

SLAVERY IN FALMOUTH

Carlton

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Some Southerners and many Hollywood films have presented slavery as a practical alliance of kindly, caring slave owners and contented, hard-working servants. Falmouth citizens in the late 1850s knew that this was not necessarily the case.

My grandparents and other old people in the town remembered the screams of anguish coming from the beating of slaves at *Carlton*. The plantation house still stands on a hill overlooking Falmouth and Falls Run. Irish immigrant Jack O'Bannon used slaves to farm his corn and sorghum on the hills and in the meadows surrounding the mansion. My grandfather, Wes Brooks, told my father that as a young boy, he had witnessed O'Bannon beating a slave until the blood streamed from his back. The slave was then doused in salt brine, which stopped the bleeding and aided healing – you did not want to lose too many work days. My grandfather said that he never knew the offense for which the young black man had been beaten.

You can imagine that O'Bannon's slaves were among the first to leave when the Union forces occupied Falmouth in 1862. O'Bannon's rage over this loss never was forgotten. Older residents said that once he no longer had black slaves, he proceeded to enslave his two daughters, Ellen and Nannie. His wife died when the girls were young, and the hard-drinking, bitter O'Bannon handed the upkeep of the stables and grounds to Miss Nannie and the housekeeping to Miss Ellen. The two women stayed on at *Carlton*, never marrying because their father would never allow either daughter to receive young men. According to my family, one of my father's uncles had dared to call on Miss Ellen and had been severely beaten about the head and shoulders with a buggy whip.

I remember the two sisters during the '30s in a black buggy hitched to a white horse, driving into Fredericksburg to go shopping. They dressed in ankle-length dresses and seemed to ignore all passing of time after the death of their father in the 1870s.

Just before Miss Nannie's death at the age of 85, my father was helping her get in some hay for the lone horse left in the stable when he saw an elegantly turned cherry bedpost sitting in a corner of the stable. When my father asked about the bedpost, Miss Nannie told him there were two more like it in the loft and that he was welcome to them if he wanted them. My father asked what had happened to the fourth post, and Miss Nannie told him it had been burned in the fireplace. It had split into several pieces when her father had thrown the bed out of an upstairs window at *Carlton*. The other three had landed in the shrubbery. Miss Nannie said that this incident happened shortly after the Union troops had left Falmouth. Her father was determined that no member of the O'Bannon family would sleep in a bed that had been used by "damn Yankees." The girls had picked up the remaining three posts and put them in the stable, where they had remained for almost 70 years. My brother still has the three posts that Miss Nannie gave to my father that day.