



Cool Spring Plantation Home
Built by James S. Battle about 1850

CHAPTER VIII

COOL SPRING

by
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By two original charters dated March 20, 1663, and June 30, 1665, King Charles the Second of England conveyed to eight Lords Proprietors "so much of the Continent of America as lies between 31 and 36 degrees of North Latitude". To these eight gentlemen was given the power to make laws (with the consent of the freemen of the territory) which would be in effect throughout this vast region. The power was also given to bestow titles of nobility; and it is interesting to note that in both charters the proprietors were authorized and indeed directed to establish religious freedom throughout their jurisdiction. The land thus ceded extended, roughly speaking, from the southern boundary of the present State of South Carolina to the northern limits of the Old North State and from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. One of the Lords Proprietors was Sir George Carteret. His grandson, John Carteret, became Earl Granville, overthrew the administration of Sir Robert Walpole, and was the Prime Minister of England. In June, 1729, the other seven Lords Proprietors sold their rights and interests in the Province of Carolana, as it is described in the Royal Charters, to the Crown, for the price of 2,500 pounds sterling each, making a total of 17,500 pounds sterling, to which was added an additional sum of 5,000 pounds in satisfaction of the claim of the Proprietors for quit rents then due to them. John Carteret, Lord Granville, however, refused to sell his birthright, and in 1700, by the King's command, his part of Carolana was set apart to him in severalty, the northern limit of his domain being the present line between Virginia and North Carolina, running west to the Pacific, while the southern boundary was the parallel of latitude 35° 34'. This southern line ran from a point midway between Roanoke Island and Cape Hatteras along the southern boundary of Mattamuskeet Lake, through Smithfield, and thence to the West. The territory thus ceded to the descendant of Sir George Carteret included about two-thirds of the present State of North Carolina. Within its borders lay the lands which now constitute the County of Edgecombe. The agents of Lord Granville pursued a liberal policy in selling and leasing the immense property over which they had jurisdiction; and settlers soon began to flock into the Granville counties, attracted by the fertility of the lands and the security of the titles.

Among these immigrants was Elisha Battle, who came from Nansemond County, Virginia, in 1747, acquired lands along Tar River in the present County of Edgecombe from the Granville agents; gave to his plantation the name of Cool Spring; built his home in a grove which lay in a bend of the river; and began the long, useful, and distinguished career which ended with his death in 1799. He lived and died at Cool Spring and is buried in the old grove in the field known as Taylor Field about half a mile west of the Cool Spring house. When he came

¹See Table 64.

to Cool Spring he brought with him his young wife, Elizabeth Sumner, first cousin of General Jethro Sumner, of the Army of the Revolution. Jacob Battle, the son of Elisha, lived with his father on the Cool Spring Plantation, building a home which still stands, nearly a mile southeast of Cool Spring, and bears to this day its original name of Old Town. Here James Smith Battle was born on June 25, 1786. When he grew to manhood he lived for several years at Walnut Creek, another plantation belonging to his father, but later took up his residence at Cool Spring, where he restored the house built by his grandfather and there established his home. He extended the large holdings of land which he inherited from his father until at his death he was the owner of about twenty thousand acres of river land and was the master of about five hundred slaves. When his children grew to maturity, he built in front of the home occupied by him, which came to be known as the Old House, another large house with white pillars at the front and connected by a corridor with the Old House. From Cool Spring his four daughters were married. He died on July 18, 1854, and is buried with his wife and many other members of his family in the grave yard on the original Cool Spring Plantation just across the road from Old Town.

