

## **Last Ride from Stonewall**

### **Written by: Gordon Bunn**

It must have been a miserable ride, that last ride from Stonewall Manor. The carriage was hers for the moment, but it would have to be returned. She only carried a few personal things, everything else was left behind; the mansion, furniture, mirrors, feather beds, and household servants. Everything... for it was all destined for the auction block... not to worry about right now. The carriage bounced under the big oaks and through the gate in the great stone wall. It wasn't long ago she had taken the left fork and buried her husband across Stoney Creek. But today she would go straight to what is thin air in our time because massive machines have moved the earth itself to carve US 64.

On it rolled through what we know as Swelden Heights and on the Nashville-Tarboro Road (now Hunter Hill), with Falls Road Baptist Church over her shoulder. She went on solid ground to get there, to the huge three story wooden house right on the road. Nowadays we have to pass over the bridge spanning the ugly gash in the land that bulldozers took out for US 301. The highway itself is where the farm was, the very land gone in modern times. The house had belonged to her son but it was hers now. The uncertainty of it all was overwhelming. How much money did she have on hand to attempt to buy at least part of her world back? Who would be at the sale and how much would they bid? What would become of her son and his children, the store, the turpentine distillery? Who would buy the great house? What about all the other relatives and friends she was so attached to? What about the slaves? She certainly did not want to see those families separated. She was the epicenter of all of it, and the burden was unbearable. Did she look back? If she did, she looked way back.

Her name was Sally Hines, and she was born in Old Sparta, Edgecombe County. Her future home, Nash County, was formed in the same year as the Revolutionary War, 1777 to be exact. Her father, Capt. Peter Hines, had served in that War with some distinction. He was a wealthy plantation owner, and he would have received additional land for serving in the war. Other than the fact that she was born with the proverbial silver spoon, not much is known of her younger years.

As a young woman, she married Benjamin Atkinson, a wealthy merchant who developed trade liaisons up and down river from his own small settlement of Bensboro (near present day Falkland in Pitt County). There were only a few roads in those days, so most of the freight and a lot of the people moved by rivers. Cotton, tobacco, naval stores (tar, pitch and turpentine) and other products moved by flat boat down the river to the coast and in turn over the Atlantic to Great Britain. On the Tar River, goods floated down as far as the Falls, where they had to be off-loaded, portaged around the Falls, and reloaded for the trip down river. The Falls of Tar River was one of the very few places for pedestrians or horses and carriages to cross the river. This area became quite a crossing point of road and river, and would eventually become the City of Rocky Mount.

The Battle's and the Bunn's owned a good deal of the land around the Falls. While the Battle family would engage heavily in the cotton manufacturing business, the Bunn family leaned more toward naval stores. When war broke out with Great Britain in 1812, a great deal of

turmoil was created in both industries. It was just before the war that young Bennett Bunn began to come into his own. He left Nash County and headed down river to Bensboro, and formed a business relationship with Benjamin Atkinson. Bunn and Atkinson began buying land together, as well as being in the store business. Atkinson made numerous trips to the coast, negotiating trade agreements farther down the line. Meanwhile, Bunn tended the store for Atkinson as well as his other interests. One of those interests was apparently our heroine, Sally Hines Atkinson. When the war ended in 1814, Benjamin Atkinson was 61 years old, Bennett was 26, and Sally was 36. Something was going on, but suffice to say it was their business and we will leave it there. Bennett's father passed away that same year, leaving him "all of my lands north of Stoney Creek". Stonewall Manor would later be built on this site.

Although still a single man, Bennett was starting a family of sorts. In 1815, the Nash County Court appointed him legal guardian of his nephew, Redmond Bunn (age 9) and of his little sister Sally as well. Benjamin Atkinson died February 2, 1816, opening the door for a Christmas wedding. Bennett and Sally were married December 22, 1816. Over the next two years, they purchased land in Nash, Edgecombe, and Pitt Counties. Their only son, William Bennett Bunn, was born December 30, 1818. The following August, Bennett's Uncle Redmun married his mother, Drucilla. Bennett and Sally began selling all their land in Pitt County to Ben Ashley Atkinson, her son by Benjamin Atkinson. It was 1826, and they were finally moving to Nash County. In addition to the wealth they had already accumulated, Bennett's uncle Redmun died in August, and he stood to inherit a great deal at the end of his mother's life.

