

SEARCH FOR MONEY UNDER PLANTATION HOME STAIRWAY

Former Louisiana Statesman
Believed to Have Hid-
den It There.

BY CARLTON F. POOL.

"The money is under the third step! The money is under the third step!"

Repeated mutterings to this effect by either a senile woman or a woman with a diseased mind, aroused the cupidly of a man at Bunkie, La., and a young woman in Mississippi, and their alleged attempt to get possession of the money resulted in the arrest of both. How far the young woman is involved is not clear, but she did not help her case by a statement she made to the deputy sheriff who arrested her.

Did ex-Gov. Henry Johnson hide his money under the stairway of his home on Woodley plantation, Pointe Coupee parish, during the troublous and uncertain days of the Civil War?

And did J. O. Stayton, the man arrested at Bunkie and charged at New Roads with burglary of the residence of Mortimer Guerin, secure the treasure trove? There is a divergence of opinion on this subject in the southern section of Pointe Coupee parish, but many persons answer both questions affirmatively.

There is nothing impracticable in the assumption that Gov. Johnson concealed money in his house. Consider the fact that the only banks available were at New Orleans and Baton Rouge, both of which places were in the hands of the federals, while Woodley plantation and its owner were in the Confederacy. Consider, moreover, that even if the banks in the two centers had been open to the Governor, that transportation in a territory continually raided by both sides was extremely hazardous. With none of the attributes of a miser, is it unlikely that the wealthy owner of Woodley would have sought a hiding place for his valuables, knowing that raiding parties of either army might descend on his neighborhood at any time?

The family residence at Woodley is a typical plantation house of its locality and date. Its interior is of unusual construction, for it has no central hall. It has three rooms on the front and is three rooms deep. The three rooms on each side of the house are square, but the three central rooms are very large, having nearly twice as much width as depth. The house is built on brick columns, the floor being about ten feet from the ground, while above the first floor is a great attic, the wine "collar" of Gov. Johnson's days.

The stairway leading to the attic was the location of the wealth supposed to have been recovered by Stayton.

AGED DARKEY CENTRAL FIGURE
Gov. Johnson bought this plantation in 1854 and lived with his wife there after the fortunes of war drove him from New Orleans until his only child died in its youth, when the Governor lived on Chalham plantation in the Lafourche country. Raised in the family was Medora Baptiste, who now keeps a tavern for white persons at Livonia. Medora is a fine type of negro house servant of ante-bellum days, and shows every evidence of having been reared in refined surroundings. She uses the vocabulary of the white, not the negro race, and has the manners of a servant brought up in a family of culture. While Medora knows nothing of the hiding of the money, and nothing of Stayton, except that he stopped at her tavern for a day, she is a central figure of the case, for she alone can supply information that no one else has.

Like the better class of former slaves Medora has a lively interest and pride in matters connected with her former master's family, and regards the history of his family as a part of her possessions.

She said somewhat apologetically to a Times-Picayune reporter who questioned her about the case: "I am of the Key side; my husband is of the Johnson side." This meant that her father was the slave of Francis Barton Key, of Washington city, the father of that Barton Key who was killed by General Skelton. Her husband's people had been raised by the Johnson family, as she herself was, her father and mother having been bought by the Governor when he lived in New Orleans.

The narrative of Stayton's connection with the mother is not entirely satisfactory. There is every reason to believe that he had heard and was fully

convinced, that there was treasure hid in the Woodley plantation house, before he went to Pointe Coupee, though he expressed a lively surprise when he was told that Gov. Johnson had lived at Woodley. When he was told by J. T. Jewell, bookkeeper of Charles A. Smith, who now owns the plantation, he requested permission to visit the place and take a photograph of the building.

STAYTON VISITS HOUSE
Stayton is said to have represented himself as engaged in historical research and mentioned a "kindergarten historical" effort in which some Mississippi women were engaged. This was the reason he gave for desiring to visit the old home of Gov. Johnson, though it is not clear what this temporary residence of the ex-Governor and ex-United States Senator had to do with the proposed history of the South. Nevertheless Stayton was given permission by Mr. Smith, the owner, to visit the place and take a photograph of the exterior, which leave him stretched when he called at the house, into leave from the owner to examine the interior.

Mrs. Guerin, the wife of Mortimer Guerin, occupant of the attic and readily showed him through the place. He particularly inquired which parts of the interior had been remodeled and doubtless was much relieved when told the whole house had been remodeled except the room in which was the stairway leading to the attic and the room behind it, used as a kitchen. The reason for this relief will appear later.

