incorrect, or whether one of the records referred to a different soldier altogether. In short, I did not always feel able to reach firm conclusions about cards I felt did not necessarily pertain to Alemeth.

This doubt became especially relevant pertaining to Alemeth's injuries and absences from the rest of his unit, and they were complicated by the fact that once released from a hospital, a soldier like Alemeth often was essentially on his own as he attempted to reconnect with his unit; knowing exactly when that reconnection occurred was sometimes problematic.

All that said, a CMSR card for John A. Byers, age 25, dated April 27, 1861, shows his being mustered into service for the State of Mississippi on that date; another card shows him "joined for duty and enrolled May 27, 1861, at Corinth, for twelve months, by George P. Foote." A card shows that "Jno A. Byars," age 25, was mustered into Confederate Service at Corinth on June 7th, and that he had traveled 155 miles from his home to reach camp there. That card also says,

[201] National Archives website at https://www.archives.gov/research/military/civil-war/resources.html#cmsr accessed April 7, 2017.

"Absent on furlough in charge of the sick." Another marks Jno A. Byars "present" and paid between June 7 and August 19, 1861.

On June 20, Private Moore's diary recorded another death in the regiment: the accidental death of private Stephen T. Hale. On June 21, he recorded the regiment's assignment to a new commanding general, D. R. Jones. On Sunday, June 23, he described an early morning false alarm that had the soldiers up and ready to fight but, as it turned out, for no reason. All these were included in early drafts of *Alemeth*, but omitted from the final so as to increase the pace of the action. Wednesday, June 26, 1861, is when the hard rains began.

What follows is the full text of a letter Alemeth wrote to Amzi on July 12, 1861. It is the first of Alemeth's letters home of which I'm aware[202] (though it does not read as if it was the first one he wrote).

> Head Quarters, Centerville Va
>
> July 12th, 1861
>
> Dear Father,
>
> I have left Charlottesville. I thought I would stay there till I received a letter from you. When I got to the regiment it was late in the evening, and found they had to march the next morning for Leesburg, about 20 miles farther, only 3 miles from the Potomac. A great many troops have gone on there. Out of the regiment about a hundred & fifty were left behind, some sick, some up but not stout enough to march. I for one stayed behind as I did not think it pruden[t] for me to take so long a march. The Doctor did not have me on the sick list in time time [sic] to draw prvisions [sic] for me. Peter & Andrew Dickens are with me in the same fix. We buy what we eat. Cruse Gouter is here quite sick, but not dangerous. Centerville is about 12 miles from Manassas. I left word with Dr Wise to send my letters to me that may be sent to Charlottesville. When I got back here I found Capt Foote had 3 letters for me, one from Dora, Ludie, and sister Mollie, he had received them while I was absent. I have written several times home but directed to Bynum, I will direct them after this to Watervaley, you can send Pack there most any day & and mail yours there too. I can get them quicker. You will continue to direct your letters to Manassas Junction as I do not know where I will find the boys when I leave here. It would amuse you all to see Peter & I cleaning a chicken for our simple meal. All we have to eat is chicken & rice a little bean left in camp the chickens we buy from 20 to 25 cts apiece. we stew the rice & chicken together with a little pickle pork in it. This we eat without bread, coffee, or milk. We buy milk when we get it from 30 to 40 cts a gal. We will folow [sic] our men when ever we can. Tell Ludie & Dora I wrote to them while at

[202] For many years, I had proceeded on the assumption that the six letters written by Alemeth which my grandmother, Corinne Logan, had passed on to my Aunt Mary Anna Rogers were the sole surviving letters Alemeth had written home. (I had seen the actual letters in the 1970's, but Mary Anna Rogers had then donated them to the Mississippi Archives in Jackson. As I wrote *Alemeth*, I had only the typescripts she prepared from the originals to work with.) There were many reasons the writing of Alemeth stretched out for seven years; by the time it was finished, I was quite worn out by all the delays. Ironically, about a week before I was ready to send the final book to the printer, I heard from second cousin Carol Lehr that she had a different letter, one that I did not have. And then she found others. By the time she was through, she had sent me typescripts of ten additional letters. Thankfully, I had reconstructed Alemeth's wartime service well enough that the new letters didn't require significant changes to the text – with one major exception that further delayed the finalization and printing of the book. My guess is that, had I had this letter of July 12th all along, I'd have included it in Alemeth, and some of its details would have become elements of the plot. But as it was, I didn't have this letter, or know of its existence, until the book was ready to go to print. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night, having dreamt that still more letters have yet to surface, revealing errors in my reconstruction of Alemeth's life. I find it fascinating the way time changes history, both making it less clear, as documents and sources are lost or forgotten, and more clear, when new evidence comes to light. There's no way of knowing what changes lie ahead in our understanding of the past.

Charlottesville. I will answer them when I can, & and have something to write about. I wish you could find some one comeing [sic] up here then you could send me some thing I have seen several from Panola. The only way to find out where we were would be to enquire of the comissary [sic] at the junction as we are all the while moving about. I no [sic] news now to write. I will write again soon. You must not expect long letters. I have no way to write only on my lap sometimes on a barrel head or drum head. One of our men died of a wound [to] day before yesterday he lived in the botom [sic] near Mr Hawkins. His name was Dupree. Hard times have just commenced and will continue to grow worse. We have a great deal of wet weather now. Pa please write to me it does me so much good to hear from home. I have nothing of interest to write a[t] present. Give my love to Ma, Sister Lou & Dora, and all the children. Also tell the negroes all howdie. Now receive a son's best love

Your affectionate son
J. A Byers
Has Uncle come home yet.
All of our neighborhood boys are tolerable well at present. I & Peter are worst off.[203]

A CMSR card dated July 19, 1861, shows "J.A. Byers" of Company H appearing on the register of the CSA General Hospital in Charlottesville with the designation "measles." That card says he was admitted on July 19, 1861, and "returned to duty" on August 8, 1861. Alemeth's letter of July 29th appears consistent with his hospitalization and absence from the major action at the Battle of Bull Run (Manassas) on July 21.

The following table shows all of Alemeth's letters home which (to my knowledge) have survived. Most of those used in *Alemeth* are letters passed down to me from my grandmother and aunt; those received from Carol Lehr after the text was essentially finalized were generally checked to make sure they didn't reveal error in what I'd written, but they were not typically made a part of the text, which I thought was essentially finished.

Date	To	Written from	At page	Comment
7/12/61	Father	Centreville		Rec'd from Carol Lehr at last minute, not included. This letter mentions several other soldiers by name; describes crude attempts at cooking; comments on prices; says he has already written letters from Charlottesville
7/29/61	Sister	Charlottesville	298	Excerpted as described here
10/26/61	Father & Mother	Camp, 6 mi from Leesburg	301	
11/4/61	Father	Camp, 8 mi from Lessburg		Rec'd from Carol Lehr at last minute, not included.
2/17/62	Sister (Dora)	Camp near Leesburg		Rec'd from Carol Lehr at last minute, not included.
6/9/62	Mother	Camp on the Chickahominy, near Richmond		Rec'd from Carol Lehr at last minute, not included.
6/14/62	Sister	Camp, 5 mi east of Richmond	317	
2/8/63	Uncle Johnson	Fredericksburg		Rec'd from Carol Lehr at last minute, not included.
6/6/64	Father	Near Richmond	369	Rec'd from Carol Lehr at last minute, but included.

[203] I'm not sure, but assume that this typescript was prepared by Frances Maginnis. I have not seen the original.

Undated, prob 6/19/64	Sister	Prob Petersburg		Rec'd from Carol Lehr at last minute, not included. "The balls are flying all around and over me while I write."
7/7/64	Sister	Petersburg	374	
7/10/64	Father	Petersburg	376	Rec'd from Carol Lehr at last minute; included because I thought the content was important, especially "I am reconciled to whatsoever is my fate; God will deal with me."
7/16/64	Sister	Petersburg		Rec'd from Carol Lehr at last minute, not included.
7/28/64	Mother	Below Richmond	378	
Undated; prob 8/10/64	Pa	Near Culpepper	385	"I will send [Gilbert] home when the campaign is over."
10/7-10/13/64	Sister	Harrisonburg/Strasburg	389	Rec'd from Carol Lehr at last minute, but included because it followed Alemeth all the way to Strasburg.

Reviewing Alemeth's letters home makes a good time for a comment about my approach to the historical fiction genre. In writing *Alemeth*, I felt free to be inventive as long as the invention seemed consistent with my historical research; in this respect, I claim nothing unique about what I set out to do. But there seem to be two prevalent types of historical fiction: a biographical type that typically deals with historical figures about whom a great deal is known. This type fills in gaps or departs from them in obvious ways (see Seth Grahame-Smith's *Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Hunter*, as an extreme example.) Another sort of historical fiction deals with fictional characters appearing against historical backgrounds. (Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* or Falkner's Colonel Sartoris might typify that genre.) In *Alemeth*, I was dealing with neither sort of main character: while people like Alexander Pegues, Jacob Thompson and Colonel Brown would probably have been considered somewhat famous in their day, my major characters – Amzi, Eliza, and Alemeth, to mention the obvious examples – never sought public office or achieved fame. "History," in the sense of newspapers accounts, history professors, biographies and Hollywood movies, has ignored them. But they were real people I chose as my main subjects, and the lack of "traditional" historical treatments did not mean there was a complete lack of information publicly available. Especially in this information age, it has become remarkably easy to access information from old newspapers, census records, court records, etc, from which the process of drawing inferences can begin. In a sense, even the most private of individuals is becoming a public figure for anyone wishing to explore the available information.[204] That created the opportunity for a challenge, which was to use *everything* my research unveiled about my three main characters as a part of the story. I accepted that challenge. I set out to voluntarily bind myself, demanding that I incorporate everything I learned about them. As I envisioned it, narrow as this historical focus would be, it would be a story made out of whatever their surviving history revealed.

[204] Thomas Pynchon may have striven to be an exception, but he, most certainly, is a "public figure" more famous than Alemeth Byers, Leander McKinney, or Sally Fox.

Neil Gaiman's tale, *The Mapmaker*, shows why I'd never have adopted such a strategy with main characters about whom more is known.[205] In writing a biography of a celebrity, there is so much known that reducing it to a book necessarily requires an enormous amount of exclusion – deciding what to include from among the huge storehouse of information your research has revealed will define your own telling of the story. Only with relatively unknown characters could a writer afford to adopt a strategy of including *everything* unveiled about them in the historical record. So that was the strategy I selected here: not to create a story, but to discover the one that had actually occurred, and then apply the best-story-telling techniques I could manage to tell it.

By way of an example, a reference in one of John Strong's early letters to sending parrots home from the Caribbean caused me to incorporate Caribbean parrots in my story. A question in another of his letters about Mary Ann's eyes required that I make something in my story of the history of Mary Ann's eyes. So too regarding everything I could learn about Leander McKinney, Amzi, and Eliza Strong Byers. Colonel James Brown, about whom there was more information available, began to test the limits of the strategy. His donations to Mount Sylvan Academy and Sand Springs Church are documented pieces of history, as is the cutting off of his horse's tail, his various dealings as Ole Miss trustee in charge of campus construction, and of course, his political affairs. I tried to include them *all*, but the difficulty of doing so began to trouble me, and eventually, I kept a few things about him out.

The newspaper excerpts are perhaps the most obvious examples of the slavishness by which I set out to tell my story not so much by adding to history as by presenting it as it occurred. But while I hoped at first that I could entirely adhere to that strategy, I eventually had to compromise it, especially when I got to the letters Alemeth sent home from the front. They simply provided too much information.

The first of these letters incorporated in Alemeth is that of July 29th, 1861, written to his sister. The actual letter begins, "As I have written several letters home lately." A later line read, "I have heard nothing more than what I said in letters before this." Since the July 29th letter was the first I was including in the novel, and all those prior letters had not survived, I removed the references to them in order to avoid a distraction to the reader. Other letters contained references to people about whom I could not find any information – and there were lots of such references. My original strategy would have required me to make at least minor characters out of every one of them. So especially with Alemeth's letters, I began to allow myself the omission of facts simply because they couldn't all become parts of the narrative. The decision on whether I would allow myself to omit a fact, or incorporate it into the story, depended mostly on how central to the letters as a whole the details in question were. But once I accepted the fact that I couldn't entirely follow my strategy, I began (reluctantly) to cut out more.

And so, I also removed from the July 29th letter: "I am improving very slow, but I can eat till I am ashamed of myself. I have made a rule always to quit before I get quite enough." And "I

[205] Gaiman's story, told in the introduction to *Fragile Things*, Harper Collins, 2006, involves a Chinese mapmaker commissioned by the Emperor to make a map of all of China – and realizes the hard way that there's an inherent and important difference between a map of a thing, and the real thing.

may be gone before you get this." I also did not include certain details about the battle: "Scott's carriage sword and register book, his letters and other papers, also a large quantity of fine brandies, wines and other fine drinks. A great jollification they intended to have over their intended victory. These were all taken. I suppose Beauregard and Jeff Davis appropriated their fine drinks to themselves."

In excerpting Alemeth's letters, I never compromised on my desire to keep the events in the novel consistent with the details described in the letters, whether those details were included in the novel or not. But I found that, even with a non-celebrity like Alemeth Byers, I couldn't confuse my map of China with the actuality of all China. Moreover, Alemeth wasn't always the clearest of writers, and he didn't have the luxury of delete keys and second drafts, nor was he focused on telling a story so much as conveying news and information. So I added occasional paragraph breaks, corrected some spelling, and tried to keep all the letters short enough that they moved my story forward. I believe I was able to delete the information I did while remaining faithful to the main story they revealed. But by the time I was ready to give the novel one last draft, I had omitted enough that I found myself excerpting the sermons and newspaper articles much more than I'd allowed myself at first, all for the sake of making a better read. Neil Gaiman is absolutely right: it's all about making maps.

Of course, history is always something that, even for celebrities, is based on a very incomplete record. No matter how much is known, it pales in comparison to the reality that was. We must attempt to reconstruct the past with a huge amounts of assumption and supposition, and those assumptions and suppositions are inevitably formed by what we, as story-tellers, bring to the party based on experiences of our own. As Mr. Ward said, no story can be told without a point of view, and everyone has one. As I write this, my brother Chris is reading the novel for the first time. He calls nearly every day to report the experiences from our own childhood which he sees in the story of Alemeth, and about 80% of the time, I'm able to tell him that he's thinking of exactly the same childhood experience I was thinking about when I wrote the passage in question. Even this – the extent to which my brother and I bring a similar subjectivity to the reading of a novel – implies a great deal about how much we all see the world through our own cultural lenses.

How much of Alemeth, then, is fact, and how much fiction? At the end of the day, I really have no way of knowing for sure. I will say that when the avowedly fictional Gordon Falkner commented about immortality on page 296, he was quoting the avowedly factual Ben Franklin.

The next major action the 17th Mississippi saw was at the battle of Ball's Bluff on October 21, 1861. The 17th was in the thick of it. When the federals came across the River at them, Colonel Featherston ordered the regiment to charge and "to drive the enemy into the river or into eternity." Under his command, the 17th advanced, drove the federals back across the river, and took many prisoners, because the federals had failed to have enough boats in the ready for a possible retreat.[206] But as Alemeth explained in his letter home of October 26th, he'd gotten sick

[206] The battle is described from the federal viewpoint at Bates, Samuel P., *History of Pennsylvania Volunteers*, Vol II, B. Singerly, 1869, at 789-790.

again in September. A September CMSR card for "A.W." Byars, Pvt, Co H., 17th Mississippi, lists Byars as "det'd as Hospital nurse, Leesburg." It wasn't until his letter dated November 4th that Alemeth reported, "I am well again, and fell [sic] more like myself than at any time since I had the Measles, but I'm not so hardie [sic]. I think by being moderate a while, I can stand most any thing [sic]." His non-participation at Ball's Bluff is clear: in his October 26th letter, he writes, "Sorry I could not be there."

The reappearance of Doctor Edgar, driving an ambulance to the front, is my tip of the hat to E. L. Doctorow's ambulance driving scenes in *The March*. The method of removing weevils from the chow described here is taken, as I recall, from Robert Moore's diary, but if not, from some other source. (I can assure you, it is not my own recipe.)

Chapter 99

Early November, 1861

CMSR cards for both September and October, 1861, show "Jno A Byars" marked "present." The CMSRs for the autumn don't say that he was sick, or hospitalized; rather, they reflect that he was "detailed" as a "Hospital nurse." We know that at Ball's Bluff, as at Bull Run, it seems our boy saw none of the action himself. His letters home imply that it was because he was sick; they say nothing of his being detailed as a hospital nurse. He seems to be avoiding mention of that assignment, while reporting what "we" (his unit) did in the battles. These ambiguities, or avoidances, if that's what they are, led me to characterize Amzi as having essentially the same reactions to the letters as I have – after all, both Amzi and I were reacting to essentially the same letters, basing our understanding of what was going on in Virginia on much the same skimpy evidence. Was Alemeth really that sick? And was it genuine sickness that caused him to miss both of his regiment's first major battles? Neither Amzi nor I had any way of knowing for sure.

