

# Death on a Summer Night: Faulkner at Byhalia

by Jack D. Elliott, Jr. and Sidney W. Bondurant

## Byhalia

Shortly after midnight on the morning of July 6, 1962, William Faulkner died at the age of sixty-four. With the coming of daylight the press began to converge on his home town of Oxford. One of the first stories concerning Faulkner's death appeared later that same day in the *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, an evening newspaper. The article noted that Faulkner "died of a heart attack in the Oxford, Miss., hospital at 2:30 a.m. today" and that his wife, Estelle, was "with him when he died."<sup>1</sup> The following morning the *Commercial Appeal* also of Memphis and *The New York Times* ran stories with similar information.<sup>2</sup> It soon became clear, however, that while Faulkner had in fact died, virtually everything else reported in the newspapers was untrue: he did not die in Oxford, he did not die at 2:30, and his wife was not with him. Furthermore, as has now become evident, many of the specifics related about his death weren't accurate either.

A year later the *Saturday Evening Post* published an essay entitled "The

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<sup>1</sup> Clark Porteous, "William Faulkner, Literary Giant, Dies in Oxford," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, July 6, 1962, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Michael, "Faulkner Rites Will Be Today At Family Home," *Commercial Appeal*, July 7, 1962, p. 1; United Press International, "William Faulkner Is Dead In Mississippi Home Town," *The New York Times*, July 7, 1962, p. 1.

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Death of William Faulkner” by Hughes Rudd, the acerbic news writer and later newscaster with CBS. As part of the press corps Rudd had traveled to Oxford in 1962 to cover the death and funeral. In his 1963 essay Rudd described the circumstances surrounding the press coverage and revealed that the press had known that significant parts of the story were not true:

someone discovered [that] the body had been brought to Oxford early on the morning of Friday, July 6, in a hearse belonging to the Douglass Funeral Home.<sup>3</sup> Before the funeral director could order him not to talk, the driver said, yes, he had gone to Byhalia<sup>4</sup> early Friday morning for the body. Where in Byhalia? At an alcoholic clinic there, the driver said. Byhalia is on the road to Memphis, north[west] of Holly Springs, and in Oxford everybody knows about the clinic. And it seemed everyone knew that Faulkner had died there, some said in a convulsion, some said in a fall downstairs . . . . As for proof, there was none. The superintendent of the clinic wouldn’t talk . . . .

In a room at the Ole Miss motel the reporters gathered and talked about it, and—already impressed, perhaps, by the implacability of that formidable family—agreed to forget Byhalia. You couldn’t prove it, and besides, what difference did it make? We were there because a great man was dead, not because a man had died in an alcoholic clinic.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The hearse, or ambulance, may have originated, not from Douglass Funeral Home in Oxford, but from Brantley Funeral Home in Olive Branch, Mississippi. See discussion below, note 99. Douglass Funeral Home was owned at the time by Richard W. “Dick” Elliott, Sr. who changed the name to Elliott Funeral Home in 1964. In 1962 it was located in the two-story hipped-roof brick structure located at 1217 Jackson Avenue, due north of and across the street from the present City Hall (the former Federal Building). The building was constructed in 1936 and opened in December of that year as a funeral home by O.H. Douglass. “O.H. Douglass Has Modern Funeral Home,” *Oxford Eagle*, December 3, 1936, p. 1. John Faulkner, the writer’s brother, wrote about standing in front of the funeral home looking out onto the Courthouse Square waiting for the arrival of William’s body while recalling incidents associated with his life. John Faulkner, *My Brother Bill: An Affectionate Reminiscence* (New York: Trident Press, 1963), 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> Byhalia is located on the western edge of Marshall County about fifteen miles from the county seat Holly Springs with the two municipalities being connected by U.S. Highway 78. According to the federal census, its population in 1960 was 674. Founded as a crossroads town with its post office established in 1846, Byhalia was named after nearby Byhalia Creek--the name coming from the Chickasaw words for “white oaks standing.” Keith A. Baca, *Native American Place Names in Mississippi* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 17-18. In 1885 it became a railroad town when the Memphis, Selma & Brunswick (soon to become the Kansas City, Memphis & Birmingham) Railroad was opened there. *Holly Springs Reporter*, May 21, 1885, quoted in D. Barton Williams, *The History of Byhalia* (n.d., c. 1989), 71-72.

<sup>5</sup> Hughes Rudd, “The Death of William Faulkner,” *Saturday Evening Post*, July 13-July 20, 1963, p. 34.

Thus Byhalia, the small town where Faulkner had actually died, never made the news coverage in 1962. Only later would the name of the clinic emerge: the Leonard Wright Sanatorium (Figure 1).

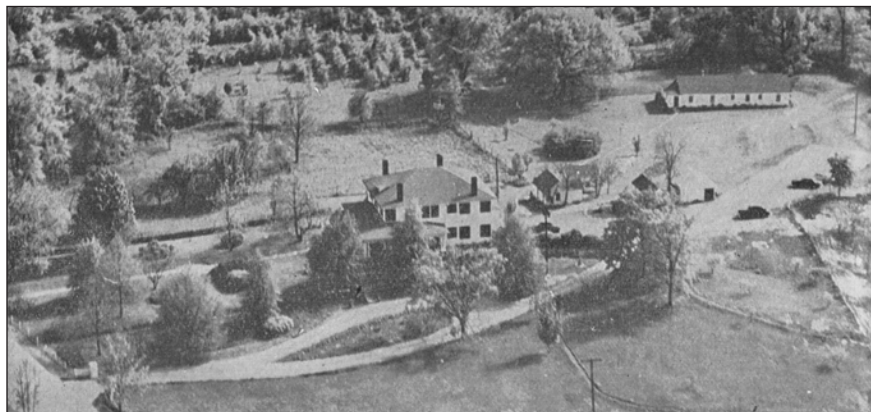


Figure 1. Aerial photograph of the Leonard Wright Sanatorium with view to south-southwest. The main building is in the center and nurses residence is in the upper right-hand corner. Photo from *The Mississippi Doctor*, 1956.

Although it was a reputable institution owned and operated by a reputable physician, its name was spoken in hushed tones, if at all, because of the stigma associated with alcoholism.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the family's initial opposition to discussing Byhalia, when the fuller story of Faulkner's alcoholism and Wright's Sanatorium appeared in the form of a biography, it was with the family's approval. Soon after the writer's death, his family authorized Joseph Blotner, both a professor of English

<sup>6</sup> Charles East later recalled: "of more immediate concern for Dorothy [Oldham, the sister of Estelle Faulkner] in the months following her brother-in-law's death was the possibility that one of the townspeople willing to talk about Faulkner would bring up the subject of Byhalia . . . the subject was one that the family did not want talked about in 1963 and 1964. Faulkner had not yet passed into history." "Oxford-in-Yoknapatawpha," *VQR*, Summer 1998. Online at: <http://www.vqronline.org/essay/oxford-yoknapatawpha>. Accessed October 12, 2015. John Faulkner referred to William as having died in a hospital without specifying the location. John Faulkner, *My Brother Bill*, 1-3. A few years later Faulkner's other brother, Murry, was more candid when he wrote "it has since been published that he had been drinking and had died after being admitted to a small hospital near Olive Branch, Mississippi." (Olive Branch is located between Byhalia and Memphis.) Murry C. Falkner, *The Falkners of Mississippi: A Memoir* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 201.

Karen Castleberry, who with her husband Jim owns much of the site today, informed Elliott that the sanatorium was seldom mentioned in Byhalia in years past. Furthermore, in perusing back issues of the *South Reporter* newspaper of Holly Springs where one would expect to find information about its opening and operation, almost no mention of it was found.

and personal friend of the writer, to begin researching what proved to be a monumental work in biography. On November 17, 1966, while conducting his research, Blotner drove from Oxford to Byhalia to visit the sanatorium and interview Dr. Wright.<sup>7</sup> Upon reaching the town he turned south off U.S. Highway 78<sup>8</sup> onto State Highway 309 and after passing through the small business district continued for a mile. Upon topping a hill he could see a cluster of buildings on the edge of a rise set amid acres of lawns and trees. He turned into the drive and passed along the north side of the buildings, gradually ascending the low ridge before turning back to the left and parking near the back door of the main house which served as the main entrance. Once inside he waited in the dining room and had coffee with three patients. He observed that the staff consisted of two registered nurses and two black men, one in his teens and the other in his twenties, who served as orderlies. When Dr. Wright arrived Blotner found him to be “about 5’ 8”, [with a] ruddy complexion, short brown hair—almost a crew cut—a bit of grey in it, blue eyes, [and] a snub nose.” He was “pleasant and obviously competent, [a] no-nonsense sort of man, very quiet, [and] soft-spoken.” Wright filled Blotner in to the best of his recollection on the events surrounding the admission and death of Faulkner.<sup>9</sup>

When Blotner’s work *Faulkner: A Biography* was completed and published in 1974<sup>10</sup> it told for the first time the story of the writer’s struggle with alcoholism and his visits to sanatoria in Memphis, Byhalia, and elsewhere. So what was initially covered up was eventually revealed to the public with the family’s approval. Blotner’s account effectively served as the basic narrative for the sanatorium on which subsequent biographical accounts were based. However, given the vastness of Blotner’s subject, his discussion of the Wright Sanatorium was understandably not as thorough as it could have been and even introduced at least one widely repeated error.

This essay will focus more closely on the history of the sanatorium along with Faulkner’s connection to it than previously attempted. This will in part be

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<sup>7</sup> See Blotner’s notes from his November 17, 1966, visit to the sanatorium and interview with Dr. Wright in the Blotner papers, Louis Daniel Brodsky Collection of William Faulkner Materials, Special Collections and Archives, Southeast Missouri State University. Blotner described the route from Oxford to Byhalia as passing through Olive Branch which is inaccurate. Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1974), 1836.