Enter Miss Bertha Lipscombe, of Mississippi. Stayton's first visit of "historical research" was made Aug. 8 and when he left he said he would be compelled to procure a stenographer to take down Medora Baptiste's statement. This woman talked so volubly he said, that only a stenographer could successfully handle her. Which assertion was nonsense, for Medora talks as one would expect a house servant reared in refined surroundings to talk. She has the garrulity of her sex and her age, but there is no difficulty whatever in following her.

But Stayton had paved the way for the entry upon the scene of Miss Bertha Lipscombe, and in two weeks he appeared at Valverde again, this time with Miss Lipscombe. The latter is described as a wife of a young and attractive woman and she appeared to Mrs. Guerin to be a woman of refinement and some culture. She told Mrs. Guerin that she had been the stenographer for Stayton for some time though her vocation was that of school teacher.

MISS LIPSCOMBE'S PART
Why was Miss Lipscombe brought into the case. The generally accepted opinion is that she was expected to lure Mrs. Guerin out of the house while Stayton was operating on the stairway. This would not necessarily imply that Miss Lipscombe was aware of what Stayton intended to do, for he might have given her another and quite an innocent reason for getting Mrs. Guerin out of the house. But a statement made by Miss Lipscombe to Joseph Desarnes, the deputy sheriff, who arrested her, puts quite another aspect on the case. It was from her, according to her statement, that Stayton received the information that there was treasure under the "third step."

This carries one back to the beginning of the story. Gov. Johnson's brother, William, lived in Mississippi during ante-bellum days, and had a numerous family. Medora Baptiste knows this, but she never met any of the Mississippi family except Mary Johnson, sister of the governor, who visited Woodley soon after her brother's death. Medora describes Mary Johnson as an old maid, when she reached Woodley, but says she soon after married a Mr. Stockett, and she believes she still is living, though of advanced age, in Mississippi.

There is one story to the effect that it was from the senile utterings of this old woman that Miss Lipscombe heard of the treasure under the stairs. Another version is that she heard of the treasure in the mad mutterings of an insane daughter of William Johnson. Wherever she heard the story, she admits she told Stayton of the treasure, and his visit to this somewhat remote rural section does not appear on the surface to be pure coincidence. In the "mutterings" about the money it is not improbable Woodley was mentioned and a copy of Boucher's Annual would have given the location. Miss Lipscombe's statement that Stayton received his information from her, and her visit to the place with him would indicate they entered into the adventure as partners.

When Stayton and Miss Lipscombe arrived at Valverde, Mrs. Smith had gone to visit his old home in North Carolina. Stayton had made his arrangements to spend the night at the old Johnson residence, but he failed in this plan, though he used artifice to obtain permission. He broached the subject to Mrs. Guerin soon after he and Miss Lipscombe reached the house, saying that the tavern kept by Medora Baptiste was crowded with drummers, and he could not obtain accommodation. This was not true, for Medora had not a single guest that day and could easily have provided for both the man and the woman.

"There was no reason why both should not have stopped at Medora's, for while the proprietress is a negress and a former slave, she keeps a tavern for whites only, and has the only place where a visitor can receive accommodation in this immediate section. 'Though Medora is a slave until I grew up,' said Medora to the writer, in speaking of slavery days, 'the only time a white person ever struck me was in this house, when I refused to let a black woman, whom he said was his wife, eat dinner with him. I told him he would have to kill me before a negro could eat here and he slapped my face.' And he received his punishment from a white man who happened to be riding by."

Stayton's story that he could not get accommodations at Medora's had no much effect on Mrs. Guerin, that she offered to care for Miss Lipscombe, but said she could not provide for him. Stayton persisted that any sort of a cot or pallet in the room of the stairway would do for him, but Mrs. Guerin told him he could not stay, and he went to Medora's leaving Miss Lipscombe at Woodley.

TO LIFT THE TREASURE
Miss Lipscombe spent the night with Mrs. Guerin and did nothing to attract any particular attention, less suspicion. The next day Stayton returned. There followed the attempt—whether successful or not probably will never be known—to obtain the treasure. Stayton brought up the subject of Governor Johnson's tomb and said he desired to photograph it. It was necessary for Mrs. Guerin to show the place, and Miss Lipscombe went along. After reaching the road in front of the place Stayton asked

Miss Lipscombe if she could operate the camera and she replied she could. He then gave an excuse for leaving the two women, asking Miss Lipscombe to take the picture. He gave no intimation that he would return to the residence and was certainly guilty of trespass when he did so. Besides his movements were furtive. The negro yardman noticed this and said to Mr. Smith later: "Boss, I never seen a white man pry around a place like this one did."