Captain Boynton's dismissal from the University for "want of attachment" to the Confederacy" is well documented.[207] The minutes of the Board of Trustees reflect that on September 2, 1861, there was a meeting of the executive committee, consisting of James Brown, Jacob Thompson and Alexander Pegues; that they had looked into the evidence regarding a letter written by Professor Boynton to his father, and that they believed the evidence sufficient to remove Boynton from his position. On Thurs, Sept 5th, Boynton appeared before the Board and admitted authoring the letter.[208] With the full Board's approval, Boynton was dismissed.[209] The Board then (on October 1) accepted the resignations of Barnard and the rest of the faculty.[210] The Board action closing the University was on November 19th, 1861.

[207] Sansing, *supra*, p. 68. Historical Catalogue, *supra*, p. 41.
[208] Board Minutes, Vol II, pp. 40-41.
[209] Captain Boynton served in the union army in the Civil War.
[210] Board Minutes Vol II, p. 42; Sansing, *supra*, pp 103-104.

Chapter 100

Early November to December 3, 1861

Back when I was naïve enough to think I might write a novel about *all* my ancestors who were alive during the civil war, the idea that first attracted me to the Byers family as my subject was the realization, upon reading my genealogy binder, that little Julia Loughborough had died during a December visit to Oxford, and her death had led to the naming of my great grandmother, which led in turn to the names of my grandfather and mother, both of whom I knew and loved. Who was this little girl whose death had resulted in these names? As time went on and I became more familiar with Alemeth's life, the focus of the story changed, but it all began with the death of one child and the birth of another.

In fact we don't know the cause of Julia Loughborough's death, but we have her mother's description of holding her in her arms as she died, and from that description, we can be fairly certain it was illness, not accident. Cholera was a common cause of childhood death in that place and time, and Mary Ann Loughborough's description seemed consistent with it. That description – of another child's cry, heard some time later, that reminded her of her own child's death – follows:

> I sat near the square of moonlight, silent and sorrowful, hearing the sobs and cries – hearing the moans of a mother for her dead child – the child that a few moments since lived to caress and love – speaking the tender words that endear so much the tie of mother and child. Oh, the little lonely grave! So far distant, yet so ever present with me; the sunny, auburn head that I laid there six months after this terrible war began!
>
> I could not hear those sobs and cries without thinking of the night – that last night – when I held my darling to my heart, thinking that, though so suddenly stricken and so scared, she would still live to bless my life. And the terrible awakening! – to find that, lying in my arms all my own, as I believed, she was going swiftly – going into the far unknown eternity! Sliding from my embrace, the precious life was called by One so mighty – so all-powerful – yet so merciful, that I bowed my head in silence.[211]

The statement that the child had been "so suddenly stricken" seemed to preclude an accidental injury, and to suggest something like cholera. The idea that Eliza may have contributed to the death by turning down offers for hydration by a wet nurse was introduced because of how often I believe that, in our wrongness, we are responsible for unintended consequences. In other words, it is there for reasons of story, not because I have any specific reason to believe it was true in this particular case.

[211] Loughborough, *supra*, p 80.

Chapter 101

Early March through June 20, 1862

My great grandmother Julia Loughborough Byers, was indeed born on March 7, 1862, and named after the recently deceased child Julia Loughborough, emphasizing the inhospitable nature of the world into which she was born. A week later, the Memphis Appeal published the piece on page 309, expressing concern about the possible loss of the Memphis and Charleston Railroad, the strategic importance of which, as the front line of Mississippi's defense, was treated in Chapter 96 of *Alemeth*.

Meanwhile, Mary Ann Loughborough, still recovering from the sudden death of her child in Oxford, was back in Memphis writing letters to her sister, Julia Blow, which were later included in *My Cave Life in Vicksburg*. In a letter from early April 1862, Mrs. Loughborough described events at the Gayoso Hotel in Memphis. The various generals, Sterling Price (whom they called "Old Pap") and General Van Dorn, as well as Claiborne Jackson, the Confederate Governor of Missouri in exile, were in Memphis, staying at the Gayoso, planning strategy, and because Mary Ann's husband, Captain Loughborough, was attached to General price, she was privy to their company. Since she was writing north, to her sister in Carondelet, Mrs. Loughborough was obliged not to mention names. So Governor Jackson became "Governor J____, of Missouri" (as if such censorship could protect any secret as to whom she was talking about). "J ____ T ____ was James H. Trapier, Sterling Price was "General P____." She wrote that a civilian like herself was a 'rara avis" in the mostly military crowd; that "amid all this mass and huge crowd, the majority are polished gentlemen," several of whom she described before ending, "In a few days, we leave. The gentlemen all go to Corinth, where a battle, in all probability, will take place before long. Fort Pillow can hardly hold out, under daily bombardment that we hear from the gunboats; and if it falls, Memphis, on taking leave of the Confederate officers, will usher in the Federals to quarters in the Gayoso. Adieu."

A few days later, on April 6-7, 1862, General Beauregard left his base in Corinth to attack General grant just north of the railroad junction, at the Battle of Shiloh. The main impact of that major battle was felt in Oxford when hundreds of Confederate wounded arrived by train, and the University Campus became a Confederate hospital.[212]

> Immediately after the battle of Shiloh, June [*sic*] 6 and 7, 1862, word was brought to Oxford that there would be sent down that evening, numbers of sick and wounded soldiers, to be cared for at the university... When this news reached Oxford excitement ran high in the town. There was a rushing and hurrying to and fro between the town and the campus. Many of the homes were stripped of mattresses, beds, cots, bed ding and everything that could be spared, or that could contribute to the comfort of the men who had spared no sacrifice for the defense of their country. The chapel building was filled with cots, and even the galleries were spread with pallets so thick that there was scarcely room for the attendants to pass between. While the chapel was the first and main building used for hospital purposes, all buildings then on the campus were used; namely, three

[212] See Sansing, *supra*, pp 110-111.

> dormitories, still standing; one double residence, where Gordon Hall now stands; one double residence on the site of the new library; one residence immediately in the rear of the Lyceum; the observatory building; the Lyceum; and the small brick building, now occupied (1912) by the D. K. E. fraternity, but originally built for a magnetic observatory.
>
> The Lyceum was used as a dispensatory, but during the time of greatest rush and need, cots were placed there also, and tents were spread upon the campus for those having contagious diseases…The dormitories were fitted up with bunks built around the walls of the rooms, and mattresses were placed upon these. The house immediately in the rear of the Lyceum was used as a mess hall for the surgeons and their assistants. The magnetic observatory was used as a morgue, and the dead were placed there, awaiting burial in the rude pine boxes that served as coffins. Hence the name "Dead House" which still clings to this building….
>
> For nurses [the] physicians were dependent upon the good women of Oxford, and upon the soldiers themselves, who were pressed into this new work as they became able to help, and as need called for their services….
>
> These ladies from the town were assigned to each ward, and they took turns, carrying out daily, soups, broths, milk and such dainties as their skill could contrive, for the sick in their wards. In addition to these ladies, each ward had two men, one a negro, the other a convalescent soldier, detailed to wait upon and care for the sick and wounded.....
>
> Supplies were sent to the hospital from New Orleans and Vicksburg by the Confederate government, until the enemy cut off communication with those cities.... Even the young girls and little children were allowed to help in making bandages and scraping lint, to be used in the dressing of wounds...[213]

As can be seen from the above account, Jemmy Johnson attributes the name “Dead House” to the use of the magnetic observatory as a morgue; I prefer the belief that the nickname predated use of the observatory as a morgue, originating from the deadening of vibrations necessary to the purpose for which it was built. The room being built in solid rock, partially below ground, would have made it a perfect place for a morgue, but ideas are powerful things, often preceding logic; I think the idea implicit in the pre-existing name ‘Dead Room’ may have had a role in causing someone to wonder if it would be a good place to put the dead in the first place, and the logic of the thing easily followed. But that story of the name is itself an idea, and as such may be powerful enough to persuade me despite the contrary authority presented by Jemmy Johnson.

Following Shiloh, the Union army advanced on the vital rail center at Corinth and lay siege to the town. On April 11, Union troops captured Huntsville, Alabama. Mary Ann Loughborough, still at the Gayoso, wrote a second letter to her sister, this one reporting that the hotel was crowded with military men, “many wounded at the late battle of Shiloh,” and noted the dismaying news that New Orleans had fallen,[214] yet also reported, “The men seem to be in good spirits; although moving them across the Mississippi has been an unpopular act. The poor fellows are being taken out to Corinth as fast as transportation can be furnished them. The

[213] Johnson, Jemmy Grant, *The University War Hospital*, Publications of the Miss. Historical Society, Vol. 12, 1912, pp 91-106.
[214] The surrender of New Orleans occurred on April 28, 1862.

compliment is paid them of being placed in the most dangerous position; for we daily expect an attack from the Federal forces at Corinth." By the end of the letter, she'd mentioned that her husband, Captain Loughborough, was headed to Corinth the following day, and expressing concern about the "most bloody struggle" that awaited them there.

A third letter from Mary Ann Loughborough, written this time from Oxford and dated the first of May, noted that the expected battle at Corinth "has not yet come off" and told poignant stories about the wounded being treated at the University military hospital. (Mary Ann had clearly started to volunteer there, as a nurse – but her letter made no mention of Eliza Byers doing likewise.) Then, on the evening of May 29, the Confederate commander General P.G.T. Beauregard evacuated Corinth, withdrawing to Tupelo. On June 5th, the southerners abandoned Fort Pillow. On June 6 federal forces crushed the remaining Confederate troops in Memphis.

It must have seemed as if everything was going badly. Mary Ann began her next letter from Oxford, dated June of 1862, "Can you credit it, dear J—, General Beauregard has evacuated Corinth? You have learned it by this time through the papers, and share with me the surprise… Everyone has something to say on the subject, and all are more brilliant in their ideas for the reason that all have full scope to exercise them. No one possesses reliable information, and we are a conjecturing community…"

Things continued to go poorly in Mississippi thereafter. General Grant, advancing south into Mississippi along the M.C.R.R., captured Holly Springs on June 20, 1862. When Union forces got that close to Oxford, the confederate forces stationed in Oxford abandoned the town. Powerful, pro-secession men like Colonel Brown, who feared that they might be tried for treason if captured, were not far behind.

> The withdrawal of Confederate troops created a panic in Oxford, and many citizens fled the town. Some of Oxford's wealthiest and most prominent citizens, including several elected officials, evacuated Oxford in June when Grant captured Holly Springs and appeared to be headed for Oxford… James Brown… [took] his slaves to Gainesville, Georgia…[215]

Mary Ann Loughborough fled to Pontotoc and Tupelo.[216] In July, deposed Confederate Colonel William Falkner and his privateers tried to harass the Federal forces behind the lines, but with little effect.[217]

---

[215] *Sansing*, supra, p. 112. I do not doubt that Brown left Oxford with his slaves, as he had plenty of reason to do so, but I do not know the basis for Professor Sansing's conclusion that Brown had gone to Gainesville, Georgia. Based on the sources cited in his notes, the assertion is perhaps based on the diary of Rebecca Pegues. Lacking any contrary proof, I accept it as true, but while I tried in vain to unearth any sort of connection Colonel Brown may have had to Gainesville, I independently found evidence that Brown had fled to Meridian, Mississippi. Meridian was closer, and was itself a strong Confederate stronghold, so I wonder if Rebeccea Pegues's diary (or other source) could have been mistaken about Brown's destination.

[216] Loughborough, *supra*, pg. 173

[217] Doyle, *supra*, p. 234. Falkner was the author William Faulkner's great great grandfather, and the model for his Colonel Sartoris.

Chapter 102

Winter through May 27, 1862

After Dec, 1861, the 17th Mississippi Regiment, commanded by Gen Richard Griffith, had been assigned to the Mississippi Brigade under Gen Charles Clark. W.D. Holder was made colonel of the 17th. In January, Private Moore's diary reported there was snow, sleet, and a furious hailstorm. In March, 1862: the 17TH had been on the march. Was able to take a train to Richmond, and then to Yorktown, to defend the fort there and stop the Union advance from coming up the peninsula. But in May, 1862, The 17th Mississippi fell back from Yorktown to Richmond.[218] They arrived at Richmond on May 18th.

The story of Colonel Featherston's negro, Joe, running away, is related in Private Moore's diary. Bob Patton spraining his foot and Bill Elliot's comments about topography are fictional. But understanding terrain is apparently Lesson No. 1 in traditional military tactics, a fact the Confederate generals used to great advantage in the Peninsular Campaign of 1862.

The information about the Parrotts and other northern armaments is authentic, but I don't recall where it came from – probably Sears.[219]

Chapter 103

June 10 - 14, 1862

The photograph that is the cover of the book and appears at page 314 illustrates well the difficulty of understanding the past. Alemeth Byers had the ambrotype taken of himself in Richmond, Virginia, on June 12, 1862, just days before the Seven Days Campaign. I first saw a reprint of it in Roberts & Moneyhorn, *Portraits of Conflict: A Photographic History of Mississippi in the Civil War*.[220] Digital copies of printed copies were later sent to me by Mrs. Carol Lehr, whose mother had been said to own the original. During seven years of writing *Alemeth*, I tried to locate the original ambrotype, and near the end of the project, Carol (unsuccessfully) joined me in trying to find it among her mother's things. Meanwhile, since Roberts and Moneyhorn had identified the firm of Holmes, Booth and Hodges as the name of the Richmond studio where it was taken, I spent many hours of research attempting to identify a firm by that name. I found nothing about it.. On the other hand, my research led me to write the following note:

> Source re info on the photograph: Portraits of Conflict: A Photographic History of Mississippi in the Civil War. I have attempted to discover further information about the Richmond photographers, *Holmes, Booth & Hodges,* to no avail, but I have found pieces on a firm called "Holmes, Booth and Haydens," which may be the same or related.

---

[218] For that March, see Alemeth's letter of June 14th.

[219] Sears, Stephen W., *To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign*, Mariner Books, Boston, 2001. If you thought first of Sears Roebuck, that just shows how "wired" our brains are.

[220] Roberts & Moneyhorn, *Portraits of Conflict: A Photographic History of Mississippi in the Civil War*, University of Arkansas Press, 1993.

> HB&H began in 1853. Holmes was the (1851) inventor of the daguerreotype, according to http://www.thelampworks.com/lw_companies_hb&h.htm. According to http://hbh.gordonmoat.com/ , the firm failed by 1857, but the principals kept on making photographic lenses (called tubes) for decades. But they were based in Connecticut, and I see no evidence they were ever commercial photographers, so I wonder, given the similarity of the names, if there hasn't been a double error: first, a mistranscription of the firm name, changing Haydens to Hodges, and second, a confusion between the name of a lens maker and a photographer… Hmnnn…. There is also a reference to Holmes, Booth, and Atwood…

When I finally wrote Chapter 103, I decided that while Mr. Holmes and Mr. Booth were probably the same gentlemen who were principals in the firm of Holmes, Booth and Haydens, they had apparently operated a studio in Richmond, Virginia, in 1862, with a different gentleman named Hodges. I wrote my description of the making of the ambrotype on that basis, giving Mr. Hodges a first name (Bob) and including a few statements about him.

Three days after the book was printed, even before I had seen my first copy of it, Carol e-mailed me to report that she'd just been given the original ambrotype by her brother, Rick Maginnis; that Rick had removed the picture from the case; and that he'd discovered on the back of it the name of the Richmond studio where it had been made: not Holmes, Booth and *Hodges*, but Holmes, Booth & *Haydens*. And so it was that my character, Bob Hodges, began his demise. Until that moment, I had thought the name of the firm, at least, was verifiably historical, and that a name like Bob (Robert) was common enough it might well have been a correct guess as to the gentleman who actually took the picture. But both the firm and Mr. Hodges had turned out to be full-blooded children of error after all.[221]

I began to consider whether I should have a "corrected" copy of *Alemeth* printed. After discovering other errors and a raft of typos, I decided to make the correction. But before doing so, I determined to research what I could about the firm of Holmes, Booth and Haydens, to see if I couldn't unearth how they'd come to open a photography studio in Richmond. On doing the further research, unearthed something else entirely: Holmes, Booth and Haydens were not the photographers *at all*. They were silver manufacturers. The silver case in which the ambrotype was housed was indeed subscribed with their name, but not as photographers. So I began a new search, this time to see if I could draw a reasonable inference about who the photographer of Alemeth really was. My conclusion: the historical Richmond photographer Charles Rees. And so, the "corrected" edition of Alemeth that appeared in July of 2017 changed Bob Hodges into Charles Rees. I say "corrected," but who knows what new light may be shed by some future discovery?

[221] A wonderful phrase, "after all." It implies that finally, at last, we now know the real truth. But who's to say that, tomorrow, I don't get another letter informing that the label on the picture was a mis-print, or just the name of the lens-maker, and the real name was Hodges, not Hayden's, after all? "After all" implies we now sit as judges at the end of all time, and that we have a better chance of distinguishing between fact and fiction than our ancestors did. But isn't the truth always dependent on who made the lens? Which are the errors we're making today, which will someday be the cause of our descendants' laughter, dismissal, or condemnation?

Regardless of the photographer, I presume that the original ambrotype was sent or brought back to Mississippi during the war, where it came into the possession of Alemeth's youngest half-sister, Julia Loughborough Byers; I presume that she passed it down to her daughter, Julia Marguerite Logan Lane; I presume that she passed it down to her daughter, Frances Lane Maginnis; and I presume that, upon her death, it came into the hands of her children, Rick Maginnis and Carol Maginnis Lehr.

