PHOTO DAVID PRICE

A MURDER IN CLARKESVILLE

"The past isn't dead. It isn't even past."
Requiem for a Nun, William Faulkner

BY DAVID PRICE

In a tiny northeast Georgia cemetery, an eerie image of a young girl's face on an ancient tombstone has resurrected ghosts from William Faulkner's past. Whether the face is an apparition from the "other side" or just random shadings of lichen and moss, its discovery led to the reexamination of a 174-year-old murder mystery that affected Faulkner and influenced his Nobel prize-winning novels.

The Old Clarkesville Cemetery sits almost unnoticed just a few blocks from the quaint town square. On this one-acre postage stamp of land, giant white pines and poplar trees tower over staggered rows of tablet headstones that lean drunkenly in the lasting gloom. Scattered among the graves are box crypts, worn from almost two centuries of exposure to the elements. Many of them gape open, their lids gradually lifted by the ever-growing, implacable tree roots.

The oldest tombstone in the cemetery belongs to Calvin J. Hanks, a young attorney stabbed to death on a Clarkesville street on August 15, 1834. Although it was a public murder, Hank's death went unpunished after a jury set his accused killers free. Adding to the enduring mystery, all four suspects were distinguished residents of the town: a doctor, a former city commissioner, a son of a Revolutionary War hero, and a teacher who later became a Mississippi judge.

Prompted by the Devil

Just a block from the cemetery, Joy Lovell works for the Habersham County Chamber of Commerce in the Mauldin House Museum and Visitor's Center. Along with other members of the Habersham County Historical Society, Lovell has taken on the job of caring for the old cemetery. Each year she leads visitors on night walks through the graveyard. During these events, volunteers dressed in antebellum costumes and Civil War uniforms tell the stories of the cemetery's permanent inhabitants.

From the beginning, Lovell notes, Hanks' grave has been a favorite with visitors, perhaps because of the mystery surrounding his death and the haunting epitaph carved into his tombstone:

Ye living men as you pass by
As you be now so once was I
As I am now so you must be
Prepare for death and follow me.

"It's almost as if Hanks was taunting his killers," Lovell says.

The story of Hanks' murder captivated Lovell when she first heard it, but details were few. During the seventeen decades since his death, many Habersham County court records were destroyed, first by fire in 1856, then when the courthouse was dynamited in 1898 during a civic feud with the neighboring town of Toccoa, and again when the replacement courthouse was damaged by fire in 1923.

The only surviving courthouse record of the crime is a grand jury indictment that describes how Dr. Elbridge G. Harris, Cuthbert Word, and William Hamilton were men who "not having the fear of God before their eyes but being moved and seduced by the instigation of the Devil..." aided John W. Thompson when he "feloniously, willfully, and of malice aforethought" stabbed Calvin Hanks, giving him "a mortal wound of the breadth of two inches and debth [sic] of six inches." The document provides no information about a motive for the crime.

In Habersham County, Hanks' murder and the trial of John Thompson were nearly forgotten until 2003, when something odd happened. Dion Beck, a visitor to the cemetery, photographed Hanks' grave. He was in for a shock when he got the pictures back. "He took the film to be developed," Lovell relates, "and he called the next day and said he had found the image of a young woman on the stone."

Lovell said she does not believe in ghosts, but admits that the picture reveals an ethereal likeness of a girl with flowers in her hair. "It does seem strange that out of all the graves here, the image would appear on this one stone," she comments.

The photograph attracted the atten-

tion of local newspapers and television stations, which featured stories about the mysterious image and the unsolved killing. "I was glad for the stories, because I just knew that somewhere, someone knew something about this murder," Lovell says.

Ten miles away, someone did. When I saw the picture and story published in *The Northeast Georgian*, Habersham County's newspaper, it triggered a memory dormant more than 30 years. A quick trip to my basement to find a dusty old book confirmed it. According to Joseph Blotner's monumental 1974 biography of the author William Faulkner, the man accused of brutally stabbing Calvin Hanks was John Wesley Thompson, Faulkner's great-grandfather by adoption. The killing was just the first in a series of similar violent events that would haunt the Faulkner family over the next 100 years, providing the great novelist with salacious material about doomed Southern families struggling against the fates.

