

# *Father-Loss in Franklin Parish*

**An imagined Hollywood film proposal  
based on the male ancestry of my maternal grandfather  
Robert Paul Bonner**

## **Synopsis**

Robert Paul Bonner was born in 1880, descendent of a line of ambitious Bonner fathers. For three generations before him, fathers died in their mid-40s, leaving young sons. Two assumed responsibilities, with their mothers, for their younger siblings as best they could. Economic recessions and changing Southern cotton farming reduced the property and fortunes left by his forebears. This legacy would haunt my grandfather, and his wife Mary Florence Stafford, for the rest of their lives.

## **Characters**

**Allen Wesley Bonner Sr.  
John's Great-Great-Great Grandfather  
(1781-1826)**

Allen Wesley Bonner, Sr., was born in 1781 in Dove Creek, Georgia. He was descended from wealthy North Carolina officers of the Revolutionary War, who had obtained land in Georgia for their war service. He was a successful land speculator and plantation owner with many enslaved persons. He married Lucy Autrey. He died in 1826, at age 45, leaving a grown daughter Mahala and his nine-year-old son Allen Wesley Bonner, Jr.

**Allen Wesley Bonner Jr.  
John's Great-Great Grandfather  
(1818-1863)**

Allen Wesley Bonner, Jr. was born in 1818 in Dove Creek, Georgia, of parents Allen Wesley Bonner, Sr. and Lucy Autry. After the death of his father, young Allen (age 9) was then given in guardianship to his adult sister Mahala and her husband, William Clark. They then traveled with their family to Claiborne Parish, Louisiana, where they bought land for growing cotton. Allen Wesley Jr. spent his teenage years attending local schools. For six months in 1839, Allen Wesley served as appointed postmaster of Claiborne Parish.

Allen Wesley left Louisiana for Boston in 1839, graduating from Harvard Law School in 1841. He then went to France to study the Napoleonic Code (the legal system of Louisiana) at the University of Paris.

Returning to Louisiana, he married Sally Reynolds, daughter of wealthy landowners in Claiborne Parish. They purchased land in Fort Necessity, Louisiana, where he established a law practice and a cotton plantation. He was a major advisor in establishing the structure of the Franklin Parish government. The first parish law court was convened in his home. He reputedly had the largest private library in Louisiana, with many books in French.

The parish elected him as their Representative in the Louisiana Legislature. In 1861, he co-drafted the state's Ordinance of Secession. He also was a drafter of the state Confederate Constitution, incorporating the first guarantee of public education in the South.

In 1861, he joined the Confederate Army as a Captain. He died during the Battle of Vicksburg in 1863 **at age 44.**

## **Wesley MacDonald Bonner Great-Grandfather (1847-1891)**

Wesley McDonald Bonner was born in 1847 to his father Allen Wesley Bonner and to Sally Reynolds Bonner. His parents owned a cotton plantation with enslaved persons in Fort Necessity, Louisiana. In 1861, his father died in the Battle of Vicksburg, when Wesley McDonald was 14 years old and the eldest living son. Later in the Civil War, Union troops took all the family's mules and cattle, leaving nothing to till the soil. Although she managed to retain ownership of their land, Allen Bonner's widow taught in a private school at her home to help maintain the family. In adulthood, Wesley McDonald also supplemented the family income by teaching at a private school in a cabin near the old Boeuf Prairie Methodist Church, located on Bonner property. In 1870, Wesley McDonald married Zelia Elizabeth Buie and they had one son, Allen, in 1871. Wesley McDonald then married Caroline Amanda "Lena" Frazier in 1878. Son Allen Bonner dies in 1881 age 10, drowned during an epileptic seizure while hunting. Wesley McDonald and Lena have eight children. In 1889 Wesley McDonald decides to begin a medical career and leaves his family for New Orleans to enter Tulane Medical School. After two years of medical study, he dies in 1891 **at age 44.**

# STORYLINE

**ACT I:** Allen Wesley Bonner Sr., born 1781, is a wealthy plantation owner and land speculator in Dove Creek, Georgia. He marries Lucy Autry and they have five children. He dies in 1827 age 46, leaving son Allen Wesley Bonner Jr., age 9.

**ACT II:** Allen Wesley Bonner Jr., born 1818, graduates from Harvard Law School in 1840 and then studies law at the University of Paris, France. In Louisiana, he establishes a law practice and a cotton plantation in Fort Necessity, Franklin Parish. He is elected a Representative in the Louisiana Legislature. Despite his personal disapproval of secession from the United States, in 1861 he represents the wishes of his constituents and helps draft the state's Ordinance of Secession. He also is a drafter of the state Confederate Constitution, personally inserting the establishment of free public education (the first such language in any southern state). And much to the consternation of local neighbors, he announces he is freeing his enslaved workers. However, as a proponent of States Rights, in 1861 he decides to join the Confederate Army, becoming a Captain. He dies during the Battle of Vicksburg in 1863 age 44, leaving his eldest son, Wesley McDonald Bonner, aged 16.

**ACT III:** Wesley McDonald Bonner, born 1847, marries Carolina Amanda Frazier in 1878 and they have eight children in Fort Necessity, Louisiana. He manages a cotton farm with his widowed mother and also teaches in his private school located on Bonner property next to the Boeuf Prairie Methodist Church. In 1889, at age 42 Wesley McDonald decides to begin a medical career and leaves his family for New Orleans to enter Tulane Medical School. Correspondence between him and his wife reveals her great anxiety over his absence. He is particularly concerned for the future of his young son Robert Paul Bonner. In February 1891 he writes his wife: "How many cows does Rob milk and how does he like milking? I have my hopes that he will better himself, and that I will live long enough to see that he is able to make something more of himself and, in order to do that, I will have to get him out of Franklin Parish before he can have any ambition." In November of that year, Wesley McDonald Bonner dies at age 44, leaving his eldest son Robert Paul, aged 11, as eldest child, to help raise the seven younger children.

**ACT IV:** Robert Paul Bonner, age 32, marries Mary Florence Stafford (age 25) in 1912. They live the rest of their lives on his family cotton farm in Fort Necessity, Louisiana, struggling financially year-to-year with the vagaries of agricultural seasons, economic recessions, and the Great Depression. They have four children [Amy Lena ("Sissy"), Robert Stafford ("Buddy"), Allen Wesley ("Wes"), and Mary Florence ("Baby"), my mother] and twelve grandchildren. He dies in 1952 at age 72 from a stroke while out in his cotton field. She dies in 1978 at aged 91.

