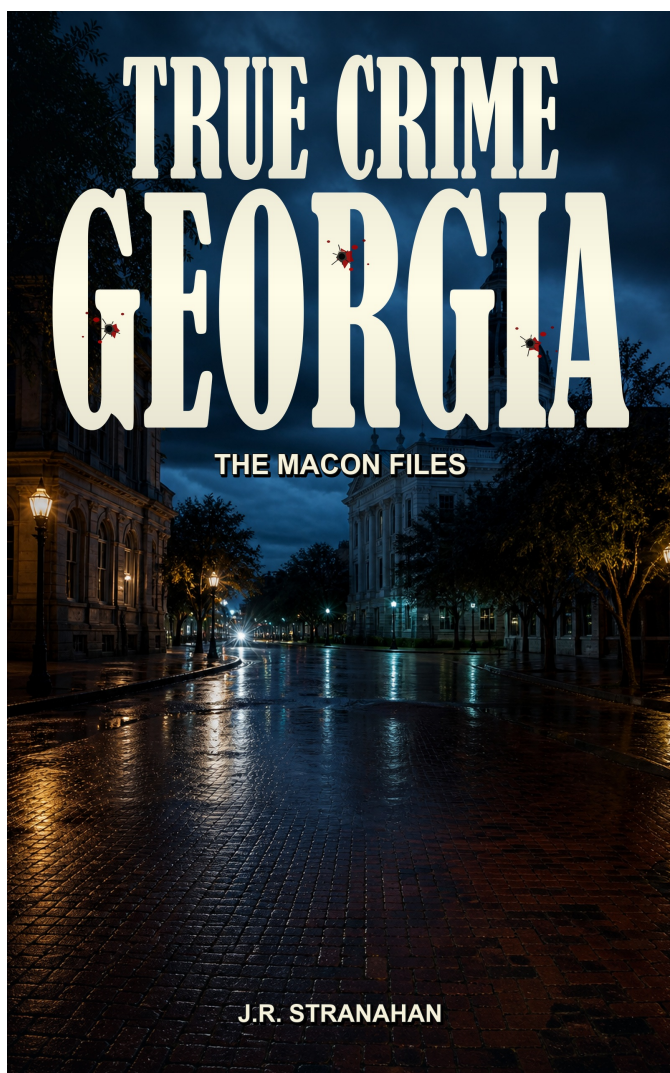


FREE READING SAMPLE



True Crime Georgia: The Macon Files

J.R. Stranahan

Read a complete chapter.

Nine Graves at Rose Hill

This free sample contains a complete chapter from the edition sold on True Crime America. Its source notes are included. The chapter text is reproduced from that edition; this is not the complete book.

Explore the full edition

One purchase includes the complete PDF and EPUB. Visit the book page for its contents, current price and availability.

<https://truecrimeamerica.us/georgia/books/macon-files/>

All rights reserved. This sample is supplied for personal reading.

Case One: Nine Graves at Rose Hill

The Woolfolk family, 1887

Before sunrise on August 6, 1887, a man came through the darkness toward a neighboring house outside Macon.

Tom Woolfolk was wearing a nightshirt. Blood marked the cloth. He said someone had attacked the family home and that he alone had escaped. What neighbors found inside turned the property into the center of one of the most publicized criminal cases in Georgia history.

Nine people were dead.

Richard F. Woolfolk Sr. was fifty-four. His wife, Mattie, was forty-one. Their children were Richard Jr., twenty; Pearl, seventeen; Annie, ten; Rosebud, seven; Charlie, five; and Mattie, eighteen months old. Mattie's aunt, eighty-four-year-old Temperance West, also lived in the household.

The family occupied a place in Bibb County's agricultural economy. Richard owned land and had children from two marriages. Tom, his adult son from the first marriage, lived in a household where property and inheritance would later become central to the state's theory.

The first duty of any account is to keep the nine names together. The case is commonly called the Woolfolk murders, a phrase that can make a family sound like a single object. They were nine people across three generations. The youngest had barely begun to speak. The oldest had lived through most of the nineteenth century.

