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## Notes and Documents

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### **Building Context around Biographical Facts: A Process Illustrated by the Backcountry Birth of George F. Ring**

By John Philip Colletta, Ph.D.

George F. Ring, my great-grandfather, was born near Rolling Fork, Issaquena County, Mississippi, on 15 January 1867.<sup>1</sup>

So?

Every family history is full of biographical facts—births, marriages, and deaths; immigrations and migrations; military service and more. Much more than amorphous data floating in a documentary limbo, these facts represent real events that occurred in a real, physical place at a real moment in time. The challenge facing the family historian is to try to personalize the biographical facts of each individual ancestor. How is the birth of George F. Ring *different* from all the other births in my family tree? What does it *mean* to be born near Rolling Fork, Mississippi, in 1867? What was the neighborhood like? Was it urban? Rural? Crowded? Noisy? Quiet? Hilly? Swampy? Who were the neighbors? Were they professionals? Craftsmen? Laborers? Foreign-born or American native? How would the dwelling in which this newborn drew his first breath have looked? Was it of brick? Frame? Logs? Sod? Would it have been a second-story flat over the father's business? A multiple-family tenement—or a multi-columned mansion?

Answering these questions made it possible for me to “individualize” the birth of this great-grandfather; it also required me to consult a wide variety of sources. In so doing, a methodology took shape for building context around biographical facts. This article retraces my steps and then deduces from those what a workable paradigm might be.

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©John Philip Colletta; 1245 Walter Street SE; Washington, DC 20003. Dr. Colletta, a professional lecturer, researcher, and writer, is the author of two now-classic works, *They Came in Ships* and *Finding Italian Roots*. He assisted with the development of the exhibit “The Peopling of America: 400 Years of Immigration History” at Ellis Island, lectures regularly on genealogy at the National Archives and elsewhere, and was a featured expert on various segments of the two PBS series entitled *Ancestors*. His latest book, *Only a Few Bones: A True Account of the Rolling Fork Tragedy and Its Aftermath*, not only examines the mysterious demise of George F. Ring's father but also demonstrates how to build context—economic, historical, legal, political, religious, social, and otherwise—around a full panoply of genealogical facts.

1. Documentation will be presented in the course of this article.

## THE EXERCISE

*The Basic Facts*

My initial document was the 1870 U.S. census of "the Bayou State." George F. Ring, who is said to be four years old and born in Mississippi, appears in the household of Joseph (born in France) and Barbara (born in New York), with two other male children (the elder born in New York, the younger in Mississippi). All resided in an abode of their own in Schola Precinct of Issaquena County.<sup>2</sup> Their community was comprised of a handful of well-to-do "planters," all white, and numerous "farmers" and "laborers," both white and black. The ratio of blacks to whites in the county was about eight to one; however, in the immediate neighborhood, Rolling Fork, it was fifty to one.<sup>3</sup>

*Documenting the Birth*

From research on the family before its removal from New York, I knew that George's parents had three earlier children (two died as infants). All had been baptized into the Roman Catholic faith—if not on the day of their birth, then a day or so later.<sup>4</sup> State and county histories indicate that the closest Roman Catholic church to Issaquena County was St. Paul's in Vicksburg, forty miles distant as the crow flies and two-and-a-half days' journey by steamer.<sup>5</sup> That is where I found the record of George's christening, showing that he was born on 15 January 1867 and was baptized—at the age of three and one-half months—on 30 April 1867.<sup>6</sup> Granted, the trip downriver would have been strenuous for a newborn. Nevertheless, these parents had waited an uncharacteristically long time to ensure the salvation of their latest offspring's soul. I suspected there was some reason for the delay other than the voyage itself.

*Defining the Community*

Those same state and local histories also explain the distinctive racial composition of George's environs. Issaquena County lies in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, a vast, fertile, bottomland of cotton plantations worked before the Civil War by thousands of slaves. After the war, many freedmen remained on the plantations as sharecroppers and wage hands. These the census taker designated

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2. 1870 U.S. census, Issaquena County, Mississippi, Schola Precinct, p. 285, dwelling 315, family 315; microfilm publication M593 (Washington: National Archives, n.d.), roll 731.

3. Tabulation by the author based on 1870 census, corroborated by the 22 June 1876 testimony of the Rings' neighbor and attorney, W. D. Brown, in *Report of the Select Committee to Inquire into the Mississippi Election of 1875, with the Testimony and Documentary Evidence*, 2 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1876), 1: 702.

4. See John Philip Colletta, *Only a Few Bones: A True Account of the Rolling Fork Tragedy and Its Aftermath* (Washington: Direct Descent, 2000), 47–75.

5. For historical background on the region, particularly see John C. Willis, *Forgotten Time: The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta after the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000); Dunbar Rowland, *History of Mississippi, the Heart of the South*, 4 vols. (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1925), especially vol. 2, chaps. 54–58; and *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Mississippi*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Goodspeed Publishing Co., 1891), vol. 1, chap. 10.

