

Willis B. Bagwell  
1814-1896

### **Murder in a Small Town**

Willis H. Bagwell was born around 1814. He was married to Emily Sheats. Willis was another of "Pleasant Grove/ Hart-Town's" first pioneers and settler. In 1840 census he lives in District 682 of Carroll. Tax Digest shows he owned 202 acres District 649, Villa Rica.

In the census of 1850 Willis is aged 36 with wife Emily and following children: Eliza, Mary, Wiley, Margaret, Amanda, Charlie, Clara, and Infant.

in the census of 1860 Willis and his family; Mary, Wiley, Margaret, Amanda, Charles, Samuel J, Ahay B., and H.H. Starke a farm laborer are living on the west side of town in Villa Rica.

Willis enlisted to fight in the war between the states 19th Regiment, Company I.

In 1865 Mary his second daughter goes missing. She left behind her son Oliver. The father of Oliver remained unknown...

Life carried on for Willis and his family in 1870, 56 of age with wife and following children: Samuel J., Ahas B. Oliver grandson, Nancy Embry, Ellen Embry, Jacob Embry, Jacob Embry, and Infant Embry.

By 1880 Willis was living a somewhat humble life with son Ahas and daughter Nora. One daughter Margaret married and moved away without speaking to them again and

Mary was still missing, her son Oliver "Ollie" moved to Carrollton to become an upstanding citizen.

in the year of 1882 a body was found.

### **In the Atlanta Constitution Newspaper July 26, 1882:**

#### **The Bagwell Murder Case**

The most exciting case that is to be tried is that of old man Bagwell and his sons, charged with connection with the murder of Mary Bagwell whose bones were unearthed in an old shaft of copper mine, in the March last. This case is of two-fold interest because it is enveloped in mystery and doubt. Mary Bagwell was the daughter of Willis Bagwell, a farmer who resided two miles from Villa Rica. She was a wayward girl and did not confine herself to the paths of virtue and her disregard of chastity made her the mother of a baby boy before she had paid the usual and very proper visit to hymens alter(married). Her son is now living in Carrollton, and is esteemed a very worthy young man.

But a still greater disgrace awaited the frail Mary. In July 1865, she was again in a delicate condition (with child), and suspicion pointed to Barney Hargrove, a married, black farm hand, as the probable cause of her second trouble. One night in July of the year mentioned, Mary Bagwell disappeared. No clue to her whereabouts was known and very little interest in her was manifested even by her friends. It was generally supposed that she had gone the way of all who fall so low, and was an inmate of one of the dens of disgraced and abandoned women in Atlanta.

At the time of her disappearance Hargrove was also missing but he subsequently turned up. Since then, however, he has died; at least nothing is known of him. Since the night of her mysterious disappearance in July 1865; no tidings has ever come from Mary Bagwell.

#### The Bones In The Shaft

About a mile and a half from Villa Rica on the Dallas Highway, a neighborhood road turns to the right and leads over hills for about a mile, where in the midst of a dark and unfrequented forest and upon the crest of a knob among the hills, is a shaft of a deserted copper mine, known as the Hill copper shaft. When being worked, the shaft was ninety feet deep. It was eight feet square, and in 1854 the owners left it, a dangerous and desolate looking hole away off by itself in the midst of that dense wood. For nearly thirty years that shaft remained undisturbed saved by the elements. But the rains and storms were gradually filling it up until a few months ago a company determined to rest the value of the ore. The old shaft was nearly filled with dirt and debris and water. The water was pumped out and the work of removing the accumulated debris of twenty-eight years was begun, a few feet down a workman came upon the bones of a dog. The work was continued and on one, Thursday in March, one of the miners, then fifteen feet below, a top of the debris threw up a human hip bone. Another shovelful brought more bones until finally the astonished workman unearthed the complete skeleton of a woman. A closer search revealed a second skeleton, that of an infant. With the skeleton was a puff corset, a gold breastpin and a piece of folded but otherwise well preserved ribbon. The bones were gathered together and on the succeeding Monday an inquest was held. The testimony was voluminous and pointed to the belief that the bones were those of the dead Mary Bagwell and her unborn baby. The suspicions of the people were directed toward the family of the girl and Hargrove.