They were killed with repeated blows from an axe.

The scene was so extensive that investigators faced an immediate problem of control. Neighbors arrived. Officials entered. News traveled

into Macon. People moved near the house before modern scene protection existed. Objects were handled, impressions formed, and stories began circulating while the blood was still fresh.

Tom's account drew suspicion almost at once.

He said an unknown attacker had entered and that he had awakened during the violence. Investigators and neighbors questioned how one person could survive an assault that killed everyone else. They examined blood on his clothing, his behavior, his relationships within the family, and the prospect that he might benefit from the deaths.

Suspicion is not proof. In August 1887, however, public suspicion moved faster than formal evidence.

A crowd gathered. The danger of lynching became real enough that authorities removed Tom from Macon for his protection. That transfer did not mean officials doubted the case against him. It meant the state understood that a prisoner could not be tried if a mob killed him first.

The distinction between custody and protection was thin. Tom was the accused man and the object of public fury. Newspapers carried detailed accounts of the crime and the developing theory. The scale of the deaths made restraint difficult. Every funeral created another visible measure of loss.

The victims were buried at Rose Hill Cemetery in Macon.

Nine graves gave the public a physical image of the crime. They also made the approaching trial feel, to many observers, like a ceremony of confirmation rather than a test of evidence.

That difference would eventually require the Georgia Supreme Court to intervene.

. . .

The state charged Tom Woolfolk in all nine deaths.

The prosecution tried him for the murder of his father, Richard. That choice matters because later summaries often say he was convicted of murdering the whole family. The state's theory encompassed the household, and evidence about all nine deaths surrounded the case, but the judgment rested on one count.

Trying one homicide could simplify a massive prosecution. The state did not have to prove separate deliberation and causation for nine counts to secure a capital sentence. The same scene and alleged plan remained relevant to Richard's death. A conviction on that charge could produce the punishment prosecutors sought.

The evidence was largely circumstantial.

There was no surviving eyewitness who testified to watching Tom commit the killings. Investigators relied on his presence, his status as sole survivor, physical traces, inconsistencies they perceived in his account, and motive evidence concerning family property and conflict.

Circumstantial evidence can support a murder conviction. It is not automatically weaker than direct testimony. A witness can lie or misidentify. Physical facts can form a chain that excludes reasonable alternatives. The legal question is whether the combined circumstances meet the burden of proof, not whether someone saw the final act.

The danger lies in allowing one circumstance to make every later fact look guilty.

Once Tom became the only serious suspect, his survival seemed incriminating. His bloodstained nightshirt seemed incriminating. A disagreement became motive. An imperfect recollection became deception. The prosecution still had to show that those pieces formed more than the natural consequences of being present during a family massacre.

The defense challenged the chain. It questioned the handling of the scene and argued that the state had converted public horror into certainty. It also objected to evidence about alleged misconduct not

properly tied to Richard's murder.

The first trial took place in Bibb County in December 1887.

Macon had lived with the case for four months. Newspaper coverage, conversation, funerals, and the early threat of mob violence created a courtroom environment far removed from a quiet inquiry. Jurors were drawn from a community that had absorbed the story before testimony began.

The jury convicted Tom, and he received a death sentence.

For many observers, the verdict closed the file. The Georgia Supreme Court saw legal errors that prevented that conclusion from standing.

. . .

The first appeal did not declare Tom innocent.

It asked whether the state had obtained the conviction through a lawful trial. That is the difference between reversal and acquittal.

In February 1889, the Georgia Supreme Court reversed the judgment. The court found that evidence had been admitted which should not have gone before the jury. It also confronted the atmosphere inside and around the courtroom.

During closing argument, people in the crowd shouted for Tom to be hanged.

The demand was not testimony. It was not subject to oath, cross-examination, or a judge's instruction about reliability. It told jurors what their neighbors expected. A capital verdict reached under that pressure could not carry confidence simply because the jury later signed a form.

Courts distinguish ordinary publicity from a proceeding dominated by outside influence. A widely reported crime does not automatically make local trial impossible. Jurors can know about a case and still promise to

decide it on admitted evidence. But a crowd's audible demand for execution enters the trial itself.