6. Baptismal Register 1: 194, St. Paul's Roman Catholic Church, Vicksburg.

laborer. By 1870, however, Issaquena County also had a considerable number of tenant farmers, renting the land they worked, and a few hearty yeomen who actually owned their modest freeholds. These the enumerator labeled *farmer*. An account of finances, handwritten in 1874 and passed down in the Ring family from generation to generation, shows that George's father did indeed plant and harvest cotton.<sup>7</sup> But on that August day when the census marshal came by with his broad schedules and his pens and his ink, and called Ring a "white farmer," Joseph possessed no real estate.

### *Locating the Parental Residence*

How does a researcher "situate" a backcountry cabin whose inhabitants were renters, not owners? First, I took the Issaquena County land plats of 1873, which are available on microfiche at the Library of Congress,<sup>8</sup> made prints, and taped them together. This provided me with a map showing the major landowners. Then, using the 1870 census, I followed the enumerator on my homemade map as he progressed from planter to planter in Schola Precinct. (The census records a "planter" followed by several pages of "farmers" and "laborers," then another "planter," followed by pages of "farmers" and "laborers," then another "planter," and so on.) By drawing a line from planter to planter, one by one as the enumerator came to their places, I could identify areas between the planters where the intervening farmers, tenants, and sharecroppers lived. Thus, I pinpointed with some accuracy the physical place where George F. Ring resided in 1870. But was he born there?

The landless have a tendency to move—a point suggesting I should locate records created closer to George's birth. The most productive source was the Mississippi state census of 1866, for which Issaquena County was enumerated in November—just eight weeks prior to the crucial date. There, amid the same families who surround them in the 1870 federal census, appear the parents and older brother of George.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the only two sources known for the birthplace of George's younger brother, John M. Ring (born June 17, 1869), identify it as "Rolling Fork, Miss."<sup>10</sup> All in all, the evidence suggests that the

7. "Mr. Joseph Ring, In a/c with Geo. F. Ring," 18 February 1874, a statement of the finances of George's father, prepared posthumously by the uncle for whom young George was named. This list of expenditures and credits, 15 October 1868–25 July 1873, was photocopied in 1985 for the author by Joseph Ring's grandson, Louis Caffall Ring, now deceased. Current disposition of the original is unknown.

8. These are identified in *Land Ownership Maps: A Checklist of Nineteenth Century United States County Maps in the Library of Congress* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1967). Specifically see p. 21 (microfiche 388), for Issaquena County, Mississippi, 1873, by Jas. M. Searles and David Stratton; published by High Lewis, New Orleans, at a scale of 1:65,000; size: 34½" x 39".

9. 1866 Mississippi state census, Issaquena County (unpaginated), microfilm 547, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson.

10. John M. Ring (Widow Mary Emma Ring), Philippine Insurrection pension file, certificate 861,644, (corporal, Co. D, Sixth U.S. Infantry); Record Group 15, Veterans' Administration, National Archives, states, "birthday: June 17th, 1869; birthplace: Rolling Fork Miss." John M. Ring Death Certificate 41588 (1906), New York State Department of Health—Bureau of Vital Statistics, Albany, states: "Age: 37 years, 3 months, 14 days; birthplace: Roling [sic] Fork Miss."

Rings did not move between the 1867 birth of George and the 1870 visit from the federal census taker.

State and county histories corroborate what this mapping exercise reveals: Delta folk lived along waterways. Specifically in Issaquena County, the major thoroughfare was a very long and navigable artery named Deer Creek.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, an 1871 application made by George's father to purchase a life insurance policy lists his residence as "Deer Creek, Miss."<sup>12</sup> Now, by superimposing the enumerator's route on the land plats, I know approximately *where* on that long, snaking stream the Ring family resided: about four miles down from the hamlet of Rolling Fork.

### *Visualizing the House*

Photographs of the region, taken by the Farm Security Administration during the 1930s, depict the countryside and the hoary dwellings of its people.<sup>13</sup> A far-flung scattering of small cypress cabins pokes out of expansive cotton fields. These, in turn, sprawl from the creek's edge all the way back to the wavy wall of cottonwoods, cypress, and willows that tower over the sloughs and bayous. Most of these cabins were home to families of poor freedmen. A few housed entrepreneurial whites who had come into the Delta, post Civil-war, from other states and countries. Because every inch of deep, black loam was valuable, cotton stalks would have pushed up as near to the Ring house as the minimum space it takes for a man to turn his mule at the end of a plowed row.

But what did the Ring house *look* like? Local histories, community lore, and a few isolated, abandoned, and collapsing cabins from the late-nineteenth century that still dot the cotton fields, all define the traditional style of the Delta cabin.<sup>14</sup> It was built of cypress, available in abundance; its foundation, basically square, rested on blocks. Its four walls were vertical planking, and its pitched roof was weathered shingles. The two gabled sides were shorter than the front and back, because an open gallery—devoid of any railing—fit under the front's sloping roof.<sup>15</sup> A post at each end of the gallery supported the roof, a window punctuated each wall, and one doorway led inside front and back. Sometimes the interior was divided into two or three rooms by vertical plank partitions, papered with the pages of newspapers if the family had any. A chimney served for both cooking and heating. Few such cabins were whitewashed.