We can be fairly confident that the ambrotype was made on June 12, 1862, by reading together two of Alemeth's letters home: first, a letter to Eliza begun on June 9 but not finished until June 12, 1862, in which he wrote, toward the end, "I am going town today [sic]," and second, a letter to his sister dated June 14, 1862 in which he wrote, "I went to Richmond the other day, I had my ambrotype taken, it is not a good one, but I did not have time to have it taken over. I will have it taken again the first chance & have it put in a larger case." Taken together, the two letters make June 12th the date of the ambrotype.

In a few lines omitted from the letter of June 14th, Alemeth refers to various soldier friends, including one named "Orr." I believe the "Orr" Alemeth referred to was likely Ira Orr, of the Lamar Rifles, 1840-1922, buried at Sand Springs Cemetery.

The letter from Semmy Lou at pp 315-316 is an attempt to reconstruct an actual letter, referred to in Alemeth's reply. From his reply, it is clear that she'd sent him a letter complaining about his not writing, as other soldiers had done. His reply – that the soldiers she mentioned were officers – had me scouring the rosters for officers she might have been complaining about. I have no idea whether I've hypothesized the right officers, but the gist of correspondence, if not its particulars, is apparently factual.

Chapter 104

June 25 – July 1, 1862

The "Seven Days" Campaign. The very name of it started me thinking.

Unlike the day, the month, and the year, the seven-day week has no known astronomical cause. It likely derives from the Babylonians' perception that there were seven heavenly bodies: the Sun, the moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn. This idea may be responsible for the Biblical story of creation in seven days. Regardless, despite the fact that it has no basis in any sort of objective reality, the seven day week is so much a part of our cultural consciousness that it holds us inescapably captive. Managing an escape from the idea of a seven day week might be as hard, mentally, as Kep's escape from the Byers Plantation was, physically and emotionally. Seriously – what are the circumstances under which we might be able to exist *without* wondering what day of the week it was? Even after years on a desert island, or on the moon, or in solitary confinement, if we no longer knew what day of the week it "really" was, wouldn't we still sometimes wonder? Even as a mere meme, a fictional construct based on bad astronomy by ancient Babylonians, it has a grip on us we're hard pressed to escape.

For me, as well as for others raised on the Judaeo-Christian Bible, the psychological grip of the seven day week is intimately tied to the psychological grip of Genesis. I doubt I'd been thinking about the Civil War's "seven day campaign" for more than a few minutes before the idea of a comparison to the seven days of creation occurred to me. And as I observed many times during the writing of *Alemeth,* the contemplation of something almost guarantees that we'll eventually start to see structure, and pattern, and meaning in it. Why? Because that's what our minds have been designed to do: they are built to try to make "sense" out of the world. We supply structure, and pattern, and symbol, and meaning, because that's the only way we know how to deal with an otherwise staggering and incomprehensible complexity.

From the outset, I'd wanted to try to capture not only Alemeth's personal story, but the broader story of the American civil war. Specifically, when it came to the battles in which Alemeth fought, I wanted to capture Alemeth's own role in its relationship to the strategic situation. Since strategy is determined by the supreme commanders, whose decisions work their way down a chain of command and ultimately devolve upon privates like Alemeth Byers, I thought of the seven important military ranks, from the Supreme Commander to his Major Generals, Brigadier Generals, Colonels, Captain, Lieutenants, and enlisted men. I thought it would be great fun – and a challenge – to divide the chapter into seven parts, the first day of the battle corresponding to the first day of Creation and the "supreme commander," working my way through the week's military action day by day, through the Creation Story and down the chain of command, arriving at the level of the private soldier, at rest, on the seventh day.

The Confederate Order of Battle, from Lee down to Alemeth, began with General Robert E. Lee, as supreme commander of the Army of Northern Virginia; below him was Major General John B. Magruder, who was in command of two brigades and some artillery at the Confederate Center; below him was Brigadier General Richard Griffith, in command of the Third (Mississippi) Brigade, which consisted of the 13th, 17th, 18th and 21st Mississippi regiments. In command of the 17th was Colonel W.D. Holder. In command of Alemeth's Company H, the Vindicators, was Captain Frank[222] Middleton. I might have been able to make the plan work, but after laboring over it for some time, I gave up trying to make the descent through the ranks work perfectly. (A major obstacle was the creation of man, from dust, on the third day of Creation – things might have worked better for *Alemeth* had the creation of Man coincided with the level of the individual soldier, on the 7th day – but God must not have created the world with *Alemeth* in mind.) In any case, I held to the general idea of working down from the big strategic picture to the individual soldier, and I kept to my initial goal of relating the seven days of June, 1862, to the seven days of Genesis.

First day (6/25):

Robert E. Lee had just been made supreme commander of the Army of Northern Virginia at the beginning of June, so Lee would have to play the role of God. Biblical Creation, of course, assumes an omniscient and omnipotent God who, we grow up believing, obviously did exactly

[222] The typescript of Alemeth's June 14 letter refers to him as "H.W." Middleton, but all other references I've seen call him Frank. I don't believe there were two Captain Middleton's of Company H, but you never know.

what he intended at precisely the time he intended. In contrast, as befits a human being who is neither omniscient nor omnipotent, Lee's plan did not go quite so smoothly. In fact, Robert E. Lee had been waiting for the arrival of Stonewall Jackson before his battle plan would begin, and planned it for June 26th, but the battle began accidentally on the 25th. The contrast between the civil war story and the one in Genesis was obvious but, I thought, fitting for a "modern Prometheus" like Lee. Meanwhile, for those who consider Genesis allegorical and that a "big bang" is the truth behind "Let there be light," the *purpose* or *intent* behind the bang is anything but clear; it could have been happenstance. The idea of a spark might come close to capturing it. In any case, my description begins with Lee going over his plans "before dawn" on the first day, points out that the "flash of gunfire" that got the battle started was *not* according to plan, and ends with Lee considering further plans "in every light he could." It all seemed a fitting statement of what happens when mere mortals play with fire.

Second day (6/26):

On the second day, according to Genesis, God divided the firmament from the waters, both under the firmament and below it. (Genesis 1:6-8.) On the second day of the 1862 military campaign, I have the supreme commander looking at his maps and considering the divisions of terrain into tidewater swamp and solid ground. (These were in fact Lee's considerations for how to use the terrain to his advantage to divide the northern army, so the parallel to Genesis seemed to work well.) Meanwhile, I moved the action down to the level of Lee's subordinate generals, including Major General Magruder.[223]

Third day (6/27):

On the third day, God gathered the water together and let dry land appear, and brought forth grass, seeds, and fruit. (Genesis 1:9-13). He also formed Man "of the dust of the ground," breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and created the tree of knowledge of good and evil. (Genesis 2:4-9).

While the real attack was underway at the Battle of Gaines Mill, on the Confederate left, the Confederate Center, under Magruder, was engaged in what Lee referred to as a "spirited demonstration," simply marching back and forth along the nine-mile road to suggest the appearance of imminent attack. In my version, in addition to stirring up the dust from which they'd been made, I include the chapter's first reference to the ordinary solder, the men of course wondering why their commander was having them march back and forth for no apparent purpose. The knowledge of good and evil is not so easy, as Adam had learned and Magruder's men were now finding out.

Fourth day (6/28):

On the fourth day of Genesis, God created the sun, the moon, and the stars. (Genesis 1:14-

[223] As an aside, this day (June 26th) was the day Lee ordered A. P. Hill's attack at Beaver Dam Creek, where another family ancestor, James Carvin, a private with the 7th Pennsylvania Reserves, received his mortal wounds.

19.) Outside Richmond, once again, the fighting (such as it was[224]) was to the north, on the Confederate left, while Brigadier General Griffith and his command (including the 17th Mississippi) were held in the center rear, blocking the approach to the confederate capital. That night, Union Commander George McClellan ordered a pull back to Savage Station. For the southern army, it was a day of waiting and trying to determine McClellan's intentions; Lee later criticized Magruder for not realizing that McClellan was pulling back.

Meanwhile, Alemeth looked skyward, to the moon and the stars, and wondered about his place in the world.

Fifth day (6/29):

On the fifth day in Genesis, God created the fish of the sea, the "great whales, and every living creature that moveth," and the birds of the air. (Genesis 1:20-23.) On the fifth day of the Seven Days' Campaign, the 17th Mississippi, which had been inactive in the rear, was assigned to follow the Yankee retreat. As they did so, they were slowed by pockets of Yankee rear guard, occasional gunfire coming from the low-lying, swampy areas in which the Yankees were likely to hide, which is why, in *Alemeth*, "there wasn't a bird in the sky."

General Griffith, commanding the brigade of which the 17th was a part, was in the rear that morning when he was mortally wounded by a stray Federal shell.[225] Magruder put McLaws' division in front of his own, then sent the 17th and the 21st Mississippi regiments, now under the command of Col. William Barksdale, ahead to support McClaws.[226] The apparent detachment of these two regiments, including the 17th, from Magruder's personal command to that of McLaws, adds to the difficulty created by the death of General Griffith in understanding the precise location and activity of the 17th on that day. Sears says that Magruder found Sumner's 2nd Corps at 9 a.m. about two miles west of Savage Station,[227] and there was a "sharp fight" there, in Mr. Allen's peach orchard, but that engagement mostly involved two regiments of Georgians. Sears then says that it was close to 5 p.m. when Magruder again made contact with the Yankees, this time *at* Savage Station, where fighting became a "bloody stalemate as the daylight faded… Barksdale's Mississippians and part of Semmes' brigade were in the thick woods south of the Williamsburg Road where simply locating the enemy was difficult enough." The battle ended about 9 p.m.[228] The 17th Mississippi lost 5 or 6 of their number, but the dead did not include any Vindicators. The fact that those killed at Savage Station did not include any Vindicators suggests that perhaps Company H was in the rear, or for other reason escaped the brunt of the fight. [229]

Sixth day (6/30):

In Genesis, the sixth day saw God create cattle and other land animals (Genesis 1:24-25).

---

[224] Davis, William C., *The Battlefields of the Civil War*, Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 200, at p 67, says there was no general engagement that day.
[225] Sears, *supra*, 266
[226] Sears, *supra*, p. 270-271
[227] Sears, *supra*, 265
[228] Sears, *supra*, 268, 271-272
[229] The webpage at http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/ ~mscivilw/17thms.htm is an effort to compile information about all members of the 17th Mississippi. It includes information about the deaths of many of them, identifies five killed at Savage Station, and one other killed either there on at Malvern Hill. None of the killed were from Company H.

The Vindicators, following the path of McClellan's retreat, found devastation, including the carcasses of cattle strewn in ravaged fields. In Genesis, God tells Man that he has dominion over all the other animals, that they are all his meat (Genesis 1:26-31); in the Seven Days campaign, the officers told the men they were to take from Yankee corpses whatever they might find useful.

While I was mostly focused in this chapter on the correspondence between the Seven Days Campaign and Genesis, I was also intrigued by the fact that two of my ancestors, one from my mother's side (Alemeth) and another from my father's side (James Carvin, fighting for the north) might actually have come into contact with each other. Carvin, mortally wounded at Beaver Dam Creek on the 26th, had been brought to the Federals' hospital at Savage Station; McClellan's retreat from there was so hasty that he left the severely wounded behind, to be captured by Confederate forces. James Carvin thus fell into Confederate hands. Carvin's CMSR indicates he died from his wounds at Savage Station on the first of July. Alemeth's 17th Mississippi descended on the abandoned Savage Station the day before. So it was altogether possible that these two ancestors crossed each other's path, if only briefly.

How to handle that possibility occupied me for some time. In the end, I decided I couldn't be so far-fetched or melodramatic as to identify a dying union soldier by name, if his name was the same as the name of *Alemeth*'s author, but neither could I simply ignore the possibility of the encounter. So I described the meeting between Alemeth and a dying man named James whose ramblings about such things as Beaver Dam Creek, his mother Mary[230], someone named Austin,[231] Michael[232] and a brother named Thomas,[233] would identify him without seeming so contrived about it.

Meanwhile, of all the things James could have given Alemeth, a St. Christopher medal seemed the perfect token, since his saintly status, and even his existence, have been thrown into question, like so much else in *Alemeth*.

Seventh Day (7/1):

In Genesis, the seventh day was the day on which God rested and on which he warned Adam not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. In the Seven Days Campaign, it looked at first to be a day of rest for the men of the 17th Mississippi, as they spent most of the day simply listening to the sound of artillery fire. They arrived at Malvern Hill only late in the day, after the fight there had been going on a good while. But in contrast to the story of Genesis, the 7th day ended with the Seventeenth joining the action. As best I can determine, with the possible exception of the fighting two days earlier, it was the first time Alemeth was really in the thick of things, if only briefly.

Most of the day on July 1 consisted of shelling. Federal forces had retreated to Malvern Hill, well south of Savage Station; the rebels were clearly in control of the former Union hospital there, and both Magruder and McLaws could have left parts of their command there. Alemeth had spent a good bit of time in hospitals, both as a patient and as a nurse. He *could* have been

[230] Mary Carvin (1814-1885), James's mother
[231] George Austin was not his father, but his brother-in-law, who had employed him.
[232] St. Michael's was the Carvin family parish in the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia
[233] Thomas Carvin, James' brother, was a member of the 71st Pennsylvania Regiment, Company B, also nearby at the time.

similarly assigned on this day, or simply gravitated there, and could have witnessed James Carvin's last breaths.

Then, late in the afternoon, Lee ordered an attack on the Federal forces. Magruder remained at least somewhat in the rear. Sears says that on June 30, Magruder had 12,500 infantry under his command, but at dusk on 7/1, he hadn't "any real idea of how many were still on the scene; every road and every grove behind Magruder's front was filled with his stragglers." McLaws too was headed toward Malvern Hill. Lee's Memoirs say that Magruder was ordered to attack early, but his attack was delayed until near sundown. Davis says Magruder attacked at 5 p.m., and got "mowed down" by the Yankee artillery. Barksdale's 17th Mississippi was involved, but just how isn't entirely clear.[234] Note that no Vindicator casualties from the Seven Days Campaign are reported on the website of Vindicators members. However, it appears that Colonel Holder was wounded at Malvern Hill, and that Lt. Col. John Fiser took command of the regiment.

I included Abraham Lincoln's August 22nd letter to Horace Greeley not only because I think it is one of the greatest letters ever written, but because its points about slavery, union and compulsion by force are all so central to what Alemeth is about.[235]

Chapter 105

July to September 17, 1862

Upon reading Lincoln's letter, the soldiers of Company H were surely incensed at Lincoln's arrogance in attempting subjugate the South to his will; and so made good on their vows of obedience to generals of their own choosing, in the face of ever mounting casualties. Numerous histories recount the deaths of General Griffith and Captain Foote. For the names of other soldiers of the 17th Mississippi who met death that summer, I am grateful to the list of soldiers posted at http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~mscivilw/17thms.html.

Portraits of Conflict: A Photographic History of Mississippi in the Civil War, (the book where I first came across Alemeth's ambrotype) asserts that on August 29, 1862, Alemeth was wounded in the hand at 2nd Manassas. Alemeth doesn't mention such a wound in any of his letters that survive. Based on the research I have done, Alemeth couldn't have been wounded at 2nd Manassas, because the 17th Mississippi did not participate in 2nd Manassas, being on their way to Leesburg and Harper's Ferry. I wonder if this information came from a CMSR card relating to a different Byers. There are CMSR cards, in the same jacket as Alemeth's, which refer to a " J.J. Byars" *of Company A* who'd been wounded in the hand. It is hard to imagine that Alemeth could ever have been considered a part of Company A—the Buena Vista Rifles – especially since he never mentioned such a thing in his letters home. This J.J. Byars stands as

[234] See Bowman, *supra*, 622,624; Davis, *supra*, 63-69; and Sears, *supra*, 323, 328, 331-2. Sears' account is the most detailed, and so probably the most authoritative as well. He treats other aspects of the Seven Days Campaign I found helpful at pp. 258, 260, 263-4, 270, 272, 277, 283-4, and 301.

[235] I took the letter from Harold Holzer & Craig L. Symonds, editors, The New York Times Complete Civil War, Black Dog and Levanthal Publishers, Inc., 2010, p 184.

the strongest reason I have for being confident that Alemeth's jacket of CMSR cards in the National Archives are actually the records of more than one person.

How very appropriate for a novel about uncertainty!

Chapter 106

October to December, 1862

While Alemeth and the 17th had been busy in Virginia, General Ulysses S. Grant's army had continued his operations in Mississippi. On September 19th, 1862, at battle of Iuka, General Price's Confederates were defeated. On October 3-4, 1862, at the Battle of Corinth, Confederate General Earl Van Dorn attacked for two straight days, trying to re-take Corinth from the Federals, but was unable to dislodge Rosencrans and was himself driven back. Captain Loughborough was wounded.