<sup>8</sup> In 1962 U.S. Highway 78 was on the north side of Byhalia. Today this highway has been redesignated as State Highway 178, while the new U.S. Highway 78 (now Interstate 22) is on the south side of Byhalia almost adjacent to the sanatorium site.

<sup>9</sup> Blotner, interview with Wright.

<sup>10</sup> Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*.

accomplished through the use of sanatorium records that have recently come to light. A perennial problem with researching medical records derives from doctor-patient confidentiality which serves to protect the patient's records and usually results in their destruction following a patient's death or the closure of a clinic or hospital, so most are destroyed long before they become of historical interest. This was the fate of the records of the Gartly-Ramsay Hospital in Memphis where Faulkner was admitted on several occasions.<sup>11</sup> This was also presumably the fate of many of the more confidential records from Wright's. However, not all were destroyed.

Jim and Karen Castleberry purchased the sanatorium property in 1989, almost two decades after its closure. Soon after, they discovered in the basement of the annex to the main building a number of records stored in boxes and inadvertently left behind by Dr. Wright when he left Byhalia in 1972 (Figure 2).



*Figure 2. Wright Sanatorium, the main building viewed to the north-northwest with the annex in the foreground and the two-story original house in the background with the enclosed front porch on the right. The sanatorium records were discovered under the annex in 1989 or 1990. Photograph by Karen Castleberry, 1990.*

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<sup>11</sup> Lisa Hickman, *William Faulkner and Joan Williams: The Romance of Two Writers* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 139.

These materials included admission cards, patients' registers, drug books, at least one order book, and various documents including checks and receipts (see Appendix A). Recognizing the potential value to Faulkner scholarship, Mrs. Castleberry went through the records, selecting for preservation those that included the Faulkner name and disposing of many others. Based on what survives it is apparent that individual patient charts with more sensitive information were not among the records discovered; they had probably been destroyed years before by Dr. Wright. Although the surviving material is not the best documentation conceivable, it provides at least minimal documentation for probably every admission by Faulkner and wife Estelle, some of which were previously unknown, along with new evidence of the writer's treatments on the night of his death. Furthermore, commentary will be provided on Faulkner's medications and symptoms, as well as probable causes of his death.

The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA) states that health information for a person is protected for fifty years following his death.<sup>12</sup> William Faulkner, of course, died over fifty years ago. Furthermore, the story of his alcoholism and that of his wife Estelle has already become public knowledge following the publication of Joseph Blotner's biography which, as noted, was fully authorized and supported by his family. Subsequent biographical works have expanded upon this subject, while interviews with people such as Estelle's granddaughter, Victoria Fielden Johnson, have openly discussed the couple's alcoholism.<sup>13</sup>

The owner and founder of the sanatorium, Dr. Leonard Davidson Wright, Sr. (1909-2003), was born in Elbridge, Obion County, Tennessee, the son of Dr. John Leonard Wright (1869-1950), a general practitioner and country doctor. The younger Wright studied medicine at the University of Tennessee College of Medicine in Memphis and received an M.D. degree in 1932.<sup>14</sup> In

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<sup>12</sup> "Health Information of Deceased Individuals," online at: <http://www.hhs.gov/hipaa/for-professionals/privacy/guidance/health-information-of-deceased-individuals/index.html> Accessed January 7, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> "White Beaches" (interview with Victoria Fielden Johnson), in Louis Daniel Brodsky, *William Faulkner, Life Glimpses* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 168-171, 175.

<sup>14</sup> Information sheet on Dr. Leonard Wright from the Mississippi State Board of Medical Licensure. On January 2, 1934, he married Ida Caruthers Banks (1912-1998). They had three children: Leonard Davidson, Jr., Harvey Banks, and Ida.

1940-1941 he was employed by the Wallace Sanitarium in Memphis<sup>15</sup> which was described as a hospital for “the treatment of drug addictions, alcoholism, mental and nervous diseases located in the Eastern suburbs of the city” on “sixteen acres of beautiful grounds.”<sup>16</sup>

Following military service in the war, Wright started looking to form his own sanatorium for the treatment of alcoholism and in 1947 purchased a nineteen-acre parcel on the south side of Byhalia. The property had belonged to Thomas Dye “Tom” Burrow, a Byhalia merchant who had purchased it in 1898 and a few years later constructed a large two-story home that would serve as the main building of the sanatorium.<sup>17</sup>

One might wonder why Wright chose such a rural setting as Byhalia rather than Memphis with its much larger population. However, he would not be relying merely on local patronage; taking advantage of the new paved highway system his patients would come from throughout the region, primarily from Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee, but also occasionally from further afield, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana and Texas.<sup>18</sup> The choice of a rural location was based in part on the practice of placing sanatoria in pastoral settings far from urban congestion as was the Wallace Sanitarium. The Burrow homestead was located in a rural area on the slope of a hillside with a view of the surrounding land providing an attractive and relaxed location.

Following Wright’s purchase of the property, modifications were made to provide what was needed to accommodate and treat patients. The main house became the central facility with nine rooms (seven upstairs, two down) for patients and a doctor’s office, nurses station, dining facilities, and sitting areas for patients. The gallery across the front was enclosed to provide more interior space. A cluster of buildings behind the main building were added: some for patients, a recreation room, a nurses residence with seven bedrooms,

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<sup>15</sup> Wright was listed in the 1940 census as residing at 430 Greer Street in Memphis and was employed as a psychiatrist at an unnamed private sanatorium. In 1941 the *Memphis City Directory* listed him as “medical director” at the Wallace Sanitarium. Presumably the unnamed private sanatorium and Wallace’s were the same institution.

<sup>16</sup> Undated brochure for the Wallace Sanitarium, online at: <http://historic-memphis.com/memphis-historic/hospitals/photos/wallace-sanitarium-1920.jpg>. Accessed October 13, 2015. The 1920 date in the url is too early.

<sup>17</sup> In 1942 Burrow (1873-1948) sold the property to his step-son, Ernest Lea, Jr., who in turn sold it to Wright on September 11, 1947. Marshall County Deed Book 62, p. 464; Deed Book 82, p. 581; Deed Book 85, p. 211, Marshall County Chancery Clerk’s Office, Holly Springs, MS.

<sup>18</sup> These states are listed repeatedly in the Patients’ Registers, Castleberry Collection.



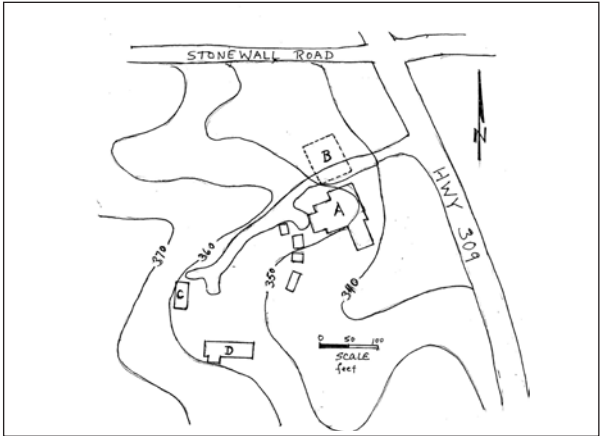


Figure 3. Site plan of the Wright Sanatorium. The topography on the eastern part of the site has been leveled including the ridge on which the main building was located. Key: A – main building; B – present-day AutoZone; C – Dr. Wright's residence; D – nurses residence. Reconstructed on the basis of photographs, aerial photographs, field observations, and the USGS topographical map “Byhalia, Miss.,” 1971. Drafted by Jack D. Elliott, Jr.

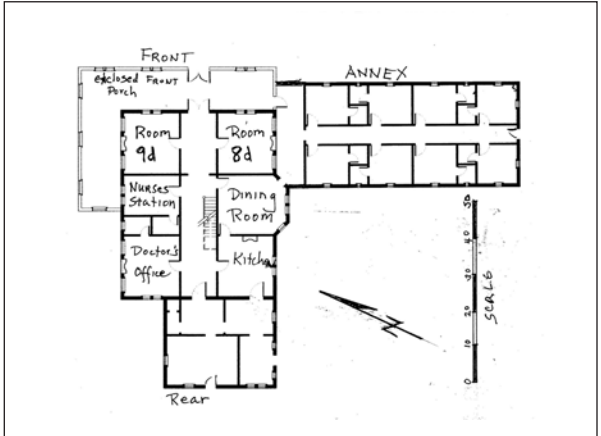


Figure 4. Floor plan of the main building of the Wright Sanatorium. Faulkner died in Room 8d. Reconstructed on the basis of photographs by Karen Castleberry and archival sources, notably Joseph Blotner's notes on his visit and interview with Dr. Wright. Drafted by John Bondurant, AIA, and Jack D. Elliott, Jr.



and a home for Dr. Wright and his family.<sup>19</sup> (Figure 3 and Figure 4)

The sanatorium was probably opened in 1949.<sup>20</sup> A few years later in 1956 an advertisement stated that it specialized “in the treatment of *Alcoholic* and *Drug Addiction* and *Mild Nervous Disorders*” and was located on “20 acres of beautifully landscaped grounds sufficiently removed to provide restful surroundings and capacity limited to insure individual treatment.” Furthermore, “the building is *Air Conditioned*.” An aerial photograph depicted the grounds with its buildings.<sup>21</sup> Somewhat later an annex was constructed on the south side of the main building adding eight more rooms for patients onto the first nine and an advertisement noted that “a separate wing is provided for quiet and convalescent patients.” There were also two cottages with a total of three rooms.<sup>22</sup> This provided a total of twenty rooms. However, throughout the 1960s the institution was reported to have twenty-two beds for patients,<sup>23</sup> the extra two were probably accounted for

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<sup>19</sup> Descriptions of sanatorium infrastructure are based on aerial photographs, photographs shot by Karen Castleberry of the grounds and buildings in 1989-1990, personal observation of surviving buildings, the sanatorium order book from 1962 in the Castleberry collection, and a deed of trust filed by Dr. Wright which includes an extensive inventory of sanatorium property. The latter source is in Marshall County Mortgages and Deeds of Trust Book 49, pp. 182-194, Marshall County Chancery Clerk's Office, Holly Springs, MS. Two small cottages and a single family residence, apparently used by the Wright family, remained on the site until 2015 when the cottages were demolished. The cottages were moved a short distance from their original sites when the ground surface was altered in 1990. The residence still remains on site (2018).