When Bennett's mother Drucilla died on June 25, 1830, a great deal of assets converged into the possession of Bennett Bunn. His father had been a wealthy man, with large land holdings as well as owning a number of slaves. In addition, his Uncle Redmun had been wealthy. He had run a store at the Falls of Tar River for years and owned a great deal of land and slaves. They say money marries money, and that is certainly the case here. Sally came from a wealthy family and married wealth as well. And of course, they made money in their own right. Because his mother had married his uncle, Bennett now inherited wealth from both. Maybe it was time to think about building a house...

Bennett and Sally had big dreams, as well as the money, raw material and labor to carry them out. With the wealth of their combined families behind them, money was no object. Raw materials were readily available. Large granite blocks were used for the foundation of the house, a by-product of the recent construction of the great cotton mill across the river. Battle & Co. had access to large quantities of granite, which was quarried to build the foundation of the mill as well as the races and dam. There was plenty available for the foundation of the house as well as the stone wall to be constructed out in front of it. Virgin stands of long leaf pine were used to build the massive roof supports, framing and flooring. White oak, and lots of it, was used to froe the shingles and the slats as well as for the plaster walls and ceilings. And brick... a great deal of brick was used in the construction of the house.

Bennett owned his own brickyard very close to where Redmond would build Benvenue years later. There was no end to high quality Nash County clay, some of the best in the world for brick manufacturing, and he owned a lot of that too. Labor was no issue either, for there were a large number of slaves in his possession. Some were field hands and general laborers to dig

trenches, mix mortar and so forth but there were others as well. There were many high skilled craftsmen such as blacksmiths to work the iron, and brick masons to construct the massive walls, 22 inches of solid brick on the lower floor and 16 inches on the top floors. Still, it took a lot of money for the architectural details, draperies, furnishings and so on, but that was of little consequence.

Soon the great mansion was complete, and it was one of the finest homes in the South. When we look at the front of Stonewall Manor today, most of us think of the river as being to our left. Few of us are aware that it goes is behind the house as well, due to a curve in the river. When Bennett and Sally lived there, there would have been as much traffic on the river as on the road. Because of this, there was a great effort put forth to show the house toward the river. When travelers approached from the river, they would have looked up a long sweeping hill, more or less clear of trees. A serpentine brick walk led from the river to the porch. Toward the top (where Stonewall's back door neighbors are today) there were three levels of terraces. Some of this area was planted with vegetables and herbs, but there were also roses, forsythia, fragrant tea olive, camellias and daffodils... daffodils by the thousands... Anyone brave enough to walk in the woods behind the house today will still find daffodils and scattered bits of brick. The daffodils that we enjoy in our own time have been there since the beginning of Stonewall. In addition, there were scuppernongs to eat off the vine and to make wine. Orchards were also there also, some peach but mostly apple, to make pies and an endless supply of brandy. The less formal areas were abundant with blackberries. Some still remain in modern times, capable of making just as good a pie or cobbler as Bennett and Sally would have enjoyed. Along the brick walk way were several brick slave cabins, a true sign of Bennett's wealth. Of course, no slave lived very high on the hog in those days, but if you rated a brick cabin at Stonewall, you were at the top of your pay grade. This was a rarity on plantations.

They had been married for almost 15 years and now they were settling into their new home. It was a busy house. Young Redmun lived with them, and he was now 24 years old. William Bennett was 12 and would spend his teenage years in the great mansion as well. Also present was a middle aged woman who was more than likely a close relative. For the ladies, dinners, teas and luncheons of various kinds were common. Among the men folk, there was horse racing, cock-fighting, and politics, all spiced with apple brandy and fine cigars. Several household servants kept the place going day and night. Eight fireplaces on the main two floors and one in the basement created a lot of work (and strong legs for those carrying the fire logs upstairs). Chamber pots and ash buckets were in constant need of being emptied, and bed linens had to be hauled up and down the stairs daily. All food was prepared in the smoky kitchen out back and all leftovers went the other way, to be shared with the servants, then remainders to the hogs. Haul it all in, haul it all out. For that regard, the house functioned much the same way as in our time now.