Immediately after the loss at Corinth, Van Dorn was replaced by General Pemberton.[236] The Confederates wanted desperately to retain control of the M.C.R.R., and Holly Springs, just north of Oxford, was a key station on it. Mrs. Loughborough went with the Confederates to Holly Springs, though it seems only briefly, as Holly Springs was soon abandoned. Although the exact timing isn't entirely clear, a long (undated) letter from Mary Ann Loughborough to Julia Blow describes distress, conflicts in reports, and her taking refuge in Oxford, Pontotoc and Tupelo, probably between October 5th and 9th.[237] Another one, also undated letter but written at Holly Springs, says that after the miserable battle of Corinth, the confederates were headquartered there expecting a federal attack.[238]

From Amzi Byers' personal perspective, nothing was going well. On the 6th (or 16th) of August, his father, David Byers, had died in South Carolina. The deceased had left to his wife Mary his negro Sarah, her children (unnamed and unnumbered), and his "negro boy Jon." The will directed that his executor give an amount to three grandchildren (of his deceased son John) to be paid in "cash or negroes." It made bequests of $500 each to his other offspring, but left Amzi nothing. I can only speculate that there may have been ill feelings since Amzi left South Carolina; another possibility is that it was because Amzi had married a Yankee. I suspect we'll never know.

The sermon which constitutes the bulk of this chapter is my own compilation from several sources which I believe to be faithful to the thinking of the time. The quotation from Armstrong is from *The Christian Doctrine of Slavery*.[239]

The hymns, *Lord, in the Morning Thou Shalt Hear* and *Adore and Tremble* were written by Isaac Watts in the early 1700's. The former was included in Charles Colock Jones's *A Catechism of Scripture, Doctrine and Practice, for Families and Sabbath Schools: Designed*

[236] Pemberton was appointed on October 10 and was in HQ at Jackson beginning October 14.
[237] Loughborough, *supra*, pp 173-183.
[238] Loughborough, *supra*, pp. 184-189
[239] Armstrong, George D., D.D., *The Christian Doctrine of Slavery*, Charles Scribner, N.Y., 1857, p 111.

Also for the Oral Instruction of Colored People.[240] I wanted to use the Hymn *Trust and Obey*, but it was not written until 1886. The common thread I see in all of these hymns, and throughout Jones's Catechism, is the wrath of the Loving God if we are heedless of His command that we love and obey Him. The Christian tradition applauds such sentiments, but in writing *Alemeth*, in contemplating what it might have been like for a black slave to be taught religion by his white master, lyrics like these took on whole new shades of meaning. Jones' Catechism for the Oral Instruction of Colored People teaches the duty of servants to obey. In teaching the Tenth Commandment, Jones emphasizes the need to be content, "whatever we may be, whatever we may have." Immersed in visions of men riding the beat in search of runaways, I was chilled to read, "Can we ever hide ourselves, by day or night, in any secret place, from God?" "No" is Jones' answer. The Gospel as taught by men like Jones appears to have served the interests of Plantation masters well.

Chapter 107

December, 1862

Information about the October 19th, 1862 Duck Hill Train Crash comes entirely from an article by Norman Ezell.[241] Ezell says it isn't known how the southbound locomotive involved – the "James Brown" – came to get its name. I left a message with the website asserting my very strong belief that a locomotive operating on the M.C.R.R. in service to the confederacy named the James Brown would have been named after Colonel James Brown of Oxford, who was clearly an active participant in getting the railroad built in the first place. But is that supposition, or fact? I really don't know, as I have a storied history of being wrong about no-brainers.

> The Army of the Tennessee under the command of Major General Ulysses S. Grant began its march on November 2, 1862, snaking southward from grand Junction, Tennessee, using the Mississippi Central Railroad for his supply line. The towns and cities that lay along that railroad suddenly found themselves in the path of a juggernaut…[242]

By November 29, Grant was in Holly Springs, and by December 1, union forces were entering Lafayette County. It was a cold and rainy day. General Pemberton, hearing of the raid at Coffeeville, set fire to the M.C.R.R. bridge across the Tallahatchie, the train depot, and dozens of bales of cotton, and pulled out of Abbeville, heading south.[243] Union cavalry chased the fleeing confederate army southward.[244] An undated letter from Mary Ann Loughborough, written at Jackson, described the northern invasion and the retreat of Confederate troops (and her

[240] Charles Colock Jones, A *Catechism of Scripture, Doctrine and Practice, for Families and Sabbath Schools: Designed Also for the Oral Instruction of Colored People*, 6th Ed., Savannah, 1837, p. 12.
[241]Ezell's article, *Tragedy at Duck Hill Station, Collision of the James Brown and the A.M.West*, 1990, is published on a genealogy website by Reba Alsup. See http://www.tngenweb.org/benton/tragedyatduckhill.html.
[242] Stephen Enzweiler, *Oxford in the Civil War*, The History Press, 2010, p.78.
[243] Don Doyle p. 202.
[244] On Doyle, pp. 202, 204.

own) in the face of it. "[H]ow systematically I have bowed myself out of one town after the other, as the Federal troops have bowed themselves in." She described the "great excitement" in Oxford, reported rumors going the rounds, described making plans to leave Oxford by train only to discover that passengers were not allowed on the southbound train, "for the hospital patients were all to be taken off before passengers could be accommodated." The scene she described was one of mayhem. The next day, she waited for hours before finally giving up on the train and taking an ambulance southward, riding with none other than "General P_____" himself.[245] The horse pulling the ambulance strained and pulled through mud from "incessant" rains as Mary Ann Loughborough fled to Water Valley, Coffeeville, and Grenada, with federal troops close behind, stopping every so often to let columns of retreating soldiers pass ahead.

In his memoirs, Ulysses S. Grant wrote that, after the war, "I read from the diary of a lady who accompanied General Pemberton in his retreat from the Tallahatchie, that the retreat was almost a panic… Had I known…"[246]

Grant's point was that, had he known, he'd have pursued the retreating Confederates more vigorously. But I am left to wonder whether the "diary" Grant was reading, after the war, was Mary Ann Loughborough's first hand account of the flight. Her *Cave Life in Vicksburg* and related letters had been published in New York in 1864. There can't have been that many accounts written by ladies who accompanied generals in their retreat south from the Tallahatchie in near panic. Mary Ann Loughborough referred to both General Pemberton and General Price simply as "General P_____." Since Pemberton had by now been put in overall command of the area's Confederates, Grant would have had good reason to think of him when he read Loughborough's account of her flight with "General P_____." So at the risk of disagreeing with a former President of the United States, I think it quite possible Grant erred – and that he was reading Mary Ann Loughborough's account of the flight from Oxford.

Stephen Enzweiler tells us that on December 2nd, Jacob Thompson sat on the roof of William Turner's home,[247] watching the Yankee approach to Oxford through a pair of field glasses.[248] Blaming the "planter elite" for the war, the yanks vandalized their homes in Oxford.[249] When Grant arrived in Oxford on December 5, 1862, "For his own headquarters, the Union commander chose the abandoned, two-story, brick home of wealthy planter James Brown, situated on Depot Street (now Jackson Avenue) just a block from the railroad station and telegraph office, a

---

[245] Cave Life p 191. General Sterling Price, age 53, former Governor of Missouri. Loughborough describes Price giving words of encouragement to soldiers and wrote, "There are few general officers in the Confederacy so well-beloved by their men as General P_____."

[246] Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant.

[247] The same William Turner who had built Sand Springs church.

[248] Enzweiler, *supra*, pp. 82-83. The first Yankees to arrive were under the command of General A. J. Smith. The same day, Sherman's troops, from the west, entered Wyatt. (See Don Doyle, p 204). At this point, Federal troops were swarming in from north, west, and south of Oxford. On December 3rd, Confederates dismantled a wooden bridge on the Yoknapatawpha and were setting it afire when Dickey's Yankee cavalry appeared. Other federals meanwhile took Granada – the town south of Water Valley. That is, as the Federals were focused on Vicksburg, planning to lay siege to it from within Mississippi, they were all over the Byers plantation and Oxford, north and south. *Sand Springs Presbyterian Church and the Orrwood Community, 2010,* by Barbara Webb, asserts at p. 7 that there was a skirmish at "Profit's" (or "Prophets") Bridge, and that "the Gray and McKie homes served as officers quarters as did other homes in the area."

[249] Don Doyle, *supra*, p. 207.

position that was ideally suited for monitoring Union communications and supply lines." Other historians agree. [250] While I do not doubt that this is so, I am still trying to understand the relationship between Colonel Brown's abandonment of the mansion in June of 1862, and the fire which had burned it down on the evening of July 18, 1860. One obvious explanation is that in the 23 months between the first mansion's burning and Brown's abandonment, he had rebuilt the two-story, brick mansion on its former site. But that would seem a monumental task of willpower, money, and labor, applied at a time when, from all accounts, every available resource was going toward the war effort. (Brown was wealthy, but was he *that* wealthy? And did he think that building a mansion in town was the best use of his disposable resources?) This leads me to wonder whether, rather than re-building on the original Depot Street site, Brown simply occupied a nearby mansion that had been built prior to the war, also on Depot Street. If so, that might help explain some of the difficulty I encountered in determining the exact location of the place. Sadly, I have not, to date, been able to resolve these questions, any more than I was able to resolve the question of when he first bought and built on Depot Street. Perhaps someday I'll find answers to these questions.

Meanwhile, I can only try to imagine the devastation he felt at the Union occupation of Oxford. The railroad he had worked so hard to get had now been used by an invading army to chase him out of town. The University of which he'd been Trustee was closed. His first house on Depot Street had been burned to the ground. His namesake locomotive had crashed. The Yankee President had announced in September that all slaves would be free effective the first of the year, and had now come to forcibly take them away. His house there was now occupied by the enemy's commanding general. If he had been "outraged" when the tail was cut off his favorite saddle horse, I can only guess at the rage he must have felt now.

But his rage, no doubt, was mixed with concern. "In September, 1862, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton [had] issued a series of general orders that set in motion a sweeping policy designed to find and apprehend persons involved in treasonable or disloyal practices against the federal government."[251] For all Colonel Brown knew, he was on the list "conspicuous secessionists" subject to capture and trial for treason.[252]

While Oxford and Holly Springs were contending with a Yankee invasion, Alemeth and the 17th Mississippi were engaged in conflicts of their own. According to Private Moore's diary, on October 24th, they'd been bivouaced near Brucetown, near Winchester. On the 31st, they'd left the Brucetown Camp for Front Royal. On November 1st, they marched seven miles, and on both the 2nd and the 3rd, twenty more, each day, finally reaching Culpepper, where it snowed on the 6th. They remained in Culpepper through the 17th, starting out for Fredericksburg, through

[250] Enzweiler, *supra*, pp 78-86. Sansing p. 112. Doyle p. 204.
[251] Enzweiler, p. 89. Enzweiler says that Jefferson Davis and Jacob Thompson were at the top of the list; I don't doubt but that Colonel Brown was not too far behind.
[252] Slaves were indeed value property, for many reasons, and safeguarding them from Yankee liberation or simple escape had become such a problem that in October, Mississippi legislature had enacted a law exempting from conscription: the October, 1862 "20 nigger" law exempting from rebel conscription one white man for every twenty slaves.

heavy rains, the next day. They reached Fredericksburg on the evening of November 20th. [253] For the next two weeks, the confederates fortified the city in preparation for a Federal assault. Longstreet's Corps at Fredericksburg and north, with McLaws and the 17th in the hills behind town, while Jackson's Corps set up its defenses south of the City. The weather was rainy virtually every day. Ambulances evacuated families from the town. [254]

On Sunday, November 23rd, according to Private Moore, a parson named Owen was handing out religious tracts, and there was a prayer meeting for the men. On December 5th, there was four or five inches of snow. Barksdale's brigade had occupied the city and the fields below it, digging a rifle pit behind a high board fence and piercing it with "port holes," and digging zig-zag trenches.[255]

The two orders at page 330 – dated November 18 and December 9th, 1862 – were intended to give the reader a feel for the strategic considerations leading up to the Battle. The orders are taken from *War of the Rebellion*.[256]

When the battle began on December 11, it was bitter cold. Barksdale had been ordered to "hold the enemy in check until ordered to retire."[257]

Chapter 108

December 11-12, 1862

O'Reilly's *The Fredericksburg Campaign* will undoubtedly be the definitive historical treatment of the Battle of Fredericksburg for a long time to come. For a fictional treatment, rom a fictional perspective, I've taken my shot at describing the battle in *Alemeth*. There'd be no point in my trying to tell the story here, except to explain what I see as evidence that Alemeth Byers might have come face to face with one of my Carvin ancestors – this time, not James Carvin, late of Savage Station, but James's brother, Thomas.

Early on the morning of December 11, the companies of the 17th Mississippi had split into separate units. General Barksdale had sent "a company of the 17th Mississippi under Captain Andrew J. Pulliam to guard the rope ferry at the Foote of Hawke Street."[258] (Pulliam's company was Company A, the Buena Vista Rifles, a natural choice to pick off the engineers building the pontoon bridge at Hawke Street, on the northern end of the city.) "Another Company of the 17th Mississippi, under Captain Andrew R. Govan, watched the Southern end of Fredericksburg." (Company B was the Mississippi Rangers.) At first, the rest of the regiment was apparently held in reserve, but then (still before dawn) "Barksdale… reinforced Captain Pulliam's group at Hawke Street with two more companies," and finally, at around 4 a.m., "ordered Colonel John C.

[253] In addition to Moore's diary, see O'Reilly, Francis Augustin, *The Fredericksburg Campaign: Winter War on the Rappahannock*, Louisiana State University Press, 2003, p. 35. O'Reilly's masterful history is the source on which virtually all my description of the battle of Fredericksburg was based.
[254] O'Reilly, pp. 37, 43, 46-47, 52-53.
[255] O'Reilly, pp. 63-64.
[256] *War of the Rebellion*, Series I, Vol 21, p 63-64. I've misplaced the citation for the Southern order.
[257] O'Reilly, pp.58,65.
[258] O'Reilly, p. 65.

Fiser to take four more companies there."[259] That would have meant there were seven of the ten companies of the 17th Mississippi at Hawke Street, on the northern side of town, while an eighth Company, under Captain Govan, had gone to the southern end of the city. Though I'm unsure about the location of the other two companies, odds are that Alemeth's Company H was one of those sent to reinforce Pulliam at Hawke Street, and that is why my description in *Alemeth* puts the Vindicators there on Hawke Street, with Colonel Fiser, when the Yankees made it across the pontoon bridge there.

According to Robert Moore of Company G, the artillery fire hitting around them on the morning of the crossing was the worst bombardment the 17th had been under. Soon after the crossing, a shell toppled a brick wall that fell on Fiser and rendered him unconscious; though he recovered, he "retained tenuous command," and soon, Fiser was "compelled to fall back to Caroline Street."[260]

Thomas Carvin was serving with Company B of the 71st Pennsylvania Infantry. The 71st Pennsylvania was part of the 2nd (Philadelphia) Brigade under the command of Colonel Joshua Owen. The Philadelphia Brigade was assigned to Gen. O.O. Howard's Second Division under General Darius Couch. According to O'Reilly, Carvin's regiment was not among the first to cross the river into the city. With the bridge across, General Couch "ordered the pious but vapid Brigadier General Oliver Otis Howard to take his entire division and clear the Confederates out of Fredericksburg. Howard crammed the rest of Hall's brigade…onto the bridge. Behind them, Colonel Joshua T. Owen's "Philadelphia Brigade" waited with Brigadier General Alfred Sully's brigade. To make room, Howard wanted Hall to push into the city.[261]

So it was Hall's 7th Michigan and 19th Massachusetts regiments that came across the bridge at Hawke Street under fire from the 17th Mississippi, with Thomas Carvin still behind them in the rear. O'Reilly says "The 17th Mississippi allowed the Federals to enter the yards leading to Caroline Street before they loosed a volley in their faces." What ensued was essentially America's first experience with city fighting, and while it was going on, General Howard's Philadelphia Brigade crossed the pontoon bridge and crammed into the fight behind Hall's men. The Philadelphia Brigade, including the 71st Pennsylvania, "infiltrated the city and stretched to the left, down Sophia Street."[262] Sophia Street ran along the river bank, the lowest street traversing the city. But by about 6 p.m., "Joshua Owen's Philadelphia Brigade had penetrated the center of the city and threatened to sever Barksdale's line of retreat… [and the] Philadelphia Brigade slipped into Caroline Street…"[263]

And so it was that, at this point, the evening of December 11th, on Caroline Street, that the 71st Pennsylvania and the 17th Mississippi came into direct contact. O'Reilly writes, "Fiser's line

[259] O'Reilly, p. 64.
[260] O'Reilly, p. 82. Because Govan's detachments were a "conglomeration" of men from several regiments (see pp. 79, 85) and Colonel Fiser himself remained with the majority of the 17th on the northern side of the city (see p. 81), for the rest of the battle I take O'Reilly's references to Colonel Fiser's 17th, as referring to the majority of the 17th, of which the Vindicators almost certainly still formed a part.
[261] O'Reilly, p. 87.
[262] O'Reilly, p. 93, 96
[263] O'Reilly, p. 96.

collapsed and his troops evacuated Caroline Street."[264] But then, when Barksdale took up his final defense on the high ridge through town, at about 6 or 7 p.m., he

> anchored his line on the Market House. Mississippians entered houses and fired from windows commanding William and George Streets. Some of the Confederates took over Saint George's Episcopal Church and probably the Presbyterian church across the street for a clear shot down George Street. Colonel Joshua Owen reported, "The houses and churches contiguous to my route were filled with sharpshooters…"[265]

The crux of the conflict between the opposing units appears, therefore, to have occurred at in the area of the Presbyterian Church at Caroline and George Street, and in the few city blocks surrounding it. The fighting continued in those city blocks late into the night, in darkness and shadow, through windows and open doorways, from behind corners and walls, soldiers from the two sides talking to each other.