The father of the girl contended that he had supposed that she was leading a life of shame in Atlanta and hence made no search for her. From all the facts many people came to believe Hargrove was the perpetrator of the murder, and that he was aided or countenanced by the family, who were willing to get rid of the disgraced girl in any way possible. Hargrove being dead, nothing could be done with him, but Willis Bagwell the father, and Wiley and Charles Bagwell brothers of the girl, were put under \$1500.00 bond for their appearance to answer to charge of complicity in the murder. Today the grand jury is at work on the case but it is not known whether true bills will be found or not. The bill charges Barney Hargrove's with being principal and Willis Bagwell, Charley Bagwell and Wiley Bagwell as being principals in the second degree and as accessories before and after the fact. It will not be a difficult matter to get a jury in the county but it is not probable that the case will come to trial at this term of the court owing to the fact that some testimony is not yet ready. The case is represented as follows: For the prosecution, Solicitor-General Reid and Mr. J. S. James; for the defense, Smith and Roberts, John V. Edge; Reese and Adamson, and W. W. and G. W. Marion.

Since the above was put into type and just before we go to press, we receive the following note from Squire J.M. Cobb, giving the substance of the coroner's inquest: The jury holding the inquest over the skeletons taken from the copper shaft near Villa Rica, returned in substance, last night, the following verdict: We, the jury, find the remains to



be those of a female, also that they are the remains of Mary Bagwell and her unborn infant, and further find that she came to her death being thrown in what is known as the Hill copper shaft by Barney Hargroves and some other unknown parties. We further find that Willis Bagwell, Wiley Bagwell and Charley Bagwell were cognizant of the fact and kept it concealed from the officers of the law. March 23rd, 1882

Some Missing Facts found throughout newspapers....

The coroner issued his warrant for the arrest of Barney Hargraves and the three Bagwell's. It is understood that Hargraves, accidentally shot and killed himself some two or three miles from Atlanta a few years ago. The Bagwells were immediately arrested by Deputy Sheriff W.J. Kilgore and placed under \$1500. Bonds for their appearance at the July term of Douglas Superior Court.

The Douglasville Star says that rumor is in circulation at that place that Willis Bagwell has received a letter from his lost daughter Mary and that she is now in Kansas City, Mo., to which place he has gone for her. We cannot vouch for the truthfulness of the rumor, but we know that Mr. Bagwell passed this place last week on his way to Atlanta, but for what purpose, we cannot say.

In 1892 Willis passed away.

In the Weekly Constitution of April 25, 1882 Willis had this to say.

The Father's Story: Mary Bagwell's life given to the public

Willis Bagwell claims that the bones found in the Carroll County Copper Mine are not Mary's, a close search intimates the fact that h/she is still alive.

"Yes I am the father of Mary Bagwell, the girl whom bones are supposed to have been found a few days ago in the old copper mine in Douglas County.

Thus did Willis Bagwell deliver himself yesterday afternoon to a Constitutional representative and as he spoke tears trickled down the old gentleman's face, which is well marked with the deep troubles which have made his life wretched and which today cause many people to look upon him as the murderer of his daughter.

"But," he continued "they are not Mary's bones and I will conclusively establish that fact within a short time. I will not only do that but I will prove to the world that my child is still alive.

"What? Alive?"

"Yes, Alive, she is my child, and although she was sinned against God and man, and has grievously wronged me and my family I will take her back in this home of her childhood and there give her such care and attention as will convince few enemies and meddlers that I love my child too well to have killed her," and here the old gentleman's emotions overcame him and he wept like a child.

As he sat wiping the tears from his eyes the reporter looked long and steadily at him his face is round, even one and entirely devoid of beard. His forehead is large and broad and his eyes keen with a deep, penetration stare. his lips are thin, indicating

decisions and his chin only adds to the good impression one entertains for him when he first sets the face of old man Bagwell. After a short silence he said:

The Story of Mary Bagwells Life:

"It is a long story and sad one, but if you would like to hear it I will do what I have never done before, repent it all, I never think of Mary and her sad life but that my throat fills with something that keeps back my speech and I fear my recital will be poor one."