Upon his death my father, Captain Turner Westray Battle, inherited as his share of his father's estate the Cool Spring home and about three thousand acres of the surrounding land. Here he brought from her home of Burncourt in Halifax County, North Carolina, my mother Lavinia Bassett Daniel, the daughter of Joseph J. Daniel, for many years a justice of the Supreme Court of the state. They were married on May 1, 1850. They both lived at Cool Spring throughout their lives; and they both lie surrounded by many of their children in the grave yard at Old Town. Both my father and mother had a great love for flowers and gardens. Before the War they brought down a German gardener from the north who laid out flower beds on either side and to the front of the house, the kitchen garden towards the rear, surrounded by a beautiful privet hedge, and with a row of cedars leading from the garden to the house. There was a green-house on the west side of Cool Spring which was kept warm during the winter and was filled with beautiful flowers. The grove surrounding the house was about twelve acres in extent and was composed of red oaks, white oaks, hickories, poplars, and one or two pines. They were all trees of original growth and were most impressive, dignified, and beautiful. Along the front of the grove ran the high road between Rocky Mount and Tarboro. There was a curved driveway leading from this high road at the southwest corner of the grove, passing by the front of the house and sweeping around to the east and again joining the highway at the grove's southeastern corner. At this corner were the stables and in later years the gin house. On the eastern side of the grove were the dairy, the smoke-house, and the other out-houses. When the War between the States came on, my father formed among his neighbors a company of which he was the captain. This company became a part of the Fifth, and afterwards the Fifteenth, North Carolina Infantry, C. S. A., in the Army of Northern Virginia. After the war he returned to Cool Spring and there continued his life as a cotton planter.

As a boy, my earliest recollections are connected with the shady grove around the home at Cool Spring and the broad shimmering cotton fields spreading in every direction almost as far as the eye could see. To the east of our plantation lay Shellbank, owned by my aunt, Mrs. William F. Dancy, afterwards Mrs. Newsom J. Pittman, and across the river was California, the plantation of my uncle, William Smith Battle. To the west of us was the home of Mr. Reddin Daughtry. Mr. and Mrs.

Daughtry were old and devoted friends. Among the most delightful recollections of my boyhood are memories of my visits to their hospitable home, where I was sure always of a cordial welcome and an abundant supply of the good things that delight the hearts of boys. Mr. Daughtry was an adept in hunting and fishing and in all kinds of woodcraft. My brothers and myself listened to his stories of the fields and the rivers with never-failing interest and delight. To the north of the Cool Spring Plantation lay a large body of swampy woodland. This we called the Poquoson, which is, I believe, an Indian name meaning "marsh." It abounded in rabbits and in the quail or bob-white, or, as we called them, partridges. In the Poquoson, and indeed all over the plantation my brothers and I set our rabbit traps, shot partridges and doves, and occasionally in the ponds of the pastures and on the river we would get a wild duck. The river was full of perch and chub and catfish, to be caught by line, while in the spring shad and rock-fish abounded. It was a custom of the negroes on the plantation in the spring to skim the river with skim nets at the early dawn. They would sometimes bring the shad up to Cool Spring and we would have them for breakfast. I can imagine no better dish than a shad freshly caught from the river for breakfast.

Indeed, as I look back, we had wonderfully good food at Cool Spring. In the season, we would have partridges, or rather, quail, in abundance and also doves and other game birds. There was a constant supply of rabbits and they would appear on the table as often as it was desired. For breakfast invariably there would be two salt herring on the table in addition to the eggs and bacon and the chicken hash and other breakfast dishes. Also, at one o'clock dinner we always had a ham on the table along with the turkey, the chicken, the mutton, or the other meats, and a ham would also invariably be found on the supper table with the broiled chicken and other garnishments of that meal. Of course we had vegetables of every character in abundance. Rice was on the table every day of the year without fail, cooked in the true Southern fashion with each grain separate from the other. Batterbread was also served at breakfast and at supper. Of course we had the hot rolls and the corn bread which form a part of all good Southern cooking.

Our post office was Rocky Mount which was then eight miles distant by the country road. We seldom failed, however, to receive the mail every day. During the winter there would be days when none of the family would go to the station, but almost invariably a colored boy would be sent to bring the mail. Both my father and mother as well as my sister and brothers were fond of reading and we had an excellent library filled with English and American books. We subscribed to the Eclectic Magazine and to Littell's Living Age, which published in serial form many famous English novels as they came out. I have often heard my father and mother tell of the delight with which they read the novels of Thackeray and Dickens as they were published in these periodicals. I remember myself the keen interest with which we followed the novels of Anthony Trollope and Thomas Hardy and William Black and other English writers. Nor was our reading confined to fiction. These two magazines which I have mentioned contained many of the best English essays of the time. We subscribed to the Raleigh News and Observer and its predecessors, to the Norfolk Virginian and to the local newspapers, and, of course, to the Southern Churchman. Later on, we took the Atlantic Monthly, Harper's, and other leading American periodicals. During the long winter nights we all read sedulously and there was much talk and discussion of what we read. Also, we played whist and backgammon and chess so that the evenings were never too long.