Bennett and Sally were the social elite, and life was grand. Bennett continued to buy land for various reasons. Some of it he sold to Redmond, his nephew, because this young man had dreams of his own. William Bennett was growing up as well. He married Sarah E.A. Sims in 1837. The following year Bennett and Sally had their first grandchild, who of course was named Sally. Their second, Harriet E., followed a year later.

Railroads were the future at that time and plans were hatched for a railroad from Wilmington to Raleigh. The days of the flat boat were coming to a close. The leaders of this little village at the Falls of Tar River saw it differently, however, and managed to have the route of the railroad changed in order that it might connect to the industrial North. The best way for that to happen of course was to build the rails through their backyard. Bennett was very influential in achieving this goal. While he already owned huge tracts of land in Nash County, he now endeavored to buy Little Falls Plantation in Edgecombe County, specifically for railroad right of way. Buy it he did, and the railroad came. On Christmas Eve of 1839, new sounds came through the woods to the Falls of Tar River. Rocky Mount has been a railroad town ever since.

February 1841 brought their first grandson, William Bennett Jr. Their joy turned to grief in September, however, when they lost both granddaughters within 3 days of each other. Another birth came soon though, in the name of Sally Eliza, and she was born in the great Manor house. The child would survive and become the wife of Capt. John Thorpe, of Civil War fame. But Sally's black dress went back on when little William Bennett Jr. died just shy of 3 years old. Keep'em barefoot and pregnant they say, and William Bennett did just that. A fifth grandchild, Ann William, was born in 1845. Benvenue had just been built the year before, and these little girls would have some cousins to play with. A little brother came along in 1847 as well, named Bennett Boyd, and then a sister named Lucy Swepson in 1849. All in all, they were living the high life. This was the old aristocratic South, mint juleps and magnolias just like our movies portray...

Life for Sally Hines Atkinson Bunn was as good as it could be in those days. She lived in one of the finest homes available, had a good family, servants to tend to her needs, plenty of sophisticated wealthy friends and a husband who was doing very well indeed. England still had the largest navy in the world, and it required a tremendous amount of pine for ship's masts and pitch and tar for the decks. There were a lot of roof tops in London and beyond which required their products to keep the rain out. Turpentine had a multitude of uses, so the distillery was kept busy. Redmond was running the Great Falls Store and that was doing well also. Little Sally Hines from Old Sparta had done very well for herself.

There was, however, a flaw in the system when it came to the way business was conducted in those days. There were no banks. Financial transactions were between individuals, with other individuals providing collateral. For example, if a young man wanted to buy a farm from Mr. Smith, the young man might ask Mr. Battle to "stand security" for him in the courthouse. Mr. Smith would agree to this, because Mr. Battle was good for the debt. Mr. Battle would agree to do so because if the young man failed, he would simply buy the land himself. It was a time when a man's word was his bond. As long as Mr. Battle was around, no problem existed.

So in effect, the pillars of the community provided the financing for those who needed it. Bennett Bunn was one of those pillars of the community and found himself in the courthouse on numerous occasions "standing security" for this, that and the other. There were loans between land sellers and land buyers. There were bonds to build schools, improve roads, bridges and the like. And of course there was a railroad to be financed...

The problems began when Bennett became ill and was confined to his bed at the Manor. He had contracted cholera, a deadly disease at the time. There had been epidemics worldwide in the past and it showed no mercy. He was dead in short order. It was May 13, 1849 and Sally's world had just collapsed. She was not alone. Since he did not have a will, not only her family but the little village itself plunged into chaos. For when Bennett went, so did the collateral. Without a will, there was no one to accept the responsibility of "standing security". Loans and bonds were called due and could not be paid. Bennett, Redmond and William Bennett had business ventures that were hopelessly entangled with each other. Who owned what, and who owed who how much? Redmond and William Bennett found themselves fending off creditors involving deals they probably weren't even aware of. There was a frantic attempt to raise cash. B.F. Knight bought out part interest in the store, which Redmond had operated for years. William Bennett hocked his crops, library, fiddles and piano. Pomeroy Clark scrambled to save his carriage business.