I therefore take it historically accurate that (1) Alemeth Byers was at Savage Station as James Carvin lay dying on June 30 and July 1, 1862; and (2) Alemeth Byers was engaged in street fighting against Thomas Carvin's unit in Fredericksburg on the night of December 11th. Somehow, the "George" Street of my research became "Grace" Street in Alemeth, but apart from that deviation, the encounter described in *Alemeth could* have happened exactly as described. [266]

Chapters 109 - 111

December, 1862

While Generals Grant and Sherman were meeting on Depot Street to discuss strategy for the siege of Vicksburg,[267] the situation at Bynum's Creek was in turmoil. The main value of Amzi's negroes was their labor; clothing and feeding them was economically worthwhile only because of their contribution to agricultural production. But with 30,000 Yankee troops camped out all over the area, any cotton grown on the land was subject to confiscation by the Yankees, any produce sure to be taken to sustain them, any corn or grain to feed their horses and livestock. That autumn, General Grant had started paying the negroes 12-1/2 cents a pound for picking and ginning cotton on abandoned plantations, and told the southern planters they were free to do likewise.[268] Did it make sense to continue to feed them, but get no labor in return? Did it make sense to set a precedent of *paying* them, to harvest a crop that would likely be used to sustain the

[264] O'Reilly, p. 87-89.
[265] O'Reilly, p. 97.
[266] The following day, Carvin's unit attacked Marye's Hill, which was defended by Alemeth's. Carvin was taken prisoner. I resisted the temptation to describe yet another hypothetical encounter between the two families. Perhaps one day I'll find time to tell the story of James and Thomas Carvin, from *their* perspective…
[267] Sansing, p. 112).
[268] Gant's Memoirs, Chpt XXX.

enemy? Many planters abandoned their lands; one wonders how close Amzi Byers came to doing likewise.

Don Doyle tells us that Oxford was full of captured rebel soldiers, brought up from the south, for imprisonment there. Others showed up in Memphis, asking to be paroled. Many rebels wanted to surrender and take the loyalty oath before the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect, since, by its terms, the Proclamation only freed slaves in areas then in a state of rebellion.[269]

I've already mentioned that I wrote most of Alemeth having only six of his wartime letters home, and that right before sending the novel to the printer, I received seven more from Carol Lehr. The biggest impact of the new letters was that it forced a change in the story of when and how Alemeth's slave, Gilbert, joined him at the front. I had previously concluded that it would have made no sense to send Gilbert north, to Virginia, on his own, and therefore, Alemeth must have brought him back with him upon his return to the front in the spring of 1864. But the "new" letters included one written to Uncle Johnson on February 8, 1863, reporting that Alemeth and Gilbert were doing well. Faced with the fact that Gilbert had obviously joined Alemeth at the front far earlier than I'd previously inferred, I had to make a number of last minute changes to reflect that fact. Chief among them was having to figure out how Gilbert traveled from Mississippi to Virginia. In the end, my best guess was that it happened just as Alemeth suggested it should happen. In Alemeth's letter to Eliza of June 9, 1862, he referred to his friend Baxter Orr going home because he'd been slightly wounded. Orr had apparently made it known that he planned to return, since Alemeth, in that same letter, wrote, "Pa must be sure to send me Gilbert the first opportunity. Back Orr can bring him when he comes, or some of the boys that have gone home. Gilbert will be worth more to me here than at home."

Discovering these additional letters at the "last minute," I declined the chance to go to the National Archives again to see if I could ascertain when it was that Baxter Orr returned to the front. I simply decided that would be in the winter of 1862-1863, and that he would, indeed, bring Gilbert to the front with him, in time for Gilbert to be mentioned in Alemeth's February letter to Uncle Johnson. Hence Baxter Orr's appearance here.

It must have been a very wet and bleak December in occupied Oxford. But the Federals had been occupying Oxford and environs for only 18 days when, on Dec 20, 1862, Confederate General Van Dorn stunned the Union army by conducting a surprise raid on Holly Springs and destroying more than a million dollars' worth of union supplies.[270] Rebels celebrated the blow to Grant's plans for Vicksburg.[271] Grant's Memoirs say the raid convinced him he could not hold the Railroad supply line through northern Mississippi for the Vicksburg siege; he described the rejoicing at Oxford. Reportedly furious, Grant ordered all of Oxford razed, then rescinded his order.[272] The yanks scoured the countryside for food and supplies.[273] Meanwhile, there's an

[269] Don Doyle p. 229.
[270] Sansing, p. 113.
[271] Doyle, p. 207.
[272] This, says Doyle, p. 208, according to the diary of a soldier, while Sansing, at p 115, casts doubt on the story.
[273] Sansing, p. 115, and Grant's Memoirs.

interesting story told about the events surrounding Van Dorn's raid that involves a character in *Alemeth*.

Specifically, it will be remembered that Colonel Brown's daughter, Fredonia, had married Harvey Washington Walter and moved to Holly Springs. Walter himself was now fighting for the Confederacy and with his troops, but Fredonia Walter was still living in her mansion in Holly Springs at the time of the raid. In fact, when Grant's army took over Holly Springs, *Mrs*. Ulysses S. Grant, her four year old son Jesse, and her personal slave, Jule, were guests in the mansion. The story is told that when the raid occurred, the Confederate army left Mrs. Grant undisturbed in a gesture of "southern chivalry," and the Walter mansion was thereafter spared by the Union army as a gesture of gratitude. The problem, according to Ole Miss historian David Sansing, is that while Mrs. Grant was indeed a guest in Fredonia Walter's home up until December 19th, there was just enough notice of the raid that Mrs. Grant was able to evacuate prior to the raid. According to Sansing, Confederate Colonel John S. Griffith had gone to the Walter home "undoubtedly" for the purpose of capturing Mrs. Grant, whom Sansing calls "a legitimate prize of war," and found her already departed. It was many years later, in Griffith's 1881 memoirs, that the old Confederate Colonel gave his account of the chivalry he'd extended to a woman who, by that time, was a former first lady of a re-united country. According to Sansing, "[T]he myth of Colonel Griffith's chivalrous gesture toward Mrs. Grant and General Grant's mythical gratitude for the gesture has seeped into the mainstream of Southern history and illustrates how Southerners make use of historical memory… It is said that truth is the first casualty of war. Perhaps memory is its final casualty."[274]

Colonel Griffith's account could not possibly have been correct, Sansing concluded, because Mrs. Grant had left the Walter home in Holly Springs the day prior to the raid, and was already in Oxford. Sansing's published endnotes do not make clear which of his sources are the basis for his conclusion about the impossibility of Griffith's story. What I don't understand is Professor Sansing's own certainty. Assuming he wrote with documentary "proof" before him that Mrs. Grant was in Oxford on the day Griffith claimed to have spoken with her in Holly Springs, he was choosing one piece of historical evidence over another. Legally, "proof" is simply a word for "evidence." There was apparently conflicting evidence, since Griffith's first-hand account was itself legal "proof" of Mrs. Grant's being in Holly Springs. As I see it, there's also the possibility of an explanation that reconciles the two accounts: perhaps Griffith arrived in Holly Springs a few hours earlier than other evidence has caused history to conclude; perhaps he was mistaken, in his memoirs, about the time of his call at the Walter home; perhaps it was Griffith's call that alerted Mrs. Grant to the raid, and perhaps steps were taken, at the time, to conceal this "assistance to the enemy."

I'm not saying that Professor's Sansing's conclusion was incorrect. Indeed, he is an accomplished historian, with access to greater resources than I, who devoted his career and substantial abilities to his research, whereas I am a mere writer of fiction. It's just that I don't understand his *certainty*. There's necessarily a weighing of evidence involved when one decides

[274] Sansing, pp. 113-155.

that one (or more) piece of evidence outweighs a conflicting piece of it. As I see it, there's *always* interpretation involved, *always* inferences drawn. I relate more to Doyle's comments about the difference between history and fiction than I do to Sansing's conclusion that Griffith's account was not possible, and that it stands as an example of "how Southerners make use of historical memory…"

The depiction of Gilbert as a "spy" is fictional. But the pillaging of Bynum's Creek is not. One source says that Grant left Oxford just before Christmas, 1862, foraging and plundering as he went, leaving the area a wasteland.[275] Another source says he left on Christmas Day itself.[276] Grant's memoirs say that the plundering was authorizing fifteen miles west and east of the M.C. R.R. – an area that included Bynum's Creek. Before he died, Amzi submitted a claim for compensation to the Southern Claims Commission. Southern planters whose stores were taken were given vouchers, and some *were* compensated, after the war – but only those who could prove they had been loyal to the Union. Amzi Byers' claim, like most others, was denied for lack of such proof.[277]

Doctor Hilgard recalled the period after Grant's army left Oxford for Memphis by observing that those left in Oxford had no news from the front, and "only an occasional visit from Forrest's men and reconnoitering parties sent out from below." Then Forrest himself, needing a hospital of his own, turned a portion of the northwest dormitory into his headquarters for a while. Hilgard used the University laboratory to distill persimmons and molasses into alcohol for tinctures, as well as blackberry brandy, "since the alcohol made from persimmons and molasses did not commend itself to their taste." Hilgard recalled that quinine was the most desired drug, and most difficult to obtain, because it was considered contraband of war, but it was "smuggled out of Memphis by farmers, then brought to Oxford by 'pony express'…"

Hilgard's recollections included a memory of Colonel Brown's daughter, Frances Avent:

> [T]hese were the darkest and most trying of all those terribly dark and trying days of the war. For food, as before, the burden devolved largely upon the good women of Oxford and the neighboring country, who came bravely to the rescue, although their own supplies were dreadfully diminished, and of poorest quality, fat bacon and corn bread being in many cases all that was left of a once abundant and varied store. Mrs. Fannie Brown Avent, who lived just north of the campus,

---

[275] Doyle, p. 213. On Dec 25th, Grant reported that they had appropriated everything from Coffeeville to La Grange, from 15 miles east and west of the railroad. (Doyle p. 209). Sometimes, vouchers were left. (Doyle, p. 210.)

[276] Johnson, Jemmy, *The University War Hospital*, Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society, Vol. 12, 1912, pp 91-106.

[277] After the war, the Southern Claims Commission reimbursed those who were found to have been loyal to the north. (Don Doyle, p. 239). Amzi's claim was denied in 1875. (Southern Claims Commission Master Index, 1871-1880, pg 69 of 70, accessed at https://www.ancestry.com/interactive/1216/RHUSA1871B_074176-00110/5059?backurl=https://www.ancestry.com/family-tree/person/tree/8412569/person/-953765360/facts/citation/2323863096/edit/record.) The list of livestock and valuables taken which appears at page 336 of *Alemeth* is based on a list which may have been copied from Amzi's claim, a photocopy of which remains in my Byers family genealogy binder. That list, titled, "List of Property Taken from A. W. Byers of Bynum Creek, Panola County, Miss by the United States Army in December, 1862" was written on the letterhead of "E.S. Byers, Dealer in Staple and Fancy Groceries, Tobacco and Cigars." The letterhead bears a printed date line that reads "Water Valley, Miss.___ 190_" so was obviously not part of the original claim denied in 1875 – but hard as it is to imagine a reason for its compilation in the 1900's, it's also hard to imagine that it was prepared by Edward Strong Byers based on memory (he was a child at the time). So I suspect it was copied from Amzi's original claim.

> was most faithful in bearing her part of the burden, by sending to the hospital every day a large portion of soup of some kind for which the poor boys looked most anxiously, and learned to depend upon for cheer and comfort through those sad, dark days."[278]

Meanwhile, trade in cotton had become a game of Russian Roulette when it came to satisfying the laws and expectations of two governments, at war with each other, but alternating in their effective control of Mississippi. And the stresses on the normal market system for pricing of cotton meant that profits could be made by those willing to take the risk of offending one government or the other

> Cotton also spawned a series of federal regulations during the war. The North needed cotton for its textile mills, and it wanted to deprive the South of its financing power. Therefore, federal permits issued by the Treasury Department were required to purchase cotton in the Confederate states. The system was rife with corruption, particularly in the Mississippi Valley. Confederate cotton that was subject to confiscation by the North could not be distinguished from legitimate cotton grown by planters loyal to the Union. Cotton could be purchased for as little as 12 to 20 cents a pound, transported to New York for 4 cents a pound, and sold for up to $1.89 a pound. One observer noted that the "mania for sudden fortunes in cotton" meant that "Every [Union] colonel, captain, or quartermaster is in secret partnership with some operator in cotton."[279]

And so, as 1863 began, there was no food in Oxford, but there was cotton. Enterprising rebels ran the Confederate blockade and sold it to the Yankees, or traded it for goods that they or confederate troops needed. Citizens were invited to turn in neighbors who dealt with the Yankees, but in a twist of great irony, the Confederate army depended on the illegal cotton trade for its own supplies.[280]

Meanwhile, General Loring reported that the slaves of Lafayette County had run their overseers off and "taken possession of everything." Rebecca Pegues reported that "All the negroes that remained in the country are all in a state of insubordination." The "day of Jubilee" had arrived.[281] And in early February, 1863, the Confederate Government ordered the conscription of 400 blacks from Lafayette County, giving slaves one more incentive to flee.[282] It seemed a smart time to send Gilbert to the front lines with Baxter Orr. He'd be surrounded by the Confederate Army there, even if that much closer to the free states of the North.

As for Clio and Calliope, it's worth pointing out that stress acts on parrots in ways not entirely dissimilar to the ways it acts on human beings. Parrots are known to pluck their own

---

[278] Johnson, Jemmy, *The University War Hospital*, Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society, Vol. 12, 1912, pp 91-106
[279] Dattel, Eugene R., *Cotton and the Civil War, http://mshistorynow.mdah.state.ms.us/articles/291/cotton-and-the-civil-war*
[280] Doyle pp. 235 - 241.
[281] Doyle, pp. 217 - 219.
[282] Doyle, p. 222, citing "Jno. J. Pettus to Lt. General Pemberton, Jackson, Miss, Feb 3, 1863, in Pemberton Papers, telegrams, February 1863, NARA."

feathers out, and to start pecking at themselves to the point of blood and death, when too severely agitated. If Colonel Brown was under some pressure as a result of the events unfolding around him, it isn't beyond the realm of possibility that Clio and Calliope felt it as well.

Chapter 112

Late June, 1863

Robert E. Lee had decided to launch a bold incursion into northern territory, threatening Washington in an effort to relieve the pressure on Richmond. Private Robert Moore, of Company G, recorded the following chronology in his diary, and it's safe to assume that Company H, the Panola Vindicators, followed the same path:

6/4/63: On the march
6/6: Culpepper Courthouse for a week
6/16: Sperryville
6/18: Railroad travel
6/23 Bivouac'ed near the Shenandoah River
6/26 Into Maryland
6/27 To Marion, Pennslvania
7/1 Four miles west of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

The messages on page 340 are from the War of the Rebellion, Official Records.[283] Altogether, General Meade had over a hundred thousand men brought to bear on Gettysburg. The Yankee orders give some idea of the massing of Yankee troops and their resolve to drive the Confederates out of Yankee territory.

Chapter 113

July 4-15, 1863

We can reconstruct what happened to Alemeth at Gettysburg, even if he couldn't recall it. At this point, the 17th Mississippi was a part of General Barksdale's Brigade, which was a part of General Lafayette McLaws' Division, which was part of General Longstreet's Corps. On June 30th, McLaws' Division was in Fayetteville, about twelve miles west of Gettysburg, on the other side of South Mountain.[284] Action on the 1st of July was limited to an assault just west of town , on Seminary Ridge, that did not involve McLaws' Division. Lee's objective for July 2nd was for Longstreet's Corps to sweep around the left (southern) wing of the Federal Army, positioned on Cemetery Ridge.

[283] The first, from General Hooker, addressed to Major General Reynolds, is from Series 1, Vol 27, Chpt 39, p 313.
The second, from Williams, is from the same Series, Volume, and Chapter, pg. 422. The commander of the Third Corps, to whom the latter message was directed, was General Sickles.
[284] *The West Point Atlas of War: The Civil War*, Black Dog & Leventhal, NY, 1995, pp. 80-81.

By mid-afternoon of the 2nd, McClaws' Division occupied the west side of the Emmitsburg Road, opposite Union forces under Birney and Humphreys. As pictured on the West Point Atlas Map #2, Barksdale and Kershaw were in the front of McLaws' Division.[285] Facing the Peach Orchard, Barksdale's brigade was at the left front, Kershaw's on the right front, with Wofford's and Semmes' brigades behind them.