Dark Foreboding

Faulkner knew of the murder from prison letters exchanged between Thompson and his bride of only three weeks that still survive among the writer's papers at the University of Virginia. In a letter written just days after the murder, Thompson encouraged his 19-year-old wife, Justiania, in truly Faulknerian prose: "In the midst of darkness light springs up, the virulent edge of tyranny and oppression is fast becoming blunted and soon the muddy stream of publick opinion will regain its purity and the facts will place the present disastrous circumstances in a proper light." Thompson, the son of a Methodist minister, also vowed that his spirit would "burst its chains and fetters and pass the walls that would confine it and climb the battlements of Heaven where justice, truth and mercy hold their omnipotent sway."

As the trial date approached, Thompson's despair became obvious. He wrote Justiania that they would have time for only one more exchange of letters. Apparently expecting to be convicted, Thompson urged her to burn all of his letters except those "that will serve you as a frail memento of him who found but one on earth that he loved without alloy and you are she."

Despite his dark forebodings, a jury acquitted Thompson of Hanks' murder. Yet Faulkner's biographers and perhaps Faulkner himself believed that Thompson had in fact committed the crime. Blotner, who was also a close friend of Faulkner's, suggests that Thompson's acquittal was an example of "frontier justice," and later biographers have agreed. Perhaps, they speculate, the "not guilty" verdict indicated that the jury believed Hanks deserved to die and John Thompson to go free.

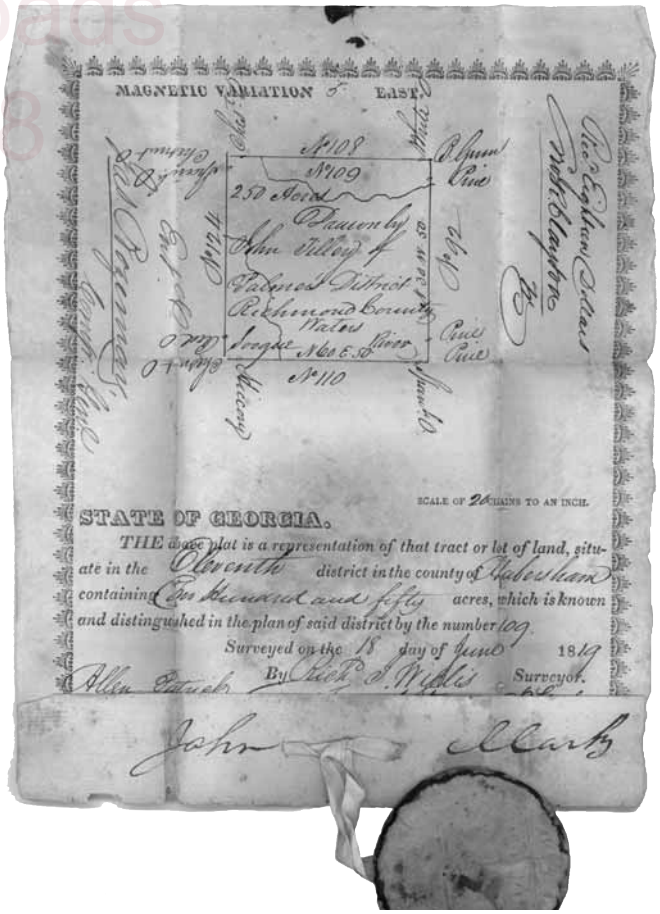
Even after his acquittal, Thompson would not have felt safe in Clarkesville. Census records show that the dead man's father and two brothers lived in Habersham County at the time. Shortly after the trial, Thompson reunited with his bride and left the area for good. The next year he was living in Ripley, Mississippi, where he found work as a teacher and then as an attorney.

"Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished."
Absalom, Absolom!, William Faulkner

But the legacy of family violence did not end with the move. According to Blotner and other Faulkner biographers, the Thompsons took in and raised the boy who became William Faulkner's great-grandfather, and then did the same for his grandfather. Like Thompson, Faulkner's great-grandfather, known as "The Colonel," was tried and acquitted of two murders. But at the age of 64, The Colonel was gunned down by a political rival on the streets of Ripley. Faulkner's own father was also shot and nearly killed after a fight with a local ruffian.

