

In Search of The Past:

The Mystery of The Missing Rosebush

-- Jeri Jennings

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"There is the rose Carl found at Appomattox Courthouse, for example. By the door to that shrine stands a venerable rosebush whose pink blossoms Carl had little trouble identifying as those of 'Old Blush.' A stubbornly tenacious shrub, 'Old Blush' is the most common rose in the dooryards of Southern cabins and shotgun shacks. 'Old Blush' Carl knew to be an antebellum variety which came to Virginia with the tobacco planters. On a hunch, he scrutinized the Matthew Brady photograph of Lee's surrender, and found the same shrub growing in the same spot by the doorway. As a Southerner, Carl takes great pride in having located the last surviving witness to that fateful event."

-- **Thomas Christopher, In Search of Lost Roses**

A plant of 'Old Blush,' that venerable China - a plant that was growing and blooming when Robert E. Lee signed Articles of Surrender of the Surrender of the Confederate Forces - still living today, and still blooming. That's an impressive piece of living history! What a great thing it would be, we thought, to go to Appomattox Courthouse, and photograph that rose -that ". . . last surviving witness"

Accordingly, on a fine day in early May, we piled dogs and rose books into our motorhome, and set out on a quest. We would journey in a leisurely fashion through some of the South, travelling the back roads, looking for old cemeteries and old roses. Our eventual goal was Appomattox Courthouse, where we would pay our respects to that venerable 'Old Blush.' [1]

We followed the "Southern route." This was familiar territory, but we would see it differently this time. Our quarry was old roses, and we determined to find them along the way.

Texas Hill Country

The South was in the second year of a drought, and we first saw its effects in West Texas. The land was dry, cracked and dusty, and high winds created dust-bowl conditions. At Pedernales Falls State Park, in the heart of the Texas Hill Country, the drought was less obvious. The land was still green; deer, rabbits, and Armadillos wandered through the campground. From there, our route lay East, through Austin, to Brenham, and the Antique Rose Emporium. If you travel this way, stop to explore old Fredricksburg, settled in the 1800's mostly by German immigrants. Texas Rose Rustlers have found the area a good hunting ground. The city is now a designated "Historic District," with a number of shops - some charming, some trivial (none cheap!).

Across Rural Louisiana to St. Francisville

From Texas, we crossed the heart of Louisiana. Rolling Northeast through the yam-growing "plains" area around Opelousas, we angled in toward Natchez, Mississippi, via St. Francisville, in Northeast Louisiana. Along these back roads, every local church had its own small, neatly kept cemetery, but there were no roses of any sort. There were no roses - or for the most part ANY flowers - around private homes and farms in this agricultural region.

We think of Louisiana as being French in flavor. Anglican English, under grant from France, however, settled St. Francisville. Catholics were a minority here, and the major church in St. Francisville is Episcopalian - an impressive medieval structure in gray stone. The adjacent cemetery offers a wealth of satisfying monuments, aged oak trees, and drapes of Spanish Moss -- but no roses.

Early in the 19th Century, St. Francisville was one of the wealthiest areas in the country. Indigo and rice bought gracious homes, which grew into exquisite mansions as the money rolled in. Leisured plantation owners made the "Grand Tour, and returned home inspired to recreate the Great Gardens of Europe. The Civil War ended this lifestyle, and many of the great homes and gardens of St. Francisville fell into ruin. Some have now been restored, and are open to the public for tours and as Bed & Breakfast accommodations.

This is a great trip, but there are no roses.

A flourishing 'Blaze' climbs the wrought iron fence outside a St. Francisville antique shop. It was the first rose we'd seen since we left The Antique Rose Emporium - and it wasn't what I was hoping to find.

Louisiana's Great Gardens made lavish use of Azaleas, Camellias, Gardenias, and Hydrangeas. These plants flourish in this humid climate, and many have survived from the glory days of the last Century. Roses, if they ever WERE there, were lost long ago to disease and neglect. The one exception, seen over and over, was **R. roxburghii**. Apparently, once established, it can survive almost anything!