Redmond was pulling rabbits out of hats to save Benvenue. He succeeded, but William Bennett was not so fortunate. His house and farm would go under the auctioneer's gavel in July. With a house full of children and no doubt more on the way, he had no choice but to turn to Sally. She was not exactly in a position to help, because she was in shock like everyone else, even more so; it was her husband in the grave. At ½ past 2 o'clock on July 23, 1849, William Bennett's house and about 70 acres of land were auctioned to the highest bidder. That bid was \$750.00 cash and the buyer was Sally Hines Atkinson Bunn. At the age of 72, she would be moving for the last time in her life.

As she settled into her new home, she tried to adjust to the grandchildren running and jumping around. That might take some getting used to. She tried not to think about the Manor, but that was not easily done. She had lived there almost twenty years, and it had been a magnificent home. But it was meant to have people in it. With the boys grown and gone, and Bennett in the grave, it was just too much house for one person. And those steps... They were wishbone steps and beautiful to look at, but they were very steep and she was having more and more difficulty negotiating them. Perhaps this was best for her after all. The debts continued to mount and she soon realized what she must do.

Sally asked J.J. Phillips to petition the Nash County Court to sell the estate – all of it. Ads were placed in the Tarboro and Raleigh newspapers, as well as those in Wilmington, Richmond and New Orleans. One thousand acres of land in Nash County, thirteen hundred in Edgecombe County. The estate itself had 140 slaves. Aside from these holdings, there were also 107 shares of stock in the Wilmington & Raleigh Railroad. Redmond was having a sale of his own at Benvenue. On October 8, 1849, he sold at public auction some land, his crops, livestock, carriages, 50 slaves and 50 shares of stock in the Railroad. But Benvenue would be saved...

Sally knew she had to go back and she was not looking forward to it. Her petticoats and such must be removed from the house and that dreaded sale. It would take everything in her to return for that. She simply must do it though she would be forced to bid on the things she cherished. In addition, she would have to endure all of those strangers stomping through her house gawking at how the other half lived, while poking and prodding at the things that she had

held so dear for so many years. Perish the thought. What of Billy, Fanny and Mourning? And Moriah with her two children, Mary Jane and Alice... the Manor house, stable and gardens were all they had ever known. They prepared her meals, tended her flowers, tightened her corsets, and drove her around. Most importantly, they looked after her grandbabies. They were now at the mercy of the court, and granting their freedom was not one of her options. The very real possibility existed that they could be bought and shipped off to cotton fields in Mississippi and Louisiana. Or perhaps separated... Perish that thought too. They were terrified and so was she. Black or not, they were part of the family, they were her people; it could not be allowed to happen.

The night of November 4, 1849, was one of the longest of her life. No one sleeps with that much burden to bear. She must have been exhausted before she even made that dreaded trip back to the Manor. Many times, however, the event itself is never as bad as the anticipation of it. So it was the next morning.

It was the worst of Monday's, that November 5, 1849. Somehow she managed to drag herself back to the Manor. She knew they were whispering about her when she arrived; some even pointed at her. Almost all of her worldly possessions were lined up in rows around the yard for all to inspect and in fact take home if they had the money to do it. Sheriff A.B. Baines said a few words about the legal issues, followed by the auctioneer J.C. Moore, explaining his rules and how the sale would be conducted. Then it began. Maybe it was respect for the widow, maybe folks were holding their money back, or maybe they had cold feet and just started slow. Whatever the reason, the crowd held their bids back and Sally took full advantage. Bureau and looking glass (mirror), \$.50. Trunk and contents, \$.10. Rocking chair, \$.20. The auctioneer's chant rolled on and so did Sally. If she bid, they did not. Before long she had regained possession of the better part of her furniture and household goods, most bought for less than \$.50. Bidding on a human being was another matter.

