

# A Story of Two Houses:

*The Wilson Mansion on Palmetto Bluff*  
and  
*The Graves House in Old Town Bluffton*  
by

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This story is about how the histories of two very different houses—one a multi-millionaire’s winter home, the Wilson Mansion on Palmetto Bluff, and the other, a very modest middle class merchant’s home, the Graves House in Old Town Bluffton—are strangely and curiously related.

R. T. Wilson, Jr., a New York banker and financier, owned the 18,000 acre Palmetto Bluff Plantation (acquired by his father, R. T. Wilson, Sr. in 1902) and had completed a three story mansion on the property in 1915 with at least 72 rooms. The home had over twenty bathrooms and a ballroom on the third floor that had a gold leaf ceiling imported from Europe. R. T.’s wife, Marion, threw many lavish parties in the mansion for wealthy guests, mostly from the northeastern states. Among their frequent guests were people like R. T.’s sister, Grace, and her husband, Cornelius Vanderbilt, III.

The story of the Graves House, a contributing structure in Bluffton’s Historic Preservation District, begins with the joining of two families by marriage—the Graves and the Guilford lines. Both families originally came from the British Isles.

George Guilford, a Union Army soldier, had been stationed at the end of his enlistment on Hilton Head Island, where he came to love the South Carolina Low Country. He would return many years later to become the first mayor of Bluffton after its re-incorporation in 1903. George Guilford built the Graves House in 1908. He was my great grandfather.

George Sewell Guilford was born April 6, 1846, in Portland, Maine to a family that had been ship

builders for generations. Young George became a master shipbuilder at an early age. The earliest members of the Guilford line came to the new world on the Mayflower. The Guilford’s have traced their ancestry back to the English poet Geoffrey Chaucer and beyond.

Young George had enlisted at age 18 in the 29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, Maine. Members of his regiment would later stand guard duty at Washington Arsenal over the assassins of President Lincoln. After the Civil War ended, and before he returned to South Carolina, George enlisted in the U. S. Navy as a ship’s carpenter, and spent years traveling back and forth across the Atlantic. On a layover for ship repairs in Liverpool, England, he met and married Jane Hore, February 23, 1872.

After retiring from his U. S. Navy career, George returned to the Low Country with his family. He and Jane had eight children. Many members of some of the oldest families in Bluffton and the surrounding areas descended from these children—McCracken, Peebles, Saussey, and of course, Graves, Guilford and others. (See *Genealogy* tab on [graveshouse.org](http://graveshouse.org).)

George designed and built the Graves House as a wedding gift for his daughter, Cora Jane and her new husband, John Samuel Graves, Sr., my grandparents. The simple and practical design is one of the few homes in Bluffton’s original square mile that exhibits a distinctive New England style.

The floor plan takes maximum advantage of the breezes from the May River and allows for cross ventilation by opening doors and windows on all four sides. Two sets of eight foot interior pocket doors allowed the cool air to pass completely through the house across two large bedrooms and an interior parlor. The house has an unusually high, four gabled, attic to allow the hot air to rise up above the main level ceilings and vent to the outside. The extra large front and side porches, over 1000 square feet, were designed to take maximum advantage of the cool river air, and provide ample space for all sorts of family and other social gatherings. Many a child, including myself, played on or beneath that porch. Grandma Graves even allowed us to skate on it. The house originally had no indoor plumbing.

Bluffton in those days was isolated and remote, but family life was very rich and full. Families were often large and the eight Graves children had cousins, aunts and uncles everywhere. Many of the interrelated adults and children felt deep loyalty, responsibility and gratitude towards their extended families and tried their best to love and care for one another.

The book *Bluffton Boy* by Andrew Peeples (my father's first cousin) presents an excellent account of Bluffton's early 20<sup>th</sup> century life. Several of the stories included in that book are about the Graves, Peeples and Guilford families. One is titled "Grandpa Guilford's Horseless Buggy." His mother, Maud Guilford Peeples, and my grandmother, Cora Jane Guilford Graves, were sisters. The Peeples House was just one block down Calhoun Street but, sadly, no longer exists. Andrew Peeples became a well known writer. Most of his stories can now be viewed on [graveshouse.org](http://graveshouse.org). Click on the **Bluffton Boy** tab.

