

# *Aunt Aggie's Bone Yard*

*Historic Old Garden of  
Lake City, Florida*



*By*

MAY VINZANT PERKINS





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*By*  
MAY VINZANT PERKINS

*Dedicated*

*to*

*All Gardeners and Garden Lovers*



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APPRECIATION

*To those who have rendered assistance  
and have in any way made possible the  
authentic story of AUNT AGGIE'S BONE YARD  
my sincere thanks.*

M. V. P.





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## *Introduction*

AS HAS BEEN OBSERVED, things of this world go through three stages. When they are new they are exciting and interesting; when they become old they are dull and there may be a revulsion of feeling against them. If they survive the latter stage they become interesting again, even romantic.

Oftentimes things of intrinsic value are lost or destroyed because of lagging interest and neglect. And so it was with AUNT AGGIE'S BONE YARD, a unique and erstwhile show place in Lake City (Florida) at the turn of the century.

Not infrequently visitors returning to Lake City after an absence of many years inquire about this old garden, the charm of which lingers in their memory, as it does in the memory of many of the older citizens of the community.

Picture post cards of the Bone Yard and its owner, an ex-slave, are treasured souvenirs. Many of these post cards (in colortone) were printed in Great Britain and Germany; others, in the United States of America. A recent research into the historic past of Lake City and Columbia County brought to light a number of these old picture cards—all that remains of this enchanting old garden.





*The Arch in Aunt Aggie's Bone Yard*



## *The Garden*

*“The glow of the dawn for glory,  
The hush of the night for peace,  
In a garden, at eve, says the story,  
God walks, and his smile brings release.”*

FOR MANY YEARS “Aunt Aggie” Jones (colored) and her husband, Jenkins Jones (affectionately known as “Uncle Jenks”), owned and cultivated a parcel of land on the outskirts of Lake City, a cross-roads town in north Florida, where, in 1883, they established a home.

The garden was Aunt Aggie’s pet hobby.

This once famed garden brought to their door many visitors, and travelers from all parts of the world who chanced to pass this way. Names and address of many of these visitors were recorded on bones which had been assembled and wired together in fantastic designs, forming gateways and arches and trellises for clinging plants and vines. These grotesque structures were often topped with skulls\* of animals. Flower

\* The skulls were sometimes rented by local white youths at Hallowe’en.

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beds, garden paths, and walk-ways of white sand (sometimes called "Florida snow") were bordered with bones.

At night these bones, which had been bleached snow-white by rain and sun and wind, gave to the place a ghostly look. Harboring the superstitions peculiar to her race, Aunt Aggie was quick to explain to visitors that there were no human bones in her garden. She was staunch in the belief that, were human bones there, the garden would be haunted, devoutly declaring, "The ghosts of their owners would come at night and carry them away."

Just when and why Aunt Aggie conceived the idea of collecting the dried bones of animals for her garden is not known. However, it is generally believed that they were adopted because of their fertilizing properties, bone meal being regarded as one of the best commercial fertilizers in the market. Or the idea may have been inherent, originating with her African ancestors. Be that as it may, bones brought erstwhile fame to Aunt Aggie and her garden. From them the garden derived its name. And flowers and vegetables, commingled, flourished. Aunt Aggie had flowers and vegetables when nobody else had them.

The Bone Yard was popular as a "lover's retreat" and frequented by courting couples of the community. It was alive with strollers on Sunday afternoons. Children gazed upon its weird beauty with awe and admiration. The strange personality of its owner gave



“atmosphere” to the place. Both the house and the garden reflected an eerie charm.

A well-worn foot-path led to a shaded nook in a corner of the garden where seats were arranged and provided a place for visitors who wished to rest or chat. Or maybe they lingered to have their fortune read. For Aunt Aggie was a wizard in the magic art of fortune-telling.

The Bone Yard was at the peak of its popularity between 1900 and 1918. Both flowers and vegetables were for sale. Although no fee was required for admittance, money derived from the sales—supplemented by free-will gifts from charmed visitors—swelled the family coffer daily.

The rose was Aunt Aggie's favorite flower. A variety known as “Duchess” was a special favorite. A query as to whether she had the Duchess among her roses brought forth the invariable reply: “Yes, ma'am, I thank yo', ma'am, I has the white Duchess, the pink Duchess, and the red Duchess.” “Yes, ma'am, I thank yo', ma'am,” was one of Aunt Aggie's pet expressions and her respectful affirmative response to all interrogations of the fair sex.