Here and there, rose beds have been restored, but more often than not they're planted with modern roses. **'Simplicity'** seems out of place in old formal gardens, and **'Mr. Lincoln'** almost a sacrilege. Private homes, old and new, seedy or prosperous, are remarkably and uniformly flower-free. Mile after mile, the only flowers to be seen were scattered plantings of bright yellow Day Lilies.

The Natchez Trace

Natchez is one of the southernmost cities in Mississippi. It is the starting point for the Natchez Trace, which runs from there to Nashville, Tennessee, almost 450 miles North and East. The Parkway follows, as much as is possible, a historic foot and horse trail which began as a series of game trails. Indians, then explorers followed the trail. Traders followed them, making the Trace a major 18th Century trade route.

As early as 1733, French maps showed the trail running from Natchez to the northeast. By 1785, American settlers in the Ohio River Valley had begun floating their crops down the Mississippi River in flatboats to Natchez or New Orleans. Flatboaters sold their wares in Natchez, then broke up their boats and sold those as well - for lumber. With whatever profit was left, after a big bash in Natchez, the boatmen then set out on foot and horseback for the trip back to Nashville.

This is beautiful country, but in the 19th Century, the Natchez Trace was 450 grueling miles of humidity, mosquitoes, mud puddles, swamps, snakes, unfriendly Indians and thieves. The trip took up six months, and any severe injury along the way was a death sentence. Those that survived built another flatboat, bought more trade goods, and did the entire thing again. The advent of Mississippi River Steamboats made the Trace obsolete, and within a few years, it began to sink into obscurity.

Today's traveler enters the Parkway just North of Natchez, Mississippi. Trees, cypress swamps, and a few open meadows flank a well-paved two-lane road. No commercial traffic is permitted on the Parkway. There are no trucks, fast-food outlets, or markets. A few small campgrounds offer spartan overnight accommodations. There are a few ranger stations, and many "informational" stops. For everything else, you must detour from the Parkway. We saw little traffic - perhaps 20 vehicles in a day - as we wound our way up the Trace. Here and there, along the way, you can walk small sections of the Trace. Slip through the forest along the rough, worn trail. In the semi-silence of birdcalls, insects, and wind in the trees, you can easily believe yourself to have slipped through a time warp, into the past.

The Parkway Ends We Head East

The Natchez Trace Parkway ends a few miles Southwest of Nashville, Tennessee. From 17th Century silence, the traveler is abruptly decanted into the hurly-burly of Interstate 40. You're on the outskirts of the "Country Music Capitol of the world."

Nothing could be more modern than today's Nashville, but another detour into the 19th Century awaits a few miles East, at The Hermitage.

This was the home of Andrew Jackson and his beloved wife, Rachel. Rachel Jackson loved her garden, and Rachel's Garden is well worth a visit. Jackson and Rachel like side by side in the garden, under a graceful gazebo. For our spring visit, the place was full of the scent and color of Old Roses, peonies, and other wonderful things. None of the roses in Rachel's Garden is original. Garden restoration used varieties which COULD have been there in Rachel Jackson's time. Most of these plants came from The Antique Rose Emporium. We found the familiar "**Chestnut Rose**" (*R. roxburghii*), '**Great Maiden's Blush**' (her pale blush blossoms glowing against cool blue-green foliage), '**Harison's Yellow**,' (the "Yellow Rose of Texas") and more. Some beautiful tree peonies, and a few other rarities, are thought to date back to Rachel Jackson's day.