The reversal recognized that procedure protects the legitimacy of a guilty verdict. It does not reward a defendant for delay. It requires the state to prove its case in a courtroom rather than allowing the courtroom to become an extension of a mob.

The decision also illustrates why appellate language must be read carefully. The Supreme Court could believe that evidence pointed strongly toward Tom and still order a new trial. Sufficiency and fairness are related but separate questions. Strong suspicion does not authorize inadmissible proof. Community grief does not suspend courtroom rules.

After the reversal, prosecutors prepared to try the case again.

This time the venue changed.

The second trial took place in Perry, the Houston County seat, south of Macon. Distance did not make the case unknown. The Woolfolk murders had received statewide and national attention. It did, however, move the proceeding away from the county where the family lived, the bodies were discovered, and the loudest public demands had formed.

Venue is not a judgment about whether every resident of a county is biased. It is a tool for protecting the process when local knowledge and emotion make an impartial jury unusually difficult to assemble.

The state again presented the circumstantial case. It described Tom's position in the family, the scene, the clothing, and the conduct that prosecutors said did not fit his account. The defense again pressed the absence of an eyewitness and weaknesses in the state's reconstruction.

On June 24, 1889, the second jury convicted him of murdering Richard Woolfolk.

The sentence was death.

. . .

Tom appealed again.

The second appellate record differed from the first in the ways that mattered most. The proceeding had been moved. The disputed evidence and public interruption that required reversal were no longer presented in the same form. The Georgia Supreme Court affirmed the conviction on July 28, 1890.

Affirmance meant the legal objections did not justify setting aside the second judgment. It did not convert the circumstantial case into eyewitness proof. It established that the conviction had survived the review available under Georgia law.

Tom continued to deny responsibility.

Claims of innocence before execution deserve accurate placement. A denial is not proof that a conviction was wrong. Neither is it meaningless simply because a jury rejected it. The historical record includes Tom's position and the state's judgment. An honest narrative preserves both without pretending they have equal legal force.

Later theories proposed other suspects and alternative explanations. Some focused on people said to have disputes with Richard. Others argued that the crime required more than one attacker or that details at the scene did not fit the state's account.

Those ideas have kept the case alive in books and local discussion. They were not findings of a court. Time has not produced a tested body of new evidence comparable to modern DNA exoneration cases. The scene was handled under nineteenth-century practices, and much of the physical material needed for present-day testing does not survive in usable form.

The proper conclusion is therefore limited. Two juries convicted Tom of Richard's murder. The first judgment was reversed because of trial error and a corrupted atmosphere. The second judgment was affirmed. No later court vacated it.

Tom Woolfolk was executed by hanging in Perry on October 29, 1890.

Execution ended the sentence three years after the killings. It did not answer every question later readers would ask about the investigation. Capital punishment often creates the appearance of total certainty because the judgment is irreversible. Legally, the state had a final conviction. Historically, the quality of the original scene, the role of publicity, and the lack of direct testimony remain part of the record.

Both statements can be true.

. . .

The Woolfolk case became a national story partly because it concentrated familiar fears inside one home.

The household was supposed to be protected by kinship. The accused was not a stranger who entered from the road but a surviving son. Property, inheritance, remarriage, and resentment offered a motive that newspapers could describe in a few lines. Nine deaths gave editors a number large enough to sell far beyond Georgia.

Sensational coverage can preserve facts while damaging the conditions needed to test them. Reporters recorded dates, testimony, movements, and rulings. They also repeated rumor and wrote as if guilt had been settled before jury selection. The case shows why historical true crime cannot simply modernize old newspaper prose and call it evidence.

The words used for the victims were often equally revealing. The children appeared as proof of the killer's cruelty rather than as people with separate places in a family. Temperance West was reduced to her age. Mattie was defined as Richard's second wife. Even now, Tom's name is more searchable than all nine victims combined.

That imbalance is created by the legal record. The accused generates motions, testimony, verdicts, appeals, clemency requests, and execution documents. The dead generate an inquest and burial record. When the victims include young children, the imbalance becomes nearly complete.