Technical names of the numerous plants she loved and tended were unknown to Aunt Aggie. But all of the old-time favorites were there.

Included among the roses—in addition to the Duchess—were: Marechal Niel, Maman Cochet, Etoile de Hollande, Seven Sisters, Moss or Chinkapin, Chero-

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kee, Cabbage, and a dainty variety known as Fairy or Sweetheart. Because of its favor and fitness as a bou-tionniere, Aunt Aggie called the latter "The Gentleman's Rose." A variety known as "Black" rose, and a green rose, a miniature cluster rose of hardy type, were among the oddities in the garden. The green rose (unidentified) may still be found in local gardens. The "Aunt Aggie" rose—a deep-red rose named for its owner—found its way into many nearby and distant gardens. Another rare rose, with velvety-textured ivory petals edged with pink, known as "the Mattox rose" (brought from the old country garden of her former mistress), bore marked resemblance to the Peace rose of today.

Among the shrubs were: Sweet Shrub (*Calycanthus*), Banana, Althea or Rose of Sharon, Oleander, Crape Myrtle, Bridal Wreath or *Spirea*, *Hydrangea*, and a native wild Azalea, sometimes called "Wild Honey-suckle."

Vines included English Ivy, Virginia Creeper or American Ivy, Honeysuckle, *Bignonia* or Trumpet Vine, Coral or Pink Vine, *Wisteria*, Yellow Jasmine (wild), and *Rhyncospermum*—which in blossoming season sent forth a far-reaching fragrance.

Among the lilies were: *Gladiolus*, *Amaryllis*, Spider, Butterfly, *Zephyranthes*, and rain or Fairy.

In season, the old-fashioned Cape Jasmine (now popularly known as *Gardenia*), the *Magnolia Grandiflora* (Southern *Magnolia*), and the Sweet Bay perfumed the air with their sweet-smelling blossoms.

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Violets, unusually large and long-stemmed and of deep-purple hue, sent forth their fragrance. The Morning Glory unfolded its tender spirals. There were Prince's Feather, Bachelor's Button, Four o'Clocks, Sunflowers, Phlox, Petunias, Chrysanthemums, Marigolds, Pinks or Dianthus (without which no Southern garden was complete), and native wild Fern.

Fruit trees (pear, peach, plum, persimmon, banana, and fig) found a place in this lush old garden of flowers and romance, which, although lacking the touch of the artisan, revealed a rare quality of workmanship. Much of a natural beauty remained in this weird wonderland.

## *The House*

*“Rich and humble,  
Poor and great,  
Through its portals  
Alternate.”*

A WIDE-SPREADING live oak with its drapes of gray Spanish moss, a towering pine, and a few orange trees (remnants of a small citrus grove) provided a picturesque setting for the house, a modest two-story frame building (unpainted), which sheltered Aunt Aggie and her family. A pergola, made of bones and covered with vines, formed an arcade between the front gate and the house.

The interior of the house, like the garden, revealed the owner's love of nature. Gourds, pine-cones, and other native materials were used in decorative designs on the stairway and throughout the house. Festoons of fringed paper hung from the ceiling of the old-fashioned parlor. The walls of the rooms were covered with old newspapers. Perhaps more for protection from the cold—by covering huge cracks—than for decorative effect. In appearance, the house was as unique as the garden—and equally fascinating.

A vast and varied collection of curios gave to the visitor the impression of being in a museum. Snakes and other reptiles were preserved in alcohol. The skeleton of an alligator and other gruesome objects were on display. A human skeleton hung in the hallway, the story or legend of which has long since been forgotten. But according to tradition it was the skeleton of an Indian. Possibly one of Aunt Aggie's ancestors. Or it may have been excavated from an Indian mound in the vicinity, the Seminoles having occupied this area previous to the cession of Florida territory to the United States by Spain\* and the coming of the first white settlers in the early 1820's. Many of these mounds are still visible.

Included among a rare assemblage of jewelry, old lace, bric-a-brac, and other heirlooms and treasure-trove, were tomahawks, bows and arrows, a crown of feathers, pottery, and numerous other Indian relics. A couple of old-fashioned dolls, a marble-topped table, and a silver coffee pot (gifts of her former mistress) were Aunt Aggie's most cherished possessions. Many of these articles—the accumulation of a lifetime—were of historical value.

Aunt Aggie and her husband, kindly and courteous, had served as house servants during slave-days. They were typical ante-bellum darkeys and welcomed visitors into their home with inbred Southern hospitality. During the latter years the house was opened chiefly to white visitors, who came from far and near to

\* 1821. Florida attained statehood in 1845.

