

A Short History of Palmetto Bluff Plantation: Part II

Photography by H. G. Rubert,
circa 1910-1929

By John Samuel Graves, III

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This article continues the story of my grandfather, H. G. Rubert, and his life serving as private secretary to R.T. Wilson, Jr., the multi-millionaire owner of the 20,000-acre *Palmetto Bluff Plantation* from 1910 to 1929.

My maternal grandfather, Harlem George Rubert, was born in Michigan on September 21, 1887. He grew up on the family farm with his father, mother and seven brothers and sisters. Many of his close relatives lived on nearby farms. He was raised to be responsible and disciplined. From an early age his parents gave him many daily chores that he completed without complaint. He and his brothers and sisters walked several miles to school each day, no matter the weather or time of year. The children endured many a bitter Michigan winter.

As mentioned in Part I of this series, my grandfather was referred to by friends and family as "Rubert" and R. T. Wilson, Jr. as "RT." After high school graduation, Rubert decided to become a surgeon, and worked very hard at odd jobs to raise money for his education. He enrolled in The Bellevue Hospital Nursing College in New York City and, after three to four years, completed the comprehensive and arduous courses, graduating with honors on April 9, 1907. He then entered medical college, intent on getting his medical degree, but it was at this time he met R. T. Wilson, Jr.

At the age of 44, RT already had health problems (which only worsened during the remainder of his life). In the early 1900s, men of wealth and importance often had private secretaries and, in almost all circumstances, male secretaries. Upon meeting Rubert, RT seized the opportunity to hire both a private secretary *and* a nurse, making Rubert an offer he could not refuse. For the next 24 years, my grandfather earned a handsome salary with huge fringe benefits and entered into the heady lifestyle of the incredibly wealthy. His newfound income made it possible to consider starting a family, and in 1909 he married Lillian Inez Cadugan. Not finishing medical school seemed a small price to pay at the time.

Rubert was 22-years-old when RT hired him. The farm boy from Michigan was about to discover that the job he had taken on was life-changing. His responsibilities were extensive and consumed most of his time from 1909 until 1933. Some of his duties included: monitoring and maintaining all of RT's properties, supervising, hiring and firing many of RT's employees, purchasing and licensing all vehicles, purchasing RT's racehorses and seeing that they were properly cared for. Additionally, Rubert arranged travel schedules for RT and his entourage as they moved from New York to Palmetto Bluff for the winters and from Palmetto Bluff to Saratoga, NY, for the racing season. RT and his family also traveled regularly to New York, NY and Newport, RI. As RT's private secretary, Rubert was expected to be wherever RT was.

When RT and Rubert and their families were at Palmetto Bluff, Rubert was the overseer and general manager of the entire, fully functioning plantation. Cotton, rice, pine trees for turpentine, cattle, hogs, sheep, dairy cows, horses and chickens were all raised there. It had its own generators, ice house, irrigation system, school with at least two teachers, an office building for RT, a beautiful stable for RT's horses, a garage for keeping



R.T. Wilson, Jr.

and repairing cars, a blacksmith shop and dairy barns. Greenhouses produced a variety of vegetables to feed the staff and the many guests who stayed at the mansion. Flowers were also raised in these greenhouses so that each room could have fresh flowers daily. Turtles were raised in the Terrapin House.

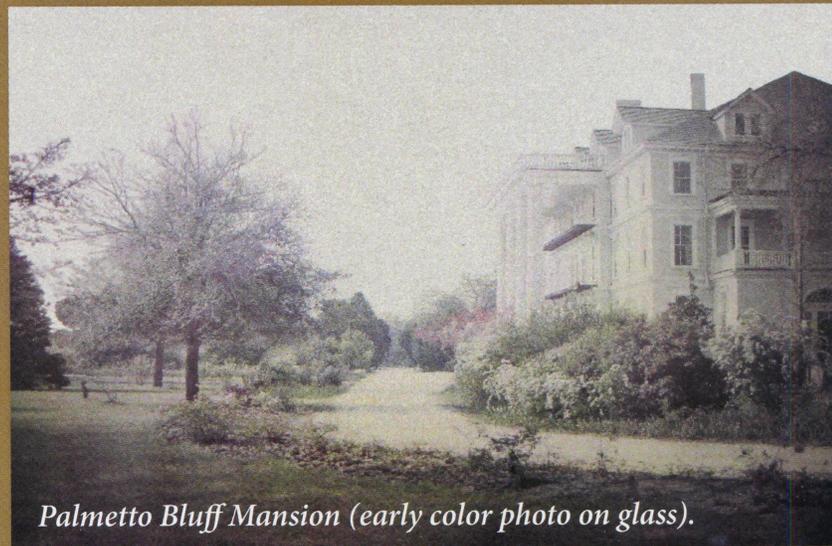
“The Bluff” also had its own post office. The side-wheel steamboat, *Attaquin*, made frequent trips out of Savannah carrying mail, cargo and passengers to Daufuskie, Bluffton and Palmetto Bluff. For a delightful story about those times and a race between the *Attaquin* and a rival steamboat, the *Louise*, read Andrew Peeple’s short story “Bluffton Boy Grows Up,” which can be found at graveshouse.org.

The Bluff had miles of crushed, white oyster-shell roads and acres of gardens to be maintained. RT employed many people on the plantation: cooks, servants, farm hands, mechanics, a landscape architect, teachers, chauffeurs and more. Virtually every day, when in residence at The Bluff, Rubert would mount his black stallion, King, and ride throughout the plantation to supervise the personnel and make sure that everything was in order.