Virginia . . . Appomattox Courthouse

"This town has now a place and name in history. Its situation is in a sort of valley, with rich slopes of cleared land rising beyond and above it on every side. There are about twenty-five dwellings in the town, I should say, and two streets. Most of the inhabitants, I am told, left on the arrival of the rebel forces, too assured of a fight here. Rising conspicuous above every other building is the courthouse. It is a two story, plain, square brick building, with a dome-like roof of somewhat pretentious height and an ambitious yellow color. The Maclean House where Lieutenant General Grant and General Lee had their conference, is evidently the best private residence of the town. It is likewise built of brick, as nearly all the houses in town are, with the inevitable portico in front and rear. I shall be greatly surprised if the bricks from this building do not at some future day command as high prices as ever did fragment from the charter oak or a cane from the Mount Vernon estate."

-- Mr. John A. Brady's -- Dispatch, to the New York Herald

Headquarters Army of the James Behind Richmond, Midnight April 9, 1865

In due course, we reached our goal.

Appomattox Courthouse National Historical Park is located in South Central Virginia. This was the heart of the Confederate States of America - between Richmond (the capitol of the Confederacy) and Lynchburg. The modern approach to the park runs through lovely rolling green hills, in country that has changed little since 9th April, 1865. I don't doubt that the park is often crowded, but on this Thursday in mid-May, there were few visitors.

The sky was gray when we arrived at Appomattox Courthouse, and threatening rain. The temperature was in the low 80's, but the air was still, and heavy with humidity. I thought about Civil War Army uniforms, made of blue wool and gray wool, picked up my cameras, thinking of backpacks and rifles - and wiped off a little more sweat.

I'd always thought that the Surrender took place in, or in front of, the Courthouse building, but that's wrong. The name, "Appomattox Courthouse" refers not to one building, but to the entire small village. Generals Grant and Lee met here, and signed Articles of Surrender in the parlor of the three-story brick home of Mr. Wilmer McLean, a prosperous wholesale grocer.

The reconstructed courthouse building serves as a visitor's center and museum. There are many photographs here, but there is no "Matthew Brady photo" of the surrender.

We asked about a Brady photo. To our surprise, we were told that there is not only no Matthew Brady photo of the event - there are no photos at all of it. Four New York Herald reporters¹ were at Appomattox when the Surrender took place. All four filed stories covering it - but **there were no photographers at Appomattox at the time of the surrender.**

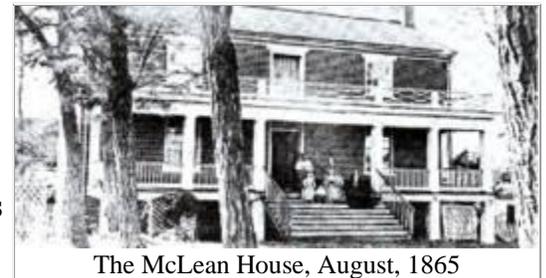
Photographs of the McLean house exist, as do images of the Courthouse (which played no role in the surrender). There are photographs of the local tavern, the surrounding countryside, and the assembled citizenry of Appomattox Courthouse. These wet collodion glass plate images (now in the Library of Congress) were made later in April, and in August, 1965, by Timothy O'Sullivan, (1840-1882).

O'Sullivan, a dashing 25-year-old, was covering the Union Army's siege of nearby Petersburg "under the supervision of" Matthew Brady." There's a marvelous photo of the handsome O'Sullivan, striking a dramatic pose next to his wagon. It was taken somewhere near Petersburg, probably not long before the surrender. When word of the event went out, he was most probably the photographer closest to the event.

The surrender came suddenly, when Confederate troops were frustrated in their attempts to reach desperately needed supplies. O'Sullivan must have been dispatched urgently to Appomattox. His photos were made after the fact, but they were invaluable tools in the Park Service's reconstruction of the village.

The McLean house today - most of the village, in fact - exists only as a reconstruction. The Courthouse burned to the ground in 1890, leaving the village to die.