"Mary Bagwell was her name in full, she was born in Carroll County, near where I now live in June 1838. She was my second child and as she was always sick when young, was the favorite. At an early age Mary was taken quite sick with the fever and for months no one had any idea that she would ever recover. However, she did get well but her mind was never what it was before her sickness. Up to the time she was twenty years of age Mary was as pure as any woman, but about that time she began to receive the attention of a young man whose parents resided on a plantation near us. As I have said Mary was not as bright as she might have been and this fact was generally known throughout the neighborhood. But on one had any idea that she would draw the eyes of the entire country upon us by being so indiscreet but she did. Sometime in 1861 she gave unmistakable evidence of her sin and in 1892 gave birth to a child. This child- a boy- is now at my home in Carroll County, where he is widely known as the son of Mary Bagwell and yet where by she strictly honest deportment he was won the respect, confidence and esteem of all who know him of course Mary's sin was her downfall and ever after a cloud rested upon the entire family, but knowing as we did her weak mind we freely forgave her and threw around her a stronger guard of affection if possible than ever before. We did all in our power to make her forget the terrible misstep she had taken, hoping that she would try to raise her child to be the useful man he has since become.

Her second sin:

"Well things went along smoothly until 1865. Mary's sin had been forgiven in fact, almost forgotten and we were rejoicing over the good our treatment of her had accomplished, when we suddenly ascertained that she was again about to become a mother. This discovery was a terrible blow to us, and we became reckless, careless and heartbroken. I told my wife that I could not afford to raise a family with this cloud rested over them, and was contemplating a removal from Carroll County. Mary although deeply ashamed of her first offence did not attach any importance to the sin and in a careless aimless way wandered about the neighborhood exhibiting her shame to all her shame to all with whom she came in contact. Frequently she would leave home and be gone two and three days and even a week at a time, and as suddenly she had disappeared she would again turn up. These unknown and unexplained visits were so common with her and we never made an effort to ascertain where she went.

"She felt indisposed to mingle with her mother, brothers and sisters, and when at home usually kept her room, passing her time with her child. Often she would say: "I see the family can't be happy with me and I am going to leave I am going away where no one will know where I am or else I will kill myself". But this statement she made so frequently that we lost all belief in it, and finally paid no attention to it. Occasionally I would



reproach her for her conduct and beg her to remain at home where people could not see her, but she never paid any attention to my wishes and continued to do as she pleased until she left home forever."

"I just can't tell you the date upon which she left: we disagree in our family about that. Some say she left home the latter part of June, but I contend that she left in the early part of July. However, let the date be what I may, the weather was warm, and we slept with doors open. On the evening of the night upon which she left, she mingled with the family more than usual and seemed in better spirits than she had been for months. Early at night she retired and as she started for her room she said good night and that is the last time any of the Bagwells have seen her or heard her voice. How will I remember how my child looked that night, and how distinctly I can yet hear those two words good night as she fell from her lips in a subdued, and half frightened tone.

Her absence discovered:

"The next morning when she did not appear at breakfast, someone went to her room she was not there but her boy was there asleep in the bed which he had divided with his mother since his birth. Some time during the day I was ascertained that all of her clothing was gone too but as I have said she was accustomed to making long and mysterious excursions into the surrounding county and we only thought she was off on one of these tramps again.

But in less than a week we began to make some inquiry about her whereby we learned she was not in the neighborhood. This intelligens somewhat disconcerted my entire family and diligent searches, though made in a quiet way was begun, but we never learned anything certain, although we learned many rumors. About this time many blacks were leaving our county and coming to Atlanta and we always have thought that Mary then home with one of those blacks she never came away alone, she was too near a mother to have make the trip by herself. And then she was not sharp enough to have reached Atlanta alone.

"But how about Barney Hargroves, the black man whose name has been associated with Miss Bagwell's? Interposed the reporter.

"Well that's a part of the story that hurts me-hurts us all. You must know that it is hard to have a daughter's name bandied about generally, but when it is associated with that of a married man is terrible," and here the old gentleman's feeling overcame him again. "But I must finish the story," he began presently, and then swear never to undertake the recital again. Barney Hargroves belonged to a young man who married one of my daughters and was working in a gold mine near my place. He was under superintendent Willoughby, who says that at about the same time Mary disappeared. Barney went off and gone two or three days and when he came back and was asked to Mr. Willoughby now testifies although I never know of the fact until the inquest where he had been, said. "I have been to Marietta but don't you tell Mary Bagwell." Barney remained in our neighborhood for about three months after this when he was arrested for burglary, but he succeeded in escaping when he came to Atlanta, where he killed himself."

