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# Bacon and \_\_\_\_\_ Undertakers

Charlie Ewing

## Foreword

86 St. Francis Street is a location in St. Augustine where the original building described here still stands today. In archival records, this address was home to at least one black funeral home from the 1930s to the 1950s. I found at this address, in chronologically distinct advertisements, the business names, “Baker and Bacon Undertakers,” and “Bacon and Thomas Funeral Home.” I immediately thought it was likely that the name, “Bacon,” referred to the same man. So, what happened to Baker? Who was Thomas? Why did this change happen, and how? I considered a few scenarios until I found one that was compelling, and chose a narrative technique that allowed me to characterize the men involved. The following is a fictional narrative about a potential event that may have happened to three very real people in our local history.

Thomas is alone in the prep room, carefully dabbing pigment onto the lips. Dabbing, *not* swiping; something he learned very quickly his first time working with a stiff. Too much pressure, or any drag, and he would ruin the set features he’d spent the morning agonizing over. And if Mister Baker couldn’t fix it, well then, it’d just have to be a closed casket for Missus Bennett. He jumps just a little as his mentor enters, disturbing the stagnant silence, but having pulled the brush away moments before, his work was not disrupted.

“Mister Thomas, how’s she doin’?”

"Very good sir. Her veins a little flat; gave me some trouble – nothing I couldn't handle." Bacon steps closer to inspect, sidestepping some spilled phenol, mindful of his best shoes, and gives Thomas a brief look. Thomas quickly moves to grab the mop reserved for hazards.

"An’ how did you handle it?" He's inspecting a small suture line in the neck, his entire face crinkling as he squints.

"Threw some sutures in to hold the entry ‘n exit open ‘nough for the ports. Then jus’ managin’ the pressure to never make no vacuum ‘n to keep ‘em pushed open through." Thomas explains easily. Bacon smiles.

"You learnt a lot these last three years, hm?"

The funeral home is a basic building with plain wooden framing like any other in the Dumas Tract subdivision. Built quickly and simply; just to get the area developed and ready for people, not necessarily to look nice. Its flat wooden exterior and boxy shape don’t stand out, even with 2 stories; most buildings nearby are made the same way. Bacon had placed a nice painted wooden sign up on the front of the building, above the window, but it was the only thing about the building that caught one’s eye. “Baker and Bacon Undertakers” in practiced calligraphy, with “Now providing embalming!” boasted in a smaller font beneath.

"Yessir. My mama say I hardly make any sense when I talk 'bout work sometimes, 'causa all I learnt." He puts the mop away and returns to his brush, tongue poking into his cheek as he resumes concentration. Bacon chuckles.

"Next thing to learn is how to explain what you saying to her. That's the mark of a expert."

"No-sir, I tried; she don' wanna hear it. Tells me, 'Stop now boy, is too much.' Say I upset her stomach, which certainly ain't no good for her business," Thomas is smiling now, "That's the paint done, best I can 'least. Don' come as easy to me yet... Whaddyah think?" Thomas leans back, stretching his cramping fingers before beginning to gather all his used tools, taking them to start washing.

Originally used as a private residence, the majority of the front of the building was set up to look like a well-to-do parlor. Plenty of light, rugs on the wooden floor (strategically placed to cover less-than-attractive boards), and sideboards and accent tables kept full of fresh bouquets. Four other rooms were also set up for the public in a similarly welcoming and comforting fashion. The front office (for discussion of plans and transactions) the viewing room, and two rooms filled with coffin and casket options, which were strategically laid out to lead the buyer to a higher price point.

"Bah, it's good work, Thomas. You handle the color very well; show me your mix?" Thomas backpedals his task to show him the pigments he mixed, matching the skin as it was in life, rather than its now-pallid shade. Bacon nods thoughtfully.

"Very good, very good..." Bacon pauses, almost hesitating, "Thomas, I think I can say you completed your apprenticeship."

"Sir?" He asks, placing the brushes in the curb sink.

"How do yah think your mama'd like the look'a your name above 'at door, hm?" Bacon asks as he walks over to meet Thomas, his hands in his pockets, a stoic look on his face, and yet a twinkle in his eye betraying his cool composure.

"Me? I-I mean, you're sure? Everythin' that happen... Mister Baker..." Thomas seems to flounder for how to complete his thought, and then quickly drops it.

At the back of the building, a large room had been renovated just enough to function as a prep room. A curb sink was installed and the wood floor was replaced with tile. Any furniture was replaced with cabinets and an embalming table, and in the corner was a small steel shelf that could hold 2 more bodies.

"Yes, that was uh... unfortunate," Mister Bacon looks away for a moment, fiddling with the chain on his watch. He takes a deep breath, coming back to himself as he returns to face Thomas, "But - anyway it goes, I need someone to fill his place. Thomas, I known you many years, taught yah almost entirely myself. I put a great deal'a work 'nta craftin' you to be a responsible, trustworthy, 'n intelligent workin' man. I see the results'a my investment payin' off these 6 months; you're exactly who I hoped I coul' make yah to be. I believe yah been ready for some time now, actually." Thomas attempts to reign himself in, but gives way to a small smile, his eyes hinting at the joy he truly felt.

“I think my mama woul’ very much like to see ‘at sir.” He says, forgetting about the brushes in the curb sink entirely.

“Mister Bacon ‘n Mister Thomas: Undertakers’. Hm?” He proposes, grinning in victory as Thomas finally can’t help himself and beams at the thought, laughing a little.

The final room in the building was the back office, allowed to be much messier than the front, and which held many more files, documents, receipts, bills, and more. The room was larger than just an office, and the extra space held excess storage for things like the abundance of linens necessary, as well as copper and dolly tubs, a dolly peg, and a large wringer. There was a clothesline out the back, but Bacon kept a clotheshorse in the office as well. When a sheet or towel was stained, but still usable in the prep room, he pulled the clotheshorse out to the fireplace in the foyer, just so long as they were closed to customers.

“Yessir, it’s a good ring.”

“Excellent! Put Missus Bennet here ‘way ‘n call Miss Fannie; see if she can come put those wonderful calligraphy skills to work ‘gain,” Bacon says as he turns to leave. “Have yah seen the sign she did for Mr. McPherson’s upcoming Automobile shop? Really make yah think he might be competent...” He muses, half-joking.

“Ah, I ran ‘nto her this mornin’ on my way, Missus Ryals in labor; dunno if she’ll be free yet.” Thomas notes, raising his voice to reach Mister Bacon, who is nearly out the door.

Bacon whirls back around, “Oh, dear! Best, uh—best not bother ‘em then... we can ask ‘morrow,” He looks a little perturbed at the thought of interrupting a laboring mother and her midwife, “The meantime; it’s close ‘nough to five, how ‘bout joinin’ me at Ol’ Reliable—on me.” He offers.

“Yessir, thank you, sir.”