Responsible writing cannot invent biographies to repair the archive. It can refuse to repeat the erasure.

Richard Jr. and Pearl were old enough to have lives moving toward adulthood. Annie, Rosebud, and Charlie were school-age children. Baby Mattie depended entirely on the adults around her. Temperance West connected the household to an earlier generation. Richard and Mattie had built the family structure in which they all lived.

The violence ended every one of those futures in a single night.

. . .

The case also reveals how a court can protect a person whom the judges may still believe guilty.

That is not a contradiction. Constitutional and common-law safeguards matter most when the defendant is unpopular. If a judge silences a crowd only for a sympathetic accused, the rule is not a rule. If inadmissible evidence becomes harmless whenever the charge is terrible, prosecutors have less reason to respect the boundary in the next case.

The first reversal gave Georgia another opportunity to prove Richard's murder under lawful conditions. The change of venue lowered one source of pressure. The second jury returned the same result. That sequence is stronger than a single verdict produced while people demanded a hanging within earshot.

It still does not justify saying Tom received nine murder convictions.

The charging record and the judgment are distinct. Prosecutors accused him in every death. The state selected Richard's murder for trial. The affirmed conviction was for Richard. The remaining eight deaths were part of the same alleged course of conduct and part of the proof, but they did not each receive a verdict.

This point may seem small beside nine graves. It is exactly the kind of point that keeps history from becoming legend.

Legend likes clean totals and absolute villains. Law records counts, objections, rulings, and burdens. Human memory carries the family together. The chapter must hold all three without allowing one to rewrite the others.

At Rose Hill Cemetery, the Woolfolk name does not belong only to Tom.

It belongs to Richard, Mattie, Richard Jr., Pearl, Annie, Rosebud, Charlie, baby Mattie, and Temperance West. The first duty of the file is to return it to them.

. . .

The first appellate opinion also offers a window into nineteenth-century evidence practice.

Modern readers are accustomed to photographs, laboratory reports, recorded interviews, and a documented chain of custody. The Woolfolk trial depended on people describing what they saw in rooms already entered by neighbors and officials. A stain had meaning only through testimony about where it appeared, who handled the object, and whether its condition had changed.

The state introduced statements and conduct intended to show Tom's hostility toward the family. The defense argued that some of this material concerned separate incidents with too little connection to Richard's death. When a court admits prior bad acts, the jury may use them as a shortcut: a person who behaved badly before must be guilty now.

The Georgia Supreme Court's reversal recognized that danger. Evidence needs a logical connection to the charged crime. The more inflammatory it is, the more carefully the connection must be examined.

The opinion did not use today's vocabulary of unfair prejudice, but the underlying problem is familiar. A capital jury should decide whether Tom murdered Richard, not whether jurors disliked him as a son.

The crowd's interruption compounded the error. Closing argument is supposed to be the lawyers' final opportunity to organize admitted proof.

The audience has no argument. When spectators demanded hanging, they inserted punishment before the jury had decided guilt.

The trial judge faced the practical difficulty of restoring order without emphasizing the outburst. An instruction to ignore it might not erase the message. Removing the jury temporarily would not make jurors forget what they heard. The appellate court concluded that a new proceeding was necessary.

That conclusion affirmed a principle easily lost in a notorious case: due process belongs to the proceeding, not to the reputation of the accused.

. . .

The change of venue created logistical burdens.

Witnesses, lawyers, exhibits, and court personnel had to move between Macon and Perry. The victims' relatives and interested citizens traveled as well. The state had to reconstruct a crime scene in words for jurors farther from the property.

Distance can protect impartiality while reducing local knowledge. A Houston County juror was less likely to know the Woolfolk family personally, yet statewide reporting ensured the case was not new. Jury selection therefore remained a test of whether prior knowledge had hardened into an opinion.

The second trial's legitimacy rested partly on allowing potential jurors to admit what they had heard. A person who claimed total ignorance might be less credible than one who acknowledged coverage but could distinguish it from evidence.