#### How Barney Died

"Yes," interposed Captain Couch, of the Atlanta police force. "Barney killed himself in this city about five or six years ago. He was working for Dr. Walker. One night he heard a dog fight in his yard, and thinking some strange dog was after his dog, he seized his gun and rushed out with the intention of taking a hand in the fight but when he got into the yard he found that the dog belonged to Dr. Walker and he did not attempt to kill him, but in his efforts to separate the dogs, his gun went off inflicting a wound of which he died. Dr. Thad Johnson of this city, was the attending physician, and Dr. Walker was present when Barney died and they can confirm the story."

"So you see we know this much," resumed Mr. Bagwell, "and we know more. We have ascertained positively that Mary lived here after she left Carroll. But as i have said we never had any positive news from Mary after that night. The impression, however, in Carroll County was general that she was living in Atlanta, and whenever i came to this place, as i frequently did. People who knew all about the affair, said, 'yes, he is going to Atlanta to see his daughter.'

"Well, we had long ago given her up as lost, and on account of her conduct had abandoned her entirely, although we felt many a pang on account of the hardships to which we knew she was exposed. I presume i should never have made an effort to reclaim her had not those bones given rise to the charge of murder and may arrest, and also the arrest of two of my sons."

#### The Recent Discovery

"Tell me something about the finding of the bones?"

"Well you see that county is full of these old copper mines. There are some of them a hundred feet deep, and none of them have been worked for- i can't say how long- until very recently, when they were cleaned out. In one of these, as you know, the bones and ribbon and comb and breast pin were found. On Saturday after they were discovered i went to Villa Rica, and while there someone told me of the discovery and showed me a piece of ribbon which i took in my hands. After looking at the ribbon i said, 'Who is missing?' i think the coroner should look into this matter, and dismissing the matter from my mind, went home, the next day Mr. Velvin told one of my sons that the bones were thought to be Mary's' and this i and my two oldest boys were suspected of having thrown her in that mine. He also stated that the coroner would begin an investigation of the affair on Monday. When my son revealed this state of affairs to me i was completely surprised and early Monday morning we all started for Villa Rica to be present at the inquest. After reaching the place an officer gave us subpoenas. The inquest Dr. Slaughter was made the first witness. He examined the bones skeleton and said that they were human bones, but added that there was one member absent, and on account of this he could not discover the sex. Then a dozen people went down in the shaft, among the number my son, who himself unearthed the missing bone which induced Dr. Slaughter to say that the skeleton was a female.

The first day's work was a tedious one, and resulted in ascertaining nothing. On the morning of the second day, Mr. James, an attorney from Douglasville was sent for and the remained two days the inquest was governed by him and Mr. Kemp, his ammunition



did all the writing, and while his employer was making a lengthy speech to the jury, wrote the verdict which the jury subsequently signed making me and my son cognizant of the murder of Mary who is yet alive."

"Do you know that she is alive?"

"Well i came here to ascertain that fact Captain Couch has known me for years, and i have engaged his services in hunting up the lost girl. Let him speak for himself."

"Yes," Said Couch, who had been a witness to the entire conversation, " I know dead sure that she is alive. I have as Mr. Bagwell says, known her for years and knew all about the girl's disappearance. When i first read of the finding of the bones, said to be Marys i was surprised for i always believed the girl to be in Atlanta. When mr.Bagwell came to me i set out to find the truth. I i found that he was guilty i wanted him punished, if not guilty i wanted to show it . I have worked three days on the case and i know know that Mary Bagwell was alive in this town four years ago. A gentleman of the best standing in this city who knew her and the family intimately and knew Mary when he saw her, will swear whom the trial comes up that he has seen her in Atlanta Within the past five years.

"Then besides that", broke in Mr. Bagwell, "I have found a gentleman who will swear when the trail comes up that Mary came to him one day about five years ago and stated who she was and asked if he knew whether there were any people from Villa rica in town. To this gentleman she said she was a daughter of Willis Bagwell of Carroll County. I would like for you to add that i will yet find Mary Bagwell and prove to the world that i ain't no murderer or accessory."

"What kind of looking girl was she?"

" She was about five feet seven inches high, and would weight about one hundred and fifty pounds. She was well built. Her complexion was neither dark, nor light. Her hair was dark and long and heavy. She was grey eyes. Her teeth were prominent. And she might have been called good looking, although she was inclined to be stooped shouldered.