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view Aunt Aggie's unique garden and to see the fascinating old house with its many curios and decorative "doodads."

Everybody that came was welcomed by Aunt Aggie. And when the inspection tour of the house and garden was completed, she stood at the entrance and presented each visitor with a bouquet of her flowers. A tourist was given an especially nice bouquet—for a larger tip was expected. But everybody that came was welcome, and received flowers, too, whether they gave a tip or not.

## *Aunt Aggie—Queen of the Bone Yard*

*“All day long I can hear her sing  
When soft winds blow,*

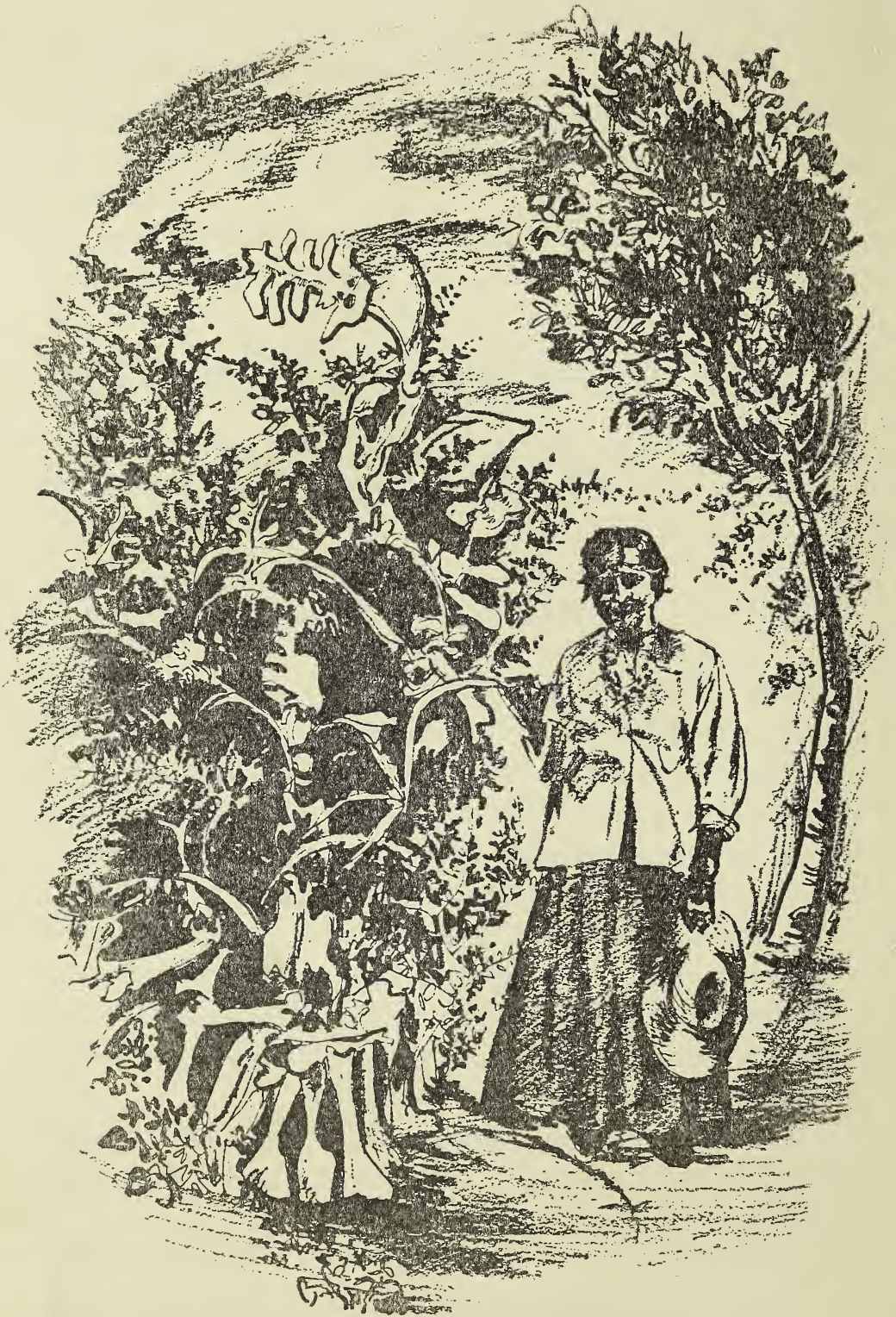
*The song of a spirit wandering  
Through gardens of long ago.”*

“AUNT AGGIE,” whose tap roots run deep into the heart of American history, is not only a unique and colorful character in the historic past of Lake City but reminiscent of the Old South. Born in slavery, she was, until the emancipation of the Negro at the close of the Civil War, or War Between the States (1861–1865), the property of Elijah Mattox, who pioneered to Columbia County, Florida, in 1844, from Georgia, and settled south of Lake City, then known as Alligator.\* The old Mattox plantation was located in what is now known as the Rose Creek settlement.