At that time it was the general belief that malaria was caused by a miasma that arose from the rivers and other wet places and was particularly harmful at night. It was the custom of my father and mother to leave Cool Spring about the first of June to go to the mountains or watering places and to return the first of October. It was considered to be very dangerous to remain in the low country during the summer months. It had not then been discovered that malaria was due not to any miasma or to any night air but to the then unsuspected mosquito. My father had for years a summer home at Warrenton to which we drove in the family carriage. Then we began to go to Asheville for the summer. We would sometimes stop at Hickory, on the way going or coming, and stay at the Catawba White Sulphur Springs. In later years we formed the habit of going to Blowing Rock where my father built a summer home. Before the War my father and mother went frequently to White Sulphur Springs in Virginia and to Saratoga as my father was very fond of racing, but that was before my recollection. During these long stays at Asheville and Blowing Rock and other resorts we met many pleasant and interesting people from North Carolina and other states and formed enduring friendships. Of course this association with outside minds was helpful and beneficial in many ways.

Take it all in all, I can look back upon our life at Cool Spring with very great pleasure. It is a human trait to paint the past in brighter colors but even making all allowance for that tendency, I am convinced that the life led by my father and mother and by their children at Cool Spring was of a high and beautiful quality. It was a simple and inexpensive life; there was nothing approaching luxury. We had, however, the means to enjoy a high degree of intellectual pleasure. My sister and my brothers and I were taught by tutors and governesses. Miss Mary R. Goodloe, whom we all remember as Miss Mollie, was a loved member of our family for a generation and was a most efficient teacher both by precept and example. As I have said, we formed habits of reading and thinking along literary lines. There was not the preoccupation with material things which has become so marked a feature in later life. Of course there were many and deep griefs and sorrows as there are in all human lives, but Cool Spring was a beautiful home; we all loved it and we all loved the life at the old place.

My mother was a very devout Christian woman and devotedly attached to the Episcopal Church. My father was not a member of any church, although he revered religion and liberally assisted my mother in the many good causes to which she gave her support. When Bishop Thomas Atkinson visited Edgecombe County he almost always spent a night at Cool Spring. I remember him distinctly as being the embodiment of a Father of the Church. He was a strikingly handsome man, over six feet in height, with long white hair falling to his shoulders. He had great intellectual powers and was of the highest and noblest character. He was undoubtedly in many respects the leading citizen in our state. He held services in every county of the state and was known, respected, and loved throughout its borders. On account of the multiplicity of his engagements, he was compelled to hold services on week-days as well as on Sundays. When he would visit the small towns such as Rocky Mount on a week day, all the stores and other places of business were closed and practically all the people of every denomination would attend his services. Bishop Theodore B. Lyman, his successor, was also a man of beautiful character and high ability. He had traveled much and was widely read. When he came to Cool Spring he would sit during the long evening smoking a pipe and telling of his travels and discussing conditions in this country and abroad. It was a great treat to us to

hear him and our mother would allow us to sit up beyond our usual hours for that purpose. My mother took an active part in the management of the Church of the Good Shepherd at Rocky Mount. We all attended services at this church each Sunday when the weather would permit.