<sup>20</sup> Information sheet on Dr. Wright from the Mississippi State Board of Medical Licensure lists him under the address “Byhalia” for April 1948 indicating that he had moved there by that time, although he apparently didn't open the sanatorium immediately. In June 1949, Dr. and Mrs. Wright were reported as vacationing in Mexico. Elizabeth Mills, “Byhalia News,” *South Reporter*, newspaper, Holly Springs, MS, June 16, 1949. Unless Dr. Wright had a substitute--and there's no evidence that he did--it is unlikely that he could have left the sanatorium for such a lengthy vacation, suggesting that it was not open at the time. However, it was certainly open by February 10, 1950, the beginning date of a surviving drug book in the Castleberry collection. By that date two patients were being administered controlled substances which were recorded in the drug book. Because only a small percentage of patients usually received these drugs, the implication is that there were several more patients present and that the sanatorium had been open for some time. If there had in fact been an earlier drug book it would have covered several months; the three surviving drug books cover respectively 7.5 months, 4.5 months, and 2.5 months. Considering that an earlier drug book would have covered at least two months, then it would have begun no later than December. The combined evidence suggests that the sanatorium opened during the period July-December 1949.

<sup>21</sup> *Texas State Journal of Medicine* (August 1956), p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> The two cottages survived until 2015 when they were demolished. One had two rooms for patients with #1 and #2 on the doors, while the other had #3 on its door. They were presumably for patients advanced in convalescing.

<sup>23</sup> *Mississippi Official and Statistical Register* (1960-1964), 213; (1964-1968), 225; (1968-1972), 356.

by two rooms with two beds. For example, Room 8d, a large room, had two beds (see below), and it is quite likely that Room 9d--across the hall from 8d and of similar size--also had two. The total number of patients per year for the period 1955-1962 ranged between 454 and 557.<sup>24</sup> The overwhelming majority of the patients admitted were suffering from alcoholism, a distant second from drug addiction, while there were occasional cases of anxiety, psychosis, and tension.

### Faulkner at Byhalia

Faulkner struggled with alcohol throughout his adult life and was repeatedly hospitalized in sanatoria. Blotner sketched out his history of treatment, reporting that the first hospitalization was at the Wright Sanatorium in either late 1935 or early 1936. However, this is in error, because as noted the institution did not exist prior to ca. 1949.<sup>25</sup> If he was in fact hospitalized in 1935-36, the place is not known while the incident was apparently an isolated event for there is little evidence of his having been hospitalized for alcoholism in or near Mississippi until 1949,<sup>26</sup> although he

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<sup>24</sup> Admissions per year are as follow: 1955--543; 1956--539; 1957--502; 1958--454; 1959--484; 1960--458; 1961--485; 1962--c. 557. This information is from the patients' registers and from the census for Wright's Sanatorium in the Castleberry Collection.

<sup>25</sup> Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*, 928. The information is attributed to Blotner's interview with Estelle Faulkner on April 29, 1968, Blotner papers, Louis Daniel Brodsky Collection of William Faulkner Materials, Special Collections and Archives, Southeast Missouri State University. The notes from the interview constitute less than two lines of typescript and make no claim that Faulkner was taken to Wright's in 1935-36. Instead they merely state: "WF first hospitalized for drinking c. 1935-36 when worried about Hollywood. Byhalia in early 1940's." Additionally, the second clause--whatever its intended meaning--is confused, indicating a time frame years before the opening of the Wright Sanatorium. The purported 1935-1936 first visit to Wright's has been mentioned by several subsequent biographers.

Additionally, Judith Sensibar pushed the origin of the sanatorium back decades earlier. First, she quoted Faulkner's daughter Jill Summers as stating that her grandfather, Murry C. Falkner, was regularly taken to the Byhalia sanatorium, this despite the fact that he died in 1932, well before Wright's was opened. In an endnote Sensibar writes that "Blotner says that when Maud [Falkner] had to take her husband [Murry] to Byhalia to be dried out, she brought the children along too, as an object lesson." Her sons can only be categorized as "children" during the first two decades of the twentieth century pushing the sanatorium's origin to possibly before the birth of Dr. Wright in 1909. Judith L. Sensibar, *Faulkner and Love: The Women Who Shaped His Life* (New Haven CN: Yale University Press, 2009), 30, 507n19. However Summers was clearly wrong in her statement, while Blotner was referring to trips, not to Wright's, but to the Keeley Institute near Memphis, one in a chain of hospitals scattered across the nation offering the Keeley Cure for alcoholism. Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*, 99.

<sup>26</sup> In 1949 Faulkner was hospitalized at the Gartly-Ramsay Hospital in Memphis. Hickman, *William Faulkner and Joan Williams*, 32-34.

was hospitalized elsewhere.<sup>27</sup>

The Faulkner family's association with the sanatorium began in 1952, although William wasn't the first patient in the family. The year turned out to be a troubled one beginning with back pains that typically triggered the use of alcohol as Faulkner's "personal remedy." In March he suffered a fall from horseback in Oxford. Two months later while in Paris the pain was such that he went to a clinic on May 27 where he was examined by a physician and a radiologist. X-rays revealed compression fractures in two vertebrae, apparently from old injuries. The prescription was for a surgical fusion of the fractures, and this Faulkner refused, agreeing only to a few days of bed rest. On June 17 he arrived back in Mississippi.<sup>28</sup> While he was suffering with his back problem and his drinking remedy his wife Estelle, who also suffered from alcoholism, was admitted to the Wright Sanatorium on August 3, 1952.<sup>29</sup> The circumstances behind her admission and the choice of Wright's are unknown, although it seems likely that she was referred there by her family physician.

On the morning of the following day Faulkner wrote to his young protégé, the aspiring writer Joan Williams of Memphis informing her that he had just finished talking with the doctor (presumably Wright) via the telephone and was informed that Estelle was sober and "screaming" to come home. He indicated that he would have to drive up that afternoon to Byhalia, calm her down, and possibly bring her home along with a nurse to look after her.<sup>30</sup> Apparently he did retrieve her that day because she was in

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<sup>27</sup> For example, Albert I. Bezzerides recalled taking Faulkner to sanatoria in California on several occasions during the 1940s. "Bill and Buzz: Fellow Scenarists" (interview with Bezzerides), in Brodsky, *William Faulkner: Life Glimpses*, 64-65.

<sup>28</sup> Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*, 1411, 1421-1424, 1426.

<sup>29</sup> Admission card, #1962, Mrs. William Faulkner, August 3-4, 1952, Castleberry collection. Previous sources have indicated that she was hospitalized at an unspecified location or in Memphis. It is now clear that she was at Byhalia. In the original edition of his biography Blotner (*Faulkner: A Biography*, 1430) states merely that she was hospitalized as "she recuperated from a physical collapse"; however, in the revised version (Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography* [New York: Random House, 1984], 559) he writes that "Estelle had been hospitalized in Memphis for an alcoholic episode." See also Joel Williamson, *William Faulkner and Southern History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 285; Hickman, *William Faulkner and Joan Williams*, 120.

<sup>30</sup> Letter, William Faulkner to Joan Williams, August 4, 1952, copy courtesy of Lisa Hickman.

fact discharged,<sup>31</sup> the final diagnosis being “alcoholic avitaminosis” and her condition on discharge “poor.”

Alcoholic avitaminosis is a vitamin deficiency found in chronic alcohol abusers that may progress to Wernicke’s Encephalopathy, a deficiency of the vitamin thiamine and a byproduct of alcoholism that can result in severe mental problems, coma, and even death if untreated.<sup>32</sup> Her quick departure in poor condition suggests that she left A.M.A. (Against Medical Advice), because it is not usual to discharge someone in poor condition unless for transfer to another hospital.

Following Estelle’s brief hospitalization, Faulkner’s back pain continued. He tried to control it with alcohol and Seconal, a barbiturate that depresses the central nervous system. On September 18, he suffered a convulsive seizure and was taken to Gartly-Ramsay in Memphis where his treatment included withdrawing him from alcohol along with back treatment such as hot packs and massage along with Pantopon for the pain. He was released on the twenty-sixth with the advice that he be confined to a bed with a firm mattress for at least a week.<sup>33</sup>

However, he did not improve and resumed drinking and taking Seconal. When his editor at Random House, Saxe Commins, arrived in Oxford on October 7, he found Faulkner in a ghastly condition “completely deteriorated in mind and body. He mumbles incoherently and is totally incapable of controlling his bodily functions. He pleads piteously for beer all the time and mumbles deliriously. Every twenty minutes or so through the night I had to carry him virtually to the bathroom. His body is bloated and bruised from

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<sup>31</sup> Admission card, #1962, Mrs. William Faulkner, August 3-4, 1952. The reverse of the card provides billing charges including \$50, presumably for overall expenses, plus miscellaneous items with the total charge being \$69.10. To the side of this fee is the notation “Refund 65.90/ Aug 15-52.” Also in the Castleberry collection there is a cancelled check on the Citizens Bank of Byhalia paying \$65.90 to William Faulkner from the Leonard Wright Sanatorium signed by Leonard D. Wright, dated August 15, 1952, and marked “For Refund].” The reason for the refund is unclear. Estelle had been there overnight and thereby availed herself of many of the services due, so for the majority of the bill to be effectively cancelled seems inexplicable. However, there is a probable solution. If one adds the charge of \$69.10 to the refund of \$65.90, the total is \$135.00. That this is such a round figure is probably not by happenstance, suggesting that Faulkner paid \$135.00 to Wright’s in advance upon Estelle’s admission. Thanks to Jay Watson for this suggestion. Following his wife’s premature discharge, Faulkner was then refunded the balance of \$65.90. One will see below that when Faulkner was admitted to Wright’s in January 1960, his brother John left a \$170 check as an advance payment.