The second verdict demonstrated that removing the most obvious pressure did not eliminate the prosecution's case. Prosecutors still persuaded jurors through circumstance. That fact is why the first reversal should not be caricatured as a technical escape. The state received another trial and won under improved conditions.

. . .

Inheritance served as the prosecution's organizing motive.

Property in a blended family can create expectation and grievance. Tom was Richard's son from an earlier marriage. The younger children belonged to the second household. Prosecutors argued that the deaths changed who could benefit from Richard's estate.

Financial benefit after death is relevant, but it is not self-proving. Many heirs gain property without harming anyone. To become persuasive, inheritance must join opportunity, conduct, physical evidence, and the absence of a reasonable alternative.

The Woolfolk case shows how motive can become stronger in public memory than it was in court. Later retellings often begin with a resentful heir and let that image explain every fact. The trial had to proceed in the opposite direction. Jurors first had to decide whether reliable evidence showed Tom committed the act. Only then could motive help explain why.

. . .

The execution attracted another crowd.

Public hanging had long served as punishment and spectacle. By 1890, executions still allowed communities to gather around the state's final act. Newspaper accounts treated Tom's demeanor, last words, religious preparation, and the mechanics of death as part of the story.

Those details gave the condemned man a final scene while the victims remained represented by graves. That is another way the archive centers the defendant.

The execution date should be preserved because it completes the legal chronology. The spectacle does not need to be recreated. The state carried out the sentence after affirmance. Nothing about the mechanics explains the nine lives lost.

. . .

Rose Hill Cemetery holds much of Macon's civic memory.

Its slopes contain soldiers, musicians, politicians, business owners, children, and families whose names outlasted the buildings where they lived. The Woolfolk graves became a destination for people drawn by the crime.

Visiting a grave can be an act of remembrance. It can also turn burial into entertainment. Respect begins with the recognition that the plot is not a prop. The family did not choose to become a landmark in a murder narrative.

Nine stones ask a harder question than whether Tom appeared guilty. They ask what the legal process owed the dead and the accused at the same time.

The answer was not instant punishment. It was a reliable judgment. Georgia failed that standard in the first trial and met the appellate court's standard in the second.

That complete sequence is more meaningful than the legend of a single bloody night followed inevitably by the gallows.

. . .

The case predates the forensic assumptions modern readers bring to blood evidence.

Investigators could observe color, location, and apparent transfer. They could not type blood, develop DNA profiles, or use validated pattern analysis in the modern sense. A bloodstain on a survivor's clothing was expected if he moved through the house, incriminating if it resulted from attack, and ambiguous without a reliable reconstruction.

The prosecution interpreted the nightshirt within the full circumstantial chain. Later writers should not claim that science proved the blood came from a particular victim unless a source from the period actually established it through available methods.

The lack of modern testing does not invalidate the conviction. It limits the certainty of modern forensic language.

. . .

Tom's sole survival created both investigative focus and alternative possibilities.

If an outsider killed the family, why was Tom spared? If Tom committed the crime, how did he carry out prolonged violence without suffering or leaving evidence that compelled every observer? Questions like these organize inquiry but do not answer it.

The state's theory made survival part of consciousness of guilt. The defense made it the reason suspicion hardened too quickly.

A rational jury could accept the state's combined evidence. The first appellate reversal shows that even a rational theory must be presented lawfully.

. . .

The victims' funeral concentrated grief before the trial.

Community mourning can coexist with a commitment to due process, but the scale of loss creates pressure for immediate certainty. Officials must protect the scene, the prisoner, and the future jury at the same time.

Removing Tom from threatened mob violence was part of preserving the state's case. If the crowd had killed him, Georgia would have lost the opportunity to establish guilt through judgment and the defense would have lost all chance to challenge the accusation.

The second trial was possible because authorities prevented that outcome.

. . .

The case remains culturally alive because uncertainty attaches to final punishment.

Readers revisit a conviction more intensely when the state executed the defendant. An alternative theory cannot lead to a new trial after death. It can only change historical confidence.

That makes discipline more important, not less. A later author may identify weaknesses but should not announce exoneration without new evidence capable of testing the original judgment. Likewise, affirmance should not be treated as scientific certification.