11. See the works cited in n. 5 above, as well as W. D. Brown's testimony, cited in n. 3.

12. Policy 29541, 21 July 1871, Germania Life Insurance Company, in possession of the successor company, The Guardian Life Insurance Company of America, New York, New York; photocopied by that firm for the author in 1995.

13. Taken during the 1930s, these are housed in the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress, where they are arranged by geographic area and thereunder by subject categories (cotton industry, housing, recreation, etc.).

14. Author's conversations (1988–99) with two local historians, Alice Wade and Katherine Branton, sisters born and raised in Rolling Fork, who have spent their entire adult lives on cotton plantations in the neighborhood; also author's on-site inspection during research trips through the Delta, 1986–99.

15. The term *gallery* seems to have been preferred in the nineteenth-century Delta to *porch* or *veranda*. See, for example, the lengthy and detailed testimony of George F. Ring (Joseph's brother) 11 March 1873, in *George F. Ring v. Franklin Fire Insurance Co.*, circuit court case 2573, Circuit Clerk's Office, Vicksburg.

Fig. 1  
Mississippi Delta Cabin, ca. 1930s



Courtesy of the Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress

This is what it meant to be born into a landless family near Rolling Fork, Mississippi, in 1867! But is it possible to say still more about this *particular* birth of 15 January?

### *Weathering the Experience*

The rhythm of toil and leisure in the Delta, season to season—then, as now—has been dictated by the annual growing cycle of cotton. By the month of January, even the last of picking and ginning would be done. Denuded cotton stalks would rustle and click in the chill winds sweeping across the fields. And those skeletal remnants of the prior year's crop would not be plowed under until February. All around were dense, deciduous forests—stark and bone-chilling cold, whistling with the breeze on most winter days.<sup>16</sup> So it was a lazy month when George F. Ring was born. Joseph might have been off doing some leisurely hunting when Barbara's labor pains struck. Or perhaps he whittled out on the gallery to calm his concerns, during the long hours of her delivery, given that the weather on that particular day was atypically mild and pleasant.<sup>17</sup>

16. See works cited in n. 5 above. Also author's conversations with Wade and Branton.

17. These were common pastimes for males in that society. Later, by the winter of 1868–69, after the Ring & Co. store had been constructed at Rolling Fork Landing, the local farmers would while away the lazy winter weeks sitting around the potbellied stove. Photographs of George F. Ring as an adult (in author's possession) show him smoking a corncob pipe; likely his father did the same. Joseph Ring was known to own a pocket knife; see "To the Editor of the Times," *Vicksburg Daily Times*, 19 March 1873, p. 3. For the country store as the neighborhood gathering spot in farm communities, see Thomas D. Clark, *Pills, Petticoats & Plows: The Southern Country Store* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1944). As for the weather, the *Vicksburg Daily Herald*, on 16 January 1867, p. 3, described the previous day as "mild and pleasant."

However, March 1867 brought disaster: rain, rain, rain. Creeks rose and flowed under the cabins, which stood on their blocks like frogs perched in a pond. Harrowing the fields, to turn the cotton stubble under the soil, was nigh onto impossible in that heavy mud the Deltans called *black gum*. Then the waters did not recede by mid-April, as they usually did, to allow for sowing; and little of the arable land could be planted.<sup>18</sup> So the infant George F. Ring would have been confined with his mother and brothers to the tight dimensions of their stark shanty by the incessant rain and lingering overflow.

Here is the reason why his parents waited so dangerously long, in that land of swamps and pestilences, to take him downriver to Vicksburg for baptizing.

### THE METHODOLOGY

Whether the biographical fact is a birth, such as this example, or a marriage, or a death, or some other life event—or whether it is an immigration from overseas or a migration from Pennsylvania to Nebraska to Idaho—the family historian can often *personalize* it to appreciate the ancestor as a real person living in a real and physical place at a real moment in time. The method is deceptively simple:

1. gather the ancestor's biographical facts;
2. inspect thoughtfully the source for each fact, one fact and source at a time (e.g., in the case of George's birth, the 1870 census);
3. accumulate other sources in any way relating to, or bearing on, the event (e.g., baptismal record, land plats, 1866 census, insurance policy, financial account);
4. examine each of these in light of local history—cultural, economic, geographic, political, and social (e.g., state and county histories, oral interviews, historic photographs, scholarly monographs on relevant topics);
5. form a hypothesis as to how this real-life event would have transpired;
6. test the hypothesis against the contents of all the sources collected; and
7. conclude, to the best extent possible, what the past likely was.

This methodology is *deceptively* simple because the process is often not as linear as *one, two, three*—and because our efforts to understand the informational content of records created in a place and time very distant and very different from our own are fraught with snares. Nevertheless, only by executing an exercise such as this can we turn statistical facts about an ancestor into experiences that faithfully personalize and humanize the name to which we attach those facts.

Regarding the birth of my great-grandfather, George F. Ring, this process allowed me to take one set of typically dry, dull facts and poignantly answer the question: So?

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18. For an account of the disastrous cotton crops of 1866 and 1867 in Mississippi, see Michael Wayne, *The Reshaping of Plantation Society: The Natchez District, 1860–1880* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 63–66.