<sup>32</sup> Allan D. Thomson, “Mechanisms of Vitamin Deficiency in Chronic Alcohol Misusers and the Development of the Wernicke-Korsakoff Syndrome,” *Alcohol & Alcoholism*, vol. 35, supplement 1, (2000), 2-7.

<sup>33</sup> Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*, 1433-1434.

his many falls and bears even worse marks.”<sup>34</sup>

On October 8, he was taken back to Gartly-Ramsay to resume his treatments. He spent the next two weeks there and was fitted for a back brace, but was informed that without the surgery that Faulkner refused, the pain would continue. He arrived back at home on the twenty-first.<sup>35</sup> In the middle of November he left home for Princeton and soon began another bout with drinking and was taken to Westhill Sanitarium in the Bronx where he went through another period of treatments before being released a few days later.<sup>36</sup>

Several months passed. In late summer 1953 he returned again to alcohol and Seconal, and about September 8, his nephew Jimmy Faulkner drove him to Memphis to Gartly-Ramsay where he was treated for alcohol and pain. However, within two days he grew restless and checked himself out A.M.A. and returned home.<sup>37</sup> He did not stay there long. On September 26 he was admitted to the Wright Sanatorium for the first time with a diagnosis of alcoholism. He remained for two weeks, the longest extent known for his staying at Wright’s, and was discharged on October 4 with his condition “improved.”<sup>38</sup>

One might wonder why after an initial stay at Gartly-Ramsay he chose to check himself into a different sanatorium for the second hospitalization. We can only speculate that while the Memphis hospital afforded a wider variety of services, including treatments for both alcoholism and back problems, it also required more driving. Wright’s, on the other hand, while having a narrower focus on alcoholism was nearer and more accessible. This suggests that in choosing the Byhalia hospital the focus was on alcoholism and not on back problems, and in fact the admission card makes no mention of back problems.

On August 21, 1954, Faulkner’s daughter Jill was married at their home, Rowan Oak, in Oxford. The aftermath of the festivities triggered another round of drinking for both William and Estelle. His step-granddaughter Victoria Fielden Johnson, who was only sixteen at the time, recalled having to deal with the ensuing unpleasantness:

He went on a binge of binges. I was there by myself. Finally, after two days or so of my trying to keep at least the beds clean of vomit

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<sup>34</sup> Letter, Saxe Commins to Dorothy Commins, October 8, 1952. Louis Daniel Brodsky and Robert W. Hamblin (eds.), *Faulkner: A Comprehensive Guide to the Brodsky Collection*, volume II: *The Letters*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 89.

<sup>35</sup> Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*, 1435.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 1442.

<sup>37</sup> Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*, 1466; Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography* (revised), 573.

<sup>38</sup> Admission card, #2527, William Faulkner, September 26-October 4, 1953.

and excrement and everything else, Pappy somehow, in his drunken stupor, realized I couldn't take it anymore, couldn't handle it. I was too immature. I really couldn't drive; I couldn't go to the bootlegger for them or do anything really. Pappy kept mumbling in his stupor. "Get Malcolm! Get Malcolm to take me to Byhalia." [Malcolm Franklin was Estelle's son by her first marriage and Faulkner's step-son]<sup>39</sup>

On August 29, Faulkner was admitted to Wright's under the diagnosis of alcoholism and was discharged four days later on September 1 with his condition improved.<sup>40</sup>

By September 10, Faulkner was in New York City at the Algonquin where he would remain at least a month writing and seeing another young woman, Jean Stein.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile back in Mississippi, Estelle was admitted to Wright's on September 15 with a diagnosis of alcoholism. Her admission card lists her nearest relative as her sister, Dorothy "Dot" Oldham, suggesting that in Faulkner's absence, Dot was her contact person. Presumably she had driven Estelle to Wright's and checked her in. Four days later Estelle was discharged with her condition improved.<sup>42</sup> The following year Estelle was admitted to Wright's again on July 10 at 5:45 p.m. under the diagnosis "alcoholism, acute." She was discharged five days later<sup>43</sup> and soon after joined Alcoholics Anonymous with good result; she quit drinking for years after.<sup>44</sup> Indeed there are no further records of her being admitted at Wright's.

On March 18, 1956, as the result of drinking and emotional problems, Faulkner began to vomit blood and collapsed unconscious. The following day he was admitted to Wright's with the diagnosis of alcoholism-chronic and gastric hemorrhage with the etiology, or origin, of the latter being

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<sup>39</sup> "White Beaches," in Brodsky, *William Faulkner, Life Glimpses*, 169-170.

<sup>40</sup> Admission card, #3043, William Faulkner, August 29-Sept 1, 1954. The bill was \$175.57.

<sup>41</sup> Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*, 1974, 1511.

<sup>42</sup> Admission card, #3071, Mrs. William Faulkner, September 15-19, 1954. To our knowledge outside of this card there is no other known documentation for this stay. The bill for the stay was \$178.37.

<sup>43</sup> Patients' Register, #3505, Mrs. William Faulkner, July 10-15, 1955. A deposit slip dated July 16, 1955, from the Citizens Bank of Byhalia notes a credit to Leonard D. Wright on a check for \$293.26 from William Faulkner, presumably for the bill for Estelle's stay.

<sup>44</sup> Although no known biography refers to this hospitalization, Williamson does allude to Estelle's having joined Alcoholics Anonymous by September 1955. Williamson, *William Faulkner and Southern History*, 299, 303. On November 5, 1956, Estelle wrote Saxe Commins, Faulkner's editor at Random House, informing him of her successful involvement with the organization. Brodsky and Hamblin, *Faulkner: A Comprehensive Guide to the Brodsky Collection*, volume II: The Letters, 199. During a 1985 interview with L. D. Brodsky, Estelle's granddaughter Victoria Fielden Johnson stated that as of 1962, Estelle "hadn't touched a drop since 1955. Not a drop!" "White Beaches," in Brodsky, *William Faulkner, Life Glimpses*, 175.

unknown. The treatment would have been to stabilize with fluids IV and blood replacement, place a plastic tube through the nose and down the esophagus into the stomach, flush the stomach with cool saline and suck out the blood, then instill antacids like Maalox. If he responded quickly, he could have checked out the next day. Erosive gastritis was almost certainly the diagnosis, but without x-ray studies or looking inside the stomach (surgery would have been required in 1956 to do this) the etiology (cause) of the bleeding could not have been identified with certainty. The lack of equipment and staff needed to diagnose and treat the cause led to Faulkner's late night—12:35 a.m.—transfer from Wright's to Baptist Hospital in Memphis where over the next few days he received the needed tests, x-rays, and treatments and was discharged on or shortly after March 27.<sup>45</sup> Later the same year he was admitted to Wright's on December 6 at 6:15 p.m. with the diagnosis of "alcoholism acute." He was discharged on December 9 at 3:00 p.m.<sup>46</sup>

After being discharged, three years passed before Faulkner was again admitted to Wright's in January 1960. The event was related in a somewhat surrealistic and comical narrative letter from Faulkner to Estelle. He had an attack of pleurisy on Monday, January 11, 1960, and was given penicillin by the local doctor Felix Linder. Subsequently on his own initiative, he supplemented the penicillin with whiskey. On Wednesday morning, his brother John arrived in an ambulance to take him to Wright's,<sup>47</sup> where he was admitted on Wednesday, January 13, 1960, at 12:15 p.m. for acute alcoholism

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<sup>45</sup> Patients' Register, #3888, William Faulkner, March 19-20, 1956. He was admitted at 4:45 P.M. and discharged at 12:35 A.M. Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*, 1598-1599. Note that Blotner did not realize that Faulkner was initially admitted to Wright's before being transferred to Memphis.

There are several causes of gastric hemorrhage associated with acute and chronic alcoholism. As noted, the most likely diagnosis was erosive gastritis. Alcohol is a direct toxin to the lining of the stomach. It strips away the protective mucus in the stomach and causes irritation to the cells lining the inside of the stomach. This causes a generalized oozing of blood that can be corrected by the avoidance of alcohol along with antacid treatment. Stomach ulcers and subsequent change from an ulcer to a stomach malignancy are common in alcoholics; both can cause bleeding. However Faulkner would not have lived another six years with these diagnoses, so this is unlikely. Esophageal varices are dilated veins in the junction of the esophagus and the stomach caused by cirrhosis of the liver. They can rupture/erode and bleed profusely. Cirrhosis is irreversible; because Faulkner had no other symptoms of this, it is an unlikely diagnosis.

<sup>46</sup> Patients' Register, #4286, William Faulkner, December 6-9, 1956. There is a deposit slip from the Citizens Bank of Byhalia in which Leonard D. Wright was credited with the deposit of four checks including one from Faulkner for \$168.80, which was presumably to cover the fee for his three-day stay. Neither version of Blotner's biography makes reference to this.