George Guilford was mayor for twelve terms dying in his twelfth term in 1916. He was working on his memoirs in the last years of his life, but they have never been found. (We were told that they were lost in a house fire.) His wife, my great grandmother Jane Guilford, was known as "Dr. Guilford" because of her healing skills. She practiced a form of holistic, naturopathic medicine and functioned as a midwife for years and years. She often treated locals without a fee and was widely regarded for her kindness and skill. She was known for driving herself all over the county in a horse and buggy at all hours of the day or night to help those in need. (See my article, **Remembering Doctor Jane Guilford**, under the *Articles* tab on [graveshouse.org](http://graveshouse.org).)

The history of the Graves side of the two families goes back many generations in the South Carolina Low Country. My great grandfather on the Graves side was Andrew Asbury Graves, born in 1851. He and his wife, Agnes Mae, had ten children, one of which was my grandfather, John Samuel Graves, Sr., the original owner of the Graves House. Beginning in 1780 the name John Samuel Graves was used for the next six generations. Most of John and Cora Jane Graves' eight children were midwived by my great grandmother, "Doctor" Jane Guilford, in the Graves House. All of the children were raised there.

John Samuel Graves, Sr. once owned and operated a general store on Calhoun St.; he owned a cotton gin; he did some banking and bought and sold real estate. He was mayor of Bluffton. He was also a longtime official with the South Carolina Board of Fisheries. J. Wilton Graves, the South Carolina State Representative for many years, was his first cousin.

My mother, Florence Rubert, married my father, John Samuel Graves, Jr., the oldest of the eight

Graves children, in 1939. She was the daughter of Harlem G. Rubert, R. T. Wilson, Jr.'s personal physician and private secretary. She spent her early years living at the Palmetto Bluff Plantation. My grandfather Rubert took some of the only existing photographs of the interior of the mansion before it burned.

My mother wrote in 2006, "The fire occurred in 1926 when I was ten years old. Now, at ninety, it seems like a hundred years ago, but I can still remember a lot of things vividly. I can remember my father having to go in after R. T. twice and carry him out. I remember my mother fixing him soft food for days afterward because his false teeth burned up in the fire. It was a windy March morning that fanned the fire and, in those days, there was no way to get help quickly from Bluffton or anywhere." The stock market crash of 1929 occurred just three years later. The Wilsons lost millions. My mother said that R. T., already in declining health, never recovered from those two catastrophic events. He died in late 1929 just a few months after the crash. (See [graveshouse.org](http://graveshouse.org) for some of my mother's poems about the Low Country. See [astarfell.com](http://astarfell.com) and [jsgraves.musicaneo.com](http://jsgraves.musicaneo.com) for more information about the songs I have written using my mother's poems as lyrics.)

The Wilson story has been included here to highlight the parallels of that time with our own, a time of huge income disparities. Unlike the Wilsons, the Graves family, and most middle class families in Bluffton at the time, went through many lean years, especially during the Great Depression that followed the 1929 crash. Sources of income were scarce, and many meals came from the river, hunting and the home garden. The Graves House, by its very existence, testifies to the endurance of the middle class even in the face of extreme hardship and deprivation. It is a tangible symbol of the way of life of the majority of Blufftonians in the early and middle 1900's.

John Samuel Graves, Jr., my father, owned and operated the Bluffton Seafood Co., now called the Bluffton Oyster Co., for over thirty years. He processed oysters, crabs and shrimp there. He was the single largest employer in Bluffton for many years. He also operated oyster factories at Trimbleston Plantation, and on Daufuskie and Jenkins Islands. I can still well remember how his sister, my aunt Cora Jane, would prepare feasts of these items. I especially remember her "muldown" oysters, fried oysters, oyster stew, crab cakes and deviled crab. Many oyster roasts took place at the Graves House or the Guilford House, which sits catty corner from the Graves House.