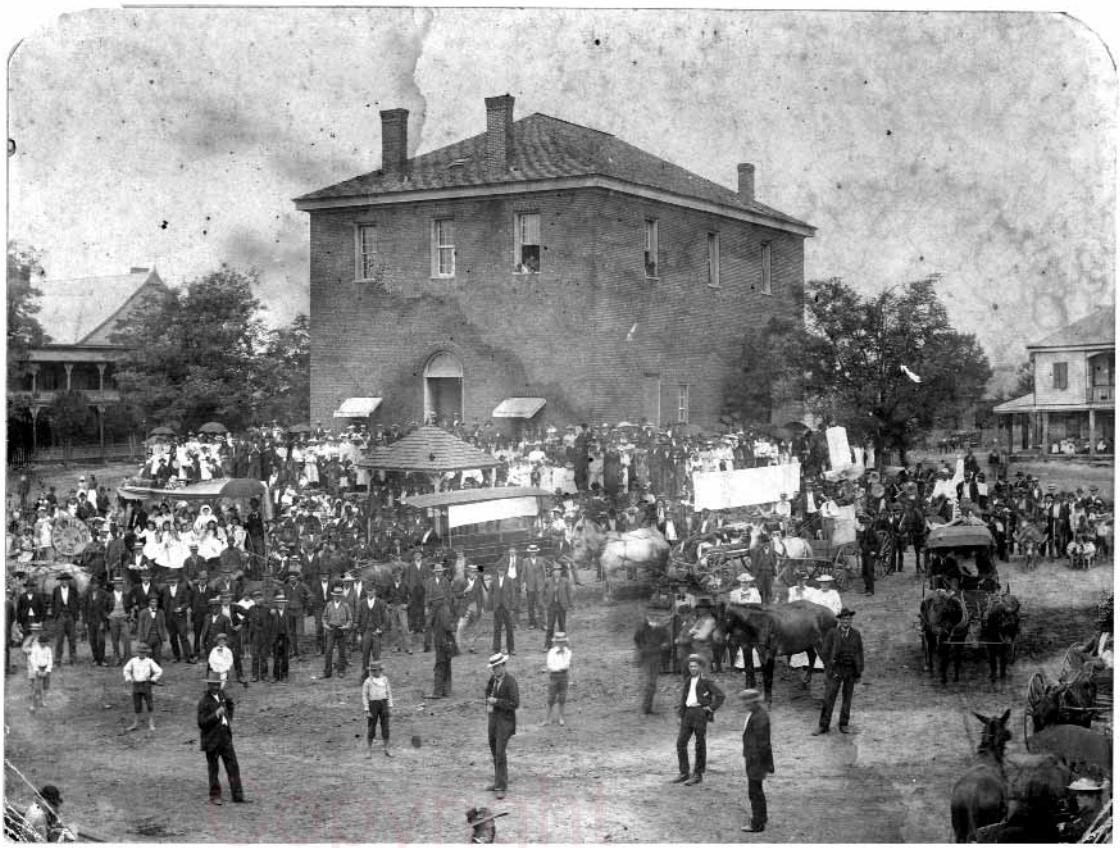
Faulkner was both appalled and fascinated by the history of violence embodied in his ancestors. "If John Wesley Thompson was not 'fated' or 'doomed'

Deeds like this one were awarded winners of the lotteries by which Georgia distributed frontier land newly acquired from the Indian nations.



like the Sartorises," Blotner wrote, "he was a strong and sometimes violent man, a fitting father-surrogate for the model of [the fictional] Colonel John Sartoris."

That is where the story stood for more than 30 years. Despite the Faulkner connection, very little was known about the murder of Calvin Hanks or the reasons for his death. But thanks to the wealth of genealogical information now available on the Internet, the microfilm collection of old newspapers at the University of Georgia Library, and previously unpublished records at the Habersham County Courthouse, the story of Hanks' murder can finally be told.



John Thompson was tried for the murder of Calvin Hanks in the Habersham County courthouse in Clarkesville (photographed here in the late 19th century).

Like any good whodunit, this one has unexpected twists and turns. Best of all, John Wesley Thompson, the man everyone has assumed committed the murder, was apparently innocent after all.

A Forbidding Countenance

Before it was officially incorporated in 1823, Clarkesville was a trading post known to the Cherokee as Sak-yi, a name similar to the Soque River, which courses along the north side of town. By the mid 1820s, Clarkesville had settled into its role as a cool summer getaway in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. Wealthy planters from Savannah, Augusta, and Charleston went there to escape the sweltering heat, malaria and cholera that dogged the low country.

All that changed almost overnight around 1828 with the discovery of gold in nearby Dukes Creek. Within a few years, the population of the county increased threefold as some 10,000 miners flooded into the area. With them came the attendant arguments over claims and deeds, which if not settled with fists, guns and knives, were argued in Habersham County's new brick courthouse, where young lawyers including Hanks plied their trade.