<sup>47</sup> Joseph Blotner (ed.), *Selected Letters of William Faulkner* (New York: Random House, 1977), 440-442; cf. Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*, 1754-1756.



and was discharged on Sunday, January 17 at 10:15 a.m.<sup>48</sup>

### One Summer Night

The year of Faulkner's death 1962 did not begin well. For several years he and Estelle had been commuting back and forth between Oxford and Charlottesville, Virginia, where their daughter Jill resided with her family. On October 21, 1961, the Faulkners arrived back at their Charlottesville residence. On Saturday, December 16 while foxhunting Faulkner fell from his horse, a fairly common occurrence that did no good for his back. About the same time a cold began to turn into an acute respiratory infection, and he returned to his old bourbon remedy. On the 18<sup>th</sup> he was admitted to the University of Virginia Hospital, where it was noted that he suffered from back pains and "acute alcoholic intoxication." He was discharged the following day. However, he soon relapsed into drinking and on the 22<sup>nd</sup> was admitted to the Tucker Neurological and Psychiatric Hospital in Richmond, where an examination revealed that his vital signs were good. After a week-long stay he was discharged on December 29.<sup>49</sup>

Soon after the beginning of the New Year on January 3, Faulkner was riding a horse, this time in the snow. When his horse fell he was thrown to the ground causing him to hit his head; he later had no memory of the incident. Two days later he was coughing and suffering chest pains and resumed drinking. On January 8 he was readmitted to Tucker. Two days later he was running a fever and complaining of chest pains when he was seen by Dr. Paul Camp, a cardiologist who said his blood pressure was normal and his heart was not enlarged. His electrocardiogram showed no signs of any heart damage and no significant abnormality of heart rhythm.<sup>50</sup> In 1962 the known major damaging effects of alcohol on the heart were high blood pressure and cardiomyopathy leading to cardiomegaly (heart muscle damage leading to enlarged heart).<sup>51</sup> We have to assume that Faulkner's alcoholism had not caused these complications at the time. Today we know that alcoholism is also a risk for developing atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease, i.e. coronary

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<sup>48</sup> Patients' Register, #5771, William Faulkner, January 13-17, 1960. A deposit slip dated January 14, 1960, from the Citizens Bank of Byhalia notes a credit to Leonard D. Wright on several checks including one from John Faulkner for \$170.00. John had presumably written the check the previous day upon William's admission as an advance payment on the bill.

<sup>49</sup> Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*, 1802, 1806-1809; Williamson, *William Faulkner and Southern History*, 347.

<sup>50</sup> Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*, 1809.

<sup>51</sup> J. W. Hurst and R. B. Logue, *The Heart, Arteries, and Veins* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1970, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition), 998, 1215, 1240-1241.

artery disease, although that effect is by causing increased blood pressure which is what leads to the disease and apparently Faulkner's blood pressure was normal.<sup>52</sup>

Faulkner's sixth and last visit to Byhalia was the indirect result of yet another fall from horseback, this time while riding on Old Taylor Road near Rowan Oak on June 10, 1962. After suffering intense back pain for over three weeks he had begun drinking by July 3. By the Fourth, the drinking had increased, and he had coupled it with prescription painkillers.<sup>53</sup>

His nephew Jimmy Faulkner recalled the decision to return to Wright's Sanatorium:

The next day [July 5], late in the morning, I went to Brother Will's again. He was awake and had about half of a second fifth of gin—not much compared to what was normal for him during a bout. I sat and talked to him about how he felt and about going to Dr. Wright's private hospital, Byhalia . . . . He agreed that he was ready to go.

I returned to the house about 4:30 that afternoon. He held onto me as he pulled himself out of bed, and I stayed behind him to steady him while he walked to my station wagon. I put him on the backseat so he could lie down. Aunt Estelle sat in the front, holding a drink for Brother Will, if he should ask for one, but he never did. She poured out the untouched drink before we reached the hospital.

When we pulled up to the back door of Byhalia, one of the male attendants met us.<sup>54</sup> (Figure 5, page 118)

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<sup>52</sup> Atherosclerotic Cardiovascular Disease (ASCVD) Secondary Prevention Guideline, *GroupHealth*, January 2014. Online at: <http://www.ghc.org/all-sites/guidelines/ascvd-secondary.pdf>. Accessed Sept. 13, 2015.

<sup>53</sup> Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*, 1974, 1827-1835. Note that Blotner dates the fall to June 17, however in a letter dated June 15, 1962, Phil Stone refers to Faulkner's having recently fallen off a horse with resulting back problems indicating that the fall was earlier than the 17th. Brodsky and Hamblin, *Faulkner: A Comprehensive Guide to the Brodsky Collection*, volume II, 307. Blotner later changed the date of the fall to June 10. Joseph Blotner and Chester A. McLarty, MD, "Faulkner's Last Days," *American Literature*, 198, vol. 57, no 4, 646. However, he did not change it in the revised version of *Faulkner: A Biography*, 1984, 708.

<sup>54</sup> Jim Faulkner, "Brother Will's Passing," *Southern Living*, March 1992, 108-109. Jimmy Faulkner provided another variation on this story during an interview in Sally Wolff and Floyd C. Watkins, *Talking about William Faulkner: Interviews with Jimmy Faulkner and Others* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 176-177.



Figure 5. Wright Sanatorium, the rear of the main building, where Faulkner entered on the evening of July 5, 1962. Photograph by Karen Castleberry, 1989.

The attendant was Willie Jamison, a twenty-two-year-old black orderly.<sup>55</sup> He and Jimmy guided Faulkner in and down the central hallway to the downstairs nurses station which was on the left behind a Dutch door and filled with the usual paraphernalia: desk, telephone, medicine cabinets, and cupboards with lab equipment.<sup>56</sup> While Faulkner sat in a comfortable chair, Estelle and Jimmy checked him in. According to the sanatorium records, he was admitted at 5:50 p.m.<sup>57</sup> (Figure 6, page 119)

On admission he was apparently somewhat confused. When leaving Rowan Oak for Byhalia he had been asked where he wanted to go and replied that he wanted to go home, despite the fact that he was at home at that moment.<sup>58</sup> On the trip he talked in a confused manner about sergeants and captains.<sup>59</sup> He was also in significant pain, both back pain and chest pain, although he had been able to walk over a half mile to a friend's house the

<sup>55</sup> Sue Watson, "Loyal, Respected Employee Retires," *Pigeon Roost News*, Holly Springs MS, January 7, 2004, p. 2.

<sup>56</sup> Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*, 1836.

<sup>57</sup> The time of admission has previously been reported as 6:00 P.M. Blotner, interview with Wright. 6:00 P.M. was subsequently listed in Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*, 1836. However this is evidently an approximation of the 5:50 time reported in the sanatorium records. See Admission card, #6975, William Faulkner, July 5-6, 1962; Patients' Register, #6975, William Faulkner, July 5-6, 1962.

<sup>58</sup> Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*, 1836.

<sup>59</sup> Blotner, interview with Jimmy Faulkner, November 27, 1965, Blotner papers, Louis Daniel Brodsky Collection of William Faulkner Materials, Special Collections and Archives, Southeast Missouri State University. Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*, 1837.

Name <i>Wm. Faulkner</i>		Date Admitted <i>7-5-62</i>		Rm. or Wd. No.		Hosp. No. <i>6913</i>	
Address <i>Oxford, Miss</i>		Telephone		Service		Date Transferred To	
Age	Sex	Occupation	Nativity	Adm. Diagnosis			
Attending Physician		Referred by Dr.		Married	Single	Religion	
Nearest Relative or Friend		Relationship	Address		Widower	Widow	
Employed by		Address		Phone			
Rate per	Day	To be paid by		Address			
Financial Arrangements		Previous Admissions					
Date Discharged <i>July 6-62</i>	Final Diagnosis <i>acute Pulmonary Edema</i>		Condition on Discharge <i>Expired</i>				
Form 317		<i>Pulmonary cardiac angina.</i>		<i>1:30 P.M.</i>			

Figure 6. Admission card for William Faulkner, July 5, 1962. Note that the card erroneously records his time of death as 1:30 p.m. rather than 1:30 a.m.

previous day. Dr. Wright performed an examination—presumably in his office—with Estelle and Jimmy present.<sup>60</sup> Faulkner told him about his riding accident and the ensuing pain. The examination showed that “heart, blood pressure, and chest were normal,” although Faulkner “complained of pain in his chest as well as his back.” Wright noted that it “could have been heart pain but there was no direct indication.” During this time Faulkner was “quiet, tractable, humble, made jokes.”<sup>61</sup>

Faulkner’s chest and back pain were not “textbook typical” of angina pectoris, the pain associated with blockage or narrowing of the coronary arteries although, in retrospect, both the back and chest pain could have been caused by coronary artery disease. He was known to have suffered several fractured vertebrae from being thrown off horses, and those fractures would seem a more likely source for his back pain. On June 24 his Oxford physician Chester McLarty had seen him and felt that his skin color suggested impaired coronary circulation. However, on July 3 after Faulkner had begun drinking, McLarty found that his blood pressure was fine and detected no alarming symptoms.<sup>62</sup> Another physician, the world renowned cardiophysiology Dr. Arthur Guyton, had seen Faulkner in June and did not notice any skin color

<sup>60</sup> “Aunt Estelle and I sat in the room while Dr. Wright examined him.” Jim Faulkner, “Brother Will’s Passing,” 109. “The examination, performed with E[stelle] and Jimmy there . . . .” Blotner’s notes from his interview with Wright.

<sup>61</sup> Blotner, interview with Wright.