According to this witness, Stayton passed behind an outbuilding until the two women were out of sight and then went direct to the residence. He started around the house to the rear, but encountered another servant and went back and entered by the front door. Passing to the rear, he found the cook on the back porch plucking a chicken, and after a little inconsequential talk he went into the house and directly to the room of the stairs. Here he was not in view but was in the hearing of the cook. Nailed to the side of the stairway was an old-fashioned coffee-grinder, and Stayton began to rattle this and talk to the cook about it. He appeared to be much interested in the simple contrivance and continued to rattle it while talking, and it is believed while prying up the loose step.

After being in the room for some time, Stayton went to the front gallery and hallooed to Mrs. Guerin and Miss Lipscombe. They had had some difficulty in getting a photograph, for the day was cloudy, and Miss Lipscombe expressed doubt of the success of the first attempt. While they were waiting for the sun to give a better opportunity, Stayton's call was heard, and Miss Lipscombe said to her hostess that the first exposure would probably do, and they returned to the house. Then it was that Stayton told Mrs. Guerin that money was hid in the house, and offered to divide with her if Mrs. Guerin would permit him to search for it. Mrs. Guerin said on the ground that the place belonged to Mr. Smith, and she had no right to give any such permission.

When Mr. Guerin came in at the lunch hour, Stayton made the proposition to him, saying he could find the money at once, but if his offer was not accepted he would never reveal its hiding place, and it would be lost forever.

IN THE STAIRWAY ROOM
Mr. Guerin acquiesced in the search, but made no agreement as to the disposition of the treasure, mentally leaving that to Mr. Smith. Then Stayton told him to get a hatchet, and Mr. Guerin having done so he led the way directly to the stair room, telling the story of the insane woman who continually muttered about the money being under the third step. Arriving in the stairway, Stayton did a very suspicious thing. Reaching into his pocket, he produced a heavy screw driver, strong enough for use as a tool to pry up a plank. He told Mr. Guerin to insert the blade of the hatchet that they might pry up the step, but before Mr. Guerin had time to exert any pressure the plank came up from the use of the screw driver.

Manifestly, from the ease with which the plank was raised the nails had previously been pryed loose, and Stayton exclaimed: "Some one has been here before us!"

This remark was made after he had perfunctorily passed his hand through the opening, but had made no search. Then Miss Lipscombe said: "Why not use your lantern?" To which Stayton replied that it was in his valise in the buggy, and was not worth going after, as the money was gone. He made no explanation of the somewhat remarkable fact that he was on a mission that called for a bull's eye, a substitute for a pinch bar, and those present did not seem to think the matter unusual.

HAD TO CATCH TRAIN
Immediately after the search Stayton said he had to catch the train to New Orleans and left at once, but instead of taking the Texas and Pacific train, he boarded the Frisco train going West, and went to Bunkie, where he lives. Miss Lipscombe left with him.

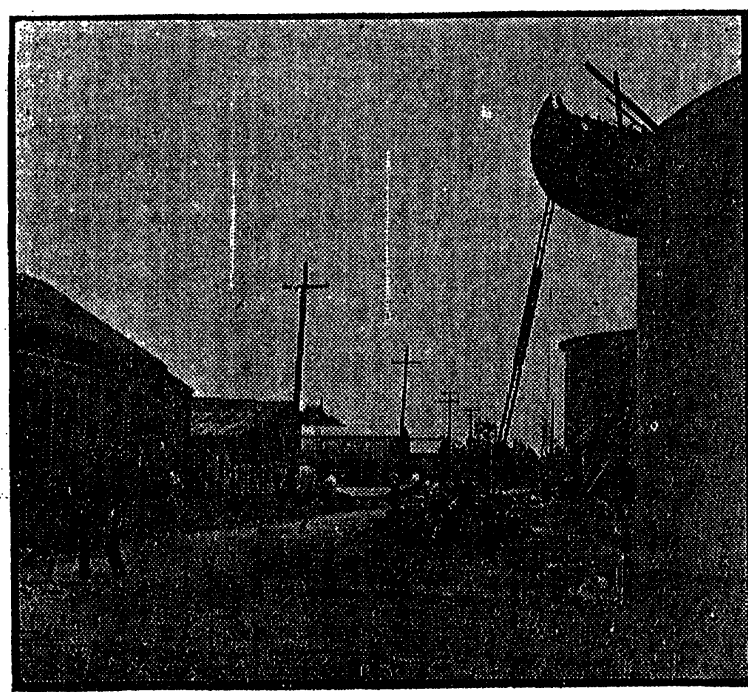
Before he left Stayton said to Mrs. Guerin that she may have considered his action suspicious, and she frankly admitted that she regarded him as they might be so regarded, but he did not continue the subject or offer any explanation, except that he would like to examine every part of the house.