My father had an overseer at Old Town and an assistant overseer at the Poquoson. Our family at Cool Spring and these other two families constituted all the white persons upon the plantation. According to my recollection there must have been from thirty to forty negro families on the place. We were thrown constantly with the negroes and all my recollections of Cool Spring are closely connected with these negro friends. There was a tradition at Cool Spring that my grandfather's negroes were the blackest in North Carolina and that they were very proud of this quality. I do not recall a single mulatto among the old negroes. Most of them were of a lustreless black and many of them were superb looking men and women with erect carriage and excellent manners. During the War between the States when my father and both overseers were absent in the army, Cool Spring was under the sole management of my mother, and its fields were devoted to the raising of supplies for the Southern Army. The negroes were absolutely loyal and I have often heard my mother say that she could not have asked for better conduct from them. In the slavery days everything that was worn or used by the slaves was made on the plantation. There were spinners and weavers, tailors and shoemakers and hat-makers. There were blacksmiths and carpenters and masons. One of the most striking among the old negroes was Uncle Dick, the blacksmith. He was a superb looking man, coal black, as straight as an arrow, with a great mass of white hair and with a native dignity which made it impossible for anyone to be other than respectful to him. He was a fine blacksmith and I have often heard my father say that the plows made by him were more efficient than, and outlasted, any of those bought in later days. Our nurse, or mammy, was Aunt Sallie, and her husband, Uncle Joe, was the striker for Uncle Dick, while Uncle Rufus had charge of the wood shop, under the supervision of Blacksmith Dick. They made all the wagons, carts, and plows used on the plantation. There were many stories and traditions about Uncle Dick. He had married a woman who lived on an adjoining plantation and was the maid of her mistress. This family determined to move further south and to take their slaves, including Dick's wife with them. He was greatly distressed and spoke to my grandfather about it, and asked for his assistance. My grandfather arranged that his neighbor should buy Uncle Dick so that he could accompany the family to the South. When the old man was informed of this decision he was at first overjoyed; but the next morning before daylight, according to the story, he came up to Cool Spring, knocked at the door and told my grandfather that he had been thinking the matter over; that he could get another wife, but he was sure he could never get another master such as my grandfather, and therefore he had determined to remain at Cool Spring. My grandfather then made arrangements to buy his wife and she came over to Cool Spring when her master went to the South. In his last illness Uncle Dick desired to be buried at the foot of his old master, my grandfather, and he and his wife, Aunt Rose, lie to this day buried at the feet of my grandfather and my grandmother in the Old Town graveyard. It was a custom in those days for the negroes to take the first name of the father. By way of illustration, Uncle Dick had a son by the name of Wiley who called himself Wiley Dick and his son Josh was known as Josh Wiley.

Another interesting character on the plantation was Uncle Orren, a short stocky negro, entirely black, with a very heavy head of gray hair. He had been my father's play boy in their early years and there was a very deep affection between them all their lives. His only occupation was to drive a yoke of oxen. He would go to the mill, he would haul wood to Cool Spring, and do all manner of work of this kind. He approached more nearly to the character of Uncle Remus than any of the others of the Cool Spring negroes, although they were all proficient story tellers. Uncle Orren, however, was the most interesting. There was nothing we loved better than to go with him on his wagon behind his oxen and listen to his stories. He had a deep melodious voice and could "whoop" most beautifully. This "whooping" was something like a cadenced yodeling. In the warm southern nights and particularly in the early morning just before dawn we could hear Uncle Orren's deep voice giving utterance to this musical "whooping." He was greatly attached to another old negro on the place, Uncle Wright, who had lost his sight in his youth, having been struck in the eye with a grape vine while cutting down a tree. Uncle Orren went to see him almost every night. When Uncle Wright died my brother Gaston took Uncle Orren in his buggy to the funeral. He was much affected and the next morning did not come to work. My brother sent for a physician who said he could see no specific illness, that he was merely grieving over his lost friend. He died a week later. If space would permit, I could tell many amusing stories of the old man. He was a fine type of the faithful old slave, devoted to his master and all the members of his family and in turn deeply loved by them. There were very many others whom I recall. Among them stand out especially Uncle Ferry, who had been my father's coachman before the war, and Uncle Sol, who had been one of my mother's slaves. Uncle Sol was, I think, the finest looking negro I ever saw. He had all the appearance and manner of an African prince. He rented his land from my father and lived in a very comfortable cabin on the edge of the woods towards the Poquoson end of the plantation. He was almost as much his own master as if he were living in his ancestral forests.

Perhaps I cannot conclude these memories of the Cool Spring negroes better than by a brief account of one of the leading law cases in North Carolina bearing upon the rights of the slave to self-defense. My grandfather, James S. Battle, had recently employed a new overseer who lived in the house at Old Town on the Cool Spring plantation. This overseer had a dispute with a slave by the name of Will. As I heard the story in my boyhood, Will had an impediment in his speech which prevented him from talking when he was excited. For this reason he did not answer the overseer, and thus produced the impression of sullenness and insubordination. The overseer went to his house and returned with a gun; whereupon Will ran off to the woods, and the overseer shot him in the back with birdshot. He continued to run. The overseer pursued him and a scuffle ensued. Will drew his knife and inflicted a wound upon the arm of the overseer, which caused his death. Will then escaped and sought the protection of my grandfather who was at the time staying at another one of his plantations about twenty-five miles away. Will arrived at about daylight the next morning. My grandfather made a careful examination of the circumstances of the case and became convinced that Will had not committed murder. He employed Mr. Bartholomew F. Moore, who was at that time the head of the North Carolina bar, paying him, as I have heard, the fee, very large for that time and place, of a thousand dollars. He also employed Mr. Mordecai, a distinguished lawyer of that great legal family, to represent the unfortunate Will. The