<sup>62</sup> Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*, 1829. Blotner and McLarty, “Faulkner’s Last Days,” 647-648.

abnormality.<sup>63</sup> However, on June 6, his old friend Phil Stone had written: "I have never seen him look so old before. It is not his eyes, but the skin around his eyes; looks like that of an old man, and he looks to me like he has aged about five years since I saw him a few months ago."<sup>64</sup> Dr. Wright's method for treating acute alcoholism involved administering alcohol in diminishing doses and increasing times between doses to prevent DTs (delirium tremens), which can occur with a sudden loss of alcohol in someone who has been drinking heavily for days. He also used sedation as needed along with vitamins and nutritional support.<sup>65</sup> Although it was common practice at the time to wean alcoholics off alcohol, academic medicine was beginning to move away from the use of alcohol and toward the use of benzodiazepine tranquilizers for "detox" purposes.<sup>66</sup> Dr. Wright's method was an acceptable procedure then and was still in widespread use for several more years. Additionally he said that Faulkner's heart and blood pressure exams were normal upon admission.<sup>67</sup>

The examination was completed by 6:10, twenty minutes after admission, as suggested by the fact that Dr. Wright began to record his findings and orders for medication. His first order was for 6:10. (Figure 7). Notations

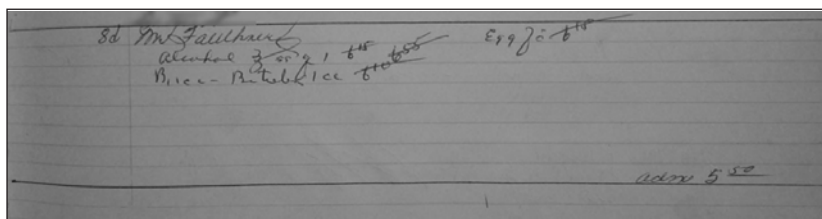


Figure 7. Doctor's order for William Faulkner for daylight hours of July 5, 1962, from the Order Book, page 239.

in the order book recorded all of the doctor's orders for medications and nourishment to be administered. A common practice of the time was for nurses to use blue or black ink for the day shift and red ink for the night shift. Faulkner was admitted at 5:50 p.m., when it was still daylight, so his

<sup>63</sup> Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*, 1831.

<sup>64</sup> Brodsky and Hamblin, *Faulkner: A Comprehensive Guide to the Brodsky Collection*, volume II, 306.

<sup>65</sup> Blotner, interview with Wright.

<sup>66</sup> J. F. Chambers, A. D'Agostino, W. H. Sheriff, Jr., and J. D. Schultz, "Comprehensive Care of the Acute Alcoholic in a Municipal Hospital," *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 86 (1962), 1112-1116.

<sup>67</sup> Blotner, interview with Wright.

first orders were entered in blue in the day orders for July 5. Because the day was almost over few orders were listed there.<sup>68</sup> Most were listed in red in the night orders for July 5,<sup>69</sup> (Figure 8) while a space was allocated for him in

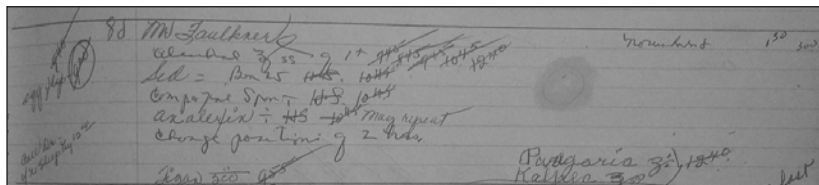


Figure 8. Doctor's order for William Faulkner on the night of July 5, 1962, from the Order Book, page 241.

the day orders for the following day.<sup>70</sup> After the examination was completed, Faulkner was ushered into Room 8d on the first floor across the hall from the nurses station. It was a large room with two double beds on opposite walls and an old fireplace on the southern wall.<sup>71</sup> Willie Jamison later recalled: "I carried him in and undressed him and put his pajamas on and put him in bed."<sup>72</sup> A nurse or attendant was to remain with him for some time.<sup>73</sup>

Nurse Jean Burrow<sup>74</sup> had been on duty since 3:00 p.m. and was present when Faulkner arrived. She was responsible for his medications until her

<sup>68</sup> Order Book, page 239.

<sup>69</sup> Order Book, page 241.

<sup>70</sup> Order Book, page 243. The day orders for July 6 consisted of alcohol and Betalin. These items were crossed out as moot using red ink.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. The "d" in 8d evidently stands for "downstairs." Rooms in the main part of the main building were listed as 1u-7u (upstairs) and 8d-9d (downstairs) with the latter close to the nurses station. Rooms in the annex to the main building were numbered 1a-8a. See daily listings of patients by room numbers in the 1962 Order Book. According to Blotner, Faulkner's room was "across from the [nurses] station" which was on the left or north side of the hall, meaning that it was on the right or south side of the hallway. *Faulkner: A Biography*, 1837. Judging from numerous photographs of the building by Karen Castleberry, there were three main rooms on the south side of the hallway. To the west and rear was the kitchen, then the dining room, leaving Room 8d as the front room. The front part of the house was an enclosed porch. Also, see Jimmy Faulkner's recollection of the room in Wolff and Watkins, *Talking about William Faulkner*, 176.

<sup>72</sup> Sue Watson, "Loyal, Respected Employee Retires." Jamison (1938-2010) worked as an orderly at Wright's from 1956 through 1962 and recalled that Dr. Wright was "like a father" to him.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.; Blotner, interview with Jimmy Faulkner; Admission card #6975 includes in the billing information a \$7.50 fee for an attendant.

<sup>74</sup> Jean Armour Burrow (1929-2008) was married to Wade Lafayette Burrow, a cousin of Tom Burrow who had earlier owned the sanatorium property.

shift ended at 11:00.<sup>75</sup> Years later she recalled that he was “totally likeable . . . just a delightful person.” She went on to say: “I think he knew he was dying . . . Dr. Wright insisted he go on to the hospital in Memphis [for his back injury] but Faulkner refused. He said he did not want to be made a spectacle.”<sup>76</sup>

Dr. Wright’s first orders included an injection of one cc of vitamin B-1, pure thiamine, and another injection of one cc of Betalin, a multi-vitamin injection, both scheduled for 6:10 p.m. and both intended to prevent Wernicke’s Encephalopathy.<sup>77</sup> Dr. Wright then ordered ½ ounce of alcohol every hour with the first doses at 6:15 and 6:45 before sunset. Subsequently—and after sunset—orders for doses of alcohol continued at 7:45 p.m. and then every hour through 10:45 p.m. at which time the patient was put to bed.<sup>78</sup> At 6:15 he was also given an egg flip, a protein nutritional supplement in beverage form. All of the written times have a slash mark through them indicating that the nurse administered that dose. Thus within twenty-five minutes of his admission, Faulkner had received a dose of alcohol, an egg flip, and vitamin injections, all consistent with Dr. Wright’s method of providing vitamins and nutritional support along with alcohol in diminishing doses. There were also orders for “nourishment” to be provided at 1:30 and 3:00.

The sun set at about 7:15 (CST), and night orders went into effect. At 9:00 and 9:40 Faulkner drank egg flips and followed that at 9:45 with another dose of alcohol. At 9:55 he also received a dose of 200 milligrams of Tigan, a commonly used anti-nausea medicine.<sup>79</sup> Estelle and Jimmy stayed with him until about 10:00. Faulkner was beginning to relax and appeared ready for sleep, so Jimmy suggested that they go. He later recalled:

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<sup>75</sup> Information on when nurses went on and off duty comes from the drug book from 1962 that was used to record the administering of controlled substances. Faulkner is not listed, because none of his medications fell into this category. Nurse Burrow was followed at 11:00 P.M. by a Nurse Moore about whom little is known. She was on duty when Faulkner died.

<sup>76</sup> Sue Watson, “Loyal, Respected Employee Retires.”

<sup>77</sup> R. S. Porter and J. L. Kaplan, *The Merck Manual of Diagnosis and Therapy* (Whitehouse Station, NJ: Merck Sharp & Dohme Corp., 2011, 19<sup>th</sup> ed.), 1516-1519.

<sup>78</sup> Primarily the Order Book, May 7, 1962-July 20, 1962, p. 241, where the night orders for Faulkner were recorded. Jimmy Faulkner later wrote: “The nurse was in Brother Will’s room shortly after midnight. He sat up while she gave him a shot. Then he put his right hand over his heart, groaned, and lay back down.” The suggestion was made here that he died almost immediately following an injection. Jim Faulkner, “Brother Will’s Passing,” 109. At the 1994 Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference held at the University of Mississippi there was discussion of the injection with the suggestion that it might have been linked to his death. Michael Kelley, “Faulkner Conferees Study His Life, Death,” newspaper clipping from *Commercial Appeal*, probably early August 1994, pp. C1-C2. However, the discussion was moot, because the injection never occurred; it is not mentioned in the orders for Faulkner.

<sup>79</sup> The specific order reads “Tigan 200 9:55.” Order Book, p. 241.



Aunt Estelle went to his bed and said something to him that I couldn't hear. Then she left and waited for me in the hall. I walked to his bed then and took his left hand in my left hand. I said, "Brother Will, when you are ready to come home, call me, and I'll come and get you."

When I said that, he recognized my voice and looked up at me. His eyes were bright and sharp, and his voice was clear and not slurred. He said, "Yes, Jim, I will." That's the last thing I ever heard him say.<sup>80</sup>

As the Faulkners were departing for Oxford, the quiet was disrupted by the arrival of a new patient from Greenville, Mississippi. She was admitted at 10:15, diagnosed with acute alcoholism, and placed in Room 9d, across the hall from Faulkner in 8d. This brought the number of patients for the night to ten.<sup>81</sup> At 10:45 Faulkner was prepared for bed. Nurse Burrow gave him his prescribed medications: Benadryl, a sedative; Compazine Spansule, another anti-nausea medication; Analgin for muscle spasms; and another dose of alcohol.<sup>82</sup> Burrow's shift ended a few minutes later at 11:00. After putting Faulkner to bed she told him "I'll see you in the morning." He replied, "I don't think so."<sup>83</sup> These were his last recorded words.