The durable conclusion is legal and human: Tom was finally convicted of Richard's murder after a lawful retrial, and nine members of the household were killed in the same attack.

. . .

The chronology protects that conclusion from myth.

The killings occurred on August 6, 1887. The first conviction came in December. The Supreme Court reversed it in February 1889. Houston County jurors convicted Tom again on June 24, 1889. The court affirmed on July 28, 1890, and Georgia executed him on October 29.

More than three years separated the crime from punishment. That interval contained two trials and two appellate records, not one uninterrupted rush to execution. The mob atmosphere damaged the first judgment, while formal review created the second.

Sources from the edition

SELECTED SOURCES

Introduction and Macon history

National Park Service, Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park and Ocmulgee regional history. New Georgia Encyclopedia, “Macon.” Macon-Bibb County, consolidated-government charter and official history.

The Woolfolk family

Woolfolk v. State, 81 Ga. 551, 8 S.E. 724 (1889). *Woolfolk v. State*, 85 Ga. 69, 11 S.E. 814 (1890). New Georgia Encyclopedia, “Woolfolk Murder Case.” Georgia Historic Newspapers, contemporaneous coverage. Georgia Attorney General, Biennial Report, 1889 to 1890.

Marcia Elaine Lyles

Lyles v. State, 215 Ga. 229, 109 S.E.2d 785 (1959). Georgia Historic Newspapers, 1958 and 1959 coverage. Mercer University Press, Jaclyn Weldon White, *Whisper to the Black Candle*. Georgia State Board of Pardons and Paroles, commutation authority and historical records.

Mary Burge

Burge v. State, 103 Ga. App. 682, 120 S.E.2d 200 (1961). Georgia Historic Newspapers, 1960 indictment, trial, acquittal, and aftermath. Mercer Law School, *Journal of Southern Legal History*, oral-history materials concerning the Burge defense.

A.C. Hall

United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, “A.C. Hall” and Notice to Close File. PBS Frontline, Un(re)solved A.C. Hall case file. Emory University Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project materials.

Sabrina Long

Georgia Bureau of Investigation, current Sabrina Long missing-person page and October 19, 2018 arrest release. Macon-Bibb County, January 8, 2019 indictment notice. Contemporary Middle Georgia reporting on the disappearance and renewed investigation.

Steven, Kristin, and Bryan Moss

Rhode v. State, 274 Ga. 377, 552 S.E.2d 855 (2001). *Lucas v. State*, 274 Ga. 640, 555 S.E.2d 440 (2001). United States Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit, Lucas federal habeas opinion. Supreme Court of Georgia, 2016 stay decision. Georgia Attorney General, Daniel Anthony Lucas execution record. Georgia Department of Corrections, execution history.

Gail Spencer

Dozier v. State, Supreme Court of Georgia (2019). *Jones v. State*, Supreme Court of Georgia (2020). Supreme Court of Georgia oral-argument summary. Macon-Bibb County and contemporaneous local reporting on pleas, verdict, and sentencing.

Lauren Giddings

Mercer University, Lauren Giddings memorial scholarship and biography. Contemporary reporting on Stephen McDaniel's guilty plea and sentence. State and federal postconviction records and disposition reporting. Federal civil docket, *Giddings v. McDaniel*.

Yvonne Pless and Fredonia Smith

Georgia Criminal Justice Coordinating Council and Bibb County Sheriff's Office, May 18, 2023 joint release. Georgia Bureau of Investigation, Samuel Little investigation. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Samuel Little case materials.

Jibri Bryan

Mercer University Athletics, Jibri Bryan community-service recognition and institutional memorial. Macon-Bibb County District Attorney, February 26, 2019 plea and sentencing release. Contemporary 41NBC reporting on indictment and mistrial. Georgia Public Broadcasting, community and investigative context.

Continue reading.

True Crime Georgia: The Macon Files

Explore the remaining cases and choose your complete edition in PDF and EPUB.

See the book and current price →

<https://truecrimeamerica.us/georgia/books/macon-files/>