Mrs. Charles Smith wrote, after the affair, to her husband, who was at his old home in North Carolina, but he did not attach much importance to the matter. On his return, however, he heard the particulars, and became indignant. He wrote to Stayton at Bunkie, saying that as a brother Mason and Shriner, an explanation was due him. Stayton replied, but gave no explanation, unless some ambiguous reference to historical research might be so regarded. He had borrowed an abstract of the title to the property from Mr. Smith, which he had previously returned by mail without any accompanying note of thanks whatever. This abstract of the title gave the dates of transfer of the property to some score or more of owners from 1825 to the present day, but certainly contained nothing of value to a "kindergarten historian."

Receiving no explanation, Mr. Smith consulted his attorney, who advised the arrest of Stayton, and he was arrested at Bunkie. Deputy Joseph Desarnes went to Terry, Miss., and arrested Miss Lipscombe, who was placed in the parish prison in New Orleans over night. While in prison the writer, who knew nothing of the cause of her arrest, asked her if she wished to say anything concerning her arrest, and she refused to talk, and declined the reporter's offer to get into communication with any lawyer in the city she might wish to retain.

Color is given to the theory that Gov. Johnson concealed something of value under the stairway, but unmistakable evidence that the plank had been pried up years ago. The stairway from the foot begins to wind, and the cypress plank forking the step is sawed diagonally to fit the winding. This plank was split down the center years ago, as the crack shows. The wall end of the plank was securely fastened, while the railing side was held by a single nail, the plank being narrow at this end. From this end the banister had been removed long ago, perhaps, for the purpose of prying up the plank from that end. After the plank was replaced it held firmly at the wall side where three nails were securely fastened, but the single nail at the railing end fitted in its old hole loosely, and the step shook at that end whenever the stairs were mounted.

OUT ON BONDS
It was learned from the sheriff's office at New Roads that Stayton and Miss Lipscombe had been released on bond, prominent Masons of the town signing the bond for Stayton, and cash bond being provided for Miss Lipscombe. This bond was entered in the name of the lawyer for the young woman, but it is believed that Stayton furnished the cash. Stayton is said to be well thought of in his home town, Bunkie, and several prom-



UNROOFED BY THE STORM.

Top of big molasses tank blown off, and wreckage thrown across the street and some distance away.

inent men from that town went to his aid as soon as they heard he was arrested. Being a Shriner, the Masons of New Roads also interested themselves in the case, and he had no trouble in making his bond.

The sheriff said both Stayton and Miss Lipscombe were in New Roads Friday, but he did not know Saturday whether or not they had left.

Miss Lipscombe is supposed to be a school teacher at Hattiesburg, but she was arrested at Terry, which is said to be her home. Every one who met her around Valverde declares her conduct there was irreproachable, and that she gave every indication of being a lady.

Whether he got the money or not, Stayton cannot be arrested on that charge, for the existence of the money cannot be proved. It is doubtful, moreover, if he can be found guilty of burglary under the legal definition of that term. There can be no question, however, that he committed flagrant trespass, and the breaking of the stairway should also be an offense in law.

SECOND TREASURE HUNT
Charles A. Smith, the owner of Woodley plantation, and an adjoining plantation on which he lives, came to Louisiana twenty-five years ago from North Carolina and married a Louisiana woman. This is said to be the second hunt for treasure on this property. Some years ago ghouls invaded the cemetery of the Valverde plantation, where he lives, and opened the grave of a member of the family of the former owner. Presumably they were in search of jewelry, supposed to have been buried with a young woman. But they got into the wrong grave, and, to save time, when they found there was nothing of value in the coffin, they dumped it into Bayou Grosse Terre.

The coffin was found floating in the bayou next day by some fishermen, who reported the matter to the coroner of the parish, who told them to bury it. Dr. Matthews, however, heard of the case, and, making an investigation, recognized the body by a faded grey overcoat and the brass buttons thereon as that of his brother, a Confederate officer, killed in the Civil War. The body was returned to the family cemetery.

Besides being a planter (he says he is not a farmer, because he does not know how to farm) Mr. Smith keeps a store at Valverde and is the postmaster there. He is now raising sugar, because he does not know how to farm. Formerly he was an extensive cotton planter, but the boll weevil drove him from that business, and he believes it will be years before he can resume it. It does not require a farmer to raise these two crops, says Mr. Smith. They are creditable businesses, but not farming. Farming consists, in his opinion, in raising grain and a diversity of crops, and he admits he knows nothing of this. He exhibited with some pride, however, several ears of corn about eleven inches long, fully grained, and says he has better specimens in his field. Should he ever learn to farm surprising results may be expected.

If Mr. Smith is not a farmer, he is also not a relative of Sherlock Holmes, or it might have occurred to him that every stairway has a top as well as a bottom, and that there is a third step from the top as well as a third step from the bottom. The disordered mind is said to have muttered only, "The money is under the third step."