Surviving Habersham County records show that a crime wave of sorts settled over Clarkesville. In place of charges of "trespass' and "pig stealing" the docket records an increase in assaults, battery, murder and even "riot" and "mayhem." It was during the peak of this crime wave that the town's residents established the Old Clarkesville Cemetery. Records show that the murdered Calvin Hanks had the unfortunate distinction of being the first person interred when the cemetery opened in 1834.

The charge of murder fell upon 25-year-old John Wesley Thompson, who may have been a teacher at the Clarkesville Academy. The suspected accomplices included his brother-in-law, Cuthbert Word, son of Revolutionary War hero Thomas A. Word. Also indicted were former Habersham County Sheriff William Hamilton and his son-in-law, 34-year-old Dr. Elbridge G. Harris.

While Thompson, Word and Hamilton were arrested immediately after Hanks' death, Dr. Harris vanished. In advertisements placed in several newspapers across the state, Georgia Governor Wilson Lumpkin offered a $300 bounty for his capture. To this amount, the dead man's brother and father-in-law offered an additional $500, a total of about $166,000 in today's money. (Monetary conversions for this article are based on formulas developed by Dr. Samuel H. Williamson and Dr. Lawrence H. Officer in their publication: "Five Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a U.S. Dollar Amount, 1790-2005." The valuations are based on the comparative wages of unskilled laborers.)

Dr. Harris is described in the bounty notices as "five feet eight or nine inches tall, rather spare made, dark skin, sallow complexion, high forehead, a large thin face, the skin of which is very rough, and a downcast and very forbidding countenance." This was not his first brush with the law, as he had been charged in 1826

with assault and battery and in 1830 with robbery. No disposition of the first case is recorded, and Harris was found not guilty of the robbery charge.

Although Thompson was tried and found not guilty, the detailed language of the indictment persuaded many historians to believe that he actually committed the murder. But a brief article in a coastal Georgia newspaper suggests that the jury's verdict should be accepted at face value. If the details reported just nine days after the crime in Savannah's *The Georgian* newspaper are accurate, Thompson was apparently innocent after all:

> *"A few days we learn upon good authority, a Mr. Thompson and a Mr. Hanks, of Clarksville, met in the streets of that village after a misunderstanding between them, which had excited warm blood. A quarrel ensued, in the course of which Thompson threw a stone or weight at Hanks; whereupon Hanks fired a pistol at Thompson, but without effect. They now closed without weapons and after a short struggle were seperated [sic], when Hanks made off, as was believed, for his gun. As he retired, he was pursued and overtaken by a Dr. Harris (who to this time seemed an indifferent spectator,) and was stabbed by Harris three or four times; of which wounds he died immediately. Harris has made his escape; but Thompson has been arrested, why, or wherefore, we cannot tell, if the foragoing be a true account of the affair. It certainly leaves him the most innocent of the three."*

Habersham County legends also suggest that it was Harris, not Thompson, who committed the murder. In a history of the county written around 1914, Julia Wilson, one of the town's oldest residents at the time, stated that "Calvin Hanks was killed by Dr. L.B. [sic] Harris." The fact that it was Harris who fled, and not the other three men, would also indicate that the jury made the right decision.

Although court records show Hanks had earlier won a small judgment against Thompson for an unspecified fraud, a clear motive for the fight and the murder has been elusive. Faulkner's biographers suggest that the killing may have resulted from a family feud of some kind.

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And while Harris could have been simply protecting his friend, records at the Habersham County courthouse disclose that the doctor had a million-dollar motive for murder. In fact many people in the town had reason to be angry with Hanks and his partner/father-in-law for their role in a gold and banking swindle that rocked the entire state.

It is worth mentioning that Thompson did have a second reason to dislike the Hanks family. According to descendants now living in Florida, Thompson was trying to hide a family secret – his mother was Cherokee – that if exposed could lead to his expulsion from the state in the Cherokee removal. The Thompsons were desperately trying to avoid relocation, but Hanks' sister-in-law, who was also Cherokee, apparently supported removal as did the Hanks family. Their support might account for the bad blood between them and the Thompsons, and the removal itself would explain Thompson's cryptic references to "tyranny and oppression" in his jailhouse letters to his wife.