At six in the evening, McLaws ordered an assault. First, it was Kershaw's turn on the right, and his regiments engaged in a terrible, bloody fight in what became known as the "Bloody Wheatfield." About 30% of the twenty thousand men engaged were casualties. Then it was Barksdale's turn on the left, and the 17th Mississippi threw itself across the Emmitsburg Road at the heart of Joseph Sherfy's peach orchard. The storming troops of Barksdale and Wofford, "yelling like demons, black with smoke and lusting for hand-to-hand conflict, soon opened a gap in the line of blue. The Federals fell back toward and across Plum Run, toward the base of Round Top, and the onslaught continued. Barksdale, conspicuous on horseback, led his Southern riflemen right into the hostile masses, where he fell mortally wounded, and whence the remnants of his gallant troops cut their way back with difficulty through the enveloping masses of blue infantry."[286]

That is, Barksdale pursued the fleeing federals past Plum Run and up onto Cemetery Ridge. In that charge, Alemeth had finally gotten into the thick of things. But at that point, the tide turned, as Colonel George Willard's New Yorkers drove the Mississippians back to Emmitsburg Road. Barksdale's troops were forced to leave him for dead on the field, and he died the next morning in a Union field hospital. Because Alemeth, like Barksdale, was not picked up and taken back to his own lines, this counter offensive by the New Yorkers seems to be the likeliest time that he, too, was hit and left on the field.

In *Barksdale's Charge: The True High Tide of the Confederacy at Gettysburg*, Philip Thomas Tucker writes, about the charge on Cemetery Ridge, "Private John Alemeth Byers, a planter's son of the Panola Vindicators, (Company H) 17th Mississippi, was cut down. Byers, whose black servant was named Gilbert, fell to an exploding shell, taking multiple wounds in the neck, head and shoulder. A handsome, blond-haired, blue-eyed youth who had long made the farm girls of Panola County swoon, Private Byers, age twenty-seven, survived the serious wounds…"[287]

("Who had long made the farm girls of Panola County swoon"??? Where did *that* come from??? It seems that even historians sometimes get carried away…)

Barksdale's loss in killed and wounded was the heaviest of any brigade in Longstreet's Corps, and the heaviest loss in the brigade was by the Seventeenth Mississippi, with 40 killed and 160 wounded. Alemeth's injuries were obviously severe, considering how long they put him out of action, and considering that he appears not to have sent any letters home from the northern

[285] *West Point Atlas*, p. 85.
[286] Battine, Cecil, *Crisis of the Confederacy*, Longman's, Green & Co., 1905, p. 234. See also Johnson & McLaughlin, *Civil War Battles*, Fairfax Press, 1977, p 91.
[287] Tucker, Philip Thomas, *Barksdale's Charge: The True High Tide of the Confederacy at Gettysburg*, Casemate Publishers, Havertown, PA, 2013, p. 187, and fn 452, citing to Harry Roach, *Gettysburg Hour by Hour*, Gettysburg, Thomas Publications, 1994, p 35.)

hospitals during the months he was recuperating. (The severity of his wounds are further confirmed by the fact that he was later sent to Wests Hospital in Baltimore, which had been designated[288] as a hospital for the severely wounded.) One can understand something of why the injuries were serious when one considers their nature as described on a CMSR card: to wit, there was damage to his neck, jaw, and chest. In a day when the main course of treatment for a battlefield injury was amputation, one's chest, neck and jaw were not the best places to be wounded.

One CMSR card says the capture of J.A. Byers of Company H by Federal forces was on July 5, 1863. As a Confederate record, it probably represents an assumption by some Confederate officials along the way. But the suggestion that Alemeth lay on the ground for three days between his July 2nd wounding and a July 5th capture is reasonable. The battle was still going on through the pouring rain on the fourth of July, and when the Confederates finally turned back and left the battlefield available for clean up, there were some *twenty-five thousand* Confederate casualties on the field. One has to wonder how the Union Army prioritized between pursuing the Confederate Army, tending to its own wounded, and looking after near-dead Confederate casualties.

In the absence of letters home, what we know of Alemeth's treatment comes from his CMSR cards, and the rest must be inferred from general research about the fate and treatment of those injured Confederate soldiers taken prisoner by the Yankees in the battle's aftermath. We know that there was no immediate prisoner exchange, as there sometimes was after the battle, from the following exchange between Meade and Lee:

HEADQUARTERS ARMY OF NORTHERN VIRGINIA,
July 4, 1863 6.35 a. m. (Received 8.25 a.m.)
Maj. Gen. GEORGE [G.] MEADE,
Commanding U. S. Army of the Potomac:
GENERAL: In order to promote the comfort and convenience of the officers and men captured by the opposing armies in the recent engagements, I respectfully propose that an exchange be made at once.
Should this proposition be acceptable, please indicate the hour and point between the lines of the armies where such an exchange can be made.
Very respectfully, your obedient servant,
R.E. LEE,
General.

[288] See War of the Rebellion, Series II, Vol. VI, p 110.

HEADQUARTERS ARMY OF THE POTOMAC,
July 3, [4,] 1863 8.25 a. m.
General R. E. LEE,
Commanding Army of Northern Virginia:
I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your communication of this date, proposing to make an exchange at once of the captured officers and men in my possession, and have to say, most respectfully, that it is not in my power to accede to the proposed arrangement.
Very respectfully, & c.,
GEO. G. MEADE,
Major- General, Commanding.[289]

A Muster Card for July and August, 1863, lists Alemeth as "absent," last paid on April 30th, and notes, "Wounded at Gettysburg and left in the hands of the enemy." A CMSR card for Byers (no first name), Pvt, Co H, 17th Mississippi Regt, "appears on a register of sick and wounded Confederates in the hospitals in and about Gettysburg PA after the battle of July 1, 2 and 3, 1863. Complaint: "Face and neck."[290]

A report filed by Federal Medical Inspector John Cuyler indicates that he arrived on the battlefield on the 10th of July and asserts that union wounded, with some exceptions, were sheltered "within a day or two" after the battle, while "For some days after the battle, many of the rebel wounded were in a most deplorable condition, being without shelter of any sort, and with an insufficient number of medical officers and nurses of their own army. Every effort was made to relieve the suffering of these unfortunate men, and as soon as it could be done, they were placed under cover or sent away to some general hospital. Our wounded, with some exceptions, were sheltered within a day or two after the battle…"[291]

The 11th Corps set up a field hospital in the battle's aftermath at the farm of George Spangler, and since Joseph Sherfy's peach orchard was only some four or five hundred yards from the Spangler's farmhouse, my best guess is that Alemeth was at first taken there. There were a hundred rebel wounded treated there, along with 1100 union wounded. "So many wounded soldiers occupied the place that not all of them could fit inside the small number of buildings.[292] Shortly after the battle, a Philadelphia surgeon helping at Spangler's farm wrote,

> The wounded soon began to pour in, giving us such sufficient occupation that from the 1st of July until the afternoon of the fifth, I was not absent from the hospital more than once and then but for an hour or two… Four operating tables were going night and day. On the fourth of July… [a] heavy rain came over in the afternoon and as we had laid many in spots without shelter – some indeed in the barnyard where the foul water oozed up into their undressed wounds – the sight

[289] Exchange from *War of the Rebellion*, Series I, Vol. XXVII, Part III, p 514.
[290] PA Reg No. 556 (Gettysburg) p 5.
[291] *War of the Rebellion*, Series I, Vol. XXVII, Part I, p 24-25.
[292] See Motts, Wayne, *The Eleventh Army Corps Hospital at the George Spangler Farm: A Short History*, contained within Silas Felton's *In Their Words: Recollections of Visitations at Gettysburg After the Great Battle in July, 1863,* in *Gettysburg: Historical Articles of Lasting Interest, Issue No. 46,*

> was harassing in the extreme… On the afternoon of the third we are exposed to a sharp fire of shells… Shells fell within 20 feet of the room where we were, and we were much in fear that the barn would blaze, which would have been an unspeakable frightful casualty."[293]

The Official War Records include numerous messages passing back and forth among Federal top brass about what to do with the massive numbers of wounded me, both Federal and Confederate. To the extent men were able to be moved, they were put on trains and taken to the cities. But presumably due to the severity of his injuries, Alemeth Byers was not among those able to be quickly moved. As late as September 25th a CMSR card records "J. Byers," (identified as a private with Company H of the 17th Mississippi Regiment) as appearing on a roll of prisoners still at the hospitals near Gettysburg.

From the nature and location of his serious injuries – an exploding shell hitting him in the jaw, neck, and shoulder – I suspect that Alemeth was likely rendered unconscious right away, and in any case before his short term memory could have become a long term one, so that he wouldn't have remembered the last moments before his injury. Because of th seriousness of the injuries and the color of his uniform, I suspect he was left on the battlefield, in the rain, even before being carried to the Spangler farm, and that he was likely unconscious and/or feverish for days. I think it reasonable to assume that when he finally came to, he would not have recalled much of anything. And so, with Alemeth himself not knowing the specifics of how the injury occurred, I felt myself unable to do any better, and chose not to describe the moment it occurred. Rather, like the explosion in the chemistry lab a few years earlier, it was an occasion to consider the experience of regaining consciousness – but this time, all indications were that with many thousands of casualties strewn across the fields of Gettysburg, Alemeth likely gained and lost consciousness a number of times; likely laid in the rain unattended after the battle before those citizen volunteers who looked for the wounded could help him. And whether they tended first to their own wounded, or gave equal priority to boys from Mississippi, isn't really possible to know.

George Spangler had eleven children, and after his death, his farm passed to his daughter Sabina. I took the liberty of having Sabina Spangler be the first volunteer to speak to Alemeth, as he regained consciousness. As for his treatment, all my research suggests that the doctors may not have sterilized the wounds. They would have removed any obvious fragments of shell, applied poultices, and given him plenty of opium – and that would have been it.

[293] Motts, supra, citing D. G. Brinton Thompson, *From Chancellorsville to Gettysburg, A Doctor's Diary*, Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, Vol 89, No. 3, (July, 1965), p. 313.

Chapter 114

July to November, 1863

In the days following the battle, efforts were gradually made to consolidate the wounded at just a few field hospitals. Several of those in Gettysburg were reserved for federal wounded, but there was one, at the college, that also took in confederate wounded, so I suspect that Alemeth was moved there. The rest can only be gleaned from his Consolidated Military Service Record.

One records a September 19th transfer from a Gettysburg hospital to the "Pro[vost] Marshall." (Provost Marshalls were officers whose duties specifically related to prisoners.) An October/November Muster card records that Private "J.A. Byers" of Company H, 17th Infantry, was "admitted October 14th, 1863, to U.S.A. Gen'l Hospital, West's Buildings, Baltimore, MD. Sent to G.H. Nov. 12, 1863," and in the Remarks section, "Paroled."

It isn't until November 16th (the day after I dated his parole at page 346) that a card reflects Alemeth's transfer from Baltimore to Richmond. A card dated November 17, 1863 refers to a "G.A. Byars," [sic], a private in Company H (so it was presumably him), as appearing on the register of "Receiving and Wayside Hospital, or General Hospital No. 9, Richmond, VA. Admitted November 16, 1863. Disposition: Howard's Grove, No. 2." Finally, a card referring to J. A. Byers, Private of Company H, says that he was admitted to Howard's Grove General Hospital in Richmond on November 18, 1863. That card gives the note, "Disease: Vul sclopt Right shoulder," and concludes, "Furloughed: Nov. 20th until exchanged."

Chapter 115 – 116

November to December, 1863

As already pointed out, I can't be sure that the "Miss Sally" to whom Alemeth asked his love to be sent was Sally Fox; Sally just seemed the likeliest candidate from any I found, after a pretty thorough search of census possibilities. But if I'm right that Alemeth's reference was to Sally Fox, then it it's also essentially accurate that his heart was broken when he learned of her marriage to Macon Thompson – that marriage was quite real. It turns out that Sally had married Macon Thompson while Alemeth was fighting in Virginia, probably on November 6th, 1861.[294] So the whole time, he'd been fighting for the love of a woman who'd married another man. If Semmy Lou or anyone had written to Alemeth and informed him of the event, I'd think we'd see some reference to it in one of his letters home. So, by process of deduction and inference, my fictional story came to be that Sally was undecided whether to inform Alemeth of her marriage, procrastinated for a time, then finally sent a letter to Gordon (the one he received in Chapter 122) asking him if he thought it wise to tell Alemeth the news.

Sally's first child, Kathryn Thompson, was born in May of 1864.

[294] Most records accessible at Ancestry.com give this date, but one at the One World Tree indicates the wedding did not occur until 1863.

For the ways in which the war had taken its toll on the Mississippi economy and Bynum's Creek, a good source is *Starving the South: How the North Won the Civil War*.[295]

My description of the interplay between Alemeth and his youngest half-sister, Julia Loughborough Byers, as the one bright spot in his life, is fictional, of course, but this 1863-64 trip home would in fact have been the first time he had seen her. It seemed reasonable to assume that, with all the horror of war he'd escaped and the desolation of the Plantation around him, Alemeth would have found some diversion and delight in the 21 month old child. Besides: I, too, had to see some cause for optimism in the little girl, since it was she who provided the link between Alemeth and me, and she without whom I'd never myself have come to be.

Chapter 117

Early February, 1864

The story of the faked execution of nineteen "deserters" in Oxford, ordered by General Forrest, is based on the account of the event given by Don Doyle, based on the account of a woman who witnessed it.[296] The image is one I created in Adobe Photoshop, beginning with two or three different photographs, added contrast, duplicating figures, skewing some angles, adding shadows… — that is, in one sense, doing graphically what it turns out I'd been doing with words all along…

Chapter 118

Late February to June 1, 1864

General Nathan Forrest's defeat of the Yankees at Okolona was on February 22, 1864. After Okolona, on April 12, 1864, came the infamous battle of Fort Pillow, otherwise known as the Fort Pillow massacre. Militarily, the battle was not all that significant.[297] But what made the battle memorable as a "massacre" was the slaughter of the defenders afterwards. About half the defenders were blacks who had enlisted in the Union Army. There were numerous reports of black soldiers falling to their knees and begging to surrender, but being shot instead. Surely, some of the dead, both white and black, had been killed in the battle itself, but the slaughter afterwards was disproportionate along racial lines. Although estimates vary, it seems that perhaps 60% of the white defenders were taken prisoner, while only 20% of the black defenders were.

---

[295] Smith, Andrew F., *Starving the South: How the North Won the Civil War,* St. Martin's Press, New York, 2011 (see especially pp. 32-33)

[296] Doyle, pp 245-245, citing Maud Morrow Brown, "At Home in Lafayette County, Mississippi, 1860-1865," typescript, box 1, Mrs. Calvin S. Brown Papers, MDAH, p. 162.

[297] Confederates under General Forrest stormed the fort that overlooked the Mississippi River about thirty miles north of Memphis. Some two thousand Confederate attackers descended upon some six hundred Union defenders and overpowered them. As a result of his victory, General Forrest was able to gain some much needed supplies.

The Confederate soldiers were reportedly angry at the North's use of African-Americans as soldiers, and were joined in that anger by their own government, which, a year earlier, had passed a "Joint Resolution on the Subject of Retaliation." That Resolution had characterized Lincoln's emancipation proclamations and the north's use of negro soldiers as "inconsistent with the spirit of those usages which in modern warfare prevail among civilized nations," and therefore authorized "retaliation," which was spelled out to mean that any white officers who commanded negro troops would be punished at the discretion of the southern court, including being put to death, and that all "negroes or mulattoes" who took up arms against the South would, "when captured in the Confederate States, be delivered to the authorities of the State or States in which they shall be captured, and dealt with according to the present or future laws of such State or States." Plainly, such armed insurrection would be viewed as treason and be punishable by death. In effect, then, the Confederate government had authorized the putting to death of both negro soldiers and white officers who commanded them, giving context, if not authorization, for the massacre at Fort Pillow, which by many accounts was a truly terrible display of merciless savagery.

The visits from Howard and Mary Ann Loughborough are hypothetical. Howard had in fact been elected to the Mississippi Legislature, and could have passed through Oxford on his way to sessions of that body. Mary Ann Loughborough's memoirs and letters had come to a close prior to this point, so I don't know her whereabouts, but Oxford was surely still on her list of favorite places.

With Sally having "betrayed" him with her marriage to Macon Thompson, Alemeth's old interest in photography[298] would have been his last hope for a truth he could rely on. Dudie's behavior, meanwhile, models the way people are: speaking for others, giving directions, and doing everything she could to have her way. There is an actual photograph on which the whole scene at pp 362-363 is based. That's Laura, standing beside Julia, and unless I am very badly mistaken, that is a doll in Julia's lap.

[298] Which was entirely hypothetical all along…

Whether Alemeth was the photographer who took the photograph of Laura Byers standing next to Julia Loughborough Byers is such speculation that *Alemeth* will never be recognized as history. ("History" is a label reserved for that which is *known* to be true.)

At page 364, the two orders from May and June, 1864, regarding Prisoner Exchange, are from *The War of the Rebellion*, and are among other official documents which, taken together, show both sides jockeying for position by blaming the other in an effort to justify their sending soldiers back to the front, despite those soldiers' parole oaths not to take up arms again.[299]

Chapter 119

December, 1863 to June, 1864

Once again, the Exchange puts Alemeth in the position of having to make a decision about what really matters to him – but this time, without the University, without Sally, without Mary Ann, and with the added element of his own prior oaths and all that they did (or didn't) entail, his decision has more to do with himself that it did the first time around. And of course, the concept that appears in this chapter – whether a person can "bind himself," and what it means to do so – is a concept central to the novel's theme.