After Faulkner was asleep the nurse was to change his position every two hours by rolling him over in order to insure that skin circulation was maintained and thereby prevent the development of bed sores.<sup>84</sup> In the left margin of the order book was the notation, "Call Dr if no sleep by 12:00."<sup>85</sup> Faulkner apparently fell asleep, because there is no note to the effect that

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<sup>80</sup> Jim Faulkner, "Brother Will's Passing," 109.

<sup>81</sup> Order Book, pages 240-241; Patients' Register, #6976.

<sup>82</sup> Among the other night orders was the notation for "Sed = Ben 25 HS," which is shorthand for "Sedative = Benadryl 25 milligrams at bed time." "HS" stands for the Latin *hora somni*, "hour of sleep," and refers to bed time. There is a slash mark through the HS and the following 10:45 indicating that he received the sedative at his bedtime which was 10:45 p.m. The next order is "Compazine Span 1 HS May Repeat." There is a slash mark through the HS and the 10:45 that follows this order. Compazine Spansule is an anti-nausea medication. The next order is for "Analgin 1 HS 10:45 May Repeat." There is a slash mark through the HS and the time. Analgin was used to treat muscle spasms. An entry for "nourishment" is recorded on the right side of the order sheet, indicating the need to provide food as needed which was followed by 1:30 and 3:00. There are no slash marks through these times. Order Book, p. 241.

<sup>83</sup> Sue Watson, "Loyal, Respected Employee Retires."

<sup>84</sup> The order reads "Change Position q 2 hrs" with "q" standing for the Latin *quaque* meaning "every." Order Book, p. 241.

<sup>85</sup> For someone being admitted with a need to withdraw from alcohol, agitation and sleeplessness are danger signs and are seen early in DTs. If Faulkner was still awake and especially if restless the doctor would want to increase the dose of the sedative or possibly the alcohol could be repeated a little earlier than scheduled. Untreated or undertreated DTs can be fatal. But alcohol itself can be toxic as well, either quickly or slowly.

Dr. Wright was called at midnight.<sup>86</sup> By 12:40 a.m. Faulkner was apparently awake and bothered by digestive problems. This was reported, probably by his attendant, and he was administered orally a mixture of paregoric and kalpec as a treatment for diarrhea and intestinal cramping.<sup>87</sup> He was also given another dose of alcohol and left to sleep.

However after 1:00 something happened. The story presented heretofore in biographies has been based primarily on what Dr. Wright told Joseph Blotner in 1966. According to this Faulkner was awake and sitting on the side of the bed. About 1:30 he groaned and fell over, the victim of a heart attack. The event was probably witnessed by the attendant if not a nurse bringing his 1:30 nourishment. One of these immediately called Dr. Wright who resided a couple hundred feet from the main building. He was at Faulkner's bed within five minutes, found no pulse and could hear no heartbeat. He started cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) with closed chest compressions and mouth-to-mouth breathing.<sup>88</sup> This was state of the art CPR for 1962,<sup>89</sup> but after an extended effort Faulkner showed no signs of life and was pronounced dead.<sup>90</sup>

Regarding the diagnosis for his cause of death there is a seeming contradiction between two scenarios. The first—and the one made canonical in the biographical material—is that Faulkner died from a myocardial infarction (the medical term for what most call a heart attack), and this is

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<sup>86</sup> Order Book, p. 241.

<sup>87</sup> This order is written on the right hand side and in a different handwriting than the initial orders, suggesting that it was added ad hoc probably by the nurse who responded to Faulkner's digestive problem, one that would not have required Dr. Wright's intervention. The order was for "Paregoric 1 ounce" and "Kalpec ½ ounce" mixed together with a 12:40 time and a slash mark through it. Order Book, p. 241. This mixture, administered orally, is the narcotic paregoric used for the treatment of diarrhea and intestinal cramping and the mixture of kaolin and pectin which is also used for the treatment of diarrhea.

<sup>88</sup> Blotner, interview with Wright. Sanatorium records are supportive of 1:30 a.m. as the time of death. Admission card, #6975, William Faulkner, July 5-6, 1962, lists "Expired 130 P.M.," with the "P.M." clearly a careless error; Patients' Register, #6975, William Faulkner, July 5-6, 1962, lists him as having died at "130 AM."

<sup>89</sup> "History of CPR." Online at: <http://www.cprlab.com/cpr-history.html>. Accessed September 21, 2015; "2010 American Heart Association Guidelines for Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation and Emergency Cardiovascular Care Science," 2010. Online at: [http://circ.ahajournals.org/content/122/18\\_suppl\\_3/S640](http://circ.ahajournals.org/content/122/18_suppl_3/S640). Accessed September 21, 2015.

<sup>90</sup> Blotner's notes from his interview with Wright state that "He applied external heart massage for 45 minutes with no results. Then he tried mouth to mouth resuscitation, but without success." John Faulkner also repeated the 45 minutes. *My Brother Bill*, 2. While Dr. Wright certainly did his best, 45 minutes may have been an exaggeration or an error in the notes; it seems to be far more than a physician would need to do while realistically expecting results.

the one presented heretofore in all biographical treatments with all lines of evidence deriving directly or indirectly from oral statements by Wright. Blotner's biography attributes the cause of death to a coronary occlusion while the revised version goes further and states that the information came from Dr. Wright.<sup>91</sup> However, the interview notes do not mention this diagnosis leaving one to wonder how the information was obtained; perhaps he simply failed to record the diagnosis in his notes and later recalled it while writing his biography. John Faulkner attributes his brother's death to a "kind of thrombosis" describing it in some detail while stating that the information was from "the doctors [who] explained it to us," presumably referring in part to Dr. Wright, the only doctor to have firsthand knowledge of the event.<sup>92</sup> Despite the difference in terminology both descriptions fall under the rubric of myocardial infarction and apparently reflect the same diagnosis. They are also consistent with the description of Faulkner's death from Blotner's interview which states: "[Faulkner] was sitting on the side of his bed. He groaned and fell over."<sup>93</sup> This appears to describe either a myocardial infarction or a cardiac arrhythmia.

A myocardial infarction happens when a coronary artery is occluded, most often by a blood clot that forms in the artery at the site of an irritated cholesterol plaque in the artery, and cuts off circulation to the heart muscle served by that artery. This causes the death of part of the heart muscle. It can lead to (1) heart failure from a lack of adequate functioning heart muscle, or (2) an abnormal electrical conduction causing an irregular heart beat called an arrhythmia, or (3) sudden death of the patient. Heart failure can be mild and not immediately life threatening or can be severe and cause shock. Cardiac arrhythmias can be transient and cause no symptoms or can cause the heart to become non-functional and cause death within seconds. Fatal arrhythmias disrupt the heart beat so that the heart cannot pump blood at all. Some degree of heart failure has been documented in over two-thirds of patients hospitalized with myocardial infarction.<sup>94</sup> In summary several sources indicate that Faulkner's death event was consistent with the sudden onset of some type of overwhelming cardiac dysfunction such as myocardial

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<sup>91</sup> Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography* (revised), 714, notes: "Dr. Wright called it a coronary occlusion"; cf. Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography* (original edition), 1838, which does not state that the information came from Wright but an endnote cites the interview with the doctor.

<sup>92</sup> John Faulkner, *My Brother Bill*, 1-2.

<sup>93</sup> Blotner, interview with Wright.

<sup>94</sup> R. S. Porter and J. L. Kaplan, *The Merck Manual of Diagnosis and Therapy*, 19th edition, (Whitehouse Station, NJ: Merck Sharp & Dohme Corp., 2011), 2099-2100.

infarction. However, these sources were by no means from independent witnesses; all apparently trace back to Dr. Wright's personal account as related to the family and friends of Faulkner.

In contrast to this scenario, administrative documents from the sanatorium present a different story listing the discharge diagnosis as "acute pulmonary edema probable cardiac origin."<sup>95</sup> Pulmonary edema is characterized by the lungs filling with fluid which is the result of the heart's inability to pump the blood coming from the lungs; consequently the lungs become engorged with blood that is "backed up" there. Fluid is then forced out of the blood vessels and into the air sacs. This pink, frothy fluid fills the air sacs thereby preventing the intake of oxygen. The patient literally drowns in his own fluids. The clinical appearance of such a situation shows an individual coughing-up fluid, gasping for breath, and having cyanotic (blue-tinged) skin deriving from hypoxia (deficiency of oxygen). The description of a patient with pulmonary edema contrasts with both the description of Faulkner groaning and collapsing and the other evidence suggestive of myocardial infarction alone.