While the ongoing Cherokee removal may explain Thompson's reasons for starting the fight with Hanks, it does not suggest Dr. Harris's motive for striking the fatal blows. The key to the mystery can be found in the actions of Calvin Hanks' father-in-law, John Humphries, who may be the gravitational center around which all of these family misfortunes revolve. Humphries was one of the original landowners in Clarkesville and a former sheriff of Habersham County. Before he fled the state for Arkansas in 1835, however, he had several brushes with the law and developed a reputation as an "unscrupulous con-man."

According to Matt Gedney's "Life on the Unicoi Road," which details some of the families living in Habersham County at this time, Humphries had worked his way up the Chattahoochee River searching for gold. In 1831, he believed he had found what he was looking for: a quartz vein near present day Helen, Georgia. Humphries agreed to pay the landowner $10,000 for half-interest in the mine.

By late 1834, though, Humphries' business forays were rapidly going sour, and Gedney writes that Humphries had "mortgaged and borrowed his way through the gold region, putting himself in a position where he had to either find plenty of gold or go broke."

Humphries had been authorized by the State of Georgia to sell up to $700,000 in stock in his mining companies, but in December 1834, Humphries' partner, Daniel Blake, died, and his executor discovered that titles to the mines that Blake and Humphries supposedly owned together either could not be located or were "defective." About the same time, Humphries moved 40 miles west to Dahlonega, where he won a contract to build the courthouse in the newly formed Lumpkin County. Humphries was the low bidder at $7,000 and received a $2,500 advance, but never did any work. By then his investments had failed and his gold properties were seized. Habersham County court records also show that he and his now deceased son-in-law were being sued by numerous creditors.

At this same time, another partner of Humphries', Archibald McLaughlin, was accused of buying thousands of dollars in gold with worthless money from the recently failed Bank of Macon. The Habersham Court records show that Elbridge Harris was apparently caught up in this gold swindle as he had incurred a debt of $5,000 ($1 million today) owed to another speculator with ties to Humphries and McLaughlin. Hamilton, too, was deeply in debt, the

SKETCH BY JOHN KOLLOCK

As he retired, he was pursued and overtaken by a Dr. Harris (who to this time seemed an indifferent spectator,) and was stabbed by Harris three or four times; of which wounds he died immediately.

records show.

Thus, two of the men implicated in Hanks' murder were financially pressed, due in no small measure to the shenanigans of the victim's father-in-law and his partners. It is also known that a close friend of the Thompson and Word families lost more than $16,000 in gold speculation due to McLaughlin.

With everyone losing huge sums of money and with the added pressure of the Cherokee removal looming over the Thompson family, it is no surprise that John Wesley Thompson and Calvin Hanks came to blows in Clarkesville that hot August day in 1834. It is certainly no stretch to conclude that Dr. Harris blamed Hanks, his father-in-law Humphries, and Humphries' partners for his losses, and in the heat of the moment stabbed Hanks to death.

So what became of the four men indicted for the murder of Calvin Hanks? John Wesley Thompson became a successful attorney in Ripley, Mississippi, and was elected district attorney and later judge. He and his beloved Justiania were married for 36 years. Thompson died in 1873 at the age of 64. Justiania died in 1898, age 83, and they are buried beside each other near Ripley.

Cuthbert Word enrolled in the U.S. Army and fought in the Mexican-American War of 1846. He died on his way home from the war in 1847 at the age of 35. He is buried on the west bank of the Mississippi River, about three miles above Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Dr. Elbridge Harris fled to Texas, then still part of Mexico. He died of unknown cause on April 4, 1838, at the age of 38. He was apparently never tried for the murder of Calvin Hanks. He is buried in the historic Oak Grove Cemetery in Nacogdoches, Texas.

William Hamilton went to Texas with Harris. He died May 3, 1837, age approximately 63, soon after reaching Nacogdoches. His son, Elias Hamilton, was a hero of the Texas Revolution. Elias was killed when his horse fell on him in 1840.

So, whose face is it that appeared on the grave of Calvin Hanks and brought this story back to life after 174 years? The mystery remains, but my money is on Hanks' wife, Charlotte Humphries Hanks, who gave birth to a son four months after the murder. She may never have seen justice served, but at last the identity of her husband's true killer is known.

> *"…and then all of a sudden it's all over and all you have left is a block of stone with scratches on it provided there was someone to remember to have the marble scratched and set up or had time to, and it rains on it and the sun shines on it and after a while they dont even remember the name and what the scratches were trying to tell, and it doesn't matter."*
> *Absalom, Absalom!, William Faulkner*

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