It's why I love the innocent phrase we use so loosely when we say someone has a strong intention of doing something. (We say they are "bound and determined" to do it – an expression that captures well the fatalistic, powerless captivity of the leg iron.)

Chapter 120

June to July 28, 1864

After wintering in eastern Tennessee amid great hardships, the 17th Mississippi Infantry had moved back to Virginia again in the spring of 1864. It was at Gordonsville until May 4th, and on May 6th, at The Wilderness, the brigade was in the lead of the corps as it turned defeat by Grant into a victory.

Alemeth's June 6th letter pretty well tells us when he returned, since he is writing from Virginia, near Richmond, has been with his company, has seen Gilbert, but "I have not been to the regiment yet." I'm not sure what to make of that – might it mean he was supposed to check in at the regimental headquarters, but had not yet done so, putting his return at just a day or so prior to writing the letter? He writes in the letter that they are two miles away from their brigade: has Company H been detached from the regiment? Were companies rotating in and out of defensive positions on the battle line, as they soon would in the trenches at Petersburg? The significance of "I have not been to the regiment yet" eludes me.

[299] War of the Rebllion, Series II, Vol 7. Preceding Townsend's Declaration of May 7, 1864 and Ould's Exchange Notice No. 10 of June 6th were a communication from Ould to Seddon on May 2 (pp 103-106) and one from Butler to Secretary of War Stanton on May 3rd (p. 108).

Meanwhile, Alemeth writes that they're in battle order, their lines two hundred fifty yards from the union line, that there'd been skirmishing, and that Tom Carlock had been shot in the mouth. The 17th Mississippi fought in the battle of Cold Harbor, the largest action of which had occurred on June 3, three days before Alemeth's letter of June 6th [300]– yet he says in the letter that "there has been no general engagement yet." While it's anything but clear, it seems that the regiment, like the brigade, may have been rather stretched out, and that communication from one point on the line to another was difficult – "our boys have to lie close in the ditches day and night, & whenever one sticks his head above the works he is shot at." Soldiers at one end of a very long battle line may not have been aware of events at the other end.

This letter strikes me as somber and resigned compared with those that preceded Alemeth's wounding at Gettysburg and his several months at home. The fact that the Vindicators have had their numbers reduced to a mere eleven men speaks volumes about the state of the Confederate army to which Alemeth had now returned. What a soldier might have been able to do with a bunch of photographic equipment is anybody's guess.

It was at 3 a.m. on the morning of June 18th that Kershaw's Division was dispatched to join the rebels' defense of Petersburg, about 25 miles south of Richmond. (The impossibility of carrying camera equipment would now have been clear.) Alemeth's July 7th letter to Semmy Lou makes clear that, once in Petersburg, units were rotated into the trenches and rotated out again, to the rear. Since he there reports that they'd been "relieved from the ditches about two weeks," it seems the remaining Vindicators were sent straight to the defensive trench works when they arrived on the 18th, and remained in the trenches about a week, until June 25th or so. They'd have been relieved from the trenches by the 4th of July. Alemeth's failure to mention Independence Day in his letter of July 7th supports the inference that there were no celebrations, no fireworks displays, and indeed, what need could there have been for the simulation of war, when real shells were bursting on air? Still, I have to believe the men knew what day it was, and considered the matter of what independence is really all about.

Alemeth tells his sister in the July 7th letter that the men are "confident of success." This, and the tone of the letter as a whole, seem contrary to everything dour about the situation, as if he's trying to relieve his sisters' worrying on his account. His "if I ever get home again" some lines later likely reveals his more realistic appraisal of the situation. The contrast makes me wonder whether Alemeth had at last put his own needs aside, and was doing what he did for his family. His affection is evident.

The "Weldon road" referred to in the July 7th letter is the railroad that led south from Petersburg to Weldon, N.C. It was an important supply line to Petersburg from points south, also a route for troop movements by train. It was likely the route by which Alemeth had made his way back to join his unit, and the way mail and packages came in from the rest of the south. A half mile of it had been destroyed by the Yanks on June 23 (the Battle of Jerusalem Plank Rd) and more cavalry raids on June 29th, explaining Alemeth's statement that "the Weldon road is not yet fixed" as well as the high prices of food in Petersburg.

[300] Alemeth's July 28 letter to Eliza confirms that Carlock was wounded at Cold Harbor.

His July 10th letter to his father is not as upbeat as his letter to his sister. (What Beauregard and Lee intend to do is not for us to know every time… I may find a soldier's grave… I am reconciled to my fate… God will deal with me…) It's the voice of a son who knows that his father understands how serious his situation is, and expects him to man up about it, and he's showing that side of himself, rather than the light-hearted face he has put on for his younger sister.

I don't recall where I first read what it meant when the soldiers saw the wagon trains come up. Heavier camp supplies obviously needed to be loaded onto the wagon train before the troops could move out for a march, or for battle. So when the wagon train came up – even before any order came down – the soldiers knew that something was about to happen. Almost like Wolf, the dog, back in Chapter 1, they'd know they were about to go somewhere, but they wouldn't know where. I don't know why, but the image struck me as a very powerful one, considering the bleak situation they faced, and the level of unquestioning obedience which those who remained had obviously accepted.

Alemeth's July 28 letter home to "Mother" seems a combination of the tones of his letters to Amzi and his sister, a combination of light-heartedness and resignation – but it expresses his homesickness, his desire for mail, and ends by sending his "love" and a signature by "your affectionate son." There is nothing about that affection that dissuades me from believing that Alemeth would not have accepted Eliza easily as a nine year old. But he was a lot older now, and his circumstances rather different.[301]

Chapters 121-122

Early August 1864

Why a Poker game? Because that's what soldiers do? Because pure chance plays a role in life? Because playing poker epitomizes the challenge of understanding what other people are thinking? Because Alemeth (soon to write home that Gilbert was "a little slow") was unable to understand whether Gilbert might have been smarter than any of the Vindicators?

I don't know.

As for the mourner's service, the idea of including it first began with Alemeth's next letter home, in which he wrote of the "preaching" in camp every night, that "mourners go up," and that "six were baptized the other day." As I tried to research and understand what sort of preaching there would have been in such a soldiers' camp, where the regiment had suffered so many casualties, where the Vindicators had been reduced to just eleven or so starving men who daily

[301] As with most of Alemeth's letters, those included in the novel are taken verbatim from the typescripts available to me. I haven't added a word, or changed the order of thoughts. I have occasionally fixed typos and misspellings to avoid distracting the reader of the novel, and I have excerpted portions. For example, in this letter to Eliza, Alemeth also wrote: (1) "We were flanked out of our position yesterday morning, in consequence of our left flank not being protected, only by cavalry, the yanks got in our rear. If this had not happened, it is the opinion of all that the Yanks would have chared our works yesterday. But one misfortune prevents another. A few nights ago, in hunting a new position, our pickets & the yankee pickets run into each other before they knew it, there was scarcely any fireing. We lost some men, and captured some." (2) "Patton is well & back here for duty." (3) "I am very fond of pickles, peppersauce, & catsup, etc." and (4) "P.S. Send me some socks the first opportunity."

looked death in the face, all signs pointed me to the way a person's faith in eternal life was used to combat the fear of dying. Sermons of the day, in soldiers' camps, amidst so much evidence of death, stressed the importance of salvation, and hence eternal life; they stressed the importance of faith that, for those who'd been saved, death was not a terrible end, but the beginning of a wonderful future. As I read of sermons about the thief on the cross and about soldiers' baptisms on the eve of battle, I was struck by the similarity between these appeals and those that had been made to the slaves. Hard and difficult labor was demanded of both. Complete obedience was demanded of both. How does a commander obtain obedience to his will when his will means putting your very life in his hands? By promising fabulous reward to those willing to obey.

But while that idea became the basis of the sermon I patched together from various sources, I quickly became aware of the parallel between these mourners' remembrance of the dead and my own. In a broad but important sense, I stood in relation to the dead men of the 17th Mississippi Regiment in the same way as Alemeth did. My time, too, will come, but for now, we have only our own memories of those who've gone before.[302] In early drafts of Chapter 122, the sermon was not in quotation marks, and was not introduced as the words of a preacher who'd set up an empty rifle crate as a pulpit. The chapter was, simply, the sermon itself, and my intent was for it to be ambiguous as to whether the words on the page were supposed to be the words of a preacher speaking in a soldier's camp in 1864, or the words of a narrator (me) speaking in the twenty-first century. Much as I enjoyed that ambiguity, I found I couldn't quite do justice to the one without detracting from the other. Still, some of the sermon retains that original ambiguity. And so, we deal with these fallen men as memories. Not to judge whether they were good, but to pay our respects to them. For every man is a sinner; we can be assured, not everything they did was good. Rather, let us remember that few men, if any, have never done *anything* good…

Of the thirteen letters Alemeth wrote home from the front six were addressed to Amzi. The first five of these six were addressed to "Father." I find it eerie and perhaps prescient – as if he had a foreboding about what was to come – that the undated letter at page 385 is addressed not to "Father" but (for the first time) to "Pa." Together with his pleas for mail from home, it's as if he wants to return to the happier days of childhood, when he'd called Amzi "Pa" instead of "Father."

"I know not what will have taken place…." he wrote.

The letter may well have been written in two different sittings. "(Between July 28th and August 7th, 1864)" appears at the top of the typescript, but whenever it was begun, the letter wasn't completed until a few days *after* August 7th.

Chapter 123

[302] I would even argue that our "memories" of these civil war dead are not that much different from the memories of their contemporaries and fellow soldiers. Psychology teaches that our memories don't somehow contain the "real" thing, but simply a few images here and there, on the basis of which we reconstruct what seems to us as memory of the real thing. Assuming that's true, there's not much difference between the reconstructions of those who were first had eye witnesss and those of us who have only letters, newspapers and a few rare photographs to go on.

August 22, 1864. 11:06 p.m.

The first burning of the Colonel's house on Depot Street, prior to the war, had been attributed, variously, to "careless servants" or an arsonist. The 1862 wartime occupation of Oxford by General Grant had left the Colonel's house unscathed. Now, the 1864 Yankee occupation was a scene of devastation in which much of the town was burned to the ground, including Jacob Thompson's home, the Butler Hotel, Avent's Bank, Neilson's Store, the Masonic Hall where *The Intelligencer* had been printed, and much more. Describing the devastation, Stephen Enzweiler writes, "On Depot Street, the home of James Brown, which served as Grant's headquarters, was consumed by flames, as was the home of Dr. Henry Branham next door."[303] Among the other details recounted by Enzeiler was that Sally Fox – now Sally Thompson – was bedridden at the Jacob Thompson home, having just delivered a baby, and that when that home was torched, "Sallie and the baby… could only stand by helpless and watch in stunned amazement as the fiery destruction did its work."[304]

I remember reading somewhere an account of the burning of Oxford which went to some lengths to describe the burning of "even the courthouse" as showing that the Yankee destruction served no conceivable military purpose, and was therefore only to terrorize the civilian population as part of a brutal effort at subjugation. Meanwhile, the massacre at Fort Pillow by Nathan Forrest's men had occurred in April, only thirty miles north of Memphis, not far from the burning of Oxford in August, in either time or space. The Confederate attitude in evidence at Fort Pillow may give additional context to the mood Amzi Byers might have been in as he surveyed the cinders of the second Yankee invasion of Oxford. And regardless, on top of all the prior humiliations suffered by Colonel Brown, this was the second time in four years that his house on Depot Street had been burned to the ground.

The animosities between northerners (and blacks) on the one hand, or white southerners on the other, may have reached a peak at this point. Don Doyle records the story of J.F. Tankersley, "a prominent member of the College Hill Presbyterian Church," whose slaves had become "unmanageable, rude and insolent." When he attempted to "correct" these unmanageable attitudes (in a manner we can only imagine), the first slave he approached turned and fled. Tankersley shot her in the back, and she died a few days later. There's apparently no record of a criminal proceeding, but the College Hill Presbyterian Church, considering the peculiar state of

[303] Enzweiler, p. 108. As we've seen, the 1860 Census listed Colonel Brown's residence along with that of W.F. Avent and Andrew Shotwell in a stretch (Familes numbered 1548-1550) that certainly appears to be Depot Street, while Henry Branham was in that census as Family 1331. The two hundred family difference in a presumably sequential census suggests that Branham and Brown did not live next door to each other at the time of the 1860 Census. Enzweiler's description is of the 1864 burning of homes around the center of town. Is it possible that after the 1860 burning of Brown's house at the western end of Depot Street, he had built another at the eastern end? I've previously discussed other difficulties I faced in pinpointing the exact location of Colonel Brown's house, or houses, on Depot Street (see above discussion of chapters 70 and 81). At this point, again, the only certainty is that I don't know whether the new house was on the same site as the old. But after the war, much of this property was inhabited – with a strong claim to ironic justice – by freedmen.

[304] Enzweiler, p 107. According to the 1900 Census, Sally's daughter, Katherine Thompson Kirkman, had been born in May of 1864, so the story of Sally having "just" delivered a baby should be understood in that light – and her being still 'bedridden' from childbirth might be the exaggeration of some later stoy-teller. Enzweiler's detailed reporting of the 1864 occupation and burning of Oxford is at pp 104-108. For other descriptions, see The Skipwith Society's *Lafayette County Heritage*, pg. 20, quoting the account of Mrs. Calvin Brown; Don Doyle, pp. 246-250; Jack Mayfield, "The Burning of Oxford," in *Oxford Town*, August 26, 2004, p. 14; Sansing, p 116; and Williamson, p. 84.

things in the country, and the demoralized condition of the servants," pardoned Tankersley and let him keep his membership in the church.[305]

Chapter 124

September 15 to October 19, 1864

The description of Alemeth's marches in Virginia between September 15th and October 6th is based on Alemeth's letter of October 7th, which I have excerpted, in part in order to tell some of the details in my own narrative. As Alemeth and the 17th Mississippi marched around Virginia, to the east of the Blue Ridge mountains, Federal General Phil Sheridan, commanding the Yankees in the Shenandoah Valley to their west, began what history knows as "the burning." The Shenandoah Valley was considered the bread basket of the South, its farms and fields providing food for the Confederate Capital and the troops defending it. Generally dated between September 23 and October 8, 1864 Sheridan's "burning" was intended to starve the south, and it was very effective. Sheridan's superior forces swept down the valley ("down," in this case, meaning northward), burning just about everything in their path. The weaker Confederate army followed them, and Alemeth, witnessing the burning of "wheat stacks, barns and houses," reported that "the whole world was full of smoke."

As indicated on page 391, Alemeth completed his letter after his regiment arrived in Strasburg, Virginia, on the 13th of October. The end of the letter (not included in the novel) was as follows:

> 6 Marched from Harrisonburg to Newmarket. The day was clear & warm. The road dry & dusty. My feet got very sore. 7th, 8th, 9th In camp all day. Cavalry fight on the 9th. In camp all day the 10th. The 11th we had inspection & went on picket. 12 March to Mt. Jacktion. 13 Marched to Strausburg and attacked the yanks. Gordon's Div, & Connors, & Woffords, brigades of our Div wer engaged. You will see from the heading, I did not finish this the day I commenced it. Today is the 14th. We are expecting order every moment to leave. If I had time I would write more. Be sure to send my gloves & coat the first opportunity. I will need some more socks by the time I get them. I have no news from Richmond or Petersburg. I and Gilbert are both well. Give my love to all the girls, and to all at home. Yours with all of a Brothers love.
>
> Your affectionate Brother.
>
> J A Byers
>
> Write soon.

Four days later – on the 18th of October – the weather was crisp and bright.[306] The day after that, beginning in the wee hours of the morning of October 19th, Alemeth and the rest of the 17th

[305] Don Doyle, p. 226.

Mississippi Infantry Regiment were roused early into a dark night and a very heavy fog, in which they crossed Cedar Creek, about waist high, before dawn, climbed a hill, and participated and descended on the sleeping Yankee camp, a complete surprise to the Yankees and the beginning of a glorious morning for the south. In addition to reading various accounts of the battle,[307] I was able to attend the re-enactment of the battle on the occasion of its 150th anniversary in 2014. A small group of historians and civil war buffs rose before dawn, crossed Cedar Creek over a little bridge (not present in 1864, but just a few yards from the 1864 crossing site), and climb the hill to the precise location where Alemeth and the other Vindicators surprised the union camp. It being (again) October 19th, the temperature, the time of day, and even (if memory doesn't entirely deceive) a little fog, served to recreate the path he took.

As for the fog, by all accounts, it really was so thick, on the morning of October 19th, that the soldiers couldn't see more than a few feet ahead. All things considered, the idea of entering extremely thick fog provided the perfect scenery for my story, given its themes.

Chapter 125

October 21 – November 1, 1864

The letter Eliza was trying to write to Alemeth is fictional, but I did read a number of Eliza's letters (written after the war) and I attempted to mimic her phraseology. *I can scarcely express myself* these days, for example, is taken from one of her later letters. The Bible verses are Habbakuk 3:17-19.

The October 24 letter from Captain Jesse Wright, of Company H, is authentic, based on the typescript in our family genealogy binders. This one I chose not to excerpt. I found it fascinating that, after delivery the sad news, the Captain went to describe the shifting tides of the battle, the artillery captured, and so – as if to serve as an implied message to Amzi that the battle (and life) goes on for those who remain.