After her freedom, Aunt Aggie continued to work for the Mattox family, until she moved to Lake City, where she spent the remaining years of her life.

Among her Lake City employers was Mrs. James

\* The name was changed from Alligator to Lake City in 1859.



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Wiley Cathey, from whom the Bone Yard property was purchased. County records show that this property was deeded to "Agnes Jones" by "Louise Cathey" in 1883. The property is located in the northeast division of Lake City, in what is listed as the Cathey Subdivision, an area which was then commonly called "Black Bottom"—a name well suited, because of its black-muck soil and its colored population.

Many of the huge *Camellia* trees which adorned the once lovely garden of Lake City's first Florist (Mrs. W. J. Edwards), and are now growing in other local gardens, were rooted in the Bone Yard, the soil being well suited to the purpose and rooting cuttings a popular method of propagating plants. Plant exchanges were often made between Aunt Aggie and the white gardeners of the community. For Lake City had its quota of flower-lovers and home gardens in the yester-years.

Little is known of Aunt Aggie's early life. Born in south Georgia,\* she was the daughter of a Creek or Seminole Indian father and a Negro slave mother. Inter-marriage between the races was not infrequent in those days.

Her Indian personality was paramount, accentuated by high cheek-bones, aquiline nose, coarse black hair (very kinky), and many traits of character which are peculiar to the Indian race. With the silent tread of the Indian, she had the habit of appearing suddenly

\* Tatnall County.

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and unexpectedly, without sound. Her speech revealed a certain linguistic element peculiar to the Indian, in which all parts of a sentence are fused into one "bunch-word" of many syllables.

A taste for personal adornment was a marked characteristic. Often, when in full dress, numerous strands of colorful beads hung about her neck, bracelets adorned her fore-arm from wrist to elbow, and her fingers were laden with rings—a ring on every finger. Many of her necklaces were home-made, of dyed chinaberries, tiny shells, and beads of various kinds.

Her usual attire was an ensemble consisting of a loose jacket and a full-flowing skirt. Her hair was dressed in the prevailing fashion for the negro of her day. Tiny braids were tightly twined with bits of cord or colored string. Front bangs—usually worn in plaits or braids—sometimes hung in cork-screw ringlets over her forehead.

Aunt Aggie was endowed with more than average intelligence and possessed considerable artistic skill. That she was deeply religious is indicated in a specimen of her handiwork, and old-fashioned "Sampler" which bears this motto or admonition:

"Go no place that you would not like to be  
when Jesus comes.

Say nothing that you would not like to be  
saying when Jesus comes.

Do nothing that you would not like to be  
doing when Jesus comes."

The Sampler was a personal gift from Aunt Aggie to Brown Sparks,\* a boyhood pal of her youngest son. From his storehouse of memories Sparks recalls many interesting incidents associated with Aunt Aggie and her household. With keen enjoyment he recounts youthful escapades in which he participated, such as secret raids on Aunt Aggie's cooky jar—a small keg, usually well filled with tempting "sweet cakes"—and wine closet, well stocked with grape, blackberry, and other homebrewed vintage.

According to Sparks, Aunt Aggie was a versatile entertainer, with a natural aptness for story-telling and a large and varied repertoire of short stories and legends. Many of the stories and legends were of Scriptural origin.

One of her favorite stories was "The Legend of the Cat." "Never," she said, "be cruel to a cat." Then, with the proverbial beginning, and after this fashion, she told the story:

"Once upon a time, while Jesus was visiting in the Temple and talking with the Lawyers and Doctors, numerous rats raced through the Temple, destroying manuscripts and creating general disturbance.

"Desiring quiet, that he might be heard, and wishing also to protect the manuscripts, Jesus removed from his hand a glove, which he threw at the rats. In its flight, the glove was transformed into a cat.

\* A local unordained negro preacher.

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“The rats were driven from the Temple by the cat, and many of them were killed.

“So the cat was blessed—and became a domestic animal.”

“By no means drive a black cat from your door,” cautioned Aunt Aggie. “A black cat,” she concluded, “brings good luck.”