When RT first acquired Palmetto Bluff, he and his wife Marion—and later their two daughters, Louisa and Marion—lived in Octagon House, a beautiful, older mansion which stood where RT later built his own. Palmetto Bluff Plantation actually included 18 to 20 smaller, earlier plantations. Octagon House (actually not octagonal in shape) was named after one of the smaller original plantations called Octagon Plantation, which in turn had been named after a previous octagonal-shaped house built in the late 1700s by Samuel Breck Parkman. Before RT built his mansion, my grandparents and their children, Muriel and Florence (my mother), also lived in Octagon House when they came down with RT to winter at Palmetto Bluff. RT built another beautiful house for his sister



The Terrapin House



Palmetto Bluff Mansion (early color photo on glass).



One of Rubert’s duties included purchasing and licensing of all of R. T.’s vehicles. Seen here is an early Ford station wagon.



The Side-Wheel Steamboat, Attaquin

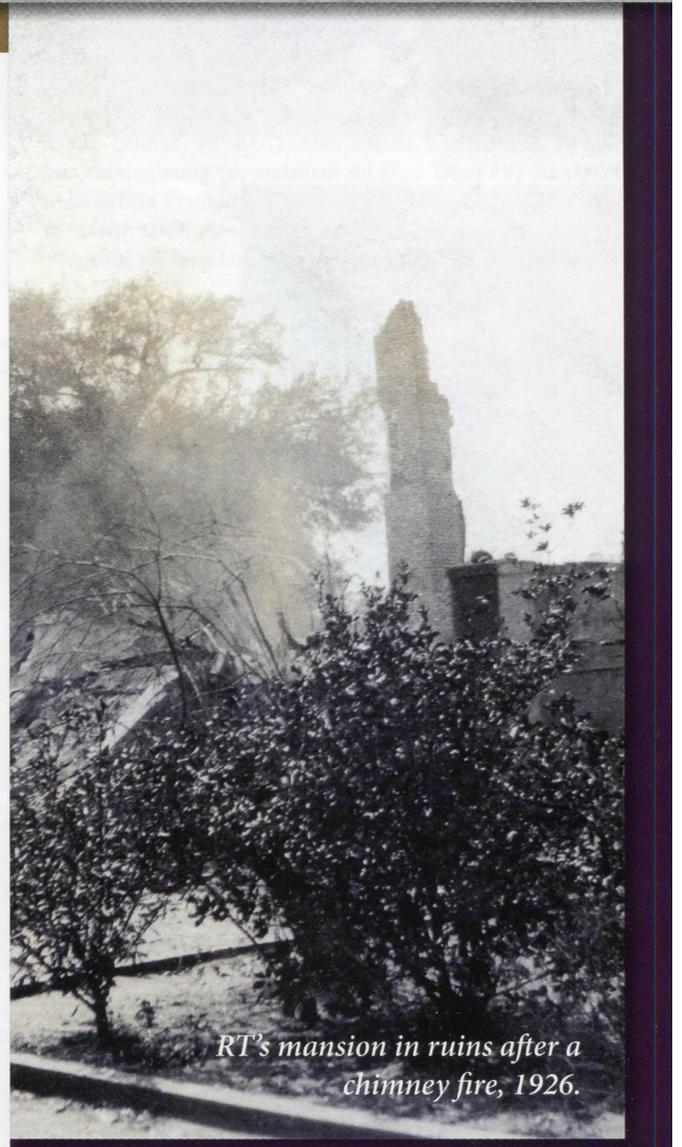
Grace and her husband, Cornelius Vanderbilt, III, across the cove from where RT would later build his mansion. That house became known as the Vanderbilt House.

RT's beautiful Palmetto Bluff mansion contained many valuable furnishings, including paintings, oriental vases, Persian rugs, beautiful lamps and fine furniture. An elevator took guests to the third floor ballroom, which featured a gold-leaf ceiling imported from Paris. RT's private library, which was home to many rare and antiquarian books, was just off the ballroom. The mansion meant everything to RT. It was his retreat from the hectic world of New York.

On March 2, 1926, a strong March wind fanned the fire that utterly destroyed RT's mansion in a matter of hours. The fire was thought to have originated as a chimney fire in the kitchen that worked its way up to the attic. As the mansion burned, a distraught and crying RT repeatedly entered the flaming home in a vain attempt to save what he could. My grandfather had to literally carry RT out of the devastating fire three times. Nothing survived. Even RT's false teeth burned up, and he had to return to New York eating only soft foods.

One month after his beloved mansion burned, RT's older brother, Marshall, died. The loss of both his dream South Carolina mansion and his brother in 1926 was the beginning of the end for RT. The stock market crash of 1929 loomed on the horizon, and he lost a great deal of his fortune. RT died just two months after the "Black Tuesday" crash of October 29, 1929.

For more information on the Graves family and their legacy in Bluffton, visit graveshouse.org. Florence Rubert Graves wrote many poems about Bluffton. Her poem "No Mo' Robert" was written about a Negro funeral on Palmetto Bluff. Her Bluffton poems can be viewed on graveshouse.org. To view the songs John Samuel Graves, III, composed using his mother's poems as lyrics, visit astarfell.com and jsgraves.musicaneo.com. See the August 2015 issue of *The Bluffton Breeze* for his article about his father, "Boll Weevils and Oysters."



RT's mansion in ruins after a chimney fire, 1926.