Despite their differences, both scenarios apparently derive from Dr. Wright. The first scenario (myocardial infarction) derives from secondary accounts based on oral testimony, while the second scenario (pulmonary edema) comes from sanatorium records. While both scenarios and their respective lines of evidence seem credible when examined in isolation from one another, when juxtaposed they present a seeming contradiction. Of the two, the sanatorium records are the more credible because they were recorded early on and for the most dispassionate of reasons: to provide an objective record in a private setting free from public scrutiny. Why then the difference? Although we may never know the exact truth, one can speculate with considerable confidence that when discussing Faulkner's death Dr. Wright modified his account to soften its impact on bereaved family members. However he probably told the truth, in part, each time he spoke about what caused Faulkner's death. Although it seems in all likelihood that Faulkner died of pulmonary edema, the edema was probably due to heart muscle damage from a myocardial infarction as suggested by the diagnosis that the pulmonary edema was of "probable cardiac origin." In about thirty per cent of cases, pulmonary edema is caused by heart failure that results from

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<sup>95</sup> Admission card, #6975, William Faulkner, July 5-6, 1962; Patients' Register, #6975, William Faulkner, July 5-6, 1962. Both sources list the cause of death as "acute pulmonary edema probable cardiac origin."

having had a myocardial infarction.<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, it should be pointed out that despite the fact that Faulkner had previously shown no indication of heart problems, up to eighty per cent of patients with significant coronary artery disease do not complain of any symptoms associated with their heart. Also, up to sixty-eight per cent of myocardial infarctions are “silent” with the heart attack patient not complaining prior to the attack of any symptom attributed to his heart.<sup>97</sup>

Extrapolating from all the evidence suggests that Faulkner had a myocardial infarction, lost function of a significant amount of heart muscle, had the rapid onset of heart failure, developed pulmonary edema with a pink froth coming out his mouth and nose, became hypoxic, gasping for breath and turning blue, followed by cardiac arrest, and collapse at 1:30 A.M. This would have occurred over just a few minutes. As this process played out the nurse and/or attendant would have seen it and called the doctor. Upon arrival he would have recognized the symptoms of pulmonary edema and surmised why it had happened. He would have begun CPR when Faulkner’s heart ceased beating. In the end he recorded that Faulkner had died of pulmonary edema, but presented the family with an abbreviated, less disturbing picture.

Dr. Wright made every effort that a doctor was capable of making in 1962 before giving in to the inevitable.<sup>98</sup> It appears that all the proper diagnostic procedures were performed as were appropriate at the time. The care he received for his acute alcoholism was very much standard for the time, and the attempt at resuscitation was actually advanced beyond what most sanatoria would have been capable of offering.

After all efforts to revive Faulkner were abandoned, telephone calls were made to Oxford and to a funeral home, probably in Olive Branch, which

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<sup>96</sup> Daniel D. Buff and Mahnaz Behboodikhah, “Acute Pulmonary Edema and Myocardial Infarction,” *Annals of Internal Medicine* 109 (1988), 247.

<sup>97</sup> Bianca D’Antono, Gilles Dupuis, André Arsénault, and Denis Burelle, “Silent Ischemia: Silent after All?,” *Canadian Journal of Cardiology* 24 (4) (2008), 285-291.

<sup>98</sup> There is no evidence that Faulkner participated in any type of follow-up care such as Alcoholics Anonymous which had become standard by that time. However this probably was not the fault of Dr. Wright. As we have seen Estelle did join the association after her 1955 stay at Wright’s Sanatorium, presumably at Wright’s instigation, and with good results, so it’s likely that Faulkner would have received similar encouragement. One suspects though that given his personality he would not have been inclined to participate in the requisite meetings with other alcoholics.

dispatched an ambulance<sup>99</sup> to pick him up and take him home. Dr. Wright completed the medical certification portion of the death certificate which was required before the body could be removed.<sup>100</sup> When the ambulance left the sanatorium and disappeared into the night, Faulkner's association with Byhalia came to an end.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> It was initially assumed based on the Hughes Rudd article in the *Saturday Evening Post* (above) that Faulkner's body was returned home via an ambulance from Douglass Funeral Home of Oxford. However, Karen Castleberry informed one of the authors (Elliott on November 20, 2015) that the late Bruce Payne, Sr. of Olive Branch, occasionally spoke of having been the ambulance driver who had given the press the information that Faulkner's death had occurred in Byhalia rather than Oxford. During communications with Gene Phillips of Olive Branch, Mississippi, a former owner and current associate of the Brantley Funeral Home of Olive Branch, it was learned that Payne was a co-owner of Brantley Funeral Home from 1960 through 1970, which covers the time of Faulkner's death, so his story is plausible. Mr. Phillips went through records pertaining to the funeral home's ambulance service. While he could find no record of a Brantley ambulance having been used to transport Faulkner's body, he did point out that the records were very unorganized and scattered, so lack of evidence is far from conclusive. Furthermore, in an interview Jimmy Faulkner indicated that the ambulance originated from somewhere other than Oxford: "I called the ambulance here in Oxford and asked them to go to the hospital in Byhalia to get Brother Will's body. I called the hospital, and they said, 'We've already sent him home.'" Wolff and Watkins, *Talking about William Faulkner*, 177. Because Olive Branch is only about ten miles from Byhalia, it was probably the closest location to offer an ambulance service, making it likely that Brantley Funeral Home did indeed transport Faulkner's body to Oxford.

<sup>100</sup> Neither of the authors of this article has seen the death certificate which is available only to immediate family members. However in a telephone interview Elliott talked to a person at the State Board of Health who wishes to remain anonymous. This person had just seen the certificate and stated that it was signed by a doctor in Byhalia whose name she did not remember. The medical certification, which is in the lower right hand side of the certificate, must be signed by either the attending physician or the county coroner to establish time and cause of death before the body can be released. The certificate was presumably given to the ambulance driver who carried it along with the body to the Douglass Funeral Home in Oxford, where the balance of the document was filled out with information pertaining to the deceased's address, occupation, place of burial, etc. Blotner's interview with funeral director Richard W. Elliott on March 23, 1965, Blotner papers, Louis Daniel Brodsky Collection of William Faulkner Materials, Special Collections and Archives, Southeast Missouri State University. The notes from this interview include a transcript of part of the death certificate which has John Faulkner listed as the informant and Dr. Leonard D. Wright, Sr. listed under medical certification.

<sup>101</sup> A bill was sent to the Faulkner family for \$57.95: \$50.00 for the base charge, \$7.50 for an attendant, and \$.45 for laundry. Admission card #6975.

## Aftermath

Following Faulkner's death, the Wright Sanatorium continued to operate; it was operating in November 1966 when Joseph Blotner arrived to interview Dr. Wright. However, its days were numbered; it was apparently closed on January 17, 1972.<sup>102</sup> Wright sold the sanatorium property in 1972 and 1973 with the majority going to Clark Cochran<sup>103</sup> who turned it into a school, the Byhalia Christian Academy, which operated for several years.

Why Wright closed the sanatorium is not known. However, we can speculate with some degree of confidence. Within the last few decades hospitals have grown in size, usually with support from governmental entities and endowments, while private institutions have declined to the point of vanishing. After Dr. Wright closed his sanatorium he moved to Holly Springs where he became associated with the Holly Springs Hospital. The burden of running a private institution and simultaneously overseeing the patients without support from another doctor was tremendous. Consequently, the opportunity for affiliation with an established hospital must have been irresistible. He would continue to practice in Holly Springs until his retirement in the early 1990s, at which time he and his wife moved to Memphis. He died there on October 6, 2003, ten days short of his ninety-fourth birthday.

Some years after the sanatorium closed, a major change came to the site. For several decades U.S. Highway 78 had been a two-lane road that passed through Byhalia just north of the central business district. During the late 1980s a new U.S. 78 was constructed with divided-lanes and limited access that passed Byhalia about a mile south of the business district and almost adjacent to the former sanatorium property. An exit was provided nearby for accessing Highway 309 making the immediate area prime real estate for commercial development.

In 1989 Jim and Karen Castleberry purchased the sanatorium property from Clark Cochran<sup>104</sup> and soon after began to prepare the front part of the site for commercial use. The main building was demolished in April 1990<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Information sheet on Dr. Leonard Wright from the Mississippi State Board of Medical Licensure has a date of January 17, 1972, alongside "Leonard Wright Sanitarium [sic] closed/804 Randolph St. Holly Springs" with the latter part being the street address in Holly Springs to which Wright moved. Also see the passage: "Dr. and Mrs. Leonard Wright moved to Holly Springs recently." From Mrs. G. H. Simpson, "Byhalia News," *South Reporter*, April 20, 1972, section 2, page 2.

<sup>103</sup> Marshall County Deed Book 139, pages 145, 384-385.

<sup>104</sup> Marshall County Deed Book 228, pages 143-144.

<sup>105</sup> "Sanatorium Coming Down," captioned photograph of the building during demolition in: *Pigeon Roost News*, April 11, 1990, p. 1; *South Reporter*, April 12, 1990, p. 1.



with the exception of the annex which was moved to the back part of the property and turned into a residence.<sup>106</sup> Other buildings were moved<sup>107</sup> or demolished, and the part of the property on which the main building and several smaller building had been located was levelled to produce a broad parking area. In 1991 the Castleberrys opened a convenience store/gasoline station and operated it for several years. This building survives today.

Today a traveler between Memphis and Tupelo who happens to exit at Byhalia will find himself in a small commercial development with a gas station on either side of Highway 309. The one on the west side is at the southern end of a large parking area with an AutoZone store at the northern end. To the west of the parking lot is a green hillside, the last untouched remnant of the sanatorium grounds, where one building remains, the former residence of the Wright family. The site of the main sanatorium building is on the south side of the AutoZone where the surface of the parking lot is about 6-10 feet lower than the ground surface of 1962. There is no marker to inform the visitor that William Faulkner died there.

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<sup>106</sup> More recently it was moved a second time to its current location at 5236 Smith Grove Road in Marshall County.

<sup>107</sup> The nurses residence was sold and moved to a location southeast of Byhalia at or near 553 Tunstall Road where it was converted into a church. More specifically it is located about one hundred yards south of Tunstall Road on the east side of Mockingbird Road. Today the building is unused and in poor condition. The cottages mentioned in note 22 above were moved back several yards from their original sites in 1990 and were demolished in 2015.