Way *way* back, soon after I'd abandoned the idea of writing a panoramic novel dealing with all my ancestors who were alive during the civil war – which is to say, as soon as I'd settled on the Byers family story as the story I wanted to tell – my thought was to tell a story with three protagonists and three points of view: Amzi's, Eliza's, and Alemeth's. I liked Alemeth's story in part because of the fact that he died young, before his life's dreams could be attempted, much less fulfilled. Among the many things that make war so horrible, I believe, is that it is the epitome of people trying to get their way over the opposition of others, to impose their wills on others. It is the end result of people's tendency to be certain that they are right (especially if God is on their side, as He almost always seems to be). Alemeth's story was always going to be a tragedy, and the tragedy would manifest itself in the loss of potential. Due to his premature

[306] Whitehorne, Joseph W. A., The Battle of Cedar Creek, Center of Military History, Washington, 1992, p. 10., quoting one of General George Custer's cavalry officers. Accessed at http://www.history.army.mil/html/books/070/70-25/
[307] In addition to Whitehorne, there is also Lewis, Thomas A., *The Guns of Cedar Creek*, Harper & Row, 1942

death, we simply don't know what sort of life he would have led. Newspaperman? Planter? Slaver owner? Abolitionist? The not knowing is the absence of the life fulfilled. Ironically, opposing certainties and convictions lead to ignorance about what might have been.

As originally conceived, the idea was to get the reader to identify with all three points of view (Amzi's, Eliza's, and Alemeth's) equally, so that, when Alemeth was killed, his point of view would simply vanish; thereafter, there'd be only Amzi's and Eliza's thoughts about him. That original idea proved too difficult for me to handle – probably 5 or ten percent of the way into the project I realized I could only have a single protagonist, could only tell one person's story, that Alemeth had to be front and center. Still, the death of the living Alemeth, and its replacement by an Alemeth who existed only in the memory of those left behind – was something I still wanted to capture.

Consistent with that objective, the *suddenness* of Captain Wright's letter, and the inability of the reader to see anything more than the ink on the page, was something I wanted the reader to feel, as close as I could get it to the suddenness and inscrutability of the news as received by Amzi and Eliza. Sure, those two knew that Alemeth *might* be killed. They worried about it. They may even have predicted it, just as readers of the novel, seeing the dwindling number of pages left, might predict it. But still, I believed, there'd be hope on the part of the reader, just as there'd have been hope on the part of Amzi and Eliza. I considered describing the battle of Cedar Creek; I considered fictionalizing an account of exactly how Alemeth had met his end. But if I had done so, telling that story from Alemeth's perspective, I wouldn't then have been able to tell the story from Amzi and Eliza's perspective. As with many other writings included in Alemeth, I found myself comparing my own reading of Captain Wright's letter to my characters' reading of the same document. Back in Chapter 9, when Eliza read her father's letter about Mary Ann's eyes, she hadn't known her father, she hadn't known anything about Mary Ann's eyes, and so she'd had to wonder about the truth that lay beyond the ink on the page. When Alemeth, in Mr. Ward's print shop, read the letter from Long Creek about the "vile abolitionist" living at Bynum's Creek, he'd had to wonder what lay beyond the ink on the page. I wanted my reader's reaction to reading Captain Wright's letter to come as close as possible to Amzi and Eliza's reactions, as *they* wondered what lay beyond the ink on the page.

Our wondering exactly how Alemeth died surely mirrors their wondering. Our reading – and rereading – the documents that provide our only clues surely mimic the reading, and re-reading, Amzi and Eliza experienced upon reading precisely those same words, a hundred and fifty years or more before we read them. But once a person is gone – once the past is past – we can never know the truth of how it was. As Gordon says to Howard in Chapter 67, people can't be reduced to words, whether they're living, breathing human beings or dead and gone. What we're really seeing when we read a letter, or a newspaper article, or a novel, is just ink on a page – and though prompted by that ink, and though reminded by it of this memory or that, the thoughts we have as a result are (psychologists assure us) of our *own* making.

So Amzi reads the words of Captain Wright's letter, and takes one meaning from them. Eliza reads the same words, and takes a completely different meaning. When I first read Captain Wright's letter, I generated a third meaning, and every reader of *Alemeth* will generate another.

When people perceive things so differently, it's a wonder we ever get along. But the perception that our own take on things is somehow the "right" one is – well – it's what *Alemeth* is all about.

Chapter 126

April, 1865, to September 17, 1878

The end of the war brought unfamiliar things to northern Mississippi – not the least of which was the fact that, in 1865 and 1866, the union troops stationed in Oxford to enforce law and order were mostly black. [308] Racial tensions had never been higher. Due to the Federal policy of reconciliation and leniency toward secessionists like Colonel Brown, they were not prosecuted for treason; despite the huge losses he'd sustained, Brown kept his head, kept his freedom, and even remained a member of the Board of Ole Miss. But the land on the north side of Depot Street was used as a camp for freedmen. On June 13, 1865, President Andrew Johnson appointed one time Ole Miss Trustee William Sharkey (one of the minority of Mississippians who'd supported remaining in the Union) Provisional Governor of the state; on July 13, 1865, the University of Mississippi Board of Trustees, convened by Sharkey, named the Reverend John Waddel, erstwhile advocate for the *Evidences of Christianity*, the new Chancellor,[309] and the University reopened its doors.[310] In September of 1870, Chancellor Waddel-sent an open letter stating that he and his colleagues would resign before they would matriculate negro students at the University.[311]

Don Doyle tells of the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871, making violations of civil rights a federal crime, and of the trial that year, in Oxford, of several Klansmen. The Klansmen were defended by L.Q. C. Lamar, who defied the judge, and when court deputies tried to control him, struck a U.S. Marshall in the face, knocking him down. The Klansmen on trial cheered and stomped their feet, and the audience in the courtroom applauded. Three years later, Mississippians elected Lamar to the U.S. Senate.[312] It must have seemed to white and black alike that the world had been turned upside down, and in the post-war years, whites did everything they could to turn it right side up again.

---

[308] Sansing, p. 119.
[309] Sansing, p. 116.
[310] Colonel Brown remained a Trustee until 1870, when a Republican legislature reorganized the Board. Sansing, p. 34.
[311] Historical Catalogue, *supra*, p. 74.
[312] Doyle, p. 287-289.

The letter from Eliza Byers at pg 400 is authentic – excerpted slightly, but otherwise verbatim from my Byers family genealogy binder.

My description of the yellow fever epidemic of 1878 is based mostly on reports of the public health officials who dealt with the epidemic.[313] On July 17, 1878 – while yellow fever was being carried (by mosquitoes, not *animalcula)* up the Mississippi Valley – Henry Walton Byers and his wife named their first born son Howard Falconer Byers. The honor thus paid to the lawyer, newspaperman, and confederate veteran continues to intrigue me, as I know little of the reasons for the connection between the men. Howard Falconer was thirteen years older than Walton Byers, and had left Oxford in 1861, when Walton was only twelve and Falconer 25. So it wouldn't seem that any sort of friendship would have arisen at that point. After the war, Falconer lived in Holly Springs, practicing law and running a newspaper, while Walton Byers remained at Bynum's Creek, helping Amzi run what remained of the family's cotton plantation. One can assume, as I did, that the relationship between the two men was initiated or strengthened in some way by the fact that Walton married a woman (Jenny Harper) from Holly Springs, but a relationship based on that alone would hardly seem enough to cause the Byerses to name their firstborn son after the man. I am convinced that there was something much deeper behind their relationship. As I ponder it, I often find myself concluding that it was Alemeth's friendship with Howard – until I remember that I made up Alemeth's stint working for Howard at the Intelligencer. For all I know, Alemeth Byers and Howard Falconer never knew one another. So it is that, after eight years of trying to understand the Byers family, I have confused my research discoveries with my fictional creations, such that now I have difficulty telling them apart.

And so we're back to inference and speculation, hampered now by a less than helpful memory. For what little it's worth, trying to clear my mind of self-created fictions, I suspect that the connection between Henry Walton Byers and Howard Falconer (like so many other connections) had to do with Colonel Brown. With Alemeth's death, Colonel Brown might well have treated Walton Byers like a son. The Colonel and Falconer were both in Democratic politics, they both had been involved with Ole Miss and *The Intelligencer* together. Maybe the Colonel even tried to get Walton to go to work with Howard in the newspaper business. But whatever was the basis of the relationship, and whether Colonel Brown was involved with it or not, we know that Walton Byers and his wife chose to name their first born son after Howard Falconer.

And we also know that, just two months later, on September 20, 1878, the Yellow Fever epidemic took Howard Falconer's life, and that the best medical professionals of the day were at a complete loss to understand the nature of the disease and its transmission. As *The Panola Star* proclaimed on December 24, 1856, the future is concealed in doubt; the doctors of 1878 would have to see ahead to the next century to realize that Yellow Fever was carried by mosquitoes. Meanwhile, in the fevered hallucinations that Howard experienced in his final illness, who knows whether Alemeth Byers came to him? Who knows, indeed, whether Gordon Falkner

[313] Choppin, Samuel, *History of the Importation of Yellow Fever Into the United States, from 1693 to 1878,* Public Health Reports and Papers of the American Public Health Association, Riverside Press, Cambridge, 1880.

came to him? As that same piece in *The Star* had noted, human nature is also heedless of the past, "regarding not science and experience that past ages have unveiled." The past, too, though everywhere in evidence around us, is impossible to see, so that my Alemeth Byers is, in a very real sense, no more factual or fictional than Gordon Falkner. And learned as she was about her Bible, Eliza had never learned Hebrew. She could never have taught Alemeth that the meaning of his name (as it appears on page 406) is "concealed" or "veiled."

Postscript

If we cannot see the past – only fragments of evidence about it, from which we can try to draw inferences – we ought to recognize the huge role that our own sensibilities, beliefs, and attitudes play in our reconstruction of it. Most of this influence is unconscious, but once we accept the concept that the best we can do is subjective reconstruction, there are times we can deal with it consciously.

An example is my effort to understand whether Alemeth's slave, Gilbert, returned to Mississippi after the war. Modern sensibility demands that I wonder why he would have. Although *Kep* is a name I made up for the novel, his very existence fictional, his risking his life to escape the Plantation reflects a reality reasonable people everywhere accept –*many* slaves *were* willing to risk their lives to escape their southern masters. But what about the historic slave, Gilbert, whose existence is confirmed by Alemeth's letters home? When he was taken to Virginia, as far north as Harper's Ferry and perhaps even into Pennsylvania, he had been brought to the very threshold of a free north. After Alemeth's death, wouldn't he have resisted a return to Mississippi?

Captain Wright seems not to have thought so. Informing Amzi of Alemeth's death, Captain Wright wrote about Alemeth's few personal belongings, saying "[we] will send everything with Gilbert as soon as the opportunity presents itself." Did he trust Gilbert to travel all the way back to Mississippi by himself? And if he did, did Gilbert return, as Captain Wright believed he would?

Looking at the Panola County census for 1870, we see black families named Byers and Beyers throughout the Bynum's Creek area.[314] Finding no Gilberts in the vicinity, I concluded that Gilbert had indeed taken his first opportunity to escape north into Maryland or Pennsylvania. But then, in the 1870 Lafayette census, I came across a 22 year old, black Gilbert "Bars," living not too far away in the neighborhood of Sand Springs Church.[315] All things considered, I suspect this was, indeed, Alemeth's Gilbert. Perhaps my mother was right, that huge numbers of southern slaves were happy with their lives on the Plantation and had no desire to flee north.

[314] In the 1870 Census for Panola County, Amzi Byers' family is listed as family #108, and Uncle Johnson (living alone – he apparently never married) as #109. Black families around them include families headed by Tom Beyers (#107), Anna Beyers (#110), Lawson Beyers (#112), Adaline Byers (#118), Oliver Byers (#119), Sam Beyers (#121), Ann Beyers (#122), and Frank Beyers (#134).

[315] "Farmer" Gilbert Bars and his eighteen year old housekeeper wife are family #83 in the *Lafayette* County census of 1870, which is labeled for census purposes as "Taylor's Depot" but which appears to be just across the county line in Orwood and the vicinity of Sand Springs church. (On the same census page as Gilbert "Bars" is the household of Mary Orr and her son J.B. (probably James Orr). Sand Springs' Gray family is on the following page.)

Perhaps Gilbert was not at all happy with his former Plantation life, but had heard enough about Emancipation during the war that he returned to Mississippi after Alemeth's death in hopes things would be different for him there, now that he was a free man. And of course, perhaps the Gilbert Bars of the 1870 Lafayette Census isn't Alemeth's Gilbert at all, *that* Gilbert having headed north the first moment he could.

I don't know. The past is gone. I have only a microfiched image of ink on a page.

Sand Springs Church still stands, now on the National Register of Historic Places. I've been there myself; brother David and I attended a church service there, and were treated to a most hospitable luncheon served up by the church's remaining elders. We also picked a boll of cotton from the fields, by Bynum's Creek, and knocked on the door of the modern house that sits at the top of the hill above those fields – the hill where, I strongly suspect, Amzi's house once stood. The teenage African-American girl who answered the door said she knew absolutely nothing about any of the prior residents of the place. It felt odd to think that I, who'd been there only once before, for mere minutes, might know more about the history of the place than she did, at least in some respects.

To the extent records exist, they suggest that Colonel James Brown continued to be active in the Oxford community; he died during a trip to Alabama on January 16, 1880. Eliza's sister, Mary Ann Strong Brown, lived out her years in Oxford, dying there ten years later, on September 16th, 1890. Eliza's sister, Julia Strong Webster, died in St. Louis July 2, 1884. Her husband, Dr. Ashbel Webster, followed her four weeks later, on July 30, 1884.

Amzi Byers eventually moved to a house in Water Valley. His claim for compensation from the Southern Claims Commission was denied in 1875, and he died four years later, on September 15, 1879. Eliza Byers – the youngest of the Strong sisters – lived until February 10, 1907, quite long enough to witness the marriage of her own youngest daughter, Julia Loughborough Byers, to William Lee Logan, a dry goods salesman. That marriage took place in Yalobusha County, Mississippi, on October 26, 1887. After it, Eliza moved to Texas with her youngest daughter and her husband, and so was able to witness the births of *their* children – including my grandfather, who was born on February 8, 1893, and christened William *Loughborough* Logan, a name that his parents assumed would keep alive the collective memory of those who'd borne the name Loughborough before him.[316]

William Loughborough Logan married Corinne Howell in Lancaster, Texas, on December 4th, 1917. My mother, Julia Corinne Logan, was born there on September 7th, 1921, preceded by a sister Eloise and followed by a sister Mary Anna. The names serve as aids to our reconstruction of the past. Certain answers – like the location of Alemeth Byers' final resting place – have proved elusive. Some of the evidence on which we might have based our reconstructions of the past have been lost with the passage of time, even as other evidence, 'new'

[316] Loughborough Avenue, in modern St. Louis, is named after the Captain James Loughborough who married Eliza's niece, Mary Ann Webster, fathered the child who died at Christmastime, 1862, and who thereby introduced the name into the Byers family.

evidence, has yet to come to light. All the while, we reconstruct not the actual past, but stories of our own, constructed on the fragile basis of evidence that's rarely more than ink on a page.

Contemplating what it is we do when we attempt to write chronicles of the past, I find myself wondering whether I begat Alemeth or Alemeth begat me. Calliope might say I begat Alemeth – supported by modern psychology, she might say that I recreated the story of his life from my own memories, experiences, and unconscious emotions. Clio, supported by modern geneticists and cultural anthropologists, might see it differently: she might say that the characters in *Alemeth* who shared in creating my family, my culture and everything I find familiar begat me. Who's to say which comes closer to the truth?

I don't know how to characterize how much of Alemeth is fact, and how much fiction. "Historical" characters, in the traditional sense outnumber fictional ones by at least ten to one.

"Fictional" Characters in the Novel

Grote, Ike, Kep & Sadie, Zack, Josh, & Abel (Byers slaves)
Harl, Sam and Emily (Colonel Brown slaves)
The Clearys (and other passengers on the stage with Eliza)
Doctor O.W. Edgar (spiritualist)
Zephaniah McKinney (Leander's grandfather)
Jim Murdock, Zeke Avery & Bill Starr (beat riders)
Nat (Leander's friend)
Reverend Frederick Coffin Vrooman (Mt. Sylvan teacher)
Jim Horton (typesetter at *The Star*)
Reverend Stewart of Pontotoc
Gordon Falkner

Every other character is "real," which is to say I've described each as accurately as the information I have about them, and the time available, and the constraints on my abilities, have allowed. Which is to say, that every character in the book is a product of the imagination. I set out to tell Alemeth's story as faithfully as I could, only to find, in the end, that I have not been writing either fact or fiction, but autobiography.

And for that reason, I can't give the usual disclaimer that any resemblance to any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. As to the dead, I've made every effort to be faithful to actual people. As to the living, anything that seems to resemble an actual living person is coincidental, EXCEPT as to my family and close personal friends. I cannot help but think that, regardless of my conscious awareness or intent, resemblances to them are anything but coincidental.