Poor McLean! Not only did departing Union Officers carry off his parlor furniture, but his brush with history led him eventually into bankruptcy. The house was sold, sold again, and eventually it was disassembled. A hair-brained scheme to reconstruct it in Washington, at the Smithsonian, came to naught, and the remains were abandoned where they lay. When the Park Service acquired the site in 1948, all that remained of the McLean house was a greatly diminished pile of bricks, and some scraps of rotted wood.



O'Sullivan's photos provided a model for reconstruction of the house, and they attest to the meticulous accuracy with which that task was carried out. It would be easy to believe that this is the original structure. Trellises, well-house, and outbuildings - all have been accurately replicated. Some of the furniture is original - the rest has been carefully reproduced. The few existing bricks from the original house have been incorporated into the front wall of its replica.

But we came to Appomattox Courthouse to see a rosebush, not a house!

Carl Cato (reports Christopher) said that he found a "venerable rosebush" standing "By the door to that shrine . . ." Christopher further tells us that Cato verified the antiquity of the plant by finding it in "... the Matthew Brady photograph of Lee's surrender..." "Of course, we now know that there IS no "Matthew Brady photograph" (or ANY photograph) of the surrender. Does Cato mean the O'Sullivan photographs, taken later? Clearly, more detective work is needed!

O'Sullivan's images do show a plant growing in front of the McLean house. It is in front of, but appears not to be attached to, a latticework trellis to the left side of the photo. The trellis shows up clearly, but the

plant can be seen only as a dark blob. It COULD be a rose bush. (It could just as easily be a pyracantha, camellia, or rhododendron.) The trellis we see today duplicates the one shown in the O'Sullivan photos. But what about the PLANT?

An 'Old Blush' does grow today, in front of the McLean house, against the reconstructed trellis. It is a very young bush, and appeared at the time of our visit to have been planted within the last year or so. Does this young plant replace an older 'Old Blush?' If so, how old was the plant it replaced? When was that older plant removed - and WHY?

Did an 'Old Blush' grow in front of the McLean house in 1865? Can we believe that such a plant survived almost 100 years of neglect - survived the destruction and reconstruction of the house itself - remained to grace the reconstructed house and trellis in the 1970's - and then died in the late 1990's? I suppose it's possible, but I oh, I do find it unlikely.



'Old Blush' grows in front of this reconstructed Law Office in the village of Appomattox Courthouse, VA

I am confused by the discrepancy between Carl Cato's tale - as recounted by Christopher - and the reality of Appomattox Courthouse. Cato is well known in the world of Old Garden Roses. He found and researched Old Roses, and returned many to commerce. He was an early and important pillar of the Heritage Rose Group, possessing encyclopedic knowledge of Old Roses - BUT his involvement with them commenced in the 1970's, long after reconstruction of the McLean House was completed, and the village had become a Park.

What, then, DID Carl Cato find growing at Appomattox Courthouse? When did he see it? From what photograph did he verify its age? Did Christopher make up the tale, or is it a true story, oddly scrambled?

We went to Appomattox Courthouse to find a rosebush. Instead, we discovered a mystery, which clearly needs unraveling.

The rain held off through our exploration of Appomattox Courthouse. A welcome, cool breeze stirred the long meadow grass as we left. Within an hour, it was raining - lightly at first, and then in an increasing downpour. At sunset, the temperature plunged, thunder rolled, and a memorable lightning show began.

Rain continued throughout the night, and the next day. Red Virginia clay turned into a thick, sticky mess that clung to feet and wheels. In that cold storm it was easy to visualize two tired armies, plodding along rutted dirt roads in just such a rain - cursing the red mud that fouled wagon wheels and wearied the horses and mules, as the cold rain soaked through worn boots and woolen uniforms.

We sat in comfort, in our motorhome as the sun set, watching squirrels and wild turkeys, the rain, and the lightning. We left Virginia with our questions unanswered, but vowing to return. Perhaps, on another visit, we'll finally unravel the "Mystery of the Missing Rosebush."

[1] 'Old Blush,' China, med. Pink, 1752