The Guilford House, also a contributing structure in Bluffton's Historic District, and the last residence of my great grandmother Guilford, became

my father's residence after her death in 1938. He lived there until his death in 1964. The two houses were forever linked. Family members called the Graves House "the big house" and the Guilford House "the little house."

My brothers and I called our grandfather Graves "Papa." He loved collies and I can still remember him sitting in his favorite rocker on the front porch of "the big house" reading a newspaper, smoking a cigar—often with his feet on the railing—with his beloved collie lying at his side. He used to say that all he needed for church was to sit on his much loved porch and take in the sounds and sights of nature, friends and relatives. Grandma Graves once expressed that she felt next to heaven sitting on her porch. My father's sister, my aunt Mary, said that the Graves House was a house full of love, and that grandma Graves was a consummate diplomat in her dealings with her eight children. (See the February, 2009 edition of *The Bluffton Breeze*, *Bluffton's Thorny Rose* by J. Mitchell Brown for an article about Mary Graves. That story is also viewable on the *Articles Tab* on [graveshouse.org](http://graveshouse.org).)

Music was very important to both the Graves and Guilford families. My father's brother, Charles, had a natural gift for improvising at the piano. My father's first cousin, Luke Peebles, another lifelong Blufftonian, was a classically trained pianist and composer whose compositions are presently being edited by myself. (His music will soon be published.) He was Andrew Peebles brother. A new book, written by Estella Saussy Nussbaum & Jeanne Saussy Wright, *A Gullah Psalm, The Musical Life & Work of Luke Peebles*, has just been released. Go to my website [astarfell.com](http://astarfell.com) for more information.

Great grandmother Guilford built and played her own mandolin, and most of the Guilfords loved to sing, dance and play instruments. Grandpa Guilford loved to present public and family readings and direct plays. He was also quite a Bible scholar.

The Graves children were encouraged to do well in school because a good education promised the best avenue of escape from the limited vocational opportunities Bluffton offered in those days. Three of the eight children attended college; two received advanced degrees. My father's brother, Eugene, became a principal in the Beaufort School System; my Aunt Mary became a professional physical therapist. She invented and patented an electric hydraulic device to place the heel joint in motion and stretch the heel cord.

Four of the eight Graves children served overseas in the United States Armed Services during WWII. One served in the Air Force, two in the Army, and one, Mary, in the Women's Army Corp. One of the

two brothers in the Army was a medic, the other a foot soldier in some of the worst combat zones in the African and European theaters. Both men were deeply sensitive individuals and returned badly damaged by their experiences from one of the most horrific wars in the history of this world. Later, their youngest brother, Fred, lost his life in combat in the Korean Conflict. Grandma Graves had a stroke and died within two weeks after hearing of his death in 1951. Perhaps the deepest meaning of the Graves House comes from remembering the lives of these persons and the contributions they made to Bluffton and their country.

The Graves House is, as long as it stands, a symbol of Bluffton's struggling and aspiring middle class during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It could have remained thus for another hundred years had sufficient forethought and care gone into making certain that it was preserved.

There is plenty of blame to go around on all sides about why the Graves House has met its recent fate. Is it now completely too late to save the Graves House? Probably. Only one real option remains. All persons who live in and around Bluffton who feel that the house should not be demolished should organize and make a last ditch, concerted effort to save it. How can this be done? The Bluffton United Methodist Church, who sought the demolition of the Graves House and now owns it, must be persuaded to have a change of heart. The church would need lots of moral and financial support.

If the house cannot ultimately be saved, the final meaning of the Graves House will be that a 104 year old contributing structure in Bluffton's Historic Preservation District can be condemned and flipped for the land beneath it—at the expense of the life and history of the structure itself—in a matter of minutes by a very few people. Each time this kind of action is permitted a piece of Bluffton's heart and soul will be destroyed forever.

Please visit [graveshouse.org](http://graveshouse.org) for more information and discussion about this lost opportunity to save some of Bluffton's most interesting history.