The Bible was Aunt Aggie's daily companion. Her favorite Bible verse was:

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.” (Ps. 19:14)

This she recited daily.

On especial occasions, and in full regalia, Aunt Aggie performed a spectacular Indian dance. Sometimes Uncle Jenks and their sons—Lem, William (“Bill”), Henry and Fred—joined in the entertainment. Henry was expert at dancing the “Clog.” Fred did the popular “Buck and Wing” dance, with an original chant.

All of them were musical and performed well on the Jew's harp, the harmonica, and various stringed instruments. Often the menfolk gave public performances on uptown street corners afterward “passing the hat” for a free-will contribution. For there were always interested spectators. Sometimes they performed in front of the homes of white citizens,\* thereby gathering in a little extra coin.

\* A prevailing custom among the town minstrels of that day.

Each of the sons possessed individual characteristics or showed a marked eccentricity—as did their parents. Lem, the eldest, always smartly dressed, was the “sport,” or “dude,” of the family. Henry, tall, straight, and slim, and wearing his hair long (Indian fashion), bore the mark of the Indian. He stammered in his speech, as did his father. Fred, the youngest of the four brothers, was short of stature and extremely bow-legged. Because of the deformity, he was sportively given the nickname “Billy Bowlegs”—a name made famous in Florida history by Chief Billy Bowlegs, in the late 1850's.

Aunt Aggie had great confidence in the efficacy of magic to insure success and cure disease. (A Bible, a wedding ring, a doorkey, and a glass tumbler filled with water, were used in her magic-maneuvers). She also kept in store a supply of home-remedies for the treatment of physical ills. Many of these remedies, made from native roots and herbs that contain medical properties, were grown in her garden. Her favorite “hair oil” is said to have been a combination of “‘coon grease,’ tallow, and orris root.” The dried root of orris (a species of iris), with the smell of violets, perfumed the oil.

Aside from gardening and housework, Aunt Aggie spent much of her time fishing and hunting. On these expeditions she often wore a buckskin suit, a relic of Indian days. It is said that she ate only the meats of freshly killed animals and averred that Samson de-

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rived his great strength from eating "roots and herbs and the flesh of wild animals."

Her favored pets included—along with domestic animals—squirrels, rabbits, raccons, opossums, snakes, and alligators, and sometimes a stray fox, deer, or goat. Rats also were pets—particularly the white variety.

Aunt Aggie often spoke of a daughter—and may have had other children—but only her two sons, Henry and Fred (unmarried), remained with her during her last years. Lem and William, though they lived near and visited her often, were married and had homes, families, and interests of their own.

Uncle Jenks preceded Aunt Aggie in death by a number of years.

During her last years, the death of Fred, her youngest-born, brought to her heart a deep grief. And Lem's tragic death, in 1916, was a stunning blow. Suddenly, Aunt Aggie felt the weight of her years, and old and tired. Confined to her bed or chair at the last, many of her white friends ministered to her, in a neighborly way, and helped to supply her with daily needs.

Death claimed Aunt Aggie in 1918. Nearly the century milestone of a long, active, and useful life, with World War I at an end, her life-span embraced four major wars.

After her death, her children moved away. And so, the home and the wonderful old garden went into the discard. Offspring of her son William are the only

representatives of the Agnes Jones family in Lake City today.

The property has changed hands many times. In 1928 the Columbia County Board of Education purchased the old house-and-garden site for school purposes. In 1930, under the supervision of Marvin Mattox, contractor and builder (and, incidentally, a grandson of the late Elijah Mattox), the buildings were razed and a large and handsome brick and stone structure was erected for a school for negroes, this building supplanting the old white frame school house\* which was built by the U.S. Government (for the negroes) in 1870. The institution is now known as the Richardson High and Elementary School, and is one of the oldest colored schools of the State.

With the erection of the school building every vestige of the Bone Yard vanished, and, with it, one of Florida's most unique and picturesque gardens and Lake City's most outstanding show place.

Today this temple of learning, dedicated to the purpose of training the youth of her race and fitting them for a broader usefulness, stands as a living monument to an ex-slave, who roamed the woods of the vicinity in search of flowers and bones, and found—in the language of William Shakespeare—"tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything."

With the passing years Aunt Aggie's Bone Yard

\* Present Masonic Lodge.

*Aunt Aggie's Bone Yard*

may become only a tradition in the history of Lake City, but Aunt Aggie will live forever, gardener immortelle—Queen of the Bone Yard

THE END