jury found a special verdict, reciting the facts in the case and praying the advice of the court. The judge presiding at the trial was the well-known jurist, John R. Donnell. He held that a slave was not entitled to kill his master under any circumstances except when it was absolutely necessary for him to do so in order to save his own life; that the case of the slave Will did not come within that rule and that Will was therefore guilty of murder. The judge then pronounced sentence of death upon him. An appeal was taken to the Supreme Court of the state and is reported in 18 North Carolina Reports (Devereaux & Battle's Law Reports, Vol. I), pp. 121-172. The briefs written by Mr. Moore and Mr. Mordecai for the defendant as well as that by the then Attorney General, the Honorable J. R. J. Daniel, are all of them most able and interesting. The institution of slavery is discussed and the relative rights of the slave and the master. The brief of Mr. Moore in particular is a noble argument for the rights of the slave. The case was heard before a bench of which Thomas Ruffin was Chief Justice, and Joseph J. Daniel and William Gaston were associate justices. Judge Gaston wrote the opinion for the court. It is closely reasoned and at the same time eloquent and moving. He concluded that the jury found no express malice; and that under the circumstances the killing was not done of malice aforethought but in the heat of passion and that the crime was not therefore murder but only manslaughter. This case occurred soon after the Nat Turner insurrection in Southampton County, Virginia, in which a number of white persons had been killed in a servile uprising. Naturally there was much uneasiness among the slave owners and my grandfather was severely criticised by some of his friends and neighbors for defending a slave who had admittedly killed his overseer. My grandfather was, however, a man of very high principles and a keen sense of justice. He conceived it to be his duty, as of course it was, to protect the defenseless negro and did so to the extent of his ability, with the result that Will's life was saved. I may say that the case is of particular interest to my immediate family. Will was the slave of my father's father. The case was argued before the Supreme Court at a time when my mother's father, Judge Joseph J. Daniel, was on the bench of that court, and he concurred in the decision of Judge Gaston. The Attorney General at the time, the Honorable J. R. J. Daniel, was a first cousin of my maternal grandfather and the husband of my mother's aunt, Frances Washington Stith, whom I remember with great affection as "Aunt Fanny." It was rather strange that one case should have so many points of contact with one family. There is a curious sequel to the case. After Will was released my grandfather sent him down to Mississippi to work upon a cotton plantation which he owned in that state. Will there became involved in an altercation with a fellow slave, killed him and was tried and convicted and hanged. I remember hearing old Aunt Rose talk about the case in my boyhood, saying: "Will surely had hard luck. He killed a white man in North Carolina and got off; and then was hung for killing a negro in Mississippi."

These memories of those remote days when slavery still existed seem now very faint and distant. That old civilization has completely passed—like an unsubstantial pageant faded. Indeed, the civilization which I recall in my boyhood on the Cool Spring plantation has vanished almost as completely. We all now recognize that slavery was an evil and rejoice that it no longer exists throughout the world except in some of its darkest corners. But on a plantation such as that of my grandfather undoubtedly the conditions were as favorable as possible. The slaves were well and humanely treated. They lived comfortably and were by universal report happy and contented. In my early years at Cool Spring the former slaves were

very fond of talking of the old slavery times before the war and it was easy to tell from the substance and the manner of their recollections that they led for the most part cheerful and happy lives under a humane and God-fearing master and mistress. Both the old and the new house at Cool Spring were destroyed by fire many years ago. By the lapse of time the old Cool Spring life has also vanished into the smoke of the past. In a book devoted to genealogy with its roots leading far back into that past these old memories of the by-gone years may, I hope, prove to be of some interest.