Tension filled the air when Billy, Fanny and Mourning came up for bid. Sally bid but her heart was racing. It was more than the auctioneer's chant causing her heart to race. There was a lot on the line. If she failed, she may never see them again. She would have to explain that to her grandchildren, and answer to her own conscience as well. It was most unpleasant, but she stayed tough. Billy, Fanny and Mourning were safe; they would remain hers. There was much more interest in Moriah and the two girls however. Sally was challenged, but she gave no ground. The price was going up. The girls were trembling and so was Moriah. They really did not understand any of it, except that Miz Sally was their only hope. It was a nasty business, but for the sake of all she had to see it through. She would not be denied and in the end she was successful. If she had paid too much, so be it. That was no one's business but hers...

She pulled from the depths of her soul and bid one more time. Her bid on the two milk cows was \$5.00, and nobody challenged her this time. Sweet milk for the babies, but if she survived this day, she would want something stronger. It was over... at least as far as she was concerned. Go to a sale, buy what you want, and get out. She had done very well indeed. She lingered for a while and then bought 3 barrels of tar for \$.10. Imagine Sally Hines buying a barrel of tar. The sale would go on all week, but Sally was done. Her help would load

everything, haul it home, and be glad to do it. They had lost their brick house, too, but by the grace of God and the iron will of Miz Sally, they had been spared the worst.

At the beginning of this story, Sally was leaving her home. This time she was just leaving a big house empty of everything but strangers. This truly would be her last ride from Stonewall. There would be no looking back this time. The life she lived in that house was her life no more.

On Tuesday, the sale moved to her new house where most of the farm equipment and live stock were sold, but Sally didn't have anything to do with it. She went down to Little Falls on Wednesday and bought a sorrel mare for \$6.00, and then on Thursday she bought a slave named Frank. Nobody would bid on him, so she bought him for \$.10 and for reasons that were hers alone to know.

As the dust settled, Sally and her entourage commenced putting their lives back together at the new homestead as best they could. The babies kept coming... Mary Ballard in 1851, Henry Sims in 1853 (my great grandfather) and Peter Hines in 1855. Peter was born in June and Anne William, then ten years old, died in October. The family graveyard had been lost in the auction back in '49, so she buried her in the garden in the back yard. William Bennett passed away the day after Christmas 1858, and was buried next to her. He was only forty years old. Sally's black dress was well worn, having buried a husband, four grandchildren and a son in less than ten years. She would be the next to go, passing on June 30, 1860, at the age of 83. She could not be buried with Bennett, as they had lost the land, so she lies with Anne William and William Bennett. She struck an early blow for women's liberation in her will and guaranteed that the business affairs of men would not cause that family to lose the roof over their heads again. She left her daughter-in-law Sarah lifetime rights to the house and farm after which it would pass to her three granddaughters equally. The grandsons were in effect cut out. She did not live long enough to see the War Between the States, and all of her men were either dead or too young to go. Sally Eliza's beau, young John Thorpe, went, but he returned to her. All three of the Benvenue boys went off to war. Redmond lost two sons in that war. Elias was killed at Hanover and William Henry fell at Petersburg. Benjamin Hickman was wounded at Petersburg but he made it home. It was probably just as well that Sally went to her maker in 1860. She was a great lady and she did not deserve to suffer through the misery that was forthcoming.

I sit out there a lot these days, either on the front steps or on the wall, just thinking. Sometimes in my imagination I can see them... ol'e Billy driving the sorrel mare along, his white shirt so bright against Mr. Bennett's old coat and top hat and his own wrinkled face, all of which are black as tar. In the back sits Miz Sally, her snow white hair in sharp contrast to the black of the handkerchief polished carriage and her widow's attire. Delicate as a rose, but tough as nails underneath. I can see them... gliding over the tractor-trailers, for in that dimension it does